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Cover: Robert Shetterly, "She Speaks for the Frogs," drypoint etching, ca. 1986.

WORMS,

those free-lance
intestines of the soil,

those moist crawly
gooseflesh straws
noiselessly slurping oozy
subterranean goop
like clotted chocolate
milkshake in one end
only to extrude it out
the other, crisp

like shoestring bacon rind
on black skillet asphalt
if caught out in the sun,
and like Eve from Adam,
two can be divided
out of every single one.

Two Poems

LAVA SOAP

Patient in its little dish, unnerving
in its longevity, this thick ingot
the color of Tijuana jade is still
for men who work hard —
gardeners, butchers, mechanics,
guys who laugh and pass it
along as they get ready to take
down jackets with sneers on the back
and fly across some unnamed lake
toward a woman modeling her skin
like a new dress.

Don't ask how, but I know the Angel
of Death washes with Lava every evening,
then has a hot meal and slips into bed,
both ghastly hands parting the gown
above his wife's quickening heart.

BOOKS

Rarely as big as the dog door,
they nevertheless drew me
away from a life where someone
cut grass and cherished salt
shakers in the shape of huts.

But it wasn't just visiting dark
beety Russia or being lost
in the snow with a dog. It was
also the unblinking page
in my lap and the way words
were separate and didn't seem
to mind that helped me think

those were only boots on the mud
porch, after all. The rooster's gooey
comb could heal, and the size
of the night in the sick room
was what it was.

So when our library burned
and Miss Simmons shrieked
and tore away from the first
fireman, I understood and watched
from across the street in the way
the books had taught me.

Ron Koertge

Two Poems

CAST

The creature we call horse was never
meant to be stabled, and can
stumble against his evident
unsuitability at any point;
just the small indulgence
of a roll in the shavings can
leave him wedged upended against
the wall, all grace overturned, the
legs stampeding helplessly in air.

It's called cast,
and in the alarm of flightlessness,
horses can struggle with force enough
to flop their innards; a twist
only surgery or death
can then release.

You who latched the door
are responsible. Sleep lightly.
When you hear the scrambling
in the night, you must
go to him in your bedclothes,
reach in among the maelstrom
of hooves, grasp firmly the far
pastern, and pull
the panic into yourself.

INHERITANCE

I
 am the
 woman they give
 dead women's
 clothes to
 I live easily grass-green
 in them, my zebras loosed
 friend's mother's in ivory
 print dress with space
 or
 my own
 mother's
 bracelet:
 her opalescent
 hearts clasp
 my wrist the continuing
 comfort- significance of
 ably I dead women's
 can never shoes even
 outwalk the cold
 I
 wrap out
 with the autumn
 orange wool
 of an
 inherit-
 ed
 coat wardrobe
 mine of chance
 is the of well-
 worn
 inevitability
 none other
 suits

THE WATER BREATHER

for Norman Fruman

It was a strange title, *The Water Breather*,
 by a strange author, Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
 in the year of 1806. The epigraph:

*A time to weep and a time to laugh
 A time for silence and a time for speech
 A time for breathing elements*

We could say it was the laudanum: a dab of opium
 gum swirled in a glass of cheap, warm claret.
 We could blame his perfect child, Sara—or

her imperfect brothers. Hartley, whose talent flared
 quickly, an impure tallow candle. Derwent, named
 for a placid lake ringed by worn mountains: master
 of a dozen dead languages, said to be a dabbler
 in the dark arts.

How these old books reach Seattle, I'll never know.
 Such fine morocco bindings once lined bookstores
 like wallpaper: scarce now, and under glass. I nosed
 the leather of an old, old goat that ate sweet grass
 when Napoleon was crowned. The thick, deckled paper,
 even more fragrant: deep ivory texture, black words
 letterpressed almost through sheets. And those orange,
 small stains—rust, fungus: foxing. Benign disease
 of tomes.

At worst, Coleridge's style is the morning's stale
 dregs of a drug-induced dream. At best, clear
 as a tropic sea:

Temperature is crucial . . .

I knew the place: the black-sand coast of Maui. Ocean
 so warm, you can't tell where air ends and salt foam
 rings brown feet.

in water paler than weakest Chinese tea . . .

Rare fish are visible for leagues. Garish shards
of church glass, waving in the soft surf: tufts
of colored flags.

First, you must cleanse the soul.

Cocktails do best. These inverted crystal cones,
odes to health and small, white onions. Through
the airplane porthole, the ground erupted: great,
green volcanoes, where the fringed king beat
the hoards back, down the jagged pass: God's
firm wind firmly behind him.

You must believe . . .

Why else a man from a cold, north town, standing
neck-deep in the dark, blood-flavored waves? No
face mask; no tanks packed with his own sweet element.
No fins, no witnesses. Not a stitch of cloth.

*Before your face touches water, learn to time
yourself. Listen to your own heart beat.*

One hundred twenty beats are but a minute there . . .

But I had brought my watch.

*Stay no longer than a dozen minutes:
learn to count the heart.*

I had told her it was business. Why Hawaii?
she asked. Because it's there. Her own salt sea
found the edges of my lips. Dark tides shuddered
at my chest.

They say a dying man rattles—chokes—on the
amniotic ocean of his own rebirth. But that first
undersea breath: no worse than my first cigarette.
Waves of white, dense smoke, searing my pipes:
and my young friends laughing, loving,
clapping my back.

Clusters of fish, in street-gang
 uniforms, trembled near my hips, waist, chest,
 like compass needles crazed near the pole.
 However I turned, warmed by an inner water,
 they changed axis. I saw gill flaps close and
 flutter open: exposed heart valves; bloodless,
 crescent cuts—blurred mouths breathing
 a drinking element.

Such bright rocks at the bottom! Once, when I dug
 roots of gnarled vine, decked with firm, foxed
 grapes, I found humus—perfect—free of stone.
 Finer than sand, silt. Finer than powdered cocoa
 in a sealed, steel can.

Count the heart

Four minutes by my watch.

You will bear tongues

A great starfish in the silt-sand: tapered fingers
 kneading dough. I count his legs: *amo, amas, amat,*
amamus, amatis . . .

I count past, present, and a future for both
 of us: this brilliant armlet, wrapped
 around the thin bones of my long reach,
 tender as a blood-infused woman. Jewelry forever.
 So many words, here. Languages I've never read
 or heard. And the cuneiform on this coral reef:
 intricate Moroccan mosques. Arrow-straight lines,
 weaving curves, florets, and sweet-graped vines.

Why?

You are Champollion, here to touch the stone.

I don't understand.

*Breathe deeply. You see meaning
 and emptiness. The sun rises through cirrus kelp,
 and sets below the shadow of the sail.*

And these cool streams?

*All streams find the sea, yet the sea never
overflows.*

Is this not new?

*There is nothing new under these waves.
You came from the ocean womb:
you have returned, naked as you came. Feel
your shoulder blades' featherless
contours. Smoothed subdermal bones:
old carved stubs of fallen angels.*

The water here is darker. How many minutes?
How many beats?

*Once, I undertook great works. I built
pleasure domes and diverted pools of water
for groves of growing palms. Night sank
from blackened waves; day woke in the sun fish.
When I arose, I saw that I was chasing wind.*

Why did you awake?

*There was a time to swim the air's gulf
currents: steady as a wicker boat, guided
by bright-starred lantern fish and fluorescent
eels. There was a time to live. There is a time
to die.*

All voices ceased. My ocean was silent and
black. My starfish clung like an old wrist watch,
pulsing time with his mouth. Then, the lunge up:
sailfish twists, scissor thrusts, cupped grasps
toward Pacific light and a thin realm—of

frigate birds, striped cats, tattered palm leaves,
young goats, tallow candles, God's steady wind,
a wife, tree-warm segments of Spanish oranges,
and fat jets splitting blue stratosphere. *This*

was a time for sipping air.

Three Poems

TRICIA LeCLAIR

Striding manfully up the front walk
I saw Tricia LeClair looking at me
Through her bedroom window — blooming
Moonface and eager brown eyes.
Her mother spoke to me in a tone

She saved for salesmen, infants and dogs.
I could smell Tricia in the next room:
She liked to dab perfume all
Over her body, places that were (as she later
Put it) “out of the way.” I gulped too happily

And wondered where she got such tiny feet.
Impatient and overwhelmed, we tackled one another
A half mile away. Even when we did it again
Things went too fast. Sliding into great glimmers,
So warm we couldn't tell our flesh from

Our thoughts, we whizzed past every prior moment
And when we tottered up to her porch light
At two before the curfew of midnight
We tried to count fireflies, our heartbeats
And the not improbable stars.

COW SYMPHONY

(for Janet)

Ovals of crushed September stubble
Where the weight has rested quilt the field.
The ambling towards the block of salt,

The algae mouthed pond, tree shade
Or blade, stalk, leaf, kernel
Or what seems movement for the sake

Of movement, purity of motive uncommonly
Encountered. Whimsical tonnage
Pissing and shitting unfugitively.

Beautiful globular eyes, demure tails,
Rough colors — browns Cezanne loved,
Always applied variously to

Each canvas of hoofed being.
Stomachs that cannot be seen.
Calves frolic, kindled, surging

With breath, blood, breeze, bodyness —
Trying out gravity, greeting ground.
Molten bellows, squeals, pacific grunts,

Cloppings, settling sighs and fearful
Stubborn bovine bleats when the truck
Comes to collar what seemed so hugely free.

Three Poems**KEVIN PLAYS THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS**

A fleet of clouds crosses the skylight.
We are riding the wind of your hands.
Sometimes the jib runs easy in its white
curve. Sometimes we vibrate on little
speedy glitters, that build until we
slap through spray. Then fall,
and we settle on the swells like gulls,
and the sea's so clear I want to cry.
We are far gone. Only you see the land,
that sweet, thin, dark edge, there where
for days we will feel ourselves rocking.

LEGGIERO

So the wild things may run and fly undisturbed,
the deer and the fox and the hawk on its wings.

The breeze knows, that just lightly stirs each
hair, but does not lift the skirts of the leaves.

There is lightly at home. Setting the gleaming
spoon down by her brother the knife, leaving

a butterfly on the cheek of your child,
just as she is beginning to dream. Some

times, watching a flight of notes turn to air,
it seems enough, to walk lightly in the world.

ECONOMICS

Stravinsky told me he had spent two days on
a single measure.

—Pasquale Tallarico

I can show you. On this measure
I spent the night I tasted vodka
for the first time, icy clear
and steeped in lemon like a moon.

That one cost the white face
of the door Catherine slammed,
the rifle slap, deep in our woods,
that told me, *Something's dead now.*

But these were pure joy. I went
reeling down the page, scattering
the splash of sky, the tight
green buds, the cherry flowers
all bridal in their spring.

The price was high, you say?
I would do the same again.
With such coin, how could any man
die with his pockets full?

Lola Haskins

Two Poems

SIGN LANGUAGE

Describe your home and hometown by using drawings and gestures with your arms such as big, small, near, far.

1. Big

Find the Spokane River as it leaves
the city, follow it with a fingertip
maps make us all larger
until it becomes a border
of the reservation. If you reach
the Columbia, that confluence
which forms the world's largest man-made lake
you've travelled too far. Turn back
with that finger like a skin salmon
until you're on the border again.
North of that blue line is my home:
my Oz; my Lemuria; my last stand.

2. Small

Through the wrong end of a telescope, Lester stands alone and reduced
his hair unbraided and unafraid. Behind him
white brick building with the yellow-and-black fallout shelter sign.

I'm still trying to decide which is the smallest illusion.

How is it memory becomes tabletop magic?

It's all card tricks and coins, cups and handkerchiefs.

One hand passed over the other, Indian head nickel disappears
like an hour, then a year, and finally, a generation. This is how
we create dreams, how our lives are defined:

1. The dark hand quicker than the white eye.
2. Crazy Horse is an American enterprise.
3. In love, we always sign treaties.
4. Beatles = Rolling Stones x Beach Boys
5. John Wayne hated horses.
6. "The pure products of America go crazy."
7. One more beer, sweetheart, and then we'll go home.

We spend our lives in mirrors, search for bruises that don't heal.

Touch arm, leg, cheekbone. Imperfections frighten us more
than our own beauty. Often, we dance in circles growing smaller
with every change of pitch in the wind, with every silence between
drum beats and I touch my arm, leg, cheekbone. This is my home.

3. Near

She said *Always be careful*
how you move. Some animal somewhere
will think it's a mating dance.

4. Far

When the Indian boy is miles from home, he gestures wildly:
fist raised in a telephone booth means he ain't coming back; weeping
in a crosswalk means he's lost the language and doesn't know
whether to walk or run; head nodding in a doorway means he is in love.

Listen:

If I draw you a picture, sketch metaphors
and give names to all my enemies
will you understand the translation?

I've changed my mind.

I am the Indian boy lost
in the city. My gestures are slight, subliminal.

When I swallow needlessly it means my heart has trembled.
When my eyes shift from object to object it means no one believes
this story I'm telling. When the color of my skin deepens
it means a stranger has learned to hate me.
When my next breath hesitates
it means I am dreaming about forgiveness.

Listen:

She asks me, "How much do you have left?"
I hold my index finger and thumb an inch apart.

DREAMING ANNA MAE

In February 1976, an unidentified body of a young woman was found on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The official autopsy attributed death to exposure. The FBI agent present at the autopsy ordered her hands severed and sent to Washington for fingerprinting. John Trudell rightly called this mutilation an act of war. Her unnamed body was buried. When Anna Mae Aquash, a young Micmac woman who was an active American Indian Movement member, was discovered missing by her friends and relatives, a second autopsy was demanded. It was then discovered she had been killed by a bullet fired at close range to the back of the head. Her killer or killers have yet to be identified.

I choose to dream of you
this way, Anna Mae
because it's the last thing
I can pretend to control.
See, you come to sit
on the bed, close enough
to touch but your hands
do all the touching
in this dream. *It's all right*
your fingers seem to say
as they run through
my short Indian hair

*Things will be fine
in the morning.* But
in the mourning after
you have gone, I find
nothing
remains of the dream

Anna Mae, except
your hands
which, if taken
finger by finger, fill
enough space in this world
to keep all of our dreams
crowded and haunted
as we travel together
into the next.

Sherman Alexie

IDA GOES TO THE HENS

When all the day had fallen down and
the moon floated up, pale as a soul,
she left the house, each dish in its
place, left her shell in the still-made
bed and went out to sleep with the hens.

Inside their shed that was hung with dusk
and webs, the birds roosted in a row,
eyes closed, heads tucked to heated breasts.
They didn't seem to mind an old woman
settling in the midst of them. When she

wobbled, kneeling in mid-air, her feet
too big for the roost, the hens
on either side cozied in to hold her
with their feathered breathing until
they dreamed they flew to the tops of trees,

dreamed of free rein in the garden,
sweet greens and grubs, warm,
ripe tomatoes on the vine, rows
of tiny, graduated eggs in line to be
born, a clutch like cobblestones,

belly-warmed. And that stirring
of beak on shell. The rhythm of each day
falling into the lap of the next.
The hens did not wake when rats
crept in to feed. Ida crouched in fear,

watching the sneaking forms below,
the sparks of eyes, the hairless tails.
The nudging birds whispered, "sleep,
sleep," until she grew soft as down
and slept to the sound of teeth in grain

while the full-yolk moon pulled them hour
by hour to dawn until the rooster
ruffled his chest and cascading tail,
stretched his luminous throat and
crowed another sun up from behind the hills.

The murmuring hens fluffed and
flurried to the straw to lay. They
filled the house with triumphant
cackling. Ida, hearing this as hymns,
reached out her ready hand to fill
her apron pockets with still-warm eggs.

Elizabeth Tibbetts

AFTERNOON OF A FAUN

"Like Sam Snead putting," I thought,
"Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune,"
not the best part of my game.

Time again to stagger
through Mallarmé's cattails,
harassed by angry blackbirds,
our feet sticking in the mud,
releasing foul choruses of bubbles.

You know the story,
Pan's pursuit of Syrinx,
the Naiads transformed into rushes.

Pan's embrace encircles endless reeds,
his breath among them
creates a sweet music.

Was it a dream?

Flashy passages,
Hindemith's "Symphonic Metamorphosis,"
Prokofieff's bird calls,
were always more my style.

I remember the first conductor
who heard me play "l'Après-midi"
almost thirty years ago.
Like a pond flute, he said.
No vibrato, no expression.
Don't call attention to yourself.

What the hell is a pond flute?
Besides, I wanted that solo bow.

The most recent one, only a few days ago:
Make it slower, languid, languid.
It must seem endless.
Why are you smiling? What?
You say it seems endless already?

In one of *New York Stories*,
Francis Ford Coppola's father,
Carmine, is a street musician,
playing "l'Après-midi"
outside the Russian Tea Room.
He takes down his flute
and asks the question,
"What's the difference between
a flautist and a flutist . . ."

You see, that opening phrase
is all one breath,
about as far as you can go
with such an air-hungry instrument.
It's a variation on C sharp,
a note that comes out the top hole
of a flute, a hole that,
like Pan's reeds,
serves several purposes.

(It was compromised in Boehm's schema,
size and location fudged,
venting the high G sharp and A,
and producing a C sharp
both pale and small.)

Probably what Debussy heard
when he dreamed this piece—
that distant pinched C sharp,
like a mourning dove,
half far, half near,
cooing from the rough.

On the shores of the River Lado
Syrinx invoked the goddess Diana
to secure Pan's frustration.

Was it a curse?

I heard stories in my student days—
one old timer who had had enough,
took his flute apart,
and aiming carefully,
one by one,
threw all three pieces at the maestro.

Another played that fiendish phrase,
then slumped in his chair,
never to take another breath.

“. . . a flautist and a flutist?”
Carmine grins and says,
“About fifty bucks a week.”

My teacher swam pool-lengths under water,
staggered to the center of the stage,
knocking over stands and music,
lungs sounder than his liver,
nailed his faun night after night.

The man is dead, a legend,
as bad as a father — no, worse.
He never told me what he said
when some idiot rattled on about pond flutes.

Now that I feel myself grinding
toward his age, I smile,
pretend to mark something in the part,
a foot soldier where he was general.

But when the time comes I'll play.
No syrupy wobble from an expensive CD,
— eighteen takes in an empty hall —

This is alive, and art says
that I'll play with almost no vibrato,
starting the sound so softly
the audience will still be fidgeting,
coughing, turning program pages.
Some will look up, thinking,
"What a way to start a piece of music."

Pan wonders if the nymphs are real,
if he himself is real,
if he is the great god Pan,
or like the dappled light,
fast fading,
a memory,
a dream —

And I will have spent countless hours
— standing over that four-foot putt,
stroking it smoothly — please, no yips —
to ease that lousy C sharp,
glorious and imperceptible,
into an indifferent world,
all for an extra fifty bucks.

Charles Wyatt

Two Poems

AFTER DINNER

And while they talk, these things come to you, returning, sudden as the convexity of an optical illusion you thought you were peering into. Suppositions, a contribution, something to amuse or challenge or puzzle those with whom you've been sharing supper. Then in the time it takes to pour a fresh glass of wine, the conversation veers off, and someone else's anecdote layers over your withheld remark that, already fading, leaves you wondering why it ever appeared — trivial privacy you'll fidget over, revise, polish, perhaps as an aid to sleep, after an hour's navigation back to your tiny bathroom, where you will rinse the face they watched speaking, that in the mirror will not betray what it heard and nurtures now: the story somebody told, too improbable for invention, of crawling out across a Parisian monastery roof to connect a blind friend's ham radio antenna . . . Listen. We live by talk — the well-turned drollery becomes serious speculation, loud conviction, then again, relieving, pure amusement. We all know it's cheap, mere syllables of longing or contentment, but there's life in these spontaneous rehearsals. Listen. How fragile they are, and how liable, when too clever, to suggest a stylish shuffle, nervy twirl of the racquet, and the smooth, compact stroke, like a signature, whirled across the corner of a check. But believe it,

(Stanza continued)

believe that words are more than currency.
You must. These hours after dinner improvise
an intimacy not made of shared experience,
but of having paid attention, so carefully,
perhaps, as to give a story back some evening
years later to its teller — a simple, affectionate
gesture just to say someone was listening,
across a complex distance, listening.

LOT FOR SALE

The knoll swells to here in a tangle
of chicory, clover, queen-ann's-lace.
It's half a mile's gentle slope to water
that works in white silence to make
islands out of shoals, and then by
my evening walk a clean, treacherous
slate of becalmed bay. Most days a bit
of the *ut pictura* keeps me happy,
as I have managed to remain at least
a visitor to seelight and salt air.
And what is there to imagine but what
I'm wanted to, or what I want, or how
want became not lack, but desire,
always for the high ground I have
supposed would appear someday,
beneath whomever I would have had
to become to stand as here in the far-
fetched breeze, certain at last of all
the earth had been asking of me,
assumed into a long, unbroken gaze
like my own, but without desire,
out across the hillside, out to sea.

Two Poems**TRAPEZE IN AUTUMN**

Grandpa hung a trapeze in the barn. Can a boy swing from his loneliness like a sanded pole pierced with rope? The boy's body rushes through air, face-first, then backward like an indecisive bird. The light through the small, high window hits his face, then apologizes, then hits it again. He smiles, showing teeth of milk and vegetables and running through summer grass. With his whole mouth he tastes the fast air. Seconds fall; he never sees the pipe, flight blinding him. Big, new teeth, the ones that separate the boys from the babies, smash out of their gums and burst into a thick mouthful of blood. The trapeze pulls him backward through the strange, hot space of the barn. Of course he wants to call for his mother, but she is gone.

In bed, the pink gap aches like fresh death. He'd spit blood and saliva and porcelain chips into the sink, his aunt holding his head, making familiar woman sounds. She pressed a warm washcloth soaked in saltwater to the bared flesh in his mouth. In bed, he pokes his tongue carefully out between his teeth. The dark moves in close and crickets flip fast pebbles of sound against the window. Eyeing the waving door, he moves his thumb toward his mouth. It tastes of soap. No stars nick the window; he can't make a wish. His mother talks with a mouthful of death. He could count the steps to her and walk them.

TSUKUBA

for Professor Hitoshi Igarashi

A knife will pull light across its edge
when the pocket has closed.

A man tests the sharpness
inside his coat and speaks to a secretary.

In his office, the professor looks
out his window, smells the air
sweetened by white blossoms.

He is thinking of translation.

He is thinking of the way
two languages twine like reluctant fingers.

Ink speckles his desk
and papers tessellate across its surface.

These are part of his death,
as are the shelves thick with books.

In one hour he will lie bleeding to death
on the sidewalk outside the building.

In one hour a man will whisper
this is for Allah

and teach him sharpness.
It is the best moment of the assassin's life,
it is his only taste of jihad.

He will stand above the body
and shake, terrified and immortal.

But for now the assassin makes small talk
and the scholar daydreams,
giving his thoughts to the four trees
beyond the window glass,
turning his chair like a cradle.

Each man's face is a soft entity.
Each man's eyes are unrepeated colors.

Dawn Diez Willis

E.J. BELLOCQ: STORYVILLE PORTRAITS, 1912

When the blond dwarf visits,
the whores' smiles are genuine,
for Papá is a lover
but not a customer.

On thin legs he ducksteps
through the humid yellow air of rue Dauphine,
six delicate glass plates gently clinking
in their black leather case,
the oak tripod and brass-fitted camera
heavy across his narrow shoulder.

Mannerly caller
at their hour of leisure,
Papá bows to them from the shuttered foyer,
a nervous series of bobs,
anxious to include all of his young ladies.
As he sets down the highly polished machine,
they dart glances at its half-extended bellows,
at the soon-to-be-uncapped lens,
and there is a universal frisson,
the simultaneous fluttering to the surface
of a dozen hidden dreams.

Vying for the privilege of taking his hat,
they hover about him,
leading him to the place of honor
next to Madame.
On a red lacquer tray,
they bring him China tea and thickly iced gâteaux,
their loose pastel gowns whispering
in the half-light of the salon.
He flushes,
and his little boots
patter soundlessly on the Persian carpet.

Because he adores
all of his children,
Papá never favors one above the others.

It is they who must reach a hand to him,
who must pluck him gently from the green velvet sofa.
It is they
who must tell him
who they want to be.

Spreading the legs of the tripod,
uncovering the lens,
opening the aperture wide,
Papá recedes to invisibility,
to an infinitely receptive stillness,
preparing a private stage
on which his daughters will come to life
as the women of their own desires:

A princess, nude,
lying Roman along a wicker chaise;
or a belle,
luminous in seed-pearl and ermine.
A femme fatale,
narrowing her eye over a raised glass of whiskey;
or — favorite vision —
a bride,
white-gowned, virginal,
eyes lowered to a pale bouquet.

Beneath the black cloth,
his soft eyes blue, wide,
Papá follows their limbs
as they blossom into dreams.
Proud father,
he focuses on the opening of a rare and vivid beauty
made possible only by their trust
in his unquestioning approval,
in his consummate affection.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Terror and Impulse: The Growth of a Poet's Mind

In 1989 I lost my nerve trying to review Peter Dale Scott's *Coming to Jakarta: A Poem about Terror* (New York: New Directions, 1989, 160 pp., \$16.95 hardbound, \$8.95 paper). I could tell that it was an enormously important poem, moving between the poet's psyche and the appalling events in Indonesia—especially the U.S. complicity in the slaughter of over half a million people there. The scholar in me was impressed by the bibliography of 108 items; the scholar in me was humiliated not to have read even one of them. How could I hope to evaluate such a work? The right margins were glossed with translations and documentation; the erudition was overwhelming.

Now it appears that this was the first of three volumes, the second of which I have at hand: *Listening to the Candle: A Poem on Impulse* (New York: New Directions, 1992, 240 pp., \$13.95 paper). This volume has 169 items in its bibliography, but many of these I have read, and Scott has provided a reassuring note that readers should "attend to and absorb only what rewards them," that what is obscure "can remain obscure for as long as the reader wants," and that if the reader skips over "recalcitrant passages" in a first browse through the poems "this will approximate to the non-linear way in which this poem has been written." Thus reassured I am setting out, if not really to review, at least to describe what this brave and ambitious work is like—at least to me. Since each volume took Scott eight years to complete, I can hardly hope to do justice to them in these few pages. But here goes.

The form of both volumes is staggered triplets, unpunctuated. The closer I could approximate a reading aloud, the closer I felt to reading correctly. Here's a sample, illustrating not only the dramatic flexibility of the form but Scott's complex maneuvering of time in space:

Taking off the
 plane tilts nearby Cape Cod
 into a map

 of when I was eleven
 before it heads north safely
 above the clouds my

 hand on the furtively sipped
 ginger ale can relaxes
 I look down without nausea

 on the invisible peaks
 the stewardess is walking over
 as if minutes not sweaty years

 separated them all Chocorua
 where I first broke out
 above a tree-line Washington

 my head pounding with a fake
 clairvoyance of altitude . . .

The reader soon comes to anticipate the repeated small shocks of surprise this form encourages and to appreciate the courage of Scott's commitment to it for the five hundred pages the poem is apt to run. To the personal level in this early example, Scott adds literary, religious, social, political, economic levels, and more. Quotations (in italics) flow seamlessly into the stream.

The poem I find most closely analogous to what Scott undertakes here is Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Both struggle to portray "the growth of the poet's mind." In the first volume the growth is largely political as a young Canadian of excellent family and education moves toward a career in the diplomatic service. Initially naive ("I was always going along/ at first with whatever/ sounded most reasonable") he slowly discovers through what I take to be a remarkable combination of poetic imagination and scholarly integrity that the responsibility for the 1965 slaughter in Indonesia lay with the diplomatic and political families with which he had grown up. He comes to see that however demented some of Pound's views may have been, he was right to see economic forces — especially the banks — as

responsible for many of the political and military disasters of modern times. Much of Scott's first volume documents the complicity of the CIA, Wall Street, and various U.S. agencies in ruthlessly paving the route to Jakarta. Complicity is the central concept: the complicity of the naive individual as a part of the national and international complicity in evil. I closed this volume thinking, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"

Listening to the Candle takes the poet through the sixties and seventies, into marriage and into teaching (Scott now teaches at Berkeley). Rilke becomes important, and Olson's field theory of composition. The book opens with Scott's participation in a U.S. Air Force experiment in sensory deprivation.

For two days they paid my mind
to withdraw itself

from every impulse but its own

Yeats '61 162

The experiment throws him "back to/ those limits of memory/ beyond learning to speak," into the "amniotic hum" and "the darkness behind thought." In some ways, despite its enormous erudition, its linguistic virtuosity (references in classical and modern European languages, Anglo-Saxon, Chinese, Sanskrit, Javanese, Old Persian, even Yurak), its magisterial command of English, this remains a book of silences — boreal silences, since the world of nature, especially the wilderness of the north, is a presence behind both volumes.

Disillusioned with the subtexts of violence throughout Western literature, he suffers from the complicity of even great poets in the ruthlessness of their age. Submerged in the radical political and social climate of "the Sixties," Scott nevertheless writes clear-headedly, almost satirically, of the commune-culture with its fascistic undertones. For nourishment he turns to Asian sources, fleeing whatever makes a commodity of life. Just as Wordsworth conceived of what we now call his "Prelude" as a poem to Coleridge, Scott dedicates most of the chapters of this volume to friends, so that they are like letters, sharing reminiscences and sources, continuing conversations. Politically the closest thing to a resolution is something very like Shelley's "Masque of Anarchy" (see pp. 154, 183-86). Personally, the poet arrives at a "field of impulse," and though he almost despairs when "we no longer hear/ the muttering candle/ at the point of

going out," he ends this volume in mid-sentence:

Go beyond language *Bodbidbarma 44*

and if the excitement of childhood
is now elusive
at least to put irony behind us

and so deeply inhabit
the night's silences
that the owl on Grizzly Peak

becomes effortlessly (surprise!)
the whip-poor-will
heard when the candle

To me this appears as a major Romantic poem for our era: a "Prelude," evaluating the century in terms of the growth of the poet's mind: like Byron and Shelley, profoundly engaged in the political and social evils of the age; like all Romantics, concerned not so much with the Classic Being, Space, Permanence, and One, but with Becoming, Time, Change, and Many. I hope not to have to wait eight years for the third volume.

A Complex Knot

Speaking at a writers' conference last summer, C. Michael Curtis, senior editor at *The Atlantic*, joked that "we have one standard rejection slip, and one slightly more flowery to placate kids 12 years old and people in their 80's and physicians and lunatics." Whoo-ee! so much for May Sarton and Stanley Kunitz. And I suppose Dr. Williams would have received the "more flowery" version. Alice Jones should not submit to *The Atlantic*, apparently, but that magazine would be the poorer. Her first book, *The Knot* (Cambridge: Alicejames, 1992, 72 pp., \$8.95 paper) is extraordinary. After several years of practice in internal medicine, Jones completed a second residency in psychiatry, which she now practices. Her knowledge of the human condition — internal and interior — informs and illuminates her work and transports the reader across borders usually sealed by ignorance and timidity. The first section of *The Knot* is a sequence of twelve poems recording the narrator's return to the bedside of a man to whom she had been close eighteen years before. He is dying of AIDS, and the physician's understanding

can do nothing to moderate the impact of her memories, her anger at his having left her, and the guilt ("Once, I had wished him dead./ I saw in his pale eyes my wish/ coming true"). The power comes through the poet's candor and the explicitness of the details, both immediate and recalled. Not only does she preserve a record of the man's lifetime, but even more affecting is her portrait of the woman who unblinkingly confronts and records her own profound and disturbing emotions. The second section of *The Knot* examines the relationship between mother and daughter. "The Knot" here is seven poems exploring the relationship in the womb, beginning with the child's wondering how "did I ever get into that/ spidery place," and ("knowing more about food than sex") imagining that "she ate me" and then "cast me out/ through that disturbing door/ to the universe." The child's questions merge with the poet/anatomist's wonderful imagination of the womb-life:

You lie nestled beside the blue-veined sponge
that hums all day.

In the placenta's cotyledon-lined bowl, small
spiny trees spread their villous
branches to feed you.

What is it like to be a fetus? Jones uses the vocabulary of her knowledge musically to create verbal equivalents of that consciousness. The result is like a new mythology of ontogeny, in which the drama is in the innate struggle between the infant's luxuriating in this nourishing garden and her destiny to differentiate herself from her encompassing environment — beginning with the individual rhythm of "the complex knot of the heart." (Two of these poems were in our Fall 1992 issue.) In a splendid poem, "Persephone," Jones turns to existing myth to dramatize the ambivalence of the daughter's attachment to and revulsion from the mother.

Most of the third section draws even more directly on the poet's medical training. The first poem recounts a biopsy from the patient's point of view, but a patient who thoroughly understands what is happening, both in the incision and in the relationship with the physician. The centerpiece in this section is a twelve-page poem "The Cadaver," which leads the reader

through the medical student's first dissection of a human body. This sounds grim, but magically Jones makes it enthralling, through her elegantly precise language, her mastery of the cadenced line, her delicate metaphors, and her poet's power of sharing her emotional response to her material. Here is a section from her account of her first day in Gross Anatomy Lab:

While you wait
for your first look at death, the level
of laughter rises, as among soldiers
nearing the enemy front.
Later, you walked to the car,
a collection of fragments,
disarticulated bones, muscle spindles,
vessels and nerves, you wondered
what held you together. At home
the cats wouldn't come near you
even after a shower. And you thought
you'd never be a whole animal again.

I don't know anything quite like this volume. If Keats had chosen to write about his experience as a physician, he might have written something like it. Like Keats, Jones hears the music in the language and gives it a voice. Like him, she both explores myth and creates it. Most painfully like him, she has a capacity for empathy. One can speculate that it was the agony of the empathy that deflected Keats from the matter of the laboratories and the wards. Thus far, Jones has been strong enough, though the prayer for rain in the last poem makes me appreciate how high the price may be.

Very Briefly Noted

Ron Block's *Dismal River* (Minneapolis: New Rivers Press, 1990, 92 pp., \$6. paper) is anything but dismal. The Dismal is a real river north of Gothenberg, Nebraska, and this book is a long narrative poem made up of sixty-six finely-tuned lyrics. Here's how his imagination works:

He rides a giant salmon bare-backed,
backward down the Dismal River,
trying to bull-dog it back upstream,
a canoe that doesn't want to spawn and die.

"Himalaya"

Great age
Great mountain

From hard
To always

Harder to
Almost beyond

The limit
To lift

One step
More if

Only one
More step

Few win
The summit

But age
Great age

Never never
Finally wins

"Himalaya" (left) is from Robert Francis, *Late Fire, Late Snow: New and Uncollected Poems* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992, 80pp., \$20. cloth, \$8.95 paper). It is a treat to have new Francis poems, many as fine as any published in his lifetime. I heard him read at Mount Holyoke in about 1941, when he endeared himself by announcing that he was a thoroughly minor poet. In spite of, or more likely because of this modesty, he has become for many, if not exactly a major poet, at least an essential one.

Another essential poet is David Ignatow, with *Shadowing the Ground* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan/University Press of New England, 1992, 70pp., \$22.50 cloth, \$10.95 paper). Many of these poems are just wonderful, e.g.:

I have lived to find out
the sun also will die,
I will die first
and in time
I will have a companion.

Lu Chi's *Wen Fu: The Art of Writing*, translated by Sam Hamill (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1991, 64 pp., \$6.95 paper). Hamill has reworked this classic Chinese *ars poetica* in a Western lyric mode, making it not only accessible but extremely attractive. Such subtitles as "Choosing Words," "Finding Form," "The Terror," and "The Inspiration" will suggest its appeal.

Readers who admired Jan Hodge's butterfly poem to John Bennett in our Fall 1992 issue may like to see a volume of his *carmina figurata*, as imaginative and musical as the butterfly: *Things Taking Shape* (Haslett, Michigan: Harold's Press, 1992, 34 pp., \$5. from the poet, 4920 Morningside Avenue, Sioux City, Iowa 51106).

Chitra Divakaruni has a new book of poems about the lives of women of South Asia: *Black Candle* (Corvallis, Oregon: Calyx Books, 1991, 100 pp., \$8.95 paper). Splendidly rich and enlightening work.

Julia Kasdorf's *Sleeping Preacher* (Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992, 66 pp., \$17.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper) is a first book by a poet who stands out among the many first-person short-narrative poets who have written most of the new books I see. The poems record her clear-eyed observation of her early life in a Pennsylvania Mennonite family and the violent, vivid multicultural world which she has subsequently entered. These worlds intersect — openly in the first poem, then internally.

Indians Discover America

I have here five strong books by Native American poets, but I approach this review with some trepidation, aware of the warning by Adrian C. Louis in his valuable introduction to Sherman Alexie's *New Sbirts & New Skins*: that there is only "a very small handful of writers who speak directly for those Indians living in Indian communities on Indian land," contrasted with the many who write from a distance: "outright fakes; romantic academics, and liberal anthropologist types." I can't vouch for the authenticity of all these poets; I can testify to the quality of the poetry.

Cheryl Savageau draws on a mixed heritage of Abenaki and Acadian in her *Home Country* (Cambridge: Alicejames, 1992, 72 pp., \$8.95 paper). Both cultures color her poems, and she represents those poets who, without living on Indian land, draw strength and pride from their Indian heritage. From the Abenaki, in "Beaver Woman":

I carry black mud in my mouth
 It is the mud of my grandmothers
 I carry black mud to the lodge
 I do this again and again
 I carry black mud of my grandmothers
 In my mouth I carry it.

With her French Canadian Memere, she has learned of the earth's abundance, overflowing the kitchen "to fill the winter shelves/ with the sweet and vinegary taste/ of life, the mystery/ flowing from the earth." Savageau's lyric and narrative gifts come from deep roots and, like her French and Indian blood, combine for power.

Red Hawk, *The Stouix Dog Dance: shunk ab web* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1991, 86 pp., \$8.00 paper). Red Hawk has "done hard time in the universities," but his strongest poems come from the compression of an ancient anger in lyric language. That rage, if expressed in action, is outrageous, murderous. Therein lies the irony:

The Indians had a saying:
words fall down on the ground
like shit from the dogs;
deeds rise up in the sky
like the spirit leaving the body.

I can only reply that the words of a strong poem are an action — perhaps the most powerful kind.

Adrian C. Louis, *Among the Dog Eaters* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1992, 92 pp., \$9.95 paper) also bears witness to what it means to be a Native American in "this carrion nation." Like Red Hawk he has survived the universities, and he honors the American poets whose company he has entered. But he too is wrenched by ironies:

Elegy is such personal business.
I don't want to say what I mean
and I don't mean to say
what I want.

Louis' poems are not, by and large, elegiac. Though spirits from the ancestral past do press up against the surface and even erupt in dance from time to time, reasserting ancient values in the "booze-sweltered villages," these poems as a whole record what brutal conflicts ravage an American Indian in this society that co-opts and corrupts. I profoundly respect the creative energy that can forge true poems from this heart-wrenching material; I respect the resilience of the poet who can bear witness without sentimentality or self-pity to the reality of his own and his neighbor's lives, nourish ironic humor even when

humor feels like a cancer, and still celebrate the "rage to survive" that smoulders and flares in his people.

Sherman Alexie has two new volumes: *I Would Steal Horses* (Slipstream: Box 2071, New Market Station, Niagara Falls, New York 14301, 32 pp., \$4.00 paper) and *Old Shirts & New Skins*, with illustrations by Elizabeth Woody (American Indian Studies Center, UCLA, 3220 Campbell Hall, Los Angeles, California 90024-1548, 94 pp., \$12.00 paper + \$2.00 postage). The title poem of the UCLA book is in the Slipstream chapbook and exemplifies the almost surreal imaginative energy that distinguishes this enrolled Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian's work:

Love, listen
before I wear the shirt
that will separate us into flame and oxygen.

The first audience for Alexie's work has to be Indian people, especially young people, who will find here someone who tells the truth about what it means to be Indian. The poet bears a heavy responsibility for lighting a path between an ancient and powerful cultural tradition, in danger of extinction, and a place to survive in or beside a social order more often than not corrupt and corrupting. It sounds corny to say it, but these poems (and Alexie's equally eloquent stories) should be an inspiration to a new generation. A second audience should be non-Indians who want and need to correct any illusions they may have about Indian life today. These readers need a strong stomach, because Alexie, like Louis, does not spare his reader the wrenching details. The third audience, overlapping the first two, is the community of tough-minded readers who are thirsty for the strong poetry of the future. Though still in his twenties, Alexie already draws from a deep well. "Poetry = Anger x Imagination" is an epigraph to a section ironically titled "Indian Education." Not +, but x. The anger comes out of the well of history: Columbus and Crazy Horse and the Seventh Cavalry and Sand Creek — even the bones the anthropologists covet. Add to it the testimony of daily life: the HUD houses, the bars, the government commodities, the Thunderbird Wine and the dumpster. Then multiply by an imagination that, first, provides an inner life that *comprehends* the bloody past and inebriated present and translates them into testimonial song. Second, it

transmutes the cancerous ironies and the mind-numbing deprivations into mirrors and windows for insight and vision. With this vision, the people should survive. Third, imagination transmutes its sociological and journalistic and anthropological and mathematical and historical raw material into a new music. It is a music of quick drum-beats in one poem, slow long-line chants in another. Pounding repetitions with delicate variations. And most movingly, as in "Horses," long riffs of syncopation. Without the imagination that marries the historical and contemporary misery to an inner and ultimately hopeful vision, without the lyric inventiveness and control, these would still be good poems. With them, they have the power to dance their readers into a new world.

The Poet's Dictionary

When I was directing Freshman English, the competing dictionary salesmen paid court to me, and I developed the habit of looking everything up in all the major dictionaries and listing in the back any words I'd not been able to find. When a salesman came I was loaded for bear. My bias was for the Merriam Webster's Collegiate, but I came to prefer the American Heritage Dictionary for its usage notes and its appendix of Indo-European roots. I have only just discovered the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, third edition (Boston, New York, London: Houghton Mifflin, 1992, 2140 pp., \$39.95 hardbound). With 350,000 entries, it is much richer than any collegiate dictionary. It is also superbly designed, with a clear type face and crisp paragraphs of supplemental information. These include gracefully-written "Word History" essays, illuminating such words as *abracadabra* and *examine*; "Regional American English Notes" on words like *agin* and *feist*; synonyms and antonyms with a wealth of examples, comprising a mini-thesaurus; and the famous "Usage Notes," based on a usage panel now expanded to 173, including not only John Kenneth Galbraith, Vine Deloria, Jr. and Garrison Keillor, but Galway Kinnell, June Jordan, and Maxine Kumin. The editors evaluate usage by referring each problem to these panelists and reporting the range of their opinions: e.g. distinguishing between *nauseous* (which 72% use only as causing nausea) and *nauseated*. Another essay explains my linguistically irrational

objection to *hopefully* as a sentence adverb. The danger is that I go to this dictionary, get totally absorbed in reading the usage notes that jump off the page at me, get wandering on from one word to another, and forget what it was I intended to look up. Like most dictionaries, this one tends toward the encyclopedic, with not only biographical and geographical sketches (want to know when Pope wrote *The Dunciad*? how tall Handies Peak is? where Jackie Kennedy has been working since 1975?) but instructions on how to graft a branch or do a Heimlich maneuver. Then there are the controversial illustrations — nearly 4,000 photographs, drawings, and maps — nothing if not p.c. and up-to-date. Sally Ride and Gloria Steinem, both Gracie and Woody Allen, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Julius Erving, Joan Baez, and each of the Beatles with his separate entry. But I found only one picture of a living poet: Gwendolyn Brooks. There's no way I'm going to quarrel with that choice, but a spot check turned up only six other living poets in the biographical entries: Wilbur, Spender, Dickey, Ginsberg, Hughes, and Baraka. Thus it is not for its coverage of contemporary poets that I call this the poet's dictionary.

Until recently, poets in English drew on a classical education. Lacking one, Blake taught himself Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and Italian. Each word in a poem resonated with its ancestry. When Frost wrote *radical* he thought *root*; *emotion* emoved him off his base; *sex* conjured up *grex*, whence *gregarious*. Hopkins' journals (see especially 24 September 1863) contain glorious romps through etymology, playing with *born* in English, Latin and Greek: "from the shape, *kernel* and *granum*, *grain*, *corn*," then off on "*Grind*, *gride*, *gird*, *grit*, *groat*, *greet* . . . *crush*, *crash*" etc. (I omit the Greek.) For the poet who has the love of language without the formal philology, this dictionary can be a whole education, because not only does it have clear etymological notes for each entry, but it has also what no other dictionary offers: references to an appendix of Indo-European roots. The back endpapers have an imaginative diagram of the dispersal of languages in our family. Four readable introductory essays provide a jargon-free history of the language, and Calvert Watkins introduces the appendix with a lucid essay on the Indo-Europeans and their language. Follow *venery* back to *wen-* in the appendix and see how "win, winsome, wont, wean, wish, venerate, venereal, Venus, venom,

venial, and venison" relate to our two words *venery*, one meaning sexual intercourse and the other hunting. Trace *beath* (still pronounced *bayth* in Maine) back to *kaito-*, forest, uncultivated land, where the heath-dwellers are *beatben* and from Middle Dutch comes *boyden*.

But don't pitch out your old Webster's unabridged or *OED*. Just this week I had to turn to my *OED* abridgement, the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*, for the following words not in the *American Heritage*: *snath*, *ficelle*, *eirenic*, *vastation*, and *aporia*. It has already dropped *frug*, and the verb *to dis* (as in "He dissed me" for *disrespected*) is not yet in.

With a language like English, changing so rapidly, we need to cherish our old dictionaries while buying new ones from time to time. Fortunately, at \$39.95 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* is a bargain for any pocketbook.

More Tools of the Trade

Dan Poynter's *The Self-Publishing Manual: How to Write, Print and Sell Your Own Book* (from the author, Para Publishing, P.O. Box 4232-890, Santa Barbara, CA 93140-4232, sixth edition, 416 pp., \$19.95 paper + \$2.00 shipping) arrived too late for mention in my remarks on self-publishing in the Winter 1992/93 issue. The first 116 pp. are on writing and printing the book; the rest are on promotion and marketing. All public libraries ought to have copies.

Michael J. Bugeja and Christine Martin are the new editors of the *1993 Poet's Market* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1992, 520 pp., \$19.95 hardbound). They carry on Judson Jerome's tradition, with a concise and generally reliable introduction on how to get poetry published; 1,700 detailed descriptions of poetry publishers; chapters on writing colonies, writer's organizations, useful publications, postal codes, grants and contests; and eleven "close-ups" of poets and editors.