

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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Cover: Chippewa medicine dolls from area of Leech Lake, Minnesota. Albert Green Heath Collection, Logan Museum, Beloit College. Photograph by Eric Sutherland, Walker Art Center.

HUNGERS

So many hungers, and so little time.
An evening of dining out and the theater,
or to stay home with good books,
soft music, cheese and wine. Perhaps the symphony,
they're playing Sibelius and Bartok tonight.
I could call my friend for supper
and perhaps a night of love. I'm reminded
of one of my early loves, a lady
who liked to quench her hungers all at once.
She'd eat an apple and read a book
while we made love. I'd implore her
to put either the book or apple
down, it's just too distracting. She told me
she'd put the book down if I'd turn
the radio on, but not wanting to lose my thrust
walking across the room, I told her
I'd sing to her instead, *My love loves me . . .*
as she chewed and humped, chewed and humped
while I sang and humped, sang and humped.
No wonder I'm the wreck I am today
sitting here trying to decide
what joy to partake of, partaking of the joy
of recording the dilemma of trying to decide
which hungers to satisfy,
and so little time.

Robert Funge

A COMMAND OF LANGUAGE

I always had trouble with the imperative.
Maybe it's because, as a woman,
linguistically I take the long way round.
Yet here is Latin shortening itself,
because when men command
they expect to be obeyed.

To make things faster,
they eliminated "you,"
not you personally,
but "you" as in
"you do what I tell you."
They figured "you" was so used
to getting orders, so invisible,
there wasn't any need
to address the subject.

Second, some of the big verbs
dropped their final syllables,
making it quicker to bark out
the common commands:
Dic, duc, fac, fer.
Speak, think, do, bring.
Well, "fer" sometimes means bring.
In other contexts, it could mean "suffer."

Then there are those who want to be gentler,
at least in grammar,
preferring the jussive subjunctive,
which is a little less peremptory.
“Mihi pareatis. You should obey me.”
But don’t forget that “jussive” is derived
from “iubeo” – to bid.
So that when we translate
“discedant” as “let them depart,”
it doesn’t mean “allow” them to go,
but, rather,
get your ass out of Dodge.

And it’s not just Latin.
I knew a man and wife
who spent twelve years
guiding adventurers through South America.
She’d studied Spanish at university,
could read Cervantes. He could speak
only in the present tense imperative.
“Get the pack. Load it on the burro.”
Who do you think it was they listened to?

On the other hand, I find
my own speech so couched in subtlety –
could, might, maybe, seems to be –
I ought to be the Queen of Qualifiers,
everything I say dependent on an if or invitation,
working the hortatory subjunctive half to death:
Let’s speak in a non-hierarchical way.

Oh, let’s not.
Just for once, I’d like to trade
this command of language for a language of command:

Bring in the handsome young gladiator.
Bring wine.
Bring pillows.
Leave us now.

Three Poems

FOR THE LOSERS OF THINGS

She is shedding belongings wherever she goes –
Necklaces, combs, virginity, lovers,
Bus-money, phone numbers, gifts and their givers,
In the laundry, perhaps, in the pockets of clothes,

Dropped in the aisle of the east-bound train,
Slipped down the seat of her car-pool-ride,
(Or her eighteenth year, in the Lenten-tide),
And places more difficult to explain,

Like deep-in-dreams, like half-way-there . . .
She has left by her unfinished drink at the bar
The keys to her house and the keys to her car,
The ribbon that orders her unruly hair . . .

He is calling her number; she is not in –
She is shedding her dress, like scales, like love,
A dry, silk hide she has cast off –
She is ranging abroad in her new skin.

HADES WELCOMES HIS BRIDE

Come now, child, adjust your eyes, for sight
Is here a lesser sense. Here you must learn
Directions through your fingertips and feet
And map them in your mind. I think some shapes
Will gradually appear. The pale things twisting
Overhead are mostly roots, although some worms
Arrive here clinging to their dead. Turn here.
Ah. And in this hall will sit our thrones,
And here you shall be queen, my dear, the queen
Of all men ever to be born. No smile?
Well, some solemnity befits a queen.
These thrones I have commissioned to be made
Are unlike any you imagined; they glow
Of deep-black diamonds and lead, subtler
And in better taste than gold, as will suit
Your timid beauty and pale throat. Come now,
Down these winding stairs, the air more still
And dry and easier to breathe. Here is a room
For your diversions. Here I've set a loom
And silk unraveled from the finest shrouds
And dyed the richest, rarest shades of black.
Such pictures you shall weave! Such tapestries!
For you I chose those three thin shadows there,
And they shall be your friends and loyal maids,
And do not fear from them such gossiping
As servants usually are wont. They have
Not mouth nor eyes and cannot thus speak ill
Of you. Come, come. This is the greatest room;
I had it specially made after great thought
So you would feel at home. I had the ceiling
Painted to recall some evening sky –
But without the garish stars and lurid moon.
What? That stark shape crouching in the corner?
Sweet, that is to be our bed. Our bed.
Ah! Your hand is trembling! I fear
There is, as yet, too much pulse in it.

EURYDICE REVEALS HER STRENGTH

Dying is the easy part.

As you still live, my dear, why did you come?

You should learn an easing of the heart

As I have, now, for truly some

Prefer this clarity of mind, this death

Of all the body's imperious demands:

That constant interruption of the breath,

That fever-greed of eyes and hands

To digest your beauty whole.

You strike a tune upon a string:

They say that it is beautiful.

You sing to me, you sing, you sing.

I think, how do the living hear?

But I remember now, that it was just

A quiver in the membrane of the ear,

And love, a complicated lust.

And I remember now, as in a book,

How you pushed me down upon the grass and stones,

Crushed me with your kisses and your hands and took

What there is to give of emptiness, and moans.

We strained to be one strange new beast enmeshed,

And this is what we strained against, this death,

And clawed as if to peel away the flesh,

Crawled safe inside another's hollowness,

Because we feared this calm of being dead.

I say this. You abhor my logic, and you shiver,

Thinking I may as well be just some severed head

Floating down a cool, forgetful river,

Slipping down the shadows, green and black,

Singing to myself, not looking back.

REMEDIES

—after paintings by Remedios Varo

1. Hairy Locomotion (1960)

*Dear Remedios – my husband seems to lack
ambition, motivation, drive to succeed.
Can I help him overcome his lassitude?*

Tell him to grow a beard and moustache.
He'll have to learn to levitate – but
only after he's able to use the colored
wax that will stiffen his handlebars.

How else would you expect him to steer?
When the beard is long enough, starched
to support his weight, he'll be so high
above the ground that clouds may begin
forming around his head. It will be your
job to make sure they do nothing more
than cover his bald spot. What could
possibly be worse than having achieved
such heights, only to find that your
vision is blocked by its own eminence?

2. *Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst (1961)*

Dear Remedios: My wife recently began seeing a therapist, and I just don't understand her anymore. She used to be so willing to please, but now she never cooks my breakfast, and rarely supper. Sex? She refuses all advances, no matter how tender – as if she's ceased to care whether I'll get a good night's sleep.

Dear Disgruntled Husband: It seems to me that you have little comprehension of the psychoanalytic process. Your wife's engaged in an intense inwardness of focus, whose purpose is to help her drop the head of her father in the nearest well. Next to that, the three minutes required to poach an egg, not to mention the nine months necessary to hatch one, have taken on new significance. She should be allowed to keep silence, since the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons-in-law even unto the twentieth anniversary. Don't be surprised if a hairbrush and a watch turn out to be the keys to her malaise: the moon in her cares nothing for minutes, and when her tresses are the same color as its face, the mask will fall away: her beauty will be no longer anything you might possess – but self-possession.

3. *Creation of the Birds (1958)*

Dear Remedios – I'm concerned about the dwindling number of songbirds that visit my back yard in the spring. Scientists think this has something to do with the deforestation of the Amazon, as well as environmental fragmentation in North American suburbs. What can a retired homeowner in Iowa do about this tragedy?

You'll need proper alchemical apparatus. Garden hoses simply won't do – although you could perhaps set up a drawing table in the garage, as long as there's a window. The distillery should be no different from the one you'd use for corn squeezings, but you should adjust it to produce pigments from the sound of falling rain. Don your cloak of feathers. Hang a lute around your neck. Tie the brush to its central string, and begin to paint by moonlight. Audubon should be your mentor, as you model wings and downy throats. Then, when you refract moonbeams through the prism mounted as a magnifying glass, every bird you've drawn will emerge from that flat page and fly.

4. Portrait of Andrea and Lorenzo Villaseñor (1957)

Dear Remedios: I once had the dubious honor of baby-sitting the children of a prominent family in Mexico City – a boy and a girl with diabolical penchants for mischief. One evening when their parents were out, I received a phone call from my fiancé. After I'd hung up, I was mortified to discover what they'd done to the parlor. Andrea was holding the strings of a kite cut from the drapery. Lorenzo's toy sailboat was floating in a pool pried from the floor tile. A wind had sprung up, strong enough to support him on the back of the kite, while rain from a tiny cloud filled the boat's miniature sea. Planets and spiral galaxies hovered everywhere – I nearly tripped over a pile of shooting stars that lay like marbles on the floor. How was I to explain to my employers that their children were brujos? I fled and never returned to that ensorcelled household. But I wonder, did I do the parents a disservice by keeping silent?

Dear Mortified in Mexico City: I've visited the house in question, painted a portrait of these demonic siblings. I must say that I found their games delightful. It saddens me to think that soon you too may be a parent – unable to observe or enter the gale of your children's imagination as it billows the edges of physics: a mantle of invisibility where every law has its own unheard of, impossible variations.

5. *Celestial Pabulum* (1958)

Dear Remedios: I just can't seem to find the proper formula for my baby daughter, who cries and cries. Should I try another brand of milk, a different temperature?

How I wish that people would sign their letters *Endless Wit*, not *At Wit's End*.

But then if it were true, I suppose that no one would need the artist, high in the tower of her Renaissance, forever grinding the mill that turns the stars to baby food. Yes, my dear, your child too is caged: a crescent moon behind the body's silver bars – and her attention to duty will wax and wane as yours did, and still does. Mother's milk won't help, nor any substitute. We're all crying for the warmth that never comes, or is never warm enough. There's nothing to do but grind whatever comes along into the soul's food, that celestial pabulum.

6. *Harmony (1956)*

Dear Remedios: My husband is a composer who spends so much time in his workshop I almost never see him. So few repairs get done around the house: the floor tiles have buckled, roots and tissues are reaching from beneath them to grasp the feet of unsuspecting visitors. Birds are nesting in the chairs; paint peels from the walls. I fear for his sanity, he spends so much time alone – and what of me, left to do the dishes in silence?

Only Mozart could write music in the midst of domestic brouhaha. Any art requires solitude – which is its bliss, its exacting punishment. And if your husband chooses to sleep not by your side but in his studio, understand it's not because he doesn't love. He must stare at the peelings on the wall until they become the tutelary spirits who help him arrange carnations and shells, ivy, crystals and carrots, octadecahedrons like quavers, semiquavers on the five wires of his musical staff. They'll vibrate, each according to its amplitude within his heart, whenever he purses his lips, blows through the mouthpiece of his trumpet's treble clef. You mustn't mind the messiness: his drawers are full to overflowing with tuneful kitsch, the bric-a-brac of daily life that becomes unbearable until it sings. You're there too, the muse he turns his back on. Don't ever think he's forgotten you. He'll return, but guiltlessly, as if from the arms of a lover.

7. *The Useless Science (1953)*

Dear Viewers: I'm tired of hearing how depressed you are, how often you think of suicide. You ask me over and over whether there's some way to deal with loneliness, divorce, a two-timing beau. Perhaps you too were born in Spain to parents who never understood you. Maybe you fled to France because of Civil War, surrealism a kind of politics, unpopular, possibly deadly. How soon until Paris would be overrun by Nazis and you were condemned as a spy for recording dreams? Until an American decided whether you and your poet-lover were of sufficient intellectual importance to save? How many husbands later would you realize that even in Mexico, where they spoke your native tongue, you were still Woman – and there were rites of sacrifice both foreign and familiar, equally intolerable? If art is the useless science, whose only warmth is poverty – the floor you've wrapped around your shoulders like a cloak of tiles – there'd be little comfort in cranking the winches of your willingness to be here, trying to distill dejection until it begins to seem like hope. Bells, flags in the wind, a funnel for collecting rain, warning sirens, the crucible of your private alchemy: you must learn to bottle the things of this world and the next, to watch while others pop the caps and drink.

Kurt Leland

TRANSFORMATIONS

1.

The rain is coming.
It will pelt a girl's
striped umbrella. It will
chew holes through roofs,
through the tough skin
of your yellow slicker.
It will tint your hair green.
Overnight it will freeze:
sooty shards and debris
you sweep from the deck,
transfer to juice glasses.
Later they will melt
to spring water, clean
and calm as breath.

2.

A man lies in bed. A virus
covers him like a quilt,
seeping into his throat,
coating his lungs dark
with sleep. He wakes one night
and exhales into a jelly jar.
For weeks he studies the grey haze
until he knows it so well
it becomes tangible,
turns to a salve.
He will spread it on his chest,
healing himself whole.

3.

All day the boys play
with pellet guns, shooting
at tin cans and squirrels.
Stray missiles sink
into the ground like seeds.
That night the lawn grows
green as dollar bills.
In the morning they pluck some
on the way to school,
their pockets growing
fat with lunch money.

4.

An artist outlines her vision
of the country: a grey landscape,
figures sick with rain and war.
Like a writer, she revises
as she works, layer upon layer
of paint, her canvas
thick with change.
Like us, she can't know
how it will come out in the end,
only that it's her picture,
it's all in her hands.

Susan E. Brown

BLAME IT ON THE DRESS

Brown and new and ankle length, it will
look great with her necklace for their
golden anniversary party, but he discovers
pearls of his own, some misshapen grains
cultured in the prostate that have grown
to a lustrous malignancy. He dreams a scalpel
transmutes into an Asian mermaid, slices
into the reedy sea of his anatomy and surfaces
with a basket of 50 shiny black ball-bearings.
He says, You counted chickens before they hatched.
She says, There's space in the closet, it'll keep.

He rebounds with grace, sleek now
with part of him cut away, and they feel safe
to drive to their granddaughter's commencement.
She knows just what to wear
but leaving the auditorium it is either the heat,
or a heel catching the hem and she's down.
Like a thick spotlight engulfing her head,
an impossible pool of red meets the sidewalk
from her lacerated cheek. The wrist shatters
and her skin fades to the color of concrete.
She says, My arm.
He says, I'll stay with you.

The emergency room bench is a ground-zero
of tobacco butts. She sits and toys
with the sleeve they had to tear off,
a cylinder of cotton that exploded around her.
When he returns with the car she will
ask him, What's the opposite of pipe-dream?
Before he can reply she will say, Pipe-bomb.

Up at 4:30 washing the blood from her hair
and this makes twice in a night
that she has put him into time-lapse.
But instead of reliving those minutes without speech
when, to his mind, she was gone and
he saw himself hovering above the body,
this time he is back with her 40 years,
when her hair was auburn
and dense with Dippity-Doo.
Then the water flows like decades.
She says, Sleep.
He says her maiden name.

He wakes late and goes for his walk,
is halfway down the block when the garbage
truck rounds the corner and he remembers
what he forgot. There is something he needs
to throw away. He scampers back, wanting
to ask permission but finds her with the sheets
twisted around her feet, eyes darting back and forth
beneath their closed lids like startled children,
her good hand clutching a bundle.
He says, Your pillow.
She says, A body of feathers.

Stan Friedman

THE MEDITATION ROOM

*The Bavarian National Museum,
Nuremberg, January, 1989*

In an elevated rectangular room
empty of almost everything but hot
light and cold shadow we sit

on a plain wooden bench, backs
against a stark white wall:
a father, mother, daughter, son.

We carry with us fresh images
of the life and death of the Jews
of Bavaria. Almost everything before

and above us is blank. Straight
ahead, a triangle is built into
the wooden floor exposing a depression

of black dirt. In the middle of the dirt
stands a fragment of a medieval tombstone
of a man from Nuremberg. Hebrew characters

carved onto his broken stone say his name
was Jechiel Isaak, and that he rests
in the Garden of Eden. He died in 1330,

and his tombstone was brutalized in the pogrom
of 1349. Suspended above this triangle of dirt,
but turned at yet another angle, is a triangle

of three strips of wood. A light above burns
this upper triangle's shadow onto the floor.
The two intersect to form a Star of David.

The room is cold and quiet. We sit
and think. The children squirm and complain.
We scold, tell them to be quiet, to think
about what they have seen and see. They
frown. They do not want to stay. To be
cold, tired, and hungry is not wrong after
what we have experienced. We will carry
this shadow, this dirt, this broken stone
with us when we walk out of the womb
of this primitive room. The Star
will continue to burn and shine.
The light will continue to pulse.

Norbert Krapf

NO BUT ABOUT IT

Sticks and stones
may break my bones
but words . . .

Oh, yes they can.
Oh, yes they do.
In there past bones.
Forever, too.

Richard Aldridge

Two Poems

LABOR DAY NAP

Here they come these back-to-teaching dreams of students stuffed
in the custodian's hutch – my classroom this year – students
call me *Davy Baby Davy Baby* instead of *Mr. Davis* or *Sir*.

A girl in pigtails shoots BB's through a pea shooter,
hits my wrist. I pound my gavel, pound my gavel, pound as Ralph
a wrestling hunk who's stuck in Junior English a third year,

chucks darts at waxcans, twirls a power cord like a lariat
over his head, yells *giddy-up Davy, ya fruit*,
whistles the Leave It To Beaver theme song.

Morgan who's forty and tosses a graph-papered
notebook at mops in the rafters, tosses
a ruler and protractor smack at my ditto machine says

Teach me Functions. I'll die if I don't learn Functions.

He starts up a floor buffer, buffs out the scuffs
in his running shoes. I cartwheel off my desk to stop

a fight. I hold my fingers in peace signs.

I say *Please, boys, please*. Morgan, Ralph and Karla
snap off bones from a plastic skeleton.

I cough up blood. I chug Maalox. I cough. I throw
my watch at boys tucking paint cans in their pants.

I cough. I yell *I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm doing.*

SCHOOLTEACHER RAKING CRIMSON LEAVES

All these leaves arranged dorsal side
down and dorsal side up are student
faces remembered or discarded.
I kneel and scoop the happy faces,
the why-did-you-flunk-me faces,
scoop them like moons to my chest, wounded
faces, crimson and flowing faces
hold them face against flattened face
scoop them until I'm fat
and warm as a red verb and I
dance among leaves. I am gripping
the faces of Doug the Slug Bolin,
of Mara who located two corpses
one month. I am twisting and turning
with Tonya, Jake and Jim, with Carroll I
counselled out of suicide, Rick I didn't,
Jarrod the Phi Beta Kappa Jehovah's
Witness addicted to Kerouac. Dance
with me Nancy: you chained your wheelchair
to gates of the Livermore Lab. Dance
with me. Dance with me Kristan
and your visit to Rajneeshpuram.
Dance with me Joel, Sandy, Alan
and the thousand ladybugs you set
free in the library. Oh Jerry
I know you stuffed cheat notes in your
chew cans. Dance your wet veins
like memory against my wet veins.
Dance me to the end of song.

John Davis

POEM TO MY HUNGRY DAUGHTER

1

I begin with my first
knowledge of you my
rounded belly you a
curve inside curved
rounded warm
floating in that sea
that calls to us both
always back to the
warm salt

oh round daughter flesh
I try now to understand
how you began not to
see your self what
evening you entered your
room to find the mirrors
cursed raving
spitting in your face like
lunatics spewing obscenities
into the clean darkness of
a spring night

and how relentless those
voices feeding on
yours growing fat
sucking inside your belly
pretending to
breathe with you

2

you used to climb to the
top of anything the
highest tree the
roof the balcony you
could chin yourself
sprint through gymnastics
jump dance twirl ski

you could turn cartwheels
one after the other in
the sand your body straight
your arms strong
black braids flying over and
over as though your
energy came from the ocean
and to try to stop you
would have been like
trying to hold
back the sea

but when that other flow
began your woman's time
that should have come with
celebration flowers and song
arrived instead infected with
the modern litany hold back
your woman's hips and thighs
hold back
hold back your arms and legs
hold back your cry hold
back your rage
hold back
hold back your sex your
laugh your fear
hold still hold
back your voice listen to
those others saying
show me show me
how small you can become

3

I want to say show me
what did this to you and
I'll kill it
but where to aim my fire
no simple monster
holds you captive these
tentacles are so many so fine
you inhale them with the air
they lie between the pages
of your magazines they
travel on airwaves they
glow like neon they
ride the sound of the
music you dance to they
slink under your pillow they
stick to the walls of your room
they hiss in your face from
the other side of your mirror

I try to imagine how it
must feel to be so
hungry your bones ache
so hungry your
hands turn blue so
hungry that a mild
breeze blows chills through
your body to be this
hungry for years not because
you were born into a
starving country but because
you were born into a
country of starving women

4

I didn't see the
changing only the
change that first
trip home from college
you standing in the
bathroom body still
wet from the tub your
back toward me each
rib outlined your
ribs a
fragile cage

take me back to
moments I missed those
times when swarms of
stings sought your
skin and stuck there
I didn't see them
you never knew how
gently I would have
tried to
wash them off

5

twenty-six years have passed since
I first fed you now we
sip coffee
sift through those years
panning for gold enough to
make an amulet to
ward off demons that
follow you from San Francisco to
Albuquerque to New York
that lurk here even now in this
warm cafe as we talk as
Friday night happens on Hudson Street
as I reach across this small table
as though to touch you

you dream of slipping into a
sweet trance from which you
awake with full breasts your
blood flowing again your
breath peaceful you tell me
how you cannot sleep how
even in bed your heart
pounds through the night as
though your body were
running running
and in my dream I
run after you in the
distance you are
farther away smaller

Almitra David

10° WEST OF GREENWICH

The winds of Bofin
howl and howl,
the grey sea and its companion sky
obliterate.

Only white scud tears
across. Gulls
waft without cry,
aimless in their search,
unresisting.

The wound the sea makes
makes island lore:
the drowning of two boys
is the island's grief,
not the world's.
Tidal treachery:
bodies scooped
from a torn February sea.
Scars, scars, scars.

There is no end to the withering
banshee winds.
Waves lick headlands foam white.
No end to the wind-stirred
memories,
presences across a continent,
an equinox for all souls
reaching grey hollows, grey times.
Remorseless.

Rain blurs the window:
a lone bird on a bare branch
huddles,
brief in a seamless world.
There is nothing symbolic in a grey sea,
not what the mood insists.
The rock remains the rock,
the sea in flux
more and more the same.

RIVER

I send a postcard to my cousin in prison
thirty minutes from my front door, twice
his skull's been fractured there
and I never visited
or cared.

But I say to him in Cellblock B, what happened?
because I like to read
the gory details
I'll never see.

And he writes back *There is
no alphabet for that* just
a gas station, he says, in the cold blue-
black of midnight up North, winter, it was closed.

Some nights I can't even
recall his name, and the screen
between us is green, it is particles
of light to reach him and I can't
quite – on the other side
it's also night, his name
is there, the syllables are small
and cool, like grapes
or cysts
before they slip away, and I think
I'll never get ahold of it again, though

I can still feel the blond hair on his arm
and how I rubbed it up
and down while we played, until

one day I turn in my hallway and he's here, white-
eyed and dead. He takes me on a tour
of the wax museum. He says: *Here*

is the part of yourself yourself you gave away
and I see myself naked
on a table, a baby
with life-like dimpled elbows, still
warm as a loaf of bread, *and here's*

the murdered part, noose
around my teen-age neck, ballet
slippers dangling
dust-pink
above the bright floor, sugar
dissolved in a glass of water, *and here's*

the dungeon where they display
the cruel things you don't
even remember doing, a Venus

Flytrap closing
its toothed cunt on something
that desperately wanted to live, and then

he shows me himself, in a top hat
and tails, smooth
skin of his hands smelling
of oil, yellow candles, weakness
like soft plastic. I kiss

those hands
with my cold lips, and a river splashes
past the museum, clapping
its ripples with the sound
of a child being
lightly slapped
over and over, out of joy.

Laura Kasischke

Three Poems

ZONA VIVA: Mexico City Market

Something about the day of the night-before-leaving
teases the yellow smog into a dream light:
I walk in a gas lit dusk, breathless,
through the Zona Viva, to find a souvenir.
Now, almost disappeared beneath the shops
that sell their artifacts, sit soft mounds
of Indian women, working in their office
of children and rags. Whirling children,
tied by invisible strings, are learning
the subtracted gravity of the Zona Viva:
the strings cannot rappel them over the fell
of poverty's edge. They are hostage tops,
caught in the hands of their holders, blurring
in an exudation of women and myrrh.

Within the flags of paper lace, cut-out fish,
birds and braided dolls, a woman weaves in a strand
from her own shawl, not distinguishing
person from place. Watching me,
she opens her flower hand, stirring
the sleeping baby in her skirt: begging,
her dropped petal fingers curl toward me,
arrowhead eyes fly toward me as I reach down
with a coin for her hand. In the gaping yellow night,
I feel my own child's hand pull me down.
"Am I going to die?" she asks, nearly grown,
I count to twenty.

Paris. An ovarian cyst after midnight
twists her to the floor: she is yours,
and mortal, avoid the hospital.
We lock in two curves, her back against my front,
between my knees, rocking, counting,

(Stanza continued)

our breaths timed with her pain;
twenty seconds, and we rest in between,
helplessly, I am chanting, "in – be – tween,
. . . there is a small space between the pains
where we rest . . .," wet as seals, our holds slip,
counting, the small space comes,
we rest in long breaths.

"Ma, am I going to die?"

"Not while we breathe, no one dies. . .
count, it is time to count!"

We count again to twenty. . . and the hours slip,
even, now subsiding, you fall to my side.

I pull the sheet down to cover you,
my long lovely daughter, sleep in the bough
of these arms and legs, while we wait
for some act of reinstatement,
until the fever breaks,
or the ancients return to the Zona Viva.

The Indian woman's eyes never leave my face
as I kneel down to her baby.

I buy a painted tin votive,
thanking God for a miracle. Permissibly,
we gaze at each other's hammock bodies,
listening to the script of origins,
seeing volcanos overturn or spare the pyramids,
begin the tops or stop their orbital spin.

Inhale, suppose there is spirea in the air,
where the women sit, twilit, watching the day close,
a book held fast in the hand of a sleeper,
where it is written: in this place of accidents,
we are innocent. Inhale.

PHANTOMS

I have been carrying
my leg for some time now.
Hopping forward is slow
progress; one elbow
hangs by a thread and
must rest on my dead hip.
My hand can no longer bear
a bare pencil weight.
I had to leave my head behind
sometime ago; it thoughtlessly
banged against the rocks. Now, I'm
afraid my other leg will fail
from this plague of constant
movement – then I'll have to
pull forward on one elbow and
one shoulder. There, I hear its
brittle cracking off; it falls.
Now all the limbs are gone.
Lacking limbs, my navel
snails across the ground,
inching along on its
own moisture, it
grips, then slips my
heavy torso forward,
spitting out the dust,
gasping with every
step. I am going
to a small sphere

(Stanza continued)

where there
is no pain,
I can
crawl in
almost tight.
No daylight.
One leg used
to stick out –
Now it won't,
of course.
Once there,
I keep
my eyes
closed;
remembering
walking
and swinging
my high
school
hips.

POLITY

I have a position that answers
each change in your position.
Excitor, your forearm bone
bows my hip, and hoping to safecrack
my dream, you prick my scheme,
then spoon me from behind
till we sit lying in our frog dialogue.
To my co-opting plea of knees
your forensic elbow replies
I will, I do, Oh, take my side!

Thus point on counter point
do we anoint our various regions
and take, God knows, what polls
in sweet debate of nightly sleep.

Weight up on elbow,
one listens sleeping
while the other pees in the dark,
a hiss through serpentine sleep:
and then by accident you're back –
kissing me and climbing like a wild
white rose – then bending down,
your shadow protects me from eclipse.

Gentle night genital,
campfire where I warm my hands,
lets love smother argument.
Promise me you'll stay
until the reverent dawn pours down the day,
I petition, stay with me,
and we will be positioned
in our polity of love.

Peggy Penn

THE OWL

I.

The house is nearly
quiet.

A half moon
lifts beyond the trees.

In the next room
my two children breathe,
the inhales, long,
the exhales, bubbling.

Mice are feeding at the spill
of flour in the kitchen
cabinet. I hear the owl
upstairs, in the room we gave her,
moving now like a bony moth
with boots on. She has found
the young light of the moon.

Her lids drift open
to a vole nosing
through the the garden's crust;
the black plug sprints
across the snow. It vanishes.

Her head bobs up
then down. Her talons flare.
She thumps
the window with her good wing.

Inside her, underneath
the tape and gauze, blood
ministers to bone,
builds a white span, cell by cell,
across the hot red empty flesh.
She cannot hear it, but tonight
I think I do. Its work
is louder than the licking tongues
of the mice. It is a high, sweet
piping to which she, unbound,
will dance before
the month has gone.

II.

The harbor tide
is full. The moon reveals
winter draggers and lobster boats
at rest. The man who owns
the Good Elaine is standing
at his window. He has met this view
before: each craft
tugs against its proper mooring,
the shoulders of the old wharf
lean. Behind him,
his wife is humming, putting up her hair.
He listens,
feels a shift. He can't
tell where or what
it is. We – his neighbors, friends, his wife
who switches to another tune –
will know it with him
weeks from now. Tonight,
not sick yet, but not well, he keeps
coming back to the
wounded owl. He is the man
who found her
when he went cutting maple
by the Winter Harbor line.

It pleases him
to recollect just how
the talons gripped
his sleeve. How light
the body was. Looking out the window,
straining for what he cannot
see, he takes himself to the woods again,
to see the healed owl step down now out
of the cold air
onto a branch above the snow. He waits
to see the big wings
flex up, tuck in.

Susan Hand Shetterly

BOOKS IN BRIEF: *CLARITY*

Welcome to a new book of poems by William Merwin. This one is *Travels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, 144 pp., \$20. cloth). If you are raw from a world of corrupt language, where a Mazda is "capable of thought," Block Island is "the last great place," and birds are "happier" nesting by an oil rig, you will be healed by Merwin's steady, quiet voice, the purity of his language, and the luminous accuracy of his images. Be prepared to read slowly, over and over. The book opens with a "Cover Note" beginning:

Hypocrite reader my
 variant my almost
 family we are so
 few now it seems as though
 we knew each other as
 the words between us keep
 assuming that we do
 I hope I make sense to
 you in the shimmer of
 our days while the world we
 cling to in common is
 burning . . .

and ends, in its fifth stanza:

. . . reader I do
 not know that anyone
 else is waiting for these
 words that I hoped might seem
 as though they had occurred
 to you and you would take
 them with you as your own

(The fact that Knopf ordered a second printing before publication gives me hope that the community of Merwin's readers is large.) Old friends will find familiar subjects here, such as elegies to vanishing landscapes and cultures. "Inheritance" is a gentle hymn to diversity, regretting the loss of the "four thousand/ varieties of the opulent pear" that "it has been said" were to be found in France a century ago.

Merwin's new direction in this volume is a gallery of narrative portraits of artists and naturalists, including the richly detailed and profoundly sad account of "The Real World of Manuel Córdova— forty-three loosely-rhymed long stanzas recounting Córdova's initiation into a culture of the Upper Amazon and his ultimate betrayal of that society. In his "Writing Lives" the poet says that "one way with words is to tell/ the lives of others/ using the distance as a lens// and another way/ is when there is no distance/ so that water/ is looking at water." Poems of both ways distinguish this book. And the image of water represents the clarity of Merwin's vision. He concludes: "to us it is clear/ that if a single moment could be seen/ complete it would disclose the whole." It is tempting to hold each image, and indeed each poem, as such a microcosm.

Also something of a departure for this poet is a Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem, "The Day Itself," a gentle comic tour de force, addressing the now-presumably-educated students on the extent and the limits of their education. Merwin once said that the poetic form is "the setting down of a way of hearing how poetry happens in words. The words themselves do not make it. At the same time it is a testimony of hearing how life happens in time. But time does not make it." "The Day Itself" makes a wonderful entrance into Merwin's poetry for those who are willing to listen and to look. Listening, one hears a gentle, civilized voice, sensitive to its audience, weaving down the channels of knowledge, through the eddies toward the *philo sophia* – the love of wisdom that is, Phi Betes are told, the guide of life. In this, as in the other poems in this volume, the inner form is the action of the poem, and the outer form expresses it. The inner form here is the flow of the mind back and forth between audience and speaker, back and forth in time. Merwin expresses this flow, here as in the other poems, by a sequence of unpunctuated stanzas through which the voice moves seamlessly in one long concatenation of ideas. Although the mind sometimes eddies back to qualify itself, to hesitate in deferential uncertainty, the flow is controlled primarily by the clarity of the syntactic units (clauses, parentheses, etc.) and, often in counterpoint to the syntax, by the exquisitely-balanced line ends. Excerpting is next to impossible, but here's a sample:

[on "Know Thyself"] . . . behind your
 own face now is the you that you
 wanted to know
 is it not and you feel that you have no
 age at all but are the same you that you were
 as long as you can remember
 while every decision that you
 made or thought you were making was conducting you
 straight to this seat and to what you
 would come to know
 as today in the middle of which no
 other you it seems is present furthermore
 what influenced each of your
 choices all of the accidents
 as they are called and such chances as your parents'
 meeting on their own before you . . .

To the ear this segues smoothly from idea to idea, seamlessly through the eighteen seven-line stanzas. If the reader pauses for a half-moment at the end of each line, the meaning holds its breath before the little twist of surprise in the following line. The poem moves from one rhythmic sequence to another, the rhythms emerging from a rich variety of repetitions, in syntax, in melody, in incremental images. The poem does not require the attention of that barbarian, as Frost calls him, the eye-reader, nor the finger-tapping of the meter-reader. But discovering that we are riding the river of the poem in a meticulously articulated craft does add a little bolt of delightening. The syllabic norm of each stanza is 4/10/10/8/8/12/8. Each first line ends in *know*. Each second line ends in *no* or a *no*-rhyme. The middle lines rhyme or half-rhyme bb/cc, and each last line ends in *you* or a *you*-rhyme. Other rhymes and half-rhymes swirl with the current throughout the poem. The Phi Betes who listened to this poem in 1989 surely heard a soft, thoughtful voice speaking directly to their condition on one bright day in their personal history – a humorous, gracious, concerned voice, speaking of the continuity of knowledge – “a body of questions in apparent suspension” – and, beyond knowledge, of kindness and generosity and even wisdom. Clarity here goes beyond mere comprehensibility to *claritas*, as in Thomas Aquinas: “*ad pulchritudinem tria requiuntur, integritas, consonantia, claritas*” – a beauty beyond

wholeness and harmony: an illumination, even a radiance. Clarity has not always been so accessible in Merwin's poems, but with each volume the complexity and the clarity have grown harmoniously together.

Clarity – the very word is like a bell to toll me back . . . to a moment during Charles Olson's visit to Beloit College for a week of talks and readings. We were on our way to a workshop when Olson halted in front of the office door of Professor Bud Clarity and exclaimed on the name plate: B. CLARITY. "Is there really someone named B. Clarity?" he boomed. "Really? What a wonderful name for a poet! What an *ideal* name for a poet!" I was amused, since clarity was not the first quality I'd then have associated with Olson's own work, though I have since come to understand something of what he meant. Still, many poets and theorists today associate clarity with simple-mindedness or, worse, political reaction. Consider the "Language poets," whose aesthetic aim, as Robert Hass has put it, is to "abolish subjectivity by making sure the poems can't be explicated. They want to somehow de-center consciousness . . . to finally throttle Romanticism to death" (interview in *Willow Springs*, #31). Perhaps so. I myself find a "Language" poem rather like bird-song: "an ornate advertisement of the singer."

For those who prefer clarity in poetry, whether in the sense of comprehensibility, transparency, illumination, or the Thomist's radiance, there are excellent new books to choose from – radically different from each other, but all powerful in their own ways. I have room to mention only a sample. The poet most often praised for his clarity of word and vision, Gary Snyder, has a "new and selected" entitled (mischievously) *No Nature* (Pantheon: New York & San Francisco, 1992, 392 pp., \$25. cloth). This is a generous selection from the range of his work, including a few new poems. I was interested, rereading, to realize how much that is distinctive and valuable in Snyder's work was there from the beginning. At first I resented the absence of dates for the various volumes, but I came to see that dates are not very significant for the general reader. One could slip the fifteen new poems into this volume anywhere and they'd settle right in. Snyder expresses perhaps more anger now at "This dolphin-drowned,/ This waste-tormented sea." But clear

water is still a central image, and "nature" still includes the whole physical universe, not excluding the "urban, industrial, and toxic." In his Preface Snyder is close to Merwin in that "the greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional." In content, Snyder's poems, early and late, act out this dance of process. In form his new work is less compacted, with more unstressed syllables, more verbs than verbals, but the old "dance with Matter" and the "honor and the humor" are still strong.

Donald Hall invites review here with the title of his new collection: *The Museum of Clear Ideas* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1993, 128 pp., \$19.95 cloth). There are certain prerequisites to fully appreciating this wonderful volume. First, playfulness and a sense of humor. Second, some responsiveness, either analytical or spontaneous, to prosody. Third, some breadth of vocabulary, or a willingness to work toward it. Fourth, openness to the Augustan spirit, particularly the Horatian. Fifth, some familiarity with late twentieth-century culture: of baseball, politics, literature and art. Editors of future anthologies will be kept happy annotating such references as Kearsarge, Lucky Strikes, SNCC, Kurt Schwitters, Olga Rudge, Madonna, a Seven and 7, and a Glenwood. Today's readers can revel in the allusions they do get and guess at those they don't.

The book is in four parts. First a heartbreakingly hilarious elegy to an invented contemporary poet, William Trout, in thirteen-syllable shapely lines, supplemented with a long "introduction" from an imaginary *Norton Anthology of Contemporary Verse*. Next is "Baseball": nine innings, nine stanzas each, and each stanza, of course, with nine lines of nine syllables. Conceived as an explanation of the game to the Dada collagist Kurt Schwitters, these innings are themselves collages of philosophical jests and gestures, erotic scenes, outrage at environmental atrocities, family snapshots, literary and historical anecdotes, political and literary satire, and, throughout, baseball. (Part four adds "Extra Innings": the tenth, ten stanzas of ten decasyllabic lines, the eleventh in hendecasyllables, etc.) Like Merwin's, these stanzas flow together seamlessly, making excerpting virtually impossible. Start reading and ride the rapids.

Part three, the title poem, "The Museum of Clear Ideas, Or Say: Horsecollar's Odes" is thirty-eight poems based on the first book of the Odes of Horace – some followed closely, some loosely, but each in itself an extraordinary contemporary poem. Horace Horsecollar is the Disney character – a shrewd rube. Scholars will have good times explicating the lightly disguised autobiographical details and the considerable parallels between the lives of Hall and Horace. Enjoyment, however, does not require such Norton anthology treatment. The subjects are varied and clear, whether Hall is excoriating poetasters or rejoicing with his Camilla on the "bright sheets." The playfulness is exquisite, as when he introduces an ode on the coy debasement of language ("We thank you for not smoking. Have a nice day./ May we share these suggestions with you?") with these lines: "Let us declare onomastic solutions/ to difficulties largely unnameable,/ and by the mottoes// of euphemism contract verbal righteousness." But this Horatian satire turns almost Juvenalian at the end:

Vocabulary voids original sin;
cavalry of the lie reaches Calvary
just in time – to bugle Christ down from the cross.

But: no nails, no Christ,

The *but* is crucial. For Hall's current rarely runs smooth. It is constantly tossing back on itself, sometimes through simple oxymoron, sometimes through a sentence that changes direction five times before its period: progression through contraries. Horsecollar frequently follows an ode with a pendant poem in a different meter, introduced with "Or say;," which parodies, contradicts, or wryly reverses the direction of its ode:

"Or say: At this moment, according to habit,
Horsecollar interrupts his ode to contradict
his ode . . .
Horsecollar revels in luxuries of antithesis,
by which any Eden, temperate with blessedness,
freezes forever in the flames of coldest hell.

So where are the "clear ideas"? Are there any lines untwisted by irony? I should think there were. And Hall's "clear ideas" are largely implicit in Horace. (In the war of the ancients with the moderns, Hall would stand at the side of Swift.) First there is the contempt for the meretricious, the superstitious, and the fake:

"Hype springs eternal in the human breast." Then there is the quintessentially Horatian *carpe diem*. And beneath it all are two subtexts, all the more powerful by being understated: first, a metaphysical rage against the dying of the light ("*Timor mortis conturbat me*"), and then, beyond that, the poets' "improbable goal":

to make objects
carved in the abiding stone of language;
to leave, when they die, durable relics.

Hall's poems make "durable relics" of late twentieth-century life in much the same way that Byron's *Don Juan* does for the early nineteenth. The "clear ideas," however, are timeless.

A very different kind of vision illuminates Betsy Sholl's *The Red Line* (Pittsburgh & London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992, 84pp., \$17.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper). I don't understand where the clarity of this vision comes from, but I am in awe of it. Most of us can contemplate the sickness of our society from the healing perspective of Maui or Kitkitdize or our Sabine farm. But Sholl has the toughness to thrive in our crumbling cityscapes: the bus depot, the hospital, the prison. She turns toward the "old jughead in the laundromat," the boozy, the broken, and the menacing. Early on in this extraordinary book she often claims to be at a loss for words. In "You Figure It Out" she winces at the woman on the bus tyrannizing her kid, and imagines meeting the boy after a "whole childhood like that," when he turns to her wanting "to touch something Mama can't slap away,"

To which I'd
reply – Only, hey – what is it a dog says,
when it throws back its head and doesn't stop?

But this loss for words fades out as the book develops. From somewhere, perhaps from the very discipline of writing the poems, the poet has found the power to pay attention, the warmth of spirit that leads to empathy, and, wonderfully, the voice to express this passion in radiant verse. I understand that Sholl is also a splendid teacher. We should all go to school to her.

M.K.S.