

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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Cover: Max Schaefer, "Bamboo Craftsman" and "Man Surrounded by Fish," Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh, December 1989.

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HERO

Crossing and recrossing his favorite hole
for over an hour without a kiss, he drifts
in the middle of a tear-shaped lake — more
an apostrophe since the rains — dreaming
the small deft waves that bear him are hands
of so many young nurses he knew in the hospital
the summer of his wound. . . That's when it slams
his plug, or tugs, warily, the rod-end dipping,
the rod an arc, like a dowser's lucky wishbone ash.
He knows it takes a little graceful whip,
a flick or yank from side to side, to snug
the silver barb to lip, quick as knotting thread
to a needle. Slapping the trigger, he also knows
if he did it right it cannot run without him.
Ah, he remembers being that hungry and taken —
eighteen and on leave: the red and white neons,
green fluorescent hulas, buckets of wet, wriggling
bait. . . Until he returned to the drama:
that final bridge fully wired and set to blow,
the sergeant stabbing him with his gunbarrel: run!
Ah, but he survived, so what the hell. Reciting
the story again and again at a hero's volume,
he's content to drift at dusk anytime — waves
shoving him back to shore, to white birches
greeting him there, like so many young nurses
he knew, each with a tiny kiss that hurts.

Christopher Seid

Two Poems

POORHOUSE

"Eat that egg!" Mama snaps.
Don't! begs the giant poached eye.

"Eat! If The Depression gets any worse
 we'll end up in The Poorhouse with nothing
 but potatoes in our bellies."

My fork fidgets with the elastic cataract.

"Here comes The Depression!" Dora grrrrs—
 all claws-yolky teeth-crossed eyes—

and I see a dinosaur-shaped tornado gobbling the neighbors.
 Its tail swishes us to The Poorhouse: I see the depot,
 made longer. My uncles, who've been laid off at the mill,
 are standing around with my cousins and aunts like families
 waiting for a train. Mama's sputtering and sweeping up gum
 wrappers with Dora, and there's Daddy on a sunny bench
 resting his wrenched shoulder against the wall. I'll sit
 beside him where Mama dassent nag me for being so finicky.
 Here comes the handcar Daddy's had to pump too many years
 with boozing Paddy Dunderstrom. It stops and Paddy's husky
 daughter dumps a gunnysackful of potatoes into the women's
 outstretched aprons. "Once there was a little squirrel
 named Ornsler—" Slowly the Sandman-hum shapes *bushy tail*
cozy nest oak tree. "Now one day a cold wind rattled
 the red leaves all around her and Ornsler said Golly, I'd
 better gather me some acorns before the winter sets in.
 Now down on the ground Old Badger was prowling around—"
 Dimmed by my yawn, Mama and Dora scrub our share
 at the pump, and tuck them among bricks in a bonfire.
 "—Then Ornsler scooted up the oak tree and she kicked
 a loose branch down onto Old Badger's snoot—"
 When sunset butters the clouds, I'm yumming the warm spud
 between my paws, and down on the ground—
 Mama's gobbling the egg.

TRANSFORMATIONS — 1934

Bad liturgy hides His face. —Martin Buber

When Bill Kloosterman was killed in the mill
 Mama's face went all crooked with dry crying.
 "We need God," she groaned, and bought a big black
 Bible which Daddy would read aloud daily at supper.

Drunken Noah sprawled in the sauerkraut and sausages
 Substitute-Lamb hid in the mashed potatoes
 "Take it, eat, this is my body," rasped rotting
 Mr. Kloosterman.

"In recess," I bleated, "some girls play church with
 a lady-doll and clover and a string of blue beads."
 "The Devil's toys," Daddy snapped. "Eat!" Mama
 yelled. "And play with the Kloosterman kids."

I tried.

 All winter our cinder-eyed snowmen
 our crossed circles for fox-and-geese the hill-
 side of indented angels were dirtied with soot
 from the mill.

Emaciated, I'm excused at last from playground,
 then table allowed, by worried parents, to tope
 Ovaltine in the closed pantry. Beside me,
 wreathed in an oval of clover—lately also a loop
 of blue beads—Lydia E. Pinkham exudes blessings.

Karen Snow

Two Poems

BETWEEN THE RAILS

He found God between two cars
of the Southern line from Greenwood to Clinton,
where his feet had frozen in place
on the small block holding the coupler.
His hands still held the ladder rung
he had swung down from
and could easily climb again
if only his feet would move.

He stood between them,
watching the couplers push and pull
each other like locked jaws of dogs
fighting, watching the one hose
swell and breathe with the back
and forth pulling, the steeled back
rippling, the ties flying by,
the rocks bouncing up and down
as they pushed into the rails.

He heard the screaming of wheels
against rails, the pulsing
at bolted joints, the banging
and groaning of huge bodies
against each other, struggling it seemed
to come together or fall apart.

When he looked down he saw his face,
clear as his mother's tears
on the bed of rocks, the eyes
as sharp as his father's,
the teeth as yellow.
It moved between the rails, never changing,
never giving him a chance to look away,
but coming closer and closer

(Stanza continues)

till he could feel the breath
on his face, taste the sweat,
smell the odor like wet leaves.
The open mouth screamed. The eyes
pierced him with anger. Something
struck him like a fist in his chest
taking his breath away, holding him
tight against the back of the car.

The railroad people called his parents
from Clinton, and his father came to get him,
slapping him all the way home, shouting
about closed doors, groundings, trains,
repeating never again, never again.
Afterwards it would always seem the same,
the hardened features, the stony eyes,
the fleeting images trapped between the rails,
the fist beating in his chest.

HEARING THE DEAD

Kiting in the cemetery,
the hope of flight flaring
in our chests, dripping
wet and messy from our mouths,
there was a secret
to dodging the stones,
running over humped earth
without stumbling, flying
between the rows without
kicking old flowers, splintered
crosses, chunks of stone.
There was a secret to letting
the wind rise from the weeds,
follow you like a voice thrown
after you, then catch you,
filling and lifting your kite
above the tethered field.

If you could lose yourself
there, forget for a moment,
what you knew to be true,
you could feel the ground
in your legs rising and falling
like circles on water,
feel wet grass licking
bare ankles, taste
the dirt in the wind,
hear grounded angels
whistling in the weeds,
the bones dancing
underground, guiding
you through this last place
on earth, with laughter.

Scott Owens

HOW JACOB LOVED

When Jacob wept in Leah's arms
it was for Rachel's lies, her eyes
her knees, her almost perfect
feet

A stubborn dream that would not let him sleep
when he had rolled aside from calculating sons

And when he bore the tricks at Laban's hands
and heard the jackals laughing in the Syrian night
he saw her smile

And knew, as only great deceivers know
the truth
about her idol thieving hands

She wove and wove
a strand of night into her hair
a woolen band
a Syrian wolf to guard the fold

Through all the years of waiting he would dream
of Laban's daughters multiplied
like sheep
in lines across the Syrian sand

She alone refused
to lay her child at his feet, herself
the gift

It was enough
if he, his face upon her knee
could beg to hear her tell again
her dream of rungs
her spinner's hands to smooth his hair
to brush away at last the lie
He loved

Jacob Rusel

STORM

a storm at last in this damned
desert,
even the lights went out on the whole block,
most of the people asleep,
the drunks just poured another drink,
I poured another drink,
1:42 a.m.
the lights go back on,
Brahms begins to play on the radio again,
I think of Turgenev, just for the hell of it,
just because I like his name.
there are good names: Mozart, Celine,
Artaud, Bach.
some names ring through and stick.
anyhow, it's raining and raining and raining.
and Joe Louis is dead and Ty Cobb is dead
and it's been a long time since the Waner brothers
patrolled the outfield in Pittsburgh
and whatever happened to Smith Brothers cough
drops?
I used to eat them like candy.
we need the rain.
we need the rain.
we need it.
I used to eat those cough drops like candy and I had
a dot and dash set and I knew the Morse code and I
used to send out S.O.S's for years but help never
came.
Turgenev.
I wish my name were Turgenev.

hello, I am Ivan Turgenev and it's raining and I'm writing
about the rain
it rains hard here in Russia and the nights are black and
the days are black
and my girlfriend keeps telling me about this guy who has
these arching eyebrows.
and I say, "oh yes, very interesting. . . "

my name is Turgenev and it's raining and we need the
rain.

ran into Gorky the other day and he said rain was just so
much capitalist bullshit.
crazy guy, crazy.

well, it's 1:58 a.m. and I am sleepy and I think that I will
sleep.

sleeping in the rain helps me forget things like I am going
to
die and you are going to die and the cats are going to die
but it's still good to stretch out and know you have arms
and
feet and a head, hands, all the parts, even eyes to close
once
more, it really helps to know these things, to know your
extensions
and your limitations, but why do the cats have to die, I
think that the
world should be full of cats and full of rain, that's all, just
cats and
rain, rain and cats, very nice, good
night.

Charles Bukowski

Three Poems

THE STORY

We walk through the aquarium's blue light behind the father and child he holds up to the tank like an offering, and he keeps saying it wrong, *Anna moans, look, anna-moans*, the child whispering chorus until I see in the anemones the face of my great-grandmother Anna, whom I knew only from tintypes found in a shoebox soft and damp to the touch as flesh, found as a child in her daughter's attic, where my mother had warned me to stay with my dolls on the open patch of planked floor, away from the strange architecture of trunks and boxes. A shoebox wouldn't matter, I thought, pulling it free, and then the face I didn't know, grieved, though I didn't know grieving, either. Not that year, but soon, I heard the story over and over, how her husband had teamed the horses and taken off across the Hudson on a January night and plunged through the ice; horses, carriage, all; and not till the thaw weeks later did they find him, washed ashore below Storm King. They poured whiskey down her throat to stop the screams. And then the part I thrilled to hear: *They buried her with him*. She never said his name again; her children's; anyone's. She never spoke. But at night they'd hear her in her room, moaning as a dog moans at full moon. That was grief, then: no words for it. . .

Now I stare at the anemones,
their reds and purples pulsing in a rhythm
like the heart's, seeing the cascade
of leather, wheel, blanket, horse; the wild
wheeling eyes of the man powerless to stop
plunging deeper into water, the cold
shock of it, the mute screams that carried
straight to her heart and stayed there
the rest of her life, opening at night
like these flowers I imagine I can hear
breathing under water. . .

The child whispers again. We move
on to the next tank, red-bellied piranhas
that hang like ornaments in the water, bright,
harmless. But if the glass were to break— .
He'd driven the river for years. Sometimes
she went with him, her dark hair streaming
in the wind, wild with it like the horses'
manes. The ice held them like the hand
of God, she wrote once in her diary. Or
someone who loved irony added that to what
I'm telling you now, making it up as I go,
by way of telling you all I keep being
unable to say, how losing you would feel
like losing the words to the story.

CLEARING ACANTHUS

The woman who planted this acanthus
loved you too. I cut back years of its slow
spread across the bank above your house
and think of her here, lifting her hair
from her neck to ease the prickly heat
beginning there, beautiful in her
exertion, thinking of you, maybe, of how
you would nod, approving, at this green
precaution against mudslides or less violent
erosions. She's humming. Her children's voices
rise from the deck below, dart around
her, quick small birds. She calls
out to them, shuddering suddenly as shade
from the scrub oaks glazes her skin. In the end,
she rued her choice, you've told me.
Too soon each year the acanthus droops
like the ears of cartoon elephants, a circus
excess its flowered stalks affirm,
rising like tubes of cotton candy,
picked at and abandoned. And nothing
stopped the mudslide when it came.

Last night, you called me her name
again, and I saw what I'd known
all along: how she's everywhere you look,
quiet as light and no less essential
to your sense of this world. And I confess
a grief at that, at not being all
to you, though reason chides me for
such greed and I love you more

(Stanza continues)

for keeping sight of what good
she did you. The ghosts of old
loves are there beside us in the bed,
an article you showed me said: Admit them.
I dig down to see how far one root has gone,
imagining her beside me, her perfume mixing
with my own and the loud sweat of broken
stalks. The soil's clay, rock-stubborn
to my spade. I watch the root disappear
beyond reach, thinking how a name imposes
its claim on the heart: ghostly, dark,
beloved of its own tenacity.

HOLDING PATTERNS

When I lift it from the glass cylindrical stand
I have to hold it with both hands, afraid
it will slip like water through my fingers,
and even when I pour boiling water down
the smaller cylinder, the infuser, over black
currant leaves, I see how it will weigh
almost nothing, not a teapot at all but the idea
of one, pure as one of Plato's forms, designed
by someone in Germany who must have held still
as handle and spout came clear in the air,
austerely beautiful. That one's in a museum.
Yours is a copy, a wedding gift, one of the few
you got to keep, you tell me, still stunned
that I've broken it, cracked the infuser
as I rinsed the black leaves free.

You're too aggrieved to continue.
Your hands hold the air as if the teapot's
there, and I see her, austerely beautiful,
holding still while you force yourself
to say it, you can't live with her
anymore, her pain enough to shatter
her, and you with her, if it came to that.
As it did. And then her rage, severing
all connection, until there was nothing but
the teapot, its glass so pure you could look
through it free of distortion however
you held it and see back through the pain
to the joys you'd known with her.
I see how your peace depends on her
seeing them too. If I'd known— ,
I begin, and you look back at me.
There's still time to stop yourself
from saying what will shatter
like glass between us. I hold still.

Lynne Knight

DEAR MISS ETHERIDGE — 1871

*With the introduction of dry-gelatin plates in
1871, sitting for portraits was much easier
than it had been just a few years earlier.*

—*The Great Photographers*

Three years, and it arrives. A thousand
days of letters, and finally I see.
Of this rough house and stony field
I have written. What I eat, where I sit.
Where I lie. Every thread of wind
that combs this roof. Every beam
that strikes wheat shafts, and finds
one's heart beneath wool shirts—
that makes skin and leather one.

I've read more of you than Whitman.
I've seen you at you desk write
my name, then gaze at downturned heads.
Heard your voice blend with others
in a sacred room, and counted every pane.
Tasted you in dust that follows Maggie's
hooves. Felt warmth mix with coolness
in a woman's hand, and sensed
you turn.

Your photograph arrived. I've held it
half a day. Turned it in the sun. Compared
it to an image seen behind closed lids.
They are not the same. Oh, lady, never
did I dream.

Four Poems

TONING THE FELTS

This procedure is done by hand, using a voicing tool to work the fibers apart, the goal being a smooth gradation from treble to bass.

At first everything bounces back
and your touch has the pingy miaow
of struck glass, the brilliance
of a young man quick with words.
Then your fingers notice flecks
in the eyes of the woman whose
eyes are like a pond, with leaves
on the surface beginning to let
go. Lower down, you sense the
slow pain as afternoon deepens
until what remains is night and
you hear a single word from
the place where the loosening
needles have entered everywhere.
Think of the deepest reach
of your left hand. Think again.

BLEEDING CHUNKS

originally, bits of opera served out of context

Tear a sonata, and you get
Frank Sinatra by moonlight

or an actor, fingering a glass
of something red while
behind the simulated mountains
a clavier pours thirty seconds
before its strings are cut.

Sir Neville sails the seas
extracted, a Reader's Digest
Haydn, and the station manager
comes on and says, Send Money.

And we do, hungry for the cadence
not injected between bits of news,
for the cadenza that carries on
until we feel it on our skin
and at the roots of our hairs.
We send because we were nearly
lost. We had forgotten, until
a whiff of Haydn brought it back,
how home feels and, new children,
what it is we have been starving for.

THE AMATEUR

She is thirty-seven and her fingers
have never touched ivory.

She does not know how to listen with
the small of her back.

She was brought up never to insist.
She whispers

not because her words are important
secrets but because

she is afraid, and when she struggles
at the piano,

her fears run like mice up and down
the keys.

What if she does not get the answers
right? What if

her teacher smiles into his beard?
She is forty-two

and five years old before her hands
come out to play.

NOCTURNE

after Chopin

i

Drawing the oval across measure
lines, he thinks, *this woman*,
and combs with his fingers
her dark hair.

The scent of
jasmine lingers on his hands.

ii

A warm wind splits the notes
into two streams of birds,
each yearning south.

He
lifts his pen, wanting to
stay their wings,
high above
the flowered islands.

iii

Somewhere he has left Helena,
trailing her fingers
in the water.

He turns the pages.
The moon silvers the paper
where the notes sail,
the small
dark notes with their flags,
the whole notes with none.

Lola Haskins

THE OLD LADY'S STORY

When my friend Clementina
Was growing up in Honduras
There was an old lady in the village
Who had died and come back to life.

As her body lay on the cot
Her soul got up and left it;
She walked out into the village street
Which was somewhat different from usual

Because instead of ending
In a muddy track into the hills,
It now ended at the edge
Of a wide, swift-flowing river.

And what was that green land
On the opposite shore
With such inviting shady trees?
Perhaps it was an island—

She couldn't quite tell—
But one thing was certain:
Happiness blew toward her from that place
With a scent like vanilla flowers.

Looking anxiously around,
The old lady saw that she was not alone;
Other people just like her
Were walking down to the bank

And as soon as each little soul
Strolled uncertainly to the water's edge,
A dog would swim up
To carry it over on its back.

The dogs were as busy as sidewheelers
Ferrying souls across the river.
The old lady stood watching a long while
But no canine psychopomp

Hurried up to *her*,
And then — she remembered!
The kicks as she cooked the beans:
Get away, you curs, there's none for you!

So she sadly turned around,
Sadly walked up the street again.
It was hard to climb back into that body
So old and fever-wasted

But she managed to blink her eyes,
And then she drank a little cold tea,
And after a while
She got quite well again

So that she lived on for years
Telling her story over and over,
A source of deep interest to the whole village —
And a notable friend to its dogs.

Kate Barnes

THE LAST NIGHT

Drinking pints of lager and lime
like any other night, we talk
until the cigarette butts overflow
spreading ashes in the darkness.
Beneath the table, your prayer
beads click as unconsciously
as the chiming church bells.
The beads shine in your palm
like little black eyes. Five pairs

stare from the family photograph
taped above your cot. Posing
on a beach in Tripoli,
they watch as we undress.
Rigid, distant, and forever wounded
your father stands in the center
like a soldier with his troops.
Nadia smiles. She is too young
to remember her banished brother.
Your mother holds a shell to her ear,
and listens as if it is your voice
echoing across the Mediterranean. The shell
is dark, smooth and cut
open to the forces of the sea.

Your body still trembles remembering
your mother's hand as it pressed
your face through the prison gates
to memorize it. The last night
your eyes search my body
as if it is unfamiliar.
We speak the wordless language
in your unheated room above
the blue and orange runway lights
where you whisper my name in Arabic
when your mind loves with your body.

I run a toenail along your arch.
Falaqua, you finally told me,
is a beating on the soles
of the feet. A punishment.
Fingering lines of the whip on your back
I feel the pain.
Scars are your body's language.

Tonight, I cannot touch you without crying.
While you sleep I lie still,
watch the sky turning to ash,
tighten my fists around the leather
string of black beaded faith,
and I pray to my God to understand you.

To wake you I touch
my lips to your forehead
as though you were a baby.
When you open your eyes, light
falls into my powerless hands.
And I take it.

Marjory Wentworth

Two Poems

CRISIS CLINIC

My first night, a woman
 with her newborn in the sling
 of her arm listens from afar
 to her voices; when her mother,
 who has brought her in, asks
 "Is the baby hungry?" she says,
 "I fed him yesterday";
 when her mother says, "I think the baby is wet,"
 she answers, "I changed him yesterday."
 The techs and I go into the staff room;
 I am the doctor; they say, "We're waiting
 for you to tell us what to do."

* *

In the seclusion room,
 the man who dove onto the hood of the police car
 lies in restraints, loudly singing.
 Each time I pass, he calls, "Come lie down with me,"
 or "Bitch Doctor,"
 or "Please marry marry marry me."
 By the front desk, a grieving mother,
 fluorescent lights; yesterday her baby
 dragged a chair to a bureau, climbed
 from chair onto bureau, bureau to ledge
 of the twenty-second story window,
 and fell. She wants
 Valium, she wants numbness.
 My colleague, here to sign some charts,
 mutters, "Have her talk about it, instead."
 I stand, a locked door, between them.

* *

In the upstairs On-Call Room,
a narrow bed, cheap bureau,
vinyl-covered chair, unframed rectangle
of mirror. It's 2 a.m.

I lie looking at shadows crouched
on the ceiling. I wait
for the bedside phone to ring.

* *

The young woman whispers
that ten days ago her husband
moved them out here
from Georgia. Then, last night, he left her
in their one room with the babies,
went up to the roof,
and someone shot him,
or he shot himself. The officer
couldn't say. The officer told her
to come here. She has no one, no money
to bury him.

And how should she tell
her five-, four-,
and two-year old children?

I listen. I say
that in the morning, when they open,
I'll phone Family Crisis upstairs;
I tell us both, "they can help."

* *

3 a.m.: Stepping outside
for air, I inhale fumes.
The intersection
of Sutter and Divisadero Streets glitters
with broken glass. A drunk zigzags by,
singing. The hospital security guard
in the Emergency Room doorway

(Stanza continues)

hums off-key. The moonlight doesn't touch
the metal-grilled windows of the bank,
the all-night convenience store.
The moon fades over the city; it wants nothing
to do with this.

* *

The rookie policeman has brought in
a girl-who-is-a-boy-who-is-a-girl
who is neither and nothing
but insists, her hair wild,
her jeans shredded. He lingers
as I fill out the form
that allows us to hospitalize her/him/her
for 72 hours' surveillance, hot meals,
a chance to talk and bathe.
My paperwork doesn't require him,
but something delays his departure.
"Doc?" he says, "Oh, never mind."
I sigh. He laughs.
"Me, too," he says, waves,
leaves to return to his beat.

* *

The young man sits wrapped
in a blanket, still wet
from his walk into the Pacific,
still pondering why the woman
walking on the beach
walked into the ocean with him
and when he changed his mind
walked out with him
and called the police.
We summon his deaf-mute father,
his father's gay lover, his father's
gay lover's neighbor
who will translate sign.

I take a swallow of coffee; it's 4 a.m.;
I walk into the small room
where they are gathered.
Fluorescent light pours down
on beige linoleum. Careful, I think.
You could drown in there;
all five
on a broken raft.

* *

For three hours, the boy in white
has sat silent where the officer
left him; he's answered
no questions; he holds himself immobile,
to outlast the voices.
Periodically, I sit down
beside him, talk a little: my name;
later, I say he looks frightened,
maybe he took something or somebody gave him
something and he's having a hard time;
later, that maybe he'd feel safer
in the hospital. He nods,
but very slightly, trying not
to fall off the ledge.
Now as I pass him,
he glances almost at me,
exhales a little.
When the gurney comes, as I've told him
it will, to take him to the ambulance,
he whispers, looking just past me,
"Tom," he says. "My name is Tom."

* *

Hunched in the straight-backed chair,
the man scowls; he's Black, thin,

(Stanza continues)

about fifty. As I step towards him,
he aims a metal ashtray to come close,
but miss. It does; he freezes;
I pick up the ashtray,
put it on a nearby table, sit down
three seats from him.
“Feel like talking?” I ask.
He nods, puts his head in his hands, sobs.

* *

This is the eleventh young gay-male-who-overdosed-
when-his-lover-of-three-weeks-left-him
that the techs have seen this week.
Immune to their cynicism, he weeps
as he sits in the interviewing cubicle,
telling me his story. It's 5:30 in the morning;
I've heard this before; I know
that after I hear about the short-term lover
who left him, I'll ask gentle questions
and there'll be a mother who died when he was three,
a father who deserted —
his first losses like fossils in rock.

* *

In the On-Call Room, the light
has turned yellow;
the glass over the bureau
is chipped; I lie down
rocking between caffeine
and something-for-sleep;
don't ring, I say aloud
to the telephone,
don't ring.

SIX GOODBYES

As he backs out of my driveway
on his way to the airport, he waves.
I don't show that his visit
has unravelled our old friendship.
Futile. Like trying to translate from Yiddish
that for which English has no equivalent.
I wave back.

* *

My seventeen-year-old student
who, in ten minutes, will die on the freeway,
stands at my elbow waiting to speak.
I am engrossed with another; when I glance back
moments later, she is gone:
slim, fitted jeans,
pale blue turtleneck sweater,
blond hair wafting behind her,
long and newly washed.

* *

I walk my friend to my door
and watch her walk
down the front path between wisteria
and flowering pear, under a shower of pollen
and a full moon.

I hear the engine of her car as she drives
down Zinn; the sound vanishes
before she reaches Snake Road.
What a good talk! Now the silence
enfolds her like a cape.

* *

Tonight, after two years
of lullabies and rocking,
lullabies and rocking, suddenly
you are asleep by your own singing.
I wander our rooms in darkness.
Such sadness, and this
merely a rehearsal;
then, in an upstairs window,
the white November moon.

* *

You respond to my invitation
with a few lines of which the letters
alternatingly spike and tremble like wet ink:

“I can no longer travel.
To your parents, and to you,
warmest regards.”

* *

She, who once flirted with the Nazi guards
and when they weren't looking,
threw parcels of medicine and food
over the barbed wire
into the ghetto of Warsaw,
raises her glass.
There in the hospice,
we drink to the peonies and irises
hastily arranged on the table,
to the black-lacquered bowl
her husband brings her,
filled with plums and pears.

Susan Kolodny

WITCHES

“My salad days,
When I was green in judgment, cold in blood. . . ”

Just three girls teamed up in their fashion,
the punk look, yet they seem a prologue
to some play about fate, some new phoneable one,
perhaps, as they cross this parking lot, their
rhythm between the cars quite another world
at work. Feral, most noticeable the one leading,
pleased with herself; her hair—like crows just
landed, preening their big wings—tucked just aside
a pale face, is wider than her small thighs.
Something male, slouching by the Rexall, shifts.
These are the teen years: today that salad.

Other shoppers turn to stare at what passes
costumed like the Impaler's blood-drunk sister.
Some of our daughters will look this way, will
slide down the rain gutters at night to mount
dangerous machinery, to tattoo the rosy place
with surreal butterfly, to share the quart beer.
Boys will ring her like a cage, drawn by her
cosmetic rebellion. She is getting even, mad at us
who can't help looking, and at the way she's been
treated; she pities the cheerleaders and softer
natures; she runs from the father who still searches
her room, who yanks up her sleeves collecting evidence
at the vein, and who one night took all her carnival
clothes out back and burned them with the leaves,
his ritual discipline; now she will dress in ashes;
she will take money, she will lead more girls. Her
soul rises to the surface like a bruise just below
the cheap puce shadow around her eyes, mad at you,
at this moment, when even to be young is not enough.

IN THIS NIGHT'S RAIN

Like the sacred text
of a mystery religion
thought lost
the trees emerge—wet as birth,
black as the coal of their ancestors.

The white birch that by day
plays with light, curves over
like a dull ghost
or pallid afterthought.
This night belongs to black.

Not bombazine, buttoned
to the chin over corsets that crack
like bark, but as your mother was,
dressed in shadow at the corner of your bed,
beating down terror by breathing—a presence
before light and beyond
that returns tonight
to stand in this deep immensity,
this black bath that was once its air.

Questions tap at my umbrella.
A white cat crosses my path.

On a night like this, Oedipus too
walked to face the questioner
who asked the easiest
riddle in her book
because she too loved his too-proud eye.

Yes, a night like this, and a tree
like this, rising in its robe of shadow—
the familiar scent beside him
in the dark—dripping from its tips
a warning of love's black first milk.

THE SATURDAY NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

but I had to exchange the wrong one
fast before they sold the right one
out from under me, so I loaded the
once-again newly post-operative
large, black dog in the car and we
went to the mall where Willie became
infected with the spirit of
Christmas and decided he wanted
a boom-box like all the other
guys who hang out at the mall,
a Raiders' jacket, a 14-karat
paw-pik, lizard leash, and
while we're at it Diana Rigg
to walk him. *Awright!* He's got
his pride, my man, his rep.
He can't be being seen—no
way—with that old bag with
the ear muffs.

Two Poems**LULLABY**

After the near-skid in the snowstorm, I park the car slowly and wait. The baby kicks so I sing, hand across my belly. What is there to remember but a lullaby that moves on its own accord?

Once I asked my mother for the words.
I made them up, she said, I can't remember.

And I can't remember how the first light was cast, fluorescent, drawing me large into the limitless world of air and the familiar pitch of my mother's voice.

I sing a lullaby that began before my birth, my mother alone in a parked car making up words that say, yes, I want you, if only for this moment that the sun drops clean as a coin through the clouds.

I start the car, singing the lullaby soiled by memory, and I am carried through water and blood, one child bearing witness to another in words made up by memory, by the blindness of the snow, by danger and grace as I turn the wheel.

IN WHAT DO YOU PUT YOUR FAITH?

Gravity. Velocity.
The aim of other drivers.
Yellow lines on the tar.
The mechanic. The sun not
exploding. The tilt of the wheel.
Safety glass. A car factory.
Someone's husband telling her, yes,
before she clocked in. Meteors.
The even grade of tar.
Shovels and drills. Coffee
for the highway workers. Quitting time.
Distance and no traffic.
A bowl of soup. Sleep. Sex. The surprise
of honeysuckle. Bread and breath.
Bones enlarging within bones.
Time. The spill of one season into another.
God or milk. Her husband leading her
to a car at night. Lightning and snow.
The timing of contractions. A parking place.
Her husband's hands on her ankles. Ice
falling. A woman squatting. Gravity.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

**HUSKS PILLAGED FOR SEEDS,
A LETTER TO AN EDITOR**

You and your co-editors speak two truths:
My use of "holocaust" trivializes
The Jewish Holocaust, and I risk
Sentimentalizing the already
Dangerously sentimental subject
Of roses. After submitting the safe
Revision, I regretted not changing
The context. A metaphor had been lost.

I wish you could see the place I live where
Roses grow like weeds. They bloom from late May
To early November some years. Only
The lawn mower keeps them from invading
The lawn. They grow in the sand on the beach.
They sprout in the cracks in the stone porch steps.
They grow between the floor boards of the porch.
There are thousands of rosebushes, thousands.

After the rose petals fall, the rose hips
Hang on all winter. Some turn black, some stay
Red as apples; some hold firm, some wrinkle.
Small birds peck through the flesh of these small fruits
To feed on the rose seeds inside. I watch
All winter as more and more rose hips hang
Black, withered and empty, torn by small beaks.
I watch thousands of husks pillaged for seeds.

Rose bushes grow outside every window
Of my house. They follow the boundary
To the north and east. They form feeble sea
Walls to the south and west between the lawn
And the beach. They grow alongside the porch
And on either side of the stone porch steps.
Life here can be all thorns, all rose perfume:
Reds, pinks and whites bloom, then red and black hips.

We become attached to our surroundings:
Those of us who live alone, perhaps too
Much so. I can be sentimental about
Roses. I write too much about my home:
The wicker rocker, the gulls, the sunsets.
It's a small thing, one word. "Those rose hips pecked
To broken shells hang like thin wrinkled skulls,
Mute remnants of a holocaust. . ." One word.

D. Woodsum

Editor's note: We accepted Douglas Woodsum's "Three Answers in Spring" for our Spring 1990 issue, but we commented that, although we'd publish it as submitted, we thought the line about pecked rosehips hanging like skulls, "mute remnant of a holocaust," was in danger of trivializing the Holocaust. And we added that there was always a risk of sentimentality in a poem about roses. The poet dropped the holocaust image and wrote this response.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Mark Strand is the editor, with David Lehman, of *The Best American Poetry: 1991* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1991, 298 pp., \$12.95 paper). In honor of Strand's poetlaureateship Knopf reissued his *Selected Poems* (158 pp., \$10.95 paper), and Ecco reissued his strange and witty *The Monument* (64 pp., \$9.95 paper). More to the point, Strand has a new volume, his first in ten years, *The Continuous Life* (New York: Knopf, 68 pp., \$18.95, hardbound). It has certainly been Strand's year!

First, *The Best American Poetry: 1991* is required reading. Although a few selections struck me as tedious and a few mere schmoozing, the editors have picked up many poems of real pioneering power, such as Carolyn Forché's "The Recording Angel," Jorie Graham's "The Phase after History," and Robert Kelley's "A Flower for the New Year." And there are poems of delicious wit and dazzle, including Brooks Haxton's "The Garden" and John Hollander's "The See-Saw."

Mark Strand's introduction is a quiet five-page masterpiece, addressing the difficulties his parents had with poetry as a way of defining what poetry, in his view, truly endeavors. This essay articulates with simple elegance one of the principal theories of contemporary poetry, and for a reading of Strand's own work it is invaluable. He claims that "a sense of itself is what a poem sponsors, and not a sense of the world. It invents itself. . . . It is in such isolation that it engenders its authority." This view has led critics to speak of Strand's solipsism, and that is certainly a problem for me, but there is more to it than that. Words in a poem "are the action," and what words communicate when poetry is successful can be "something that originated not with the poet but in the first dim light of language, in some period of 'beforeness.'" A poem then can be the search for something ineffable but real in the heart of experience, "something that can nevertheless be contained so that it is not so terrifying." Poetry can thus give expression to emotions such as grief and anguish and the fear of extinction, thereby allowing the poet and the reader to survive them.

Although Strand has long renounced the bounding high spirits of his much anthologized "Eating Poetry," he has not in this new volume abandoned his comic muse. There is in it much ironic wit and some sharply-focused parody. "Narrative Poetry" maintains a straight face while mimicking the baroque flights of current critical language. And he does something similar in "Translation." But these are ironically written from inside the subject, and especially in his poems about the poetic process Strand's distinction between satire and self-satire is ambiguous. In "The History of Poetry" and "The Famous Scene" Strand shapes exquisite poems

on the terror of what Bloom has labeled *belatedness*, as a way of facing up to that despair and journeying on despite it. Such a reading makes these poems very moving in the way of Frost's "Desert Places." I can read many of these new poems as a collection of verbal spells against the loneliness of the artist gazing back at the wake of a ship headed into the "indelible dark" that may well be nothingness. In a reading at Antioch a year or so ago Strand said he was saving his dark poem "The End" to *begin* his next book. But here it is as the final poem: a voyage into darkness, "when the weight of the past leans against nothing" and "the stories of cirrus and cumulus come to a close," when "not every man knows what he shall sing." The reader can only be grateful for the biblical resonance of this splendid bleak poem and for the implication that even in the ultimate horror the poet will — like the dismembered Orpheus in Strand's master poem in this volume, "Orpheus Alone" — still sing.

Works-in-Progress

M.L. Rosenthal has assembled works in progress from thirty-four writers (mostly poets) for the Spring 1991 issue of *Ploughshares* (Vol. 17, #1, Emerson College, 100 Beacon Street, Boston MA 02116, 236 pp., \$7.95): an astringent antidote to the bland homogeneity of several recent anthologies.

More than half of the selections reflect Rosenthal's interest in the long poetic sequence as the next stage in the evolution of contemporary poetry from the personal lyric to the larger, more complex vision (consider Walcott's *Omeros* as a wave of the future). Still, there is a gratifying diversity in this issue: two sections from opera libretti, some Arrowsmith translations from Montale, an interview with Donald Hall and selections from his new series, *My Life and Times*. The range in form is also broad. There is Peter Hughes's imagined letter from Simone Weil, "Why I Am Not a Jew," in a long-lined epistolary mode. And there's Jon Stallworthy's "The Girl from Zlot," in the meter of Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott"! Different as these two are in versification, they share what seems to be a significant tendency: in the process of writing these poems, both poets are entering imaginatively into the experience of courageous women acting in defiance of totalitarian societies a half-century ago. The poets are, of course, enlarging themselves in this process of composition, but the effect is the reverse of subjective self-indulgence.

This collection also has moving poems of personal reflection. I was especially affected by Tess Gallagher's sequence of valentine poems for Raymond Carver and by six stanzas from Galway Kinnell's *Sheffield Pastorals*, beginning, mordantly, with this wild idea:

The biting insects don't like blood that tastes of the fear of
dying.
They prefer the blood of those who can imagine themselves
entering other life-forms.
These are the ones the mosquitoes sing to in the dark and
feed upon.

A different approach to Works-in-Progress is a pair of notebook or commonplace-book excerpts by Louis Simpson and Philip Booth. Simpson generously provides fourteen pages of quotations that he says may "help me to clarify my ideas and induce me to write a page or two." He follows many with brief essays or poems precipitated by the quotations; for instance, passages from Cezanne and Leopardi on originality precede a crisply hostile essay on postmodernism. Booth's notebooks, called "Fragments," are, as one would expect, profoundly different from Simpson's — observations and concepts more than quotations. Booth sees them as "disparate (and all but aleatory) measures of a lifetime given to writing-as-process," a way of "serving my apprenticeship to myself." The twenty-eight unedited entries, selected from three-hundred-some written in 1987, provide some of the compost from which eventually the poem "Calling" (from *Selves*) evolved. Despite the probing of multitudinous interviewers, a reader today rarely gets much insight into the long process of accretion, association, and transformation by which a poem is conceived and carried to term. Reading "Callings" against this tapestry of perceptions, contemplations, reading notes, and drafts will enrich the literary experience of the poem, certainly, but beyond that will open the privileged realm of imagining how the poet imagines.

I have taken so much pleasure and instruction from this issue of *Ploughshares* that I urge my readers to obtain a copy (where else can you find such wealth for under eight dollars?) and take heart for the future of our poetry.

M. K. S.