

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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Cover: Robert Shetterly, Jr., *A Man with One Tusk*, ink drawing.

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THE WHITE MARE

My friend Hilda came to visit me in Maine, and she bought
A democrat buggy out of a barn, she tied the body
To the roof of her station wagon, put the wheels in the car.
Her mother wouldn't speak to her. All the way back
To California they wavered in the wind. At home
She paid a thousand dollars to have the old buggy restored,
And another thousand to have her white mare trained to pull it.
The money comes slowly teaching third grade, her husband doesn't
Approve. Ever since then her life has scintillated with terror
And something that must be hope. The mare has broken the harness
Three separate times; she tips over carts; she runs
Away, and she runs away. What is she thinking about?
For that matter, what is Hilda thinking about?
They are both opaque to me, I don't understand them,
I only see them, flashing through my head down a long road
Bordered with palm trees, the blurring hoofs, the white mare
Covered with foam, Hilda clutching the reins, a thin
Determined blond woman, her eyes wide with fear, flying
Down the road willy-nilly and hanging on, hanging on.

Kate Barnes

SOLD

One toot means lunch, two toots means quitting time.
You'll get the hang of it.
Just take this knob-thing here, screw it to this flap-thing here,
and put the whole thing in this tray, here.
You'll get the hang of it.
Do it today, tomorrow, week after, next year, and
you can do it blindfolded with one arm one leg while
chewing gum and whistling Dixie.
All at the same time.
Here have some. Do you chew gum?
Passes the time you know.
Me I chew gum and imagine the boyfriend's hand up my thigh.
You got a boyfriend? Should see mine.
You'll want his hand up your thigh too.
Gee I love your hair. What do you do with it?
Mine's hopeless. A head of pubic hair.
What conditioner do you use?
Gum sort-a stops you from going on the munchies.
See Row-6-#-3-Mathilda there?
Two years ago she looked like Zsa Zsa Gabor young.
Acted like she was too.
Now pig-woman. Gum passes the time you know.
Here have some. Do you chew gum? You got a boyfriend?
I love your hair. What conditioner do you use?
Do you like movies? Bunch of us go to the movies Thursday.
Or maybe go bowling. But mostly we go to movies with happy
endings.

(Stanza continued)

We like love stories. We like to have a good cry.
Do you like movies? Do you like gum?
Do you want your boyfriend's hand up your thigh?
Do you have a boyfriend?
You'll get the hang of it.
Put the whole thing in this cart here. Passes the time.
What do you do with it? One toot lunch.
Zsa Zsa Gabor at Row-6-#-3. Pig-woman with 6 kids. Do you
chew gum?
Today, tomorrow, week after you'll get the hang of it.
One long toot means fire drill. If you're lucky.
We get to go to the courtyard and gossip.
Two toots quit one long toot gossip one toot lunch.
You'll get the hang of it. I love your hair.
Do you like movies? Maybe bowling with a good cry?
What gum you use? Here have some.
Put the whole pig-woman in this cart, here.
I love your movies with a good cry and happy endings.
Munchies stops you going tomorrow. Lunch toot.
Boyfriend toot. Movie toot. Bowling toot. Happy endings toot.
Pig-woman toot. Gum chewing toot. Fire toot.
Flap-thing-knob-thing toot.
You'll get the hang of it.

Justin Chin

JESU MEINE FREUDE

after BWV 227

And I wonder if she died slowly,
carefully, the taste of ink blackening
her tongue, fingertips, the virgin feather nib
tight in her right hand, the upturned back
of the breakfast tray balanced on two pillows
in her lap, a thin, black cross at the top
of the first page, unsubstantial, yet enough
to say *Jesu will protect me* — it was her last
letter, and she knew it. She knew it in the cramp
writing itself into the back of her hand. *Dear Johann* —

how easy it would have been to change
that salutation, transform, allude, lie.
But she had written just those letters
in the hundred letters she had written
in her mind: *Dear Johann*. Nothing more
complicated, intricate, or gilt. Nothing
suggesting anything but the imagined
conventional familiarity — nothing
closer than a nod or bow between them
in this letter they might both touch. *It was for me*

the greatest pleasure — a compliment first,
 something to come back to if the letter fails —
to hear your latest composition
honoring our Saviour and the Arch-Duke's
Uncle Karl — (her husband slept, as usual,
 through the last six movements, erect in their pew,
 a foamy paste forming at his just-parted lips)
my only regret being — Only regret!
 As if she had mailed the rest away, a faint
 dust from her husband's wig descending

over them like a blessing as they sat
 piled in great envelopes upon his desk, waiting
 to be cancelled by some clerk. He paid
 attentions like a tithe — *that I could not speak*
this to your face, which I have never seen
but learn to see, in hearing. Now, confined to bed,
 this sin no doubt to blame, she hears her husband's cane
 begin its serpentine ascent, its little thing,
motet, a step at a time, closing, not one hers —
For truly, or so I would believe

and have it, now, you are not in flesh,
aber Geistlich, though no one on earth is
more dear to me. By now the cane is passed.
I am invalid. By what I cannot say.
Herr Doktor Schmidt confides the Lord is wont
of righteous souls. And so it seems. My husband
told me (for every post with high court seals would pass
 his hands) *you are well spoken of — a family man,*
honest, careful. We are, were, alone. We left
no one in leaving each Sunday for the church

*where I first heard you. Now I am left
that is so soon to go. And yet — If I had gone
to church as often as I've thought of you, or heard
your straining in this chamber's wood, or watched the light
grain in the oaken chest across from me
form syllables like sound, sweetening the lament
of hope constructed, stored, unspent — its symmetry
remains — I might, again, be well. No matter:
Wednesdays Frau Hoffman's boy Heinrich practices
the klavier in that room across the way, there,*

*with the blue shades. His master tells him what to play
but he plays Bach anyway, broken, fumbling,
as if his hands can't quite reach all the keys.
I fear the boy might fail his lesson learning
how to choose — which is a good fear, a pious fear:
What can you do, dear Johann? I feel I write
to you as part of some corrupt romance
with my own poverty — it seems I cannot ask
for what I may not buy — Christ Jesus has made
freedom enough that it may not be shared.*

*When I was a girl my father took me up
to the organ loft of Saint Thomas' Church
and touched the keyboard so it made the sound
the Serpent makes, he said, when he has caught
a soul in his web of thorns that was not made
safe by holy baptism — a sound as low
in those throats as a cross dragged over stones —
it seemed the enunciation of my case,
and I loved him so for saying I was saved —
(‘This is only sound, my little one,’ he said) —*

*I wept — then out into the air again, hand
in my father's hand. The snowflakes were as blue
as the eyes I've made up for my Johann's face —
I know what you sound like. And to be here
in this yellow room, the sunlight spilling in,*

(Stanza continued)

*to be protected from that sound again —
the sound he makes of God's sound, the whole mass
reined in his play — yet strangely, as a body,
falling now, protected only by a hope to fall
in grace, not smothered like the gift of Cain*

*in flesh, but guided by your hand, I am
enabled — I begin, now, even, to forget
for what I thought to write: just to be clear
of it, this body, this willful burning
toward you at my death — to send my spirit hence.
To know as much of you as you make clear
in music has accomplished far too much. Bach
and Jesu will protect themselves. 'Who is in Him
will have eternal life,' and who I know
as spirit only cannot lead me into sin.*

*A gift I will not be delivered of
I offer: that I thought I could begin, here,
with you, to play at what I might have, given
choice, conceived to do. Nothing more. A letter
that I shall not read myself, though it sounds
childish to say so. (Soon Heinrich will begin
to conquer you with his small hands, and just
as I would sleep.) Tomorrow there is every chance
I will — the cane again — tear up this letter.
Until we meet, know I am yours*

in Christ,

Frau Kees.

Daniel Bosch

Bach's motet (BWV 227) was composed for the funeral of Frau Kees in 1723. The poet imagines that the Frau knew of Bach and thought of him. The poem echoes some of the structure of the motet.

Two Poems

A CLASSICAL EDUCATION

— in answer to Hirsch, Bloom & Co.

Tonight I'm going to sleep out on the deck
and keep my glasses on to count the stars
and watch the constellations that parade
like Barnum and Bailey's animals in a ring.
And when the Great Bear circles by
I'll find his crooked tail and mark the spot
where Mizar is, then stare until that star
is twinned by its companion, Alcor.
Thus I'll pass the test some Caesar gave
his new recruits: men who saw but one star
had not the stuff of soldiers. When legions
marched to Germany or Gaul, these others
stayed at home, safe in their blurry villas.
Theirs was an age of uncorrected vision —
and visions, too, for those who were inclined
to drape myopia in cloaks of myth.
And so they came to write of swords and men
and of how sweet it is to die
when men and swords are patriotically together.
The intent was public-spirited
so there were men who took these words to heart
and bound them into volumes. Those books
are what we used to mean by Western Civilization.
They were to us as great a work
as anthills are to ants:
each student had a chance to be a hero
to the extent his specialty advanced
the highest Good, and each so took his strength
for granted that he thought nothing of it
to sacrifice himself by laboring in darkness
and heaving twigs a dozen times his weight.

ADJUSTING THE VERTICAL

Sometimes every sentiment needs a cliché
to come home to, an easy chair
to relax in, a hearth
to kick off its shoes in front of
while someone else sets the evening table.

Suppose, for example, I love you
or — let's make this more honest —
I've been wanting to get you in bed
since we met at the annual
Modern Cryptographer's Convention

and we talked about Derrida and you asked
whether I thought the connection
between Heisenberg's uncertainty principle
and the linguisticity of thought
is best expressed as metaphor or as metonymy.

That evening — don't you remember? —
I loaned you my copy of *Are Quanta Real?*
hoping you'd notice the pinpricks
beside the key words: desire / intensity /
experiment / a sequence of zeroes / the universe.

So why haven't you stayed in touch?
Or have you? Are the clicks and silences
I hear when I play back my answering machine
your way of leaving a message? Your way of saying
let's get together, we have a lot to talk over.

Jay Klokker

Four Poems from *The Book of Naples*

THE KINGDOM OF HANDS

As you reach into your pocket, suddenly you touch an alien hand.
 But wait: it's not a hand, it's a skittish five-legged animal
 nosing through your bills, your small change, your pocket lint.
 And then suddenly it's gone. Had you forgotten? This is Naples
 the Kingdom of Hands, where the tired and hungry subjects go
 wandering
 off on their own to visit some of the warm and inviting places
 in the human hemisphere. Like today, someone's hand
 was having a brief Easter vacation inside your coat pocket.
 Tomorrow someone else's will be laid out on the sandy beaches
 in your hip pocket. Not that your cuff links or your scapular
 wouldn't be welcome souvenirs, but the hands would just as soon
 fold a ten thousand lire note so cunningly that the teller
 will count it twice in that stack they are depositing at his window,
 or pull off something magical — levitate the lid of a display case
 in a pastry shop to cause one eggy rum-soaked cake to disappear —
 or pull in society's clotheslines overhead and relieve them
 of the oppressed laundry hanging out over the streets, those
 bedsheets
 straining themselves into squares and weeping cold, gray tears.

A policeman is having his morning coffee in the bar down the block
 and when you tell him some of the sadder Tales of the Wandering
 Hands
 his eyes fill with tears. He says that except for the tourists

(Stanza continued)

and killers who don't want to leave their fingerprints behind
and girls who get chilblains when February winds come off the sea
the glovemakers really have it tough. Tough's not the word,
you say, all over the town there are hands, hands, hands,
naked as the day they were born. They've got no shame, he says.
Shame's not the word, you come again; any time, day or night,
you can see them. They pat, stroke, they tease, they grab, let go,
they nip and plunge. You pause while these images sink in.
He says they've noticed down at headquarters that some have gone
over
to the province of the arts. They're recreating Roman deities,
evoking
Etruscan burial necklaces. Indistinguishable from the originals.
Creativity is good therapy, they say. Which reminds you —
has he noticed how the church by the Fontanelle cemetery is filling
up
with women's hands? It is? he echoes. *Is* is not the word, you say;
they're cleaning bones, laying them out, forming the initials of
the dead
on the tables in the ossuary. But more than that, you continue,
what
they're really doing is working up an outline. And next week
they'll be
delivering preliminary sketches; week after next they'll have
first drafts.
A volume is shaping up. Something they can pray for, pray to,
protect,
whatever. You say they're writing a *book*? he asks, puzzled. Well
not really
a book-book, you answer. Something more like a dictionary.
Something more
like a speller, for words beginning with sounds no one has ever
heard.

Naples, Italy
1983

RED BEACH, PAESTUM

September 9, 1943

We began with the thing we would never see again.
The way we were, it never occurred to us
to see it as we should. There they were, the mountains of Cilento
clear and brown and gathering shadows in their folds,
the red-tiled roofs, flash of whitewashed walls,
the little helicline of smoke in the middle distance,
that gray and grainy thorax of a beach spread out
horizon to horizon, and twenty yards from water's
edge, a stand of pine, its floor so thick
and dark with a hundred falls of cones and needles.

So we began with the thing that we would never see again
and the way we were, what we thought was now behind us —
a sea so thronged with ships they seemed uncountable,
Red Beach, LSTs, grids of wire mesh
floating our bogeys across the trap of sand — all this
would come again. Not knowing X-Ray Beach was twenty weeks
away. Or six months beyond, D-Day. For us
there was just one fact: ours were the wheels that turned
the shaft of Axis power toward defeat,
ours the ring of steel that would bring them to the ground.

What one knows and doesn't know. Yesterday we signed
 an Armistice with Italy. Today, we invade that Italy.
 So much for intelligence. Reports? Not a single
 sentence. All those agents, not a word. And Mussolini?
 Alive, dead, here, there, no one knew.
 The Germans? Somewhere . . . The greatest operation history
 had seen, but no one knew a thing. And yet
 one knew: those bodies all laid out like logs
 arm-by-arm as if to stand inspection *the first assault*
 and behind them stockpiles not of shells
 or food or medicine, but adding machines, typewriters, desks,
 chairs, as if some corporation gone massively astray
 was floating in on waves from the standing ships.
 What one knows and doesn't know . . . Beyond the sentries
 we heard a muttering of voices *Panzerwagen Kriegsflotte*
 or was it *pranzo ricotta* and in the ears of soldiers
 fresh from Oconomowoc and Junction City, passwords
 flew like swallows, in and out, in and out, until no one
 could tell *what's the name the name of this place*
what's the way you say P-a e-s-t-u-m

you are here you are going forward your helmet angles off
a tree limb you wish this stand of pine was somewhere
down in Arkansas that you were too that what drives you now
hadn't been so long in coming that it was in another life
but it is here and you are standing still and it is moving
toward you its face is not the face you'd thought
but somehow brighter straighter greener soundless
and the wind? the dust? the rain? the enemy?
nothing: it is the thud of your boots on this piney floor
and the grunts are your grunts you are the thud, the grunt

you are here you are going forward but now the trees
are myrtle cypress laurel the green and gray
is olive is a pile of stones an opening the cool
celeste is sky, shell-like with a shaft
of clouds so round, so iridescent, they seem a brace of pearls:

(Stanza continued)

*then rising up, the ruins of the three great Temples
 their sandstone salmon-colored in the sun's last rays
 shadows darkening their sculptured frieze their columns'
 fluting aaeiiioouu comes in a breeze comes
 as you stop as you stand as you stare and again it comes*

and we began with the thing that we would never see again:
 a war, frozen in stone, metope by metope,
 where the Letoides raised their bows and Hercules grabbed
 Alcioneus by the hair and ran him through as Ajax
 bending down as if to puke ran his belly on his sword.
 Hercules carrying the bodies of the Cercopes like milk cans
 on a pole, their peckers dangling down. And the war
 went on and on around the Temples, and as we looked, the eye
 of Clytemnestra caught with ax in hand glinted
 like a flake of ruby quartz in the setting sun.

*And now we have it: you are the one, the believer,
 you, dear reader, and around us both another
 book is being written, book around book,
 whose author is ever more than a maker of names
 and I never more than his eye or hand.* And the thing
 not one of us could have conceived — the place that was a name that
 was the end

of all our dying, Naples, is now just over the horizon,
 across the mountains, around the bay, under
 the volcano. It's there. And having begun with the thing we would
 never
 see again, we fight our way out of it, and into the other.

PLUTOLOGY

April. Mussels again in the market stalls,
all done up in wet bouquets of colored string.
Steely tuna, blebs of squid. And scallop balls
bleeding in banks of lemon. And waterfalls
of cress. But Gennaro can't eat anything.
April, mussels again in the market stalls
and he's flat broke. On his chest, in iodine, he scrawls
"Profit from my coming death." He's selling
himself, himself. For tuna, squid, or scallop balls
he'll carry your messages over the walls
of the Underworld, he'll tell them anything.
April. Mussels again in the market stalls
and no more limpets, no more raiding sea-walls
for their winkles. Hard cash now is everything,
the steely tuna, blebs of squid, scallop balls
cost fifty lire. And so does he. With protocols,
an extra fifty. And next week he'll be offering . . .
April. Mussels again in the market stalls.
Steely tuna, blebs of squid, and scallop balls . . .

Naples, Italy
1944

THE EXAMINATION

He was not a hunchback. So, inherently no luck in him.
 But famous, yes. And the smallest of the small.
 "Look up," you say to get someone's attention
 but from him-to-us the world was always up,
 nowhere but. His hands so dextrous, so
 diminutive, they'd fit inside a woman's
 pelvic cavity, zero in a speculum
 or swab exactly on a canker, finger her ligatures,
 scars. He was Doctor Pollici. And when the MPs pushed
 their first half-dozen women through the doors, there was a rush
 of frigid air around his ears that caught
 the soldiers at their knees and thighs, and the women cried
 clutching their drawers and coats and shopping
 bags as orderlies pushed them into the examination
 chairs and locked their feet in metal stirrups.

Ab pudenda disce omnes and all
 in a row *et labia* as he approached with his tiny stepladder.
 He could see the knuckles, the little scabs
 and scars, and the rings hung moon-like by his eyes.
 The little sighs, the handkerchiefs, the clink of coins . . .

Major O. D. Blade was AMG Staff
 Surgeon, and he found this Doctor Pollici a pain
 in the ass first because a midget a goddamn
 midget, not to mention local, one
 of those wop doctors who smells your piss, sets leeches
 on your veins. Just saying it, a local midget, didn't
 sound medical. Or military. Or anything he'd ever
 heard of. Only in Naples could it be so weird.
 There was Pollici on his little stepladder, a mouse

(Stanza continued)

sniffing cheese, his squeaky voice, "Va bene" and the swabs as long as his forearm falling on a tray the orderly bent over double just to hold. And his fame, for what? Plastic jobs, snip-and-stitching, reconstructing hymens. Instant virgins were Pollici's specialty, because in Naples . . . because in Naples they were better even than original, they took the local studs three nights to break. And because in this city of studs, it was O. D. Blade who had to have a major VD epidemic on his hands. And the best that Naples had to offer was a goddamn local midget . . .

A stream of sheep, Teresa thought. About to hustle through a dip. Or worse. There they'd been, standing in the queue for bread, when a jeep pulled up beside them, all that shouting, pushing, truncheons swinging, the women herded one street to another. The Negro MPs frightened her. And always the fear of the Moroccans — *les goumiers du Generale Juin* — how was she to tell the difference? And Simonetta wouldn't stop her sobbing. And the crowds by the hospital gate, the MPs pushing, pushing at them, *o' sciaquapalle* that redfaced ball-washer of an orderly shouting "Panties down girlies, the Americani want a look at what you've got" and the sob, the moan that broke out then. The shouts. Not even the Germans picked up housewives for a thing like this. The orderlies took hold of her, of Simonetta, pushed them into chairs. Rocked them backward, raised their feet. Threw back their skirts and spread their legs . . .

Moaning, sobbing, yelling. The noise became a din, became a roar. From the first the women fought the MPs and the orderlies, crying *mannaggia o' cazzo tuio va a fa'nculo a soreta* but the orderlies pushed, the MPs pulled, and the AMG VD inspection lumbered like a bullfight through the morning. Speculum, swab, smear,

(*Stanza continued*)

he could tell with his nose. It was like a hundred different kinds of codfish, but he could tell. Standing on his stepladder, he could see the girl was virgin, imperfect as nature made her. And the mother held her hand from the chair beside. She was clean. Speculum, swab, it was all the same. "Va bene." Pollici turned to Major Blade, "You see? a virgin, a real virgin, still *in vivo*, don't you see?" pointing with his swab. And Blade had answered, "Fuck the virgins." One hears his voice coming from above, easy with arrogance, clean as the smell of their Lifebuoy soap. Conquerors, they touch your skin, and suddenly the skin becomes their single thought, their dream, their appetite . . .

But then the sudden. The unexpected. As if some huge invisible bird had spread its wings across that chaos, had moved the air, had thrown a second darkness over them, one they'd never dreamed of. And from just one phrase *mines delayed action mines*.

As if in confirmation that the truth should come by word of mouth and rumors out of GHQ, the courier came with orders *threat of German DAMs evacuate port area 1400 hours all personnel, all civilians out*.

Blade had blanched. The fucking city was a bomb, that's what it was, with a midget doctor for a fuse. And Pollici had paused, then clambered down from the warm ramparts around his ears and dropped his speculum and swab. "Va bene," he began to say, but the women were pulling up their drawers and putting on their coats and shouting *fessi!* as they started out the doors that hung so limply open, bleeding into the streets, their lingering cries rising and redoubling in the rubble to a howl . . .

Naples, Italy
1944

THE LOCATION OF FLEDA PHILLIPS BROWN

I think my grandmother stays mostly
in this part of the lake, maybe up to Birch Point,
down to Deepwater Point,
her ashes churning behind big boats, rocking
against the shore, ashes
in the fishes' mouths, ashes in the ribbon
of sun under the water, ashes the sound
of rain in the trees.

I was nine when they scattered her over Central Lake,
but I swam in her for years before I knew.
When I found out, reading papers
in the attic, death got up from its one bed.
Before, there was only what I thought
I knew, one story, me,
kneeling on her iron bed, brushing her long
gray hair while she read me *White Patch the Ant*.
For thirty-five years she brushed against me
on all sides while I held on to that
one story. Everything I find out opens the pores
of my skin so that life and death can
get through me, properly. Fleda Phillips Brown
makes a fine grain throughout. When I try
to follow her, she takes the crest
of a wave, never the same ridge for long.

Two Poems

IN A SARI SHOP

Always with our eyes locked,
the shopkeeper's assistant
pours rainbows at my feet:
lustrous and sheer,
they turn to wine mother
in the light.

"What color is the lady's hair?"
"Black," I say, *like yours*.
He shows me one, jade white,
with morning-glories
along the border,
a symbol of legs intertwined:
his hand swims its shadow
beneath the fish's own white fins.

I notice that his shirt is broken
(my teeth could do that),
and through the gape
I see blue-brown breast muscle
over his heart.

The shopkeeper pours me rum,
offers to show me
how the lady should drape the silk.
"No," I say,
"let him model."
Mad with color, or mad with heat,
I buy sheet after sheet of it.

Money: magic.
More rupees change hands
and later, at my hotel,
the non-existent lady
wears the white one for me.
Inside the opulent cocoon
I see all of his skin.

EVENINGS IN KASHGAR

Like a golden florin
with two heads facing right
but opposite,
the horsecart driver and I
are obverse and reverse
of each other.

The horse
exhales the scent of ferns
from the afternoon.
His harness
is peppercorned with small brass bells
that bubble in the *brut* summer air:
dry seedpods
sizzle with seeds;
Ethiopian singers
are shaking their rattles.

The driver's face
is purple-brown against purple sky.
His profile, Greek,
grins a sliver of white
as I muster up his language.

Life is slowing down:
twenty years ago, or ten,
I would have been in love.
Shirts moonflower
from the arch-shaped blacks
of candleless houses,
but the tambourine monotony
of harness bells
goes on and on and on.

I lean my back
against the driver's back.
I feel wing muscles tense
as he pulls on the reins.
I gaze up,
but the tester over the cart
blocks the all-covering sky.
The trees
have their fingertips in silver,
so there must be a moon.

Roger Finch

TO ANY WOMAN DYING OF FEBRUARY

Listen.

We curve

curve around major news.

We carry it low,

tamped deep.

It's new,

so tender a rough breath could scathe it.

We listen for its beat,

we watch each other's eyes.

No child,

it has no body, no color even,

but if you cut a wellshaft

deep

through ancient grievance

tortured root,

this would be what rises,

brims with moon,

this circled shine.

Three Poems**DUTCH WIFE: A SAILOR'S ODYSSEY**

has gerhardus mercator misplaced his equator?
i take a peg from the board; another day gone, dropped
like a hot rivet
on the lower deck of remembrance.
we are lost, in lust, my dutch wife & i,
leg sprawls across hard stitches of her canvas belly
like caesarean scars on a dusseldorf
stripper.

we rock together on a treasonous sea, sealed with my
semen, more an ejaculate of fear than love,
slapping together on a tanker's raft,
bodies bound in seabrine's
bundle.

at night we search the heavens for our deliverance
(wars hibernate in spent stars of reason).
it is hell to die undistinguished by fight or fever,
my mute lover,
no bloody mouth, bruise of passion,
starshells passing over, the submarine
submerging
in a world awash in burning stars, oil trailing
from my fingers
to her sunburnt hair, cracked blue of painted eyes
that will never know birth or death, unblinking
in that final thrust.

AMERIKA

— for William Willis

in semidarkness he prised a ratguard off a bow hawser,
slid down the line to freedom: Galveston,
Gulf of Mexico, low plains of Texas white with cotton;
secret melding with the workers, grime of a coal passer
darkened skin;
slipping inland, felling trees in the Brazos Bottom,
land of red-eyed dogs & soft-eyed llamas —
on to the oil fields of West Texas—Oklahoma—
girls with skin like a stretch of stars
stitching the states together,
hair curled dark as freighter smoke, burning feather
on the horizon of his desire;
older women who drank straight from the bottle,
men with the lost hope of barroom brawlers, slick splat
of blood, hands balled to fist or glass . . .

remembering lines from Philip Larkin:

*I work all day, and get half-drunk
at night.*

*Waking at four to soundless dark,
I stood.*

wondering where Larkin found the first lines of the
delta blues in a London park

(Stanza continued)

as he searched now for the fount of this strange music,
 face dimetered with hope & disgust, disquieting
 dream
 awakened to nightmare: pushing up the visored cap
 in a stare-down with a boss whose cold eyes
 dishumed his humours —
 nothing in the dime novels of Buffalo Bill & Texas Jack
 rang bells of truth,
 so strange in the low German voice of his grandfather
 with dreams of *Amerika*, handed down
 to become his father's dream
 spilling over stone quays, hand winches, liner funnels,
 tooting & shrieking of lighters, barges,
 steamer cargoes — oranges from Spain, pineapples, bananas,
 coffee from Brazil, dried fish
 from Scandinavia,
 nitrate from Chile; but always the rounding ring of
 AMERIKA,
 his father sticking fuel & water tanks of hobo freighters
 like poking holes in the world
 to find the rise & fall of a single name,
amerika amerika . . .
 a father lost as his father in deep whoring feather-
 beds, drowning in feathered
 breast, soft as eiderdown, soft
 as a hum, *amerika* —
 seabags packed with self-deception, hardtack &
 stale tea
 lost among those who lie in narrow bunks & dream
 of coffins; his grandfather, first,
 deck boy on an English ship, four-masted bark
 of three-thousand tons,
 he, who felt the land breeze of Hamburg without
mal du pays,
 nose sharp as a shipwright's axe, big wallowing man,
 dancer & roller,
 a shouter mixing doldrum's calm,

(Stanza continued)

rumming the song-starved night, shirtfront like a
mainsail
blown out of the boltropes of his belly, a father
who stood on the hot steel deck of a Peruvian guano
carrier
like a big fish with a hook-torn jaw
singing *amerika, amerika* . . .

had he not seen their frigate birds black as crosses
in scabrous sky,
lived, as they had, on raw rye flour from the Andes,
hardtack broken up with belaying pins,
had he not jumped ship for them warmed by a word
liberty
with its hot little belly like a primus stove
simmering his blood?
to this moment as he waits for the American girl
gliding toward him down the bar,
breasts threaded in ropes of Irish linen,
thin dress billowing under the furious wooden fan
like sails of Egyptian cotton . . .

outside, the ravenous sea nibbles at the Narrows,
hoot & shout of sailors pulling at her arms, her dress,
& still she comes to him with outstretched
arms . . . *amerika . . . amerika . . .*

THE LAST WHALE

futtock shrouds of the topmast high seas
gray with distant flensing of bloodied bull whales,
aboard a half-brig, 372 gross ton, 183 foot two-decked
framed with white oak, chestnut planked with long leaf pine
copper fastened and lost at sea in . . .

a twentytwo year old kid who wanted to be . . . today
he would be a buff ecologist signed on as assistant navigator,
young tar-scented gutsy lads, roaring sunburned
sons-of-bitches

posing as words on Conrad's cold & boiling sea, yet willing

in his soundless calm to breach the roaring forties
of the south latitudes
cosecant to polar distance to
cosine of the half sun

a barnswallow rests on the lazyjack,
310 miles S by E of Bermuda, a porpoise impaled
on a harpoon over the martingale stays

the girls back home like garupas in the water
legs spread for deep diving in the galley
of black eyed skipjack blue eyed albacore
dark eyed blue-lined runner

waiting for a harpooned whale snuffed
to the loggerhead as neatly as an account exec
on the big street of dreams and
what's the difference in a wooden hulled existence
without care for sea or storm
but for the very form of existence, the black-
browed mollynaude, an albatross, still . . .

time to flex his knitsuit, grease lance,
mount the director's larboard boat
pull heavy oars of the board meeting

meeting to order sang the secretarial cooper's devil
turning the stone on razorwhetted boarding knives,
wood to the blackskin! blows!

dead ahead! forty-barrel bull abound
this crucifying sea stoked with the hard bread,
water of Club 21

gray overcast strong winds chop the long
swells of cigar smoke as he waits anxiously
for a snick of sun
through lowering clouds of cologne
Miami tans varnished with bull spermaceti
beyond flickering cabin light of whale oil
burning lamps, to sea again
pulling the heavy share, watching a squadron
of bikinied squid bearing contractual documents, blowing
a drowsy sepia inked screen
before the maggotswarm of sharks
gunning for his ambergris
carefully hidden in his secret belly
in the darkest part of him
but for the buglight lit . . .

the shouted song *Whiskey Johnny*
sung by the ring of bulls
as the larboard boat pounded, fell, rose
in the watch for weather

he adjusted his monkey belt and held the needle
overhead so they could see the color
of his pride in the morning rain
as the foresail goose-winged abanging
high on the swinging mast again

look sharp! raise a whale!

razorwhetted iron at half-cock for *Johnson*
far at the end of the table, forty-barrel
Johnson who opposed the merger, Johnson,
surfacing and blowing a vaporous nasal spray
of shredded invectives, swimming easily,
smoothly with speed, flukes barely
under the surface

in minutes the kill over the kill over
get over the kill so Johnson's widow
can play with his scrimshaw sperm whale teeth
incised lampblack designs, time

for his widow to bake a lonely pie
crimpin' the gunnel of freshly rolled piecrust
with Johnson's ivory jaggin' wheel, so now . . .

reach in the water and touch Johnson's crinkled
rubbery skin, touch the knobs, partitions,
to see what corporate life is like the instant
before death,

surfacing big bull he is O my God yes he breaks
water back from blowhole to hump

grease the lance take steady aim FIRE!

waifs and wigwags to the skipper

I've got Johnson!

toss out the barrel drogue let him swim
with the line in his bloodstained sea, *harpooned*,
waiting for the bloody boarding knives
to cleave his scarf of blubber, oil tried-out
and casked for home.

HOW TO GIVE UP EVERYTHING

Each morning, willing the world,
we walk through it
for a last time,
lingering, like children
leaving home.

Each leaf is memorized.
Each face. Each room.
The earth reels
beneath its fullness,
and only our age is barren.

The wind lifts up a sea of flowers
and the April sun
awakes such rawness in us
that we remember
how to give up everything.

RED EFTS

I would only bother to catch the ones
flame-quick. I loved how they flickered,
the shock of their capture
running a wick through them,
the spine of a flame.
Now I paint them
as once I threaded fire
through my finger:

so you can see
the crimson life hushing out from the skin,
the pebble of pulse from a neck.
Now my brush passes
each red eft

through water and fire-bright
pigment, and the grains of the paper
catch on the dampness spreading,
cooling a burn.

You appeared too quickly
to me, a day the world was drying
to sepia, ochre. Like something
vermilion, a flame
in the eye's far corner,
an astringent tear for the colors
missing. You placed a red eft

on my heart who vanished the moment
I lifted my finger
to stroke its pulse,
to say wait, don't go.

So I keep a finger
always raised, as if I were hushing
everything red. As if I were asking
red to listen
for only the flame.

Frannie Lindsay

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Donald Hall, *The One Day: A Poem in three Parts* (N.Y.: Ticknor & Fields, 1988, 70 pp., \$8.95 paper).

This is one hell of a poem. And if the curse, the prophecy and the apocalypse are three modes of the sublime, then this is also an uniquely sublime poem. These modes (like the eclogue and the pastoral, also in this volume) are not much in favor today, though no age has stood more in need of them. *The One Day*, which the poet tells us has been gestating for almost two decades, is a major achievement — a contemporary *commedia*.

In the opening section, two voices alternate and interweave — one roughly identifiable with the poet *nel mezzo del cammin*, and the other of a woman similarly adrift in the waste land of contemporary society. They are in separate cells of a cultural *inferno*, scourged by “desires and treacheries,” numbed by alcohol and drugs, prey to infidelity and self-pity. The *purgatorio* section is in the form of “four classic texts”: prophecy, pastoral, history, and eclogue. There the poet rages like Amos, endures days “without pleasure or purpose,” despairs over four hundred years of history perversely repeating its terrors, and like Isaiah dreams of a millennial redemption. The *paradiso* reintroduces the two voices from the opening and reveals them in their later years, illustrating the sad little epigraph from Freud: “We consider that we have succeeded when hysterical misery turns into ordinary unhappiness.”

But this summary does not begin to do justice to the power and even the glory of this poem as a vision and as a poem. The form of the verse is simple on its face but a web of masterful complexity in its internal workings. Hall has settled on a ten-line stanza in which the rhythms of colloquial speech clothe an irregular five-stress grid of meter:

I told the fourteen-year-olds:

“Never do anything except what you want to do.”

This is a poem that demands to be read aloud; the rhythms of the assonance, alliteration, and supple syntax appeal directly to the

voice:

In the morning I lie
waking dozing twisted in the damp workclothes
of lethargy, loathing, and the desire to die.

Ultimately the controlling image is the building of a house. From a central position in this *topos*— a yellow chair, a bed, a kitchen — the characters move out to build the house of their dying. And in this existential journal, each moves out into the “one day” of the title. Thus the time-structure of the poem is complex and interesting, working as it does on at least three levels. First is the linear progression of each life. Then there is the synchronic awareness of each character’s whole history, in the context of all human history. The narrator remembers lying in his childhood bedroom “hearing trees scrape/ like Hauptmann’s ladder,” recalling the Lindberg kidnapping. Then he sees “another self” subsiding into a sleep eased by “golden whiskey” and “yellowjacketed Nembutals,” and thereafter envies “an old man hedging and ditching/ three hundred years ago in Devon.” Finally, there is a third time outside of Time — the “one day” of the title. In the third section, “To Build a House,” both the narrator and the woman artist, now in her nineties, achieve a transcendent sense of living and working in an eternal present, that one day “unrolling/ continuous as the broad moon on water, or as motions of rain/ that journeys a million times through air to water.” The interweaving of these various time-senses creates the firm and fascinating fabric of the book as a whole. At first Hall seems to be working with Bergson’s concept of *durée*, in which we carry with us all of our experience compacted into the ever-growing snowball of our rolling life. But he goes beyond Bergson, first in the act of imagination through which he creates the alternative consciousness of the woman artist, and then in the transcendental process-philosophy in which “we are one cell perpetually/ dying and being born, led by a single day that presides/ over our passage through the thirty thousand days”

Tracing the elaborate web of Hall’s spider-work composition is one of the great satisfactions of reading and rereading this important poem. In addition there is the exhilaration of his irony, satire,

and invective. Not since Gil Orlovitz's "Not" have we had so comprehensive an excoriation of our corrupt and corrupting civilization. From "Prophecy":

I reject Japanese smoked oysters, potted chrysanthemums
 allowed to die, Tupperware parties, Ronald McDonald
 Your children will wander looting the shopping malls
 for forty years, suffering for your idleness
 until the last dwarf body rots in the parking lot

And Phyllis, in "Eclogue":

I set the oven for two hours and ten minutes
 while I cross-country. Dryads with slim exact
 hips and hair assemble in my living room for bridge.
 I am cheerful in order to be approved of. We forget
 every skill we acquired over ten thousand years of labor.

But the poet does not abandon us without alternatives. For in the *paradiso* the two personae of the poem are indeed redeemed. The artist grows beyond her chilling dreams, her alcohol and depression, to "lose self in the hourless hour of love" and in the creation of her art. The narrator leaves behind "the deject passion of self-regard" in "the house of daydream or idleness" to plant, to store the seedcorn, to "build the house," in a resolution that suggests both Wendell Berry's ideal of individual productive action and Hall's own life on the New Hampshire farm he inherited from his grandfather. Like Berry, Hall sees the path to redemption through productive labor. Unlike Berry, Hall is not here an elegiac poet, but more like an Old Testament prophet, both scourge and visionary.

John Allman, *Curve Away from Stillness: Science Poems* (N.Y.: New Directions, 1989, 96 pp., \$7.95 paper).

Like Hall's *The One Day*, this is a group of poems that cohere to make one major poem. Like Hall, Allman includes an eloquent statement by the poet about his poem; both conceive the poem as "the mind acting — theorizing, remembering, and most of all: making" (Allman's words). Both move from the sensuous evidence to the larger vision. Both have produced important books.

But Allman's poetic is radically different from Hall's. Without punctuation except for white space, Allman's poems swirl and tip-toe and parade over the whole field of the page. Like Hall's, however, they tempt the reader to act out the lines with the voice. They do read wonderfully aloud; Allman has a superb ear.

And a beautiful mind. These poems demand to be read slowly, as though the reader were composing them along with the poet. Most readers will enjoy having a dictionary at hand: the vocabulary is rich and sometimes strange: *albedo*, *spiracles*, *stomata*, *feculent*, *sudorific*. Allman avoids jargon; the language is precise, and some of the strangeness results from its wonderful precision:

constant
change
 in this pond
 the growth
of weeds
 sunlight seeping through an undisturbed
 depth
bullfrogs
swelling on the rocks
 their deep voice
belched
from a turbid
 loneliness

Like the poetry of Ammons, which it resembles in its meticulous observation, its thoughtfulness, and its range of subject, this work makes much contemporary poetry seem brainless and hackneyed. Of course the more one knows about physics and biology, astronomy and chemistry, the more one will win from these poems, but there is no barrier here between the poetry and the unscientific reader that close attention will not dissolve. Poets especially will relish the complex sound layers, mercurially shifting

 this trembling in his legs
though he stood still though he stared at the light
 breaking through grey webbing of the birch tree
visibly

at least
 himself in this time the place of his
 choosing habiliment in white
 winter's habitual breathless
 hibernation the illusion
 of stasis.

This is a book for people who have time for reading, and re-reading, and closing the book and taking it up again, perhaps with colored pencils to trace the complexity of the metaphor webs, the Shandean simultaneities, the recitatives, the arias, the ensembles. And these readers will soon recognize that this is not a poem *about* science so much as it is a love poem, and the complex and delicate metaphoric structure of the book, taken as a whole, is the lover's dance between the beloved and the universe. Beyond that readers will experience another analogy: to quote Allman's "Prolegomenon":

Whether one chooses to affirm or negate the material world, there is a physical *something* in the experience of beauty — and it is the somethingness of thought and perception, the palpable matrix, that provides the diction for discourse and the vehicle for metaphors here. Poetry, like science, is a way of knowing. The poem: an epistemological artifact, a musicalized synthesis, a layered history of ideas. A thinking dream.

Fifty Fables of La Fontaine, trans. by Norman R. Shapiro, illustrated by Alan James Robinson (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988, 122 pp., \$29.95 clothbound).

Here we have an admirable edition of about one-fifth of these wise and witty poems, drawn from all twelve books, re-created in the varied forms of the originals, with those originals *en face* for immediate appreciation of the translator's charm and ingenuity. The introduction and notes are valuable; the illustrations are appealing.

Margaret Gibson, *Out in the Open* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989, 56 pp., \$13.95 clothbound).

These poems sound so simple and clear, they seem as easy as breathing. It's an illusion. They grapple with difficult subjects, in meticulous and resonant language. They seem the result of some long-practiced discipline — perhaps Zen or yoga — in which intense concentration on the environment and the subject's interaction with it produces moving movements of illumination. Gibson amazingly has the language and the prosody to share these moments with the reader. Here's a sample from the middle of a poem entitled "Green Pepper":

My fingertips trace each yield
and slide of pepperskin north
and south, a surge into shadow
and line, shoulders and buttocks.
In the world of the pepper I'm plural,
polymorphous, perverse
as a play of light in the original
void.

First, the pepper is intensely real. Then the mind of the poet moves supplely in space, always dynamic. From sensuous fingertip to the geography of north and south, of the human body, and then, sensually, the slide into mythical cosmology — all in one surging gesture. And this is one small nibble from one of the smaller poems in this delicious volume. I would like space to quote all of "Doing Nothing," a virtually perfect poem — ostensibly about berry picking.

"A book lives through the passionate recommendation of one reader to another," wrote Henry Miller in *Books in My Life*. I should acknowledge that I discovered this excellent poet through hearing Philip Booth reading some of her poems on our community radio station. I then sought it out and I passionately recommend that my readers do so too.

M.K.S.