

CONTENTS

	PAGE
John Davis	<i>Reference Desk Woman</i> 5
Rex Wilder	<i>On The Eve of the Millennium</i> 6
Charles Muñoz	<i>Lockerbie</i> 9
	<i>Osiris in Arizona</i> 12
Sherman Alexie	<i>Things (for an Indian) To Do In New York (City)</i> 14
Taylor Mali	<i>I Could Be A Poet</i> 20
Molly Tenenbaum	<i>The Aptitude Test</i> 22
	<i>As I Set Out</i> 24
	<i>Spring Vase</i> 26
Roger Williams	<i>Deltrium</i> 28
	<i>Buffalo Creek</i> 28
John Millstone	<i>Harley</i> 29
David Starkey	<i>Pottawatomie Creek</i> 32
Charles W. Pratt	<i>Wolsey's Hole</i> 34
Susan Wicks	<i>Wake</i> 35
	<i>Caves</i> 36
Books in Brief	
Six anthologies of recent Chinese poetry, reviewed by John Rosenwald and Yanbing Chen	37
A. R. Ammons, ed., <i>The Best American Poetry 1994</i>	42

Cover: Sunrise in sea smoke, Mount Desert Island, winter solstice, -18°F.
Photograph by Mark Baldwin.

The Editors
of
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
are proud to announce
the winner of the second
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
of \$3,000
to
Albert Goldbarth
for his poem
The Two Domains: in several voices
in the Spring 1994 issue



This prize, awarded annually,
is the gift of
the friends and family
of the poet
Chad Walsh,
co-founder, in 1950, of this magazine.

REFERENCE DESK WOMAN

I love you from Navajo to Opium from Photograph
to Pumpkin, even your mid-stops in Pinstripes and Pistons.

I love
the grey hair looping in your bifocals. I love you from Skin

to Sumac and I'll scratch
your itches from Birmingham to Burlington and back.
I love you from Heart to India and I'll smooth

your pages of Hexagons, Horseflies, Highroads
and Hydrofoils. O darling sweet honey when you knot
your hair while thumbing from Egypt to Falsetto,

let me be the Epiphany your fingers trace. Let me be
your Equator, your Etching, the Epicenter of your Earthquakes.
Sweet one, you spend so long staring in Falstaff

to Franco. Is it Fedora, Florida, or Feldspar that takes you
when you could take the pen from your teeth and smile? Please
don't

shelve me as just another Sumatra to Trampoline man.

Smile when I come to your desk. Let me loop
your hair. Show me what you keep in your indexes and we'll
work

our way from Trance to Venial Sin.

John Davis

ON THE EVE OF THE MILLENNIUM

I put out my only clean pair of socks, not caring
If they match. Although, of course, they do. I drape
Tomorrow's plain-colored uniform over the designer
Jeans my wife, in Central Park, at the height of her powers
Of indiscretion, emptied me out of
And flung, puncturing them, into the recently deflowered

Nether-branches of a hawthorn, out of the range
Of mortal ears, noses, and naked eyes, but well within
Striking distance of the expertly trained Audubon
Society binoculars that day in unfortunate abundance,
Making history making love to, and a spectacle
Of, me. That was before we heard that time was to be subject

To strict regulations. Now I watch television for hours
On end, and often two or three shows at once.

When something empties, it empties into something.

I open my rented curtains and let lightlessness
Seek, in the glossy surfaces, like a first-time burglar,
Restitution, and easier ways out. Herman,

The superintendent from Lisbon, has given notice and gone
To live with his son and daughter-in-law in Jersey. He left me
His non-power tools, the usual ones, plus a dismantled
Toaster, which can be made to work again, he said like he was
Some psychic healer trying to convince a man
Who's had his knees crushed to bone meal: "Don't operate . . .

. . . Concentrate." Right now, I'm shutting out
The world, and thinking about toast. My socks are sopping
Wet and I washed them last week. I take the Russian
Vodka I bought in West German East Germany out of the
freezer

And pour myself some. Suddenly, I am free; or at least
To imagine, which I do. I dive beneath a breaking

Wave as clear as this vodka, and come up among splashing
 Girls, as drunk as I am, but on something purer. Ten years
 From today, if you believe statistics, seven percent
 Will be dead from skin cancer, or some other kind of cancer,
 As there are always enough new strains to keep up
 With progress and kill the Joneses. The wind crams

Like soccer match hooligans through the gap in the window
 Jamb, which the super no doubt booby-trapped
 His last weekend here, when he was fuming Portuguese smoke
 Signals all over the place, landlord-directed epithets
 And the like. *When something empties into something,*
The memory of something remains. My socks, like flabby

Sanddabs — to whose existence in this condition I can attest,
 But about which I cannot expound, the fish fry in question
 Happening to belong to a particularly humorless mafia family
 In Queens — discover the muscle of the radiator's grill.
 It is, in truth, a hit-or-miss proposition, as the steam heat,
 Much like my missing Mrs., either sets fires or

Puts them out. More often than not, however, I and my socks
 Freeze on, while my wife, whose gyroscopic breasts blind
 People might, with two open palms and a little encouragement,
 Use to see, as it were, a perfect sunrise and sunset,
 Or, of course, vice versa, continues to refract the Côte d'Azur
 Sun with abandon and nothing on, immune to skin cancer

And every other kind of cancer. Her tan, in fact, I hear,
 Has been making unfair demands on her already insufficient
 Powers of humility. WOMAN DIVORCES MAN TO MARRY SELF.
 Don't laugh. *The memory of something has its own weight,*
And can itself be emptied. At this very moment, if you
 Believe statistics, a student, to make a point he could never

Make at his university, is setting himself on fire.
 If he survives, he will no longer be welcome at the café
 Where he came up with the idea. The newly unsightly
 Do not, frankly, in a milieu so attuned to the eye, boost
 Business. I think about visiting the poor
 Student at whatever state-run hospital they take him to,

But the irony of the state he was protesting against
Now committed, if only by law, to the freedom-lover's speedy
Recovery would probably kill him before I got there,
Or could even figure out how to send flowers to a country
Struggling with democracy. Ten years from today
Jesus Christ will take the place of Greta Garbo,

If only by default, as she will, God granting, be left
Alone, at last and for good, thanks to skin cancer,
Or some other kind of cancer, and He will be hounded outside
His apartment by the formerly faithless who all of a sudden
Want to be his best friend. Look for wienie wagon and knish
Concessions, not to mention a lifesize likeness of Himself

On the cross next to John the Baptist, whose head, so
Tourists can put in their own and have their picture taken
With the Lord, is missing. *When something empties,
It empties into something.* Every year at this time,
Whether or not I'm at a party, I empty the refuse of my life
Into a huge plastic bag. I turn to the person next to me

Or I turn to the darkness. And it is then I discover
I am no longer holding the huge plastic bag, but am inside
All over again. This will happen ten more times.
If I survive, I expect my wife and the superintendent
To make an appearance on my brownstone stoop,
The latter with fixing my toaster his number one priority

And my wife with an infant in her arms, which she holds out to
me.

(31 December 1989)

Rex Wilder

Two Poems**LOCKERBIE**

I have never understood
how Zeno's famous paradox could twist
through anybody's mind
without damaging
a few brain cells, scorching them with sparks from that brilliant
absurdity of never-ending travel. When the airplane had spun
halfway down from eight miles up, it still, naturally,
had half of the original eight
miles left to go,
a four-mile cushion of clear air and of reasonable safety as long
as it stayed in the sky, and, continuing to obey
that law of demi-
proportionality, it could spin its passengers halfway down the
sky
again, a precise half of those four cushioning
miles, which would leave, as always, another
half of the distance
safely remaining, so now there would be two miles of
springtime air below
each passenger's pressing
feet, an altitude
then to be divided into equal segments by tumbled gyro
compass and hazy straightedge
horizon, though, to tell the truth, the controls had lost all
function. Zeno
was, at that next moment,
one full mile from harm (philosophers die old) and he easily
fell halfway yet again,

teaching that no matter how far you travel
from that last bed,
you can always split
the difference
and find yourself a chunk of time useful for thinking and
falling, but

by then even Zeno was only a half
mile above the town's scrubby trees, the village where
faces
had already started to look
up. From a quarter mile above
the streets you could glance down and see one arm
pointing

at you, see mouths crying
"O," see faces, mouths and eyes defining well-constructed
geometric circles,
see town turning as the plane spun, radius and
diameter shown to all of us. see the whole great wheel
of the universe and the irrational

number shaped by the wingtips,
and you could surely feel the discipline of centrifugal
force that kept the passengers securely clenched to
cushions whose upholstery
springs popped upward through the plastic seats, heads
pulled back so
hard that mouths

dragged open, eyes
watching black shadows in the sunlight that flashed into
alternate
windows of the broken cabin, as round they went,
drawing geometry
in the sky, pinned, held fast by that spinning gravitation,
clutched
by the simple physics that shoved

their magazines and underseat
baggage against the sides of the airplane and filled
flickering space with dust. They heard the loudspeaker
 sizzling, saw
the perfect circles of their coffee cups, felt
time disturbed

by granite hills, space wrenched
by roof tiles, and they believed
Zeno's elegant demonstration that never will we get
to that last point of our travels
(nor fly into the sun,)

not even when the town's sheep meadow, upside down,
 spins
over us. For still there will be time
for a wind of treetops, weeds between the trees, and a
 space of white rocks.

OSIRIS IN ARIZONA

The god, the newspapers told us, the god lay helpless
in darkness while the world became hotter
and the directors of our irrigation district reported
that the aquifer was running low.

Diesel exhaust shook the air where drills
mounted on trucks dug
the city wells deeper. The Salt River failed
above the first high dam. In the fields
where cotton grew last year, mesquite
sprouted, bushes with poison
at the tips of their roots.

And the god, the god below lay on his left side without
moving, without dreaming,
the mighty sleeper poisoned.

The irrigation water
trickled slow and thick to our fields,
our fathers' fields, with dead fish,
dead fish lying as dead fish lie, dull in the
scummed water, staring upward with one eye flattened.

Our neighbors came in the darkness
and broke down the berms
and stole water from our fields.
We hired shotgun watchmen to protect
the hours of our night.

The god,
the dead god lay on his left side,
knowing that the grain
had twisted and failed, poisoned in darkness. His sisters
called to him.

What good is the song of people gone
four thousand years?
What good is the prayer to a god
of ancient Egypt,
the superstition of people dead four thousand years?

Salts leach upward, corrupting the soil
in our own valley. Our trees begin to fail.
They curl in the yellow leaf; the new leaves
fall in early Spring, whirling
as they fall through the days of Lent,
ticking when they strike dry branches.

Each year, his sisters
sang to the god, the dead
god, telling him the river
had failed. The congregation
of Egypt sang for eight days,
the great dark song
to the god descended into death.

Each year, the god, the dead
god, heard, called
out, his voice feeble,
called out for
help. He struggled into the light,
balancing the upper world
with justice and sweet waters.

This month the elegant sidewinder
hunts through the clotted dirt and the mesquite
of last year's cotton fields. Dust
blooms up behind automobiles on the interstate.

Charles Muñoz

THINGS (for an Indian) TO DO IN NEW YORK (City)

1.

Walk down the Avenue of the Americas
even though it's actually Sixth Avenue
and I mean, walk right down the middle
of the Avenue of the Americas

and tell all of the cab drivers I love them
or walk down the middle of Wyckoff Street
in Brooklyn at three in the morning
waving my arms like a crazy man

because some New Yorker once told me
it will scare all of those muggers away
but I think it means those muggers
will just end up mugging an Indian

acting like a crazy man
but maybe I can make them laugh
and they'll leave me enough money
for another cannoli, cannoli, cannoli

or convince myself that I look more
like a mugger than one who is to be mugged
because I have dark skin, long hair
and those dark-skinned, long-haired muggers
will all nod their heads at me

whenever I walk by, brother to brother
but wait, everybody is a mugger
and that white man in his wool suit
just lifted my wallet
and disappeared down the Avenue

of the Americas, which, as we all know
by now, is actually Sixth Avenue
and lucky me, he took my throw down
wallet, which only held a twenty
and a sepia photograph of Mister X.

2.

Read Ted Berrigan's sonnets
and wonder how we are all alike
but still have absolutely nothing
in common. I stop bearded men
and beautiful women in the streets
and they're all poets. Everybody
is bearded and beautiful. Everybody
is a poet. I roll a drunk over
in a doorway and he quotes
Robert Frost. My God, he's home-
less and formalist. How much money
should I drop into his tin cup?

3.

The whole world does not belong
in any one place, but here we are
all of us gathered in Times Square
with our guns drawn and teeth bared.
I want to find somebody to kill
because of their skin color. No.
I want to kill a bus full of children
because of their parents' religion
and I want to build a hate machine
in the middle of Times Square
and call it a piano. I want
to start a circus in Manhattan
and call it a church. I want to hail
a mounted policeman and call him God.

4.

What time is it? I stop
a passer-by in this cruel city
and ask her. It's 12:02 p.m.

she tells me and keeps
walking. She actually gave me
the correct time. Oh, the kindness

and I stop watch wearer
after watch wearer, asking
for time and they all give it to me.

I could live here
forever. No, that's not true
at all. I'm lying

because it's nearly 1:34 p.m.
and I have only an hour
before I travel back home.

5.

There is nothing as sad as a bad guitar player
in the hotel room next door at some insane hour
moving his clumsy fingers from chord to chord
until you think, in those long pauses between
a B minor and F, that he must be an Indian
adopted as a young child by a white family, and now
confused and desperate, has come to New York City
to become a rock star, but hocks his guitar
eventually for a bus ticket back home
to his white parents, who love him so much
that they don't say a word about his new braids
and they all travel to a powwow together
slightly embarrassed to find their feet tapping
along in an imperfect rhythm with the drums.

6.

I was looking for a happy ending
but found a refrigerator

abandoned on East Fifth Street
instead. In New York City

an entire family will soon live
in that refrigerator.

I know this
because it happens

on my reservation, too.

7.

Think how my entire world used to be white
but this is New York City and everybody is brown
but this is America, too, and everybody is still
white, but then again, I know America is not white
exactly, but it is white inexactly, without
color, wanting this or that blood to stain its hands.

8.

There's too much to do
on some of these days
so I don't even leave
the Brooklyn brownstone

and I'm frightened
because I'm an Indian
who knows the difference
between Monet and Manet

so I just watch TV
because I am an American
and the walk to the subway
can break all of my hearts.

9.

world cup soccer on television

About soccer riots in Europe:
there would be riots in American stadiums
during our particular games
if the people who had reason to riot
could pay the price for admission.

10.

But, America, I think how
your men will always find
a more effective way to kill.

No Indian would have ever invented
an automatic bow and arrow
but I love you still

in the way that I have been taught
to love you:
with fear.

11.

So how is it possible
that I could fall in love
with every waitress
and waiter in Manhattan?

Stop. I'm not in love
with any of them.
It must be the food
although they are all gorgeous
and horrible at their jobs
so when they drop
the plates and cups
it does sound like music.

12.

Then I think to thank all of you
for Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman
for the automobile and Orson Welles
for the fluoride in drinking water.

13.

Suddenly, there's another Indian on the subway
sitting right beside me, surprise, there's an Indian
on the subway, F Train from Brooklyn
to Manhattan, on a Monday afternoon, surprise
there is another Indian, I mean, another American
Indian sitting on the subway seat next to me
really, in the seat right beside me, our legs touch
and I am convinced that she's Indian, Native
American, Aboriginal, beneath her clothes
she's Indian in her clothes, her clothes are Indian
because she's wearing them, there's an Indian
on the F Train all the way from Brooklyn
to Manhattan and she loves me, she loves
me, she loves me, of course, she's my wife.

Sherman Alexie

I COULD BE A POET

*A poem for people who know
how poems are supposed to be read*

I think I could be a poet
because
I
never
learned
how to breathe (✂)
I can think of incongruous images
like a Marxist with a trust fund (✂)
A Porsche pulling a U-Haul (✂)
A lobsterman in espadrilles sipping a cappuccino (✂)
his pinky pointing toward the rosy-fingered dawn (✂)
I can say the same line twice and make it mean something
else (✂)
I can say the same line twice and make it mean something
else (✂)
I have studied the poets who sing-song out their lines
For no other reason than that's how it's done (✂)
In love with the sound of their own voices
Ending each line going up (✂)
Every single line going up (✂)
As they read, and read, and . . . read (✂)
See, declarative sentences that in prose would go down,(✂)
In modern poetry seem to go up (✂)
As if it adds some hidden meaning.
I know what I'm talking about and you should too (✂)

When it comes to making references
to obscure works of literature that you should have read
I am as bold as Chapati on the peak of Mt. Gaia
slaying the three-headed Wetzelscottle.

And I have known anger too!
 And I'm not afraid to let it show.
 I'm not afraid to use that one requisite swear word
 that shows I'm *fucking* serious
 if not dangerous.
 I'm not afraid to

SHOUT!
 WITH INTENSITY!
 AND LONG DRAMATIC
 PAUSES FRAUGHT WITH ANGST!

Still you can hear the lines go up (↗)
 And the words, the vocabulary words —
 Glaconian, distemic, Koa-tahkah-nahbey —
 Thrown in to remind you
 "I am a writer! Eat my Verbal dust!"
 My G.R.E. dust.

And then the end
 Spoken softly, hauntingly tender,
 Though not devoid of irony,
 Ending abruptly as if there is more . . .

Taylor Mali

Note: (↗) This symbol indicates a rise in vocal pitch such as can be heard at the end of a question. This interrogative phenomenon is also prevalent among Ivy League graduates who are afraid of being thought of as elitist snobs: "Where did I do my Under-graduate work? Oh, um. I went to . . . Harvard (↗)." .

Three Poems

THE APTITUDE TEST

Which activity would you prefer?

- a. Sitting with a sick friend.*
- b. Climbing a mountain.*
- c. Reading a book.*
- d. Reading a book about mountains to a sick friend.*

— Educational Testing Service, from memory

Now that you're settled in the arm
of this desk, do you incline
to watch the pine in all weathers,
the distracting sun on sequins of snowmelt, or do you
seek inside weather
a central shape of tree?

Perhaps instead you wonder
why snow sticks to grass before sidewalks, why lawns
then seem like sheets tucked in, borders
neat as the imagined orderly world.

Where do you stand on birdseed,
tons sold every year,
the junco hungry in the yard?

Do you like winter?

Speaking of carpentry, are you for
hammers or nails?

If you had one hour left,
would you fix the screen door handle,
read your favorite psalm,
kiss your love goodbye,
eat at last the habanero,
hottest pepper on earth?

Suppose someone offered you,
in the middle of life,
a tray of cucumber slices,
a doily of cunningly cut canapes,
then a third hand brought
rich chocolates, each one in a gilt-foil cup —
quick, what calls,
the shine, the sweet, the strange third hand,
or beautiful cucumber's palest green?

Do you like spring?

Quick, what was your first thought when you were born?

STOP

AS I SET OUT

Today I toss a wish in my Perhaps Bag
before setting out,
and I put cheese and bread together,
seal them in my plastic sandwich box,
then tumble these
together with the wish
inside the dark Perhaps Bag.

Today I pat my shoes to fit my feet,
place shoe and foot together on the step,
bread and cheese and wish banging my hip
through the bag's soft cloth as I set out.

Today I slip my eye in place under my glasses,
then stand back, allowing eye through glass
to light on blooming Double File Viburnum,
a tree whose name I have just learned;
so name and eye and glasses bob above
the foot and shoe, while in between
the wish and sandwich bounce,
Perhaps Bag at my hip as I set out.

Today as I set out, I add the bird
leaving the birch,
whose crossing to the roof seems such hard work,
suspension using every ounce of wing.
I add the white bar and black head
of another bird, small, but weighing
enough to twitch bright arcs of dew from highest hemlock
branches.

Today I'd planned to pack the fewest necessary things.
I'd eat the sandwich, I'd remove the shoes,
but keep the eye, for looking later where the day had gone,
how it started with a wish, how the wish and sandwich
rubbed
together in the swaying dark Perhaps Bag.

But I added birds and trees with names,
and I collected on my way small garden jobs to tuck
somewhere,
and hoped to manage this as simply
as I had tucked the eye snug to its eye-spot,
as I had fit the foot, extending in its shoe:
trim the sorrel, weed the stones,
clear tall clutter from clean lines of iris bed —
though in bare dirt, a new small clutter grows.

Today when I came home, I opened the bag that had
flapped
beside me all day, shook crumbs
from the sandwich box, and washed it, leaned it up to
dry.

As I walked by the open bag, not looking
down, I saw with sight like muffled hearing,
sight like the sound of a roundness pressing the air —
I saw the farthest corner darkest,
saw the shape of something without corners,

where I had tossed it when I started,
beside me all day,
between eye and shoe,
small as a burn
in a purse, and swaying
through soft cloth as I set out.

SPRING VASE

Bleeding-heart forget-me-not the world
 vase-water a pond the kind concocted
 in a jar for home or science class but this one
 irreproducibly tangled so lush with cut stem
 no one could have made it all I did was fill a cup
 all I did want flowers by me where a spider
 now continues one leg another intent
 who knows if to him the world seems the same green
 or stuffier consider Dutch bouquet painters
 introducing insects for verisimilitude
 surfaces whose lightest white of brushstroke equals crystal
 outside in his spider-life he travelled up and down
 now in by accident spider-life and all
 what enters what leaves won't stay even
 the screen door open shut clattering and now
 in the waterdrops tense on the petals now in the drops that
 shake
 from the petals more lives
 than I see bleeding-heart forget-me-not
 came in the door what went out
 to find them I think of names
 for the world shall it be
 Spring Vase shall it be O Unimaginably Slender Line
 O Sea-Green But Leafing
 O Unicellular Flutter Bacteria O
 Slipper-Shaped Paramecium (each spider-leg
 a host of drops his invisible eyes
 like drops while hearts
 like baby pocket-watches

pend from green) the screen door swings
I want to forget myself and plants bring me
nearer endless though inches
deep this water in ceramic handwork
glazed and fired I can't forget
myself in what my own hands filled
can't drop in what my own steps lifted through
the door a spring wind bangs today listen
the call from wind to stem
forget and not forget bleed and not to bleed
swing in a row that is not a row
arching line neither arch nor line
O Splash of Pond and Muddy Drop O Continual
Imbalance O All
my banging in and out bearing worlds
I can't see swinging
to empty just color and line then back
to trace twining cause and effect
so locate
me there between root and bloom
somewhere on a stem
my foot just coming in going out the door
forget forget forget forget
cancels or enhances
whatever I am a clear blue
ages pink the petals forget
whatever I am a stem dips
arching pink and white whatever I am
that banging

Two Poems**DELIRIUM**

I popped up thick-necked and surveillant
as one of those phallus-turrets on the Maginot Line.
Something had happened. The old man had fallen
dead into his plowman's harness, a mess
of reins and traces, hip straps and bellybands.

In Latin, *lira* was the furrow. If you went off the >
you were literally delirious. Seeing him shimmy
told me, "Keep it on the plumb —
you'll be a slacker soon enough."

BUFFALO CREEK

When the bubble of gob split like a bulb
and the head of the hollow broke its water
one hundred and twenty-five went under
the flood, into the mouth of the whale.
They spun and snagged and died and left
a silverado of washed-up dinner buckets.

Roger Williams

HARLEY

In the Bandi area of northwest Liberia this is the best known legend, a story that I collected several times. I paraphrase the interlinear translation in Barnabas Saji Ndebe's collection, *Tales from Bandiland*. It's so literal that it preserves the word order of Bandi, where prepositions are postpositions: they follow their nouns.

When once war was going badly the Bandi for, them and tribes other between, they did not know what they should do. They meet together, they go the diviner to, they ask him what they must do, the war them not overcome. The diviner in-looks, says, "This do, the war you not overcome: You must native born one sacrifice, shoot with arrows seven, breath in him, bury."

When they came from the diviner, they cried it the land's people to. Man one he was there, called Harley.

Incidentally, I am surprised that Ndebe puts an "r" in "Harley." The Bandis cannot pronounce "r." The "r" in their mouth makes the vowel longer or more back. Thus, the Holy Fathers pronounced the formulaic greeting as *I huwubun wiangor le*, making *wiangor* rhyme with "cellar door," as if to say, "You can't pronounce your own greeting, but we can." (The Anglicized form reminds me of motorcycles.)

Hale, his Bandi name, may pun on *sale*, which gets mutated to *bale*, meaning "medicine" or "magic."

He himself gives the country for, that they kill him. But he told them they must his relatives all free foreigners' labor from. They none of them will not porter work do. The people of the land agree. Then Harley he himself gave, the country for. He remained sitting. They his grave dig town the middle of. They place him the grave before.

He must have sat composed at the edge of his open grave awaiting the seven arrows, in a trance. I imagine a drumming and chanting. Wailing of a group of women. The dignitaries of the clan took aim, pulling back their bows. The arrows flew. The grunt and the moan of Harley. He was lowered into the grave, he was set on the floor of the grave, they shoveled the earth around his knees, his chest, over his mouth. The top of his head was covered.

He howled from underground, seven days and nights, the legend says, sobbing, groaning, earning the victorious silence of the ultimate perfection of the medicine, a going forth of power, the invincible consensus: never again can we be pressed to porter a foreigner's burden. We will drive them out, and wear Harley like an amulet, dust of his grave, dust of his mere story, like a weapon.

We may look the Holy Fathers in the eye and say, "You have your Jesus. We, too, we have been nursed, fed by the sweat of our mother and father, rocked, loved, sung to, laughed with, and died for. You are not addressing anyone here who has not been died for."

I was thinking of trekking to Halipo, Harley's town, the center of the power of the tribe. They say that magic dwells in his mound. No amulet against it can be bought or found. It gives one pause to just hike over there like a tourist. It might know how to use the energy of my boldness, wariness and disbelief against me. I declined to go.

Harley is an ancestor, and in this country one has to have great respect for the ancestors. This is a country in which a woman before she throws slops out the window from a wash basin or from cooking, says *Akaba!*: "Excuse me." The term is plural: "You all excuse me."

It's to warn the ancestors who stay close to her house, and eavesdrop at her windows, hovering in the air, to judge her conversation, whether it is still worthy, for purity of conversation is sweeter than the rice and chicken she sets out for them on the well scraped grave under the mango tree.

They are not my ancestors, but I know the way ancestors are the world over. As they listen they must get hit with our slops and offal. By habit she warns hers by going, You all excuse me, (splash), as I warn mine: You all (splash) excuse me.

John Millstone

POTTAWATOMIE CREEK

When I woke to the cold hand
 on my shoulder, I thought God had come
 to take me for swiping
 Isaiah's peppermints.
 A bushy-bearded man grunts,
 Outside.

Quick now, son,
 Father whispers. Oil lamp
 makes the walls shiver like grass.
 T' others had hands on heads.
 Isaiah pulled on his boots.
 No need for that,
 Man says.

Then we're all in the dark.
 It was May, time for summer work.
 Man starts talking.
 His voice is beautiful,
 like the Preacher's in Mobile.
 Points his rifle, says,

Lord,
 forgive these Southerners
 strayed so very far from your Word.
 It is like a sickness come upon them
 and they cannot now be cured.

Two of these
 is only boys, Father says.
 And they will grow to men,
 says he.

Uncle rushed forward
 then fell to the sod.
 Father held my hand.
 My friend, we also antislavery.
 It was a lie, he cursed for slaves
 walking behind the plow.

His hand

stanza continued

slips from mine.

The man who works for us began to run
then isn't running. Isaiah knelt
crying. Please, mister. I hate Kansas,
my brother and me both do.

Sword slashes

again and I was left alone. Boy,
he says, not talking to me
looking toward Orion's belt,
I will enter history.

And you, he murmurs, his voice
is water,

you will be forgotten.

David Starkey

WOLSEY'S HOLE

Somewhere on a stream in Vermont, a cold
Bright stream bellying black over boulders
And ruffling cowlicks of foam, a live slick
Stream, a lithe quick stream like a rope thrown down,
Is a hollow carved by an eddy into the sheer
Granite under a fall — a wetwalled pocket,
Stone womb that for sixty years my cousins have known
As Wolsey's Hole — because my father, sixty summers ago,
Slipped into it swimming and couldn't get out, I was told
Last summer by a cousin's cousin. Oh, when I heard,
How there rose from some hole in my heart a magnificent
 bellow,
Cold and afraid and delighted! I heard the laughter
From faces rimming the hollow, I saw the knotted
Rope let down, and my father hauled out glowing
In his baggy trunks, freckled and shaking, red hair aflame
In sunlight. And I thought: Can I learn
To think of death not as infinite contraction,
Curtains closed over midnight, but as curtains drawn back
To let in the moon and the stars, the whole horizon,
To let in the dead and the living — a rope thrown down
To haul me from the hole of my heart, all dripping and shining?

Charles W. Pratt

Two Poems

WAKE

and pretend it is just summer,
the end of May, the honeysuckle full open
on the back fence, the bees travelling

between trumpets. Notice these shadows,
the green dapple up in the branches,
as you come down in your cotton dress

covered with the blue flowers.
Say hello to Celia and Liz for me,
put their pinks in water, set

the vase at the front window.
Lie down here on the sofa
and go cold. Let's do it over and over.

CAVES

I would not make you enter
the caves, the cleft face
where saplings hang by knotted
hair-roots. I would not ever take you
in through the dark passages
with their cold greeting of fingers
to where the lit white pools,
the basins pitted with slow water
still hollow their matrix of footprints.
I would not take you in
to where our own breathing
pushes us both towards daylight,
your screams slaked in lime, the fat
droplets welling to completion.
I would leave you to wait patiently
in the circle of grey air above me,
as I still went down to visit,
following the roped causeway,
the stars looping back through darkness
to where you still are, sitting
in summer grass, grateful
you are not asked to go with me.

Susan Wicks

BOOKS IN BRIEF

The Red Azalea: Chinese Poetry since the Cultural Revolution, ed. Edward Morin; trans. Fang Dai, Dennis Ding, Edward Morin (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1990, xxix + 235 pp., \$35 cloth, \$14.95 paper)

A Splintered Mirror: Chinese Poetry from the Democracy Movement, trans. Donald Finkel (San Francisco: North Point, 1991, xvi + 101 pp., \$25 cloth, \$10.95 paper)

Women of the Red Plain: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Women's Poetry, trans. Julia C. Lin (Beijing: Chinese Literature Press, 1992; New York: Penguin, 1992, 162 pp., \$10 paper)

Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry, ed. & trans. Michelle Yeh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, lv + 245 pp., \$35 cloth, \$14.95 paper)

Out of the Howling Storm: The New Chinese Poetry, ed. Tony Barnstone (Hanover, N. H.: University Press of New England for the Wesleyan University Press, 1993, xxii + 155 pp., \$30 cloth, \$14.95 paper)

Recent books have widely increased the availability in the United States of contemporary Chinese literature, especially poetry. As a complement to more frequent publication in literary magazines and volumes by individual authors such as Bei Dao, Duo Duo, and Gu Cheng, the five anthologies listed above provide both a socio-political context and a substantial sampling of poets and poems.

Interest in the extraordinary poets who emerged in China following the collapse of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 has been growing for a decade: witness early translations in *Renditions* (Hong Kong), Perry Link's *Stubborn Weeds* (1983), "China Today" in *Nimrod* (1986), the *Beijing/New York* exchange of 1987, and the *BPJ's Smoking People* (1988/9). But it took increased access by Western translators to Chinese texts and the political tension/explosion of early 1989 to produce an audience and market for the volumes listed above. After five years it seems appropriate to evaluate what is available.

The Red Azalea features a long introduction by Leo Lee, who provides the average reader with a superb sketch of the culture from which modern and contemporary Chinese poetry emerged. The anthology aims at a comprehensive and diverse selection of poets from several generations. This breadth is valuable for English-speaking scholars unaware of recent Chinese literary history, but it results in very uneven poetry, ranging from rich creations by major poets such as Shu Ting to doggerel by government-endorsed versifiers.

A horsetail pine begs the wind
 To give him back his true shape.
 The wind keeps on mocking him,
 So he gets angrier
 But still can't stop shaking.

— Shu Ting, from “Montages in Twilight”

We've always been ordinary persons
 Like the two smallest stars
 On the horizon . . .
 Yet we also have the pride of common people
 Who willingly offer up our rendezvous
 For the sake of our motherland.

— Li Qi, “Spring Night”

The translations themselves are generally accurate, though often undistinguished as poetry in English. One positive aspect of *The Red Azalea* is the inclusion of at least some of the Chinese texts, which are absent in the other collections under consideration.

A Splintered Mirror is the first American anthology of *meng long* (misty or hazy) poets, including Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Duo Duo, Jiang He, Yang Lian, Mang Ke, Gu Cheng—the movement which began in the late 1970's and transformed Chinese poetry. Donald Finkel has the knack of creating terse American poems from the Chinese:

Above the snow line
 after the avalanches,
 something is quietly
 healing on the cliff.

Below the snow line
 meltwater streams
 through the lush marsh grass.

— Bei Dao, "Snow Line"

The translations sometimes suffer, however, from being too careless and more casual than the originals. Nevertheless, the book remains useful for its generous selection of *meng long* poems, for a preface which crisply demonstrates how seemingly innocuous poetry can be intensely political, and for its role in stimulating the Academy of American Poets to sponsor in the spring of 1992 a symposium, also called "A Splintered Mirror," which gathered *meng long* poets from all over the world.

Like Finkel's and Morin's volumes, *Women of the Red Plain* has a political slant, though here the angle is gender politics rather than national. The idea is a good one: Chinese women poets are generally underrepresented both in and out of the People's Republic. Like *The Red Azalea*, however, the book suffers from its inclusive quality. In one sense this is not Julia Lin's responsibility, since the volume was first published in Beijing as a government-authorized Panda Book. The selection, for example, from Shu Ting, China's most distinguished woman poet, is much more conservative than it might be. And although the text includes two important poets of the younger generation, Zhi Yongming and Tang Yaping, the selections themselves angle towards gender awareness without grappling with feminist issues acutely present in the PRC such as the contrast between official equity and actual oppression, between Mao's philandering and his "Women hold up half the sky." An important younger poet like Zhang Zhen is not represented in this volume; her powerful poem "Abortion" would amplify the discussion of gender issues. As a translator Julia Lin provides versions which seem fresh and smooth, though occasionally reflecting the simplistic quality of much official verse.

Michelle Yeh's *Anthology* is by far the most ambitious in this group. Starting with Hu Shi, the first Chinese free verse poet, and concluding with three poets born in the 1960's, the book includes sixty-six poets and more than three hundred poems, three times the number in any of the other volumes. As an editor Michelle Yeh distinguishes herself through her selection of

poets/poems—which is well-informed and representative, although unfortunately the most important *meng long* poet, Bei Dao, is absent due to copyright conflicts. As a translator she excels in both accuracy and accessibility/transformation. Her long introductory essay goes even further than Leo Lee's in laying out the necessary sociocultural background for the Western reader. Witness her translation of and commentary on a section of Wang Xiaolong's ironic "Taxis Always Come at Moments of Despair":

only when we got there did I remember
the tie in my pocket
I put it around my neck like a belt
no, I'm not committing suicide

In contrast to Menglong poets, who often project a vision of the ideal world or the desire to retrieve a perfect world (nature, childhood), the poets of the Newborn Generation tend to accept human limitations, even make fun of them, and to be resigned to an imperfect world.

By including both mainland and Taiwanese poets and by arranging the poets in chronological order, the volume establishes an interesting correlation between the poetries on opposite sides of the Taiwan straits. If future editions manage to include Bei Dao, as well as stay current with recent poetry, the *Anthology* may remain for many years a standard source for anyone interested in the historical development of twentieth-century Chinese poetry.

Out of the Howling Storm is unique in this group in that Tony Barnstone has collected translations from various sources, though he and his primary collaborator Newton Liu have done perhaps half. The introduction is theory-laden, and perhaps consequently both more scattered and more provocative than the literary historical approach adopted by Leo Lee and Michelle Yeh. Here he quotes and discusses Mang Ke's "Ape Herd," as translated by Nicholas Jose and Wu Baohe:

in the cavities of empty heads
the spider spins at leisure
and one healthy chap
drowns in his own piss

We see at last that the genesis that Mang Ke is describing is a genesis of death, a creation myth in which the world, created from incest and violence, becomes a wasteland, a “dead expanse of land” populated by human monsters who echo the domestic violence of the gods on a national level.

Overall, the quality of the translations varies considerably. A comparison, for example, of two Tang Yaping’s poems in both *The Red Azalea* and *Out of the Howling Storm* reveals a Barnstone/Liu translation that is more interesting, perhaps, but less smooth and accurate than the version by Edward Morin and his collaborators.

There can be little doubt the interest in Chinese writing created and reflected by these volumes stems partially from political concerns; their appearance so soon after the events of 1989 provides ready evidence, as do the subtitles, the poets, and the poems selected. This is particularly fascinating in that many of the poets themselves might wish to divorce politics and literature. Bei Dao, for example, clearly states, “I am a dissident, but I am not a dissident poet.” Perhaps it is time for an anthology which, without denying the political dimension, has as its goal simply a selection of the best poems of the past fifteen years.

One final note: For those wishing a very different experience of recent Chinese literature, the volume *Under Sky Under Ground*, ed. Henry Y H Zhao & John Cayley (London: WellswEEP, 1994) provides a selection of prose and poetry in translation but chosen by the Chinese artists themselves from the most significant Chinese literary journal of our time, *Jintian* (*Today*), founded by Mang Ke and Bei Dao in 1978, revived in exile in 1990. Though the quality is uneven, the chance to see

very recent work by major writers as well as numerous poets included in none of the other volumes provides both an extension and correction to them, and a sense that this is a literature which remains very much alive.

John Rosenwald and Yanbing Chen

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The Best American Poetry 1994, A. R. Ammons, editor; David Lehman, series editor (New York: Simon and Schuster/Touchstone, 1994), xii + 278 pp., \$13. paper.

As the editor of the seventh volume in this invaluable series, Ammons gets to make two statements about the poetry of our day. First, he has an introduction to write, defining his vision of what Poetry can do. Then he gets to provide examples from his reading in American literary periodicals for one year (1993). Each poet selected also gets two chances: first, the testimony of the poem itself, then a statement about that poem in an appendix. The canon-mongers will read this volume one way: seventy-five poets, fewer than half of whom have appeared in previous editions. Poets reading it will plunge in, riding the surge of familiar tides but also feeling the lift of strange new swells. Readers eager to learn how to read the poetry of their day will find glorious diversity, along with the friendly assistance of the prose commentaries. Teachers will want all this for their students. Literary historians will know they have their fingers on the pulses of the nineties. Ammons is as a guide both adventuresome and trustworthy.

And Ammons lets us know where he stands. "Language is the medium that carries the inscription, but what is inscribed in poetry is action, not language." There now! He accepts the Aristotelian concept of imitation, and like Aristotle is moral in a profound sense: poetry for him reveals through language "what we would have our behavior imitate or strive for." It produces a sense of "renewed vitality," and provides "access to a knowledge of the meaning of behavior in our time." Perhaps this sounds austere; it's anything but. The significance of *action* shows in the powerful energy of the poems Ammons selects. They sing and

dance, wrestle and wrench, laugh, lament, copulate and dream and dive. There are some cryptic poems in this collection, some shallow and some turgid ones, but none that are limp or lazy.

So what is the poetry of the nineties like? As Ammons sees it, remarkably diverse. There are some predictable categories: post-modernism for example. Michelle T. Clinton's "Tantrum Girl Responds to Death" tells a story "without the linear, ideological, and consequently manipulative aspects of traditional fiction." The eleven stanzas look like prose, but the prose is cadenced, and the lineation is marked: "she didn't know me/ i winked at her/ i dragged her into my masturbatory fantasies/ i tried to lift my skirt & wave the vanilla scent i use to lure butch gay girls/ sex and death is dancing." I don't see how this narrative is less ideological or this form less manipulative than conventional fiction, but I do recognize how for the poet the freedom from formal and verbal and subject-matter taboos has been liberating. It was a bit of a shock to discover how conventionally "moral" was the end: "don't wanna this shit sticking to me/ don't wanna pay for arrogance in the death of some beloved/ death could come around and kick me in the ass good/" Here the post-modern stance breaks down, and the old timeless cause-and-effect determinism snaps its whip.

Another category of poems is, unsurprisingly, the elegy – from Amy Clampitt's anticipatory elegy for "A Catalpa Tree on West Twelfth Street," through Janet Sylvester's grieving for a lover dead of AIDS in her almost-sonnet sequence "Modern Times," to one of the truly major poems of the year, Donald Hall's "Another Elegy" in memory of the composite modern poet "William Trout." With so much of the age-old natural and cultural life of our planet disappearing while we stand by in impotent grief, the elegy is an appropriate mode. And as most of these elegies illustrate, we are grieving for ourselves as much as for the departed, sometimes as candidly as in Sylvester's "Without you, who remembers me?" But the finest elegies, like Hall's, face the reality of the human condition bravely and unblinkingly, accept the implications, celebrate the joys and creations of the passed life, and try to answer Chaucer's question: "what thing may this signifye?"

Very rare among these poems is any treatment of the great political, scientific, and cultural revolutions of our age – very rare

any sense that the poem's moment has any past or future. Dick Allen's "A Short History of the Vietnam War Years" is perhaps the most significant of these exceptional few. Begun as a parody of surrealism, the poem apparently took on a life of its own and became the vehicle of a dreamy collage of allusions and associations. Allen explains, "The Surrealism I began with an intent of mocking became deadly serious and paradoxically realistic." I find his poem accurate and moving:

Mai Lai fell half-asleep
Under the full-thrust moon. On bruised hands and knees,
Tet advanced along the shadowed railroad ties
And the deltas awoke and flooded Washington.

Instead of outer breadth and depth, many of these poems seek for an inner depth. I say *seek* because I have the impression that the poet is using the process of composition as a means of exploration of the mysteries of the psyche. The danger is solipsism, but it is through such pioneering that the poet, as Freud discovered, "hat es immer bekannt" (has known it all already). So we can share the process here through poems of free association, dreamscapes, intense self-observation, and often the relentless worrying of the sexual moment with language. Consider Jeffery McDaniel's "Following Her to Sleep," with its wicked lines, "I pay an elderly man to sit in a booth/ and keep track of what crosses my mind." And Alan Shapiro's poignant Orpheus story in reverse, "The Letter." And Sharon Olds' lyric narrative of transcendent love, "The Knowing." And James Cummins's explicitly sexual but curiously abstract "Sestina."

Flipping through the book, I had a visual impression that there was little or no free verse in it. Most of the poems are arranged in what look like stanzas. Even lineated prose is made to appear formal. The poets' commentaries frequently discuss the fun they have had with the form. Cummins turned to the sestina "to contain and form prose rhythms." Henry Weinfield's "Song for the In-Itself and For-Itself" has fourteen of its fifty-six lines rhyming *self*, and he brags that "it was through the necessity of rhyming that the poem generated many of its details." I enjoy the buoyancy of the resulting lyric, though I confess I wince when I come to "the views of every other elf." One could profitably use this volume as a text in a prosody

class, not just for the examples of dramatic blank verse (Tom Disch), parodic elegiac hexameters (Hall), sonnet sequences (Mark Jarman's "Unholy Sonnets"), shapely melodic lyrics (John Hollander, Ramola Dharmaraj), but for a broad spectrum of contemporary prosodies. Especially interesting among these are the techniques of the cinema, such as fast cuts, montages, and surreal sequences. Tom Andrews makes the most entertaining use of these devices in his "Cinema Vérité." Here is the death of Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

The camera pans a gorgeous snow-filled landscape: rolling hills, large black trees, a frozen river. The snow falls and falls. The camera stops to find Tennyson, in an armchair, in the middle of a snowy field.

Tennyson:

It's snowing. The snow is like . . . the snow is like
crushed aspirin,
like bits of paper . . . no, it's like gauze bandages,
clean teeth, shoelaces, headlights . . . no,
I'm getting too old for this, it's like a huge T-shirt
that's been chewed on by a dog,
it's like semen, confetti, chalk, sea shells, woodsmoke,
ash, soap, trillium, solitude,
daydreaming . . . Oh hell,
you can see for yourself! That's what I hate about film!

He dies.

Here are many of the elements that recur throughout this anthology: a wacky humor, an indulgence in incoherent catalogues, an irreverence toward sacred cows, an inventiveness in form and content, a relish for demotic language, a shattering of syntax, a non-linear treatment of time and space, and above all a gusto for the process of composition in new forms.

Up to here my review has been largely descriptive. It is now time for some evaluation. My examples will suggest that I do not find the poems in this volume equally successful. Several, even by some of our best-known senior poets, seem to me slight and even vapid. Several others would be totally obscure were it not for the poet's explanatory notes. But the proportion of so-so poems seems to me lower in this volume than in its predecessors. And none strikes me as downright feeble.

I have yet to mention some of the strongest poems here. Three of them, though radically different in their subjects and voices, illuminate aspects of a sick society. One is Tom Disch's extraordinary "The Cardinal Detoxes: A Play in One Act." Here is a sixteen-page blank verse drama, with more than four pages of the poet's comment on the play and its fate in the puritan theater. It takes Browning one step beyond the dramatic monologue – only the Cardinal speaks, but he is attended by a monk, a functionary of the order of the Most Holy Blood. The drama is powerful. Disch has mastered the almost extinct art of dramatic blank verse. It might be a fragment of Jacobean gothic, were it not so horrifyingly contemporary. And it is devastatingly anti-clerical. It would have been easy and discreet for the editors quietly to exclude it; they deserve our respectful gratitude for acknowledging its power as a poem.

Another very fine poem in the anatomy of our disordered time is Denise Duhamel's "Bulimia," a case history that on first reading seems merely that. Only on second and third reading did I see the artistry in the composition: the neat enjambment, the visceral rhythms of the varying line-lengths, the delicacy of the balancing of the sexual and the alimentary. And more than that, the tone: the compassion for the compulsion. Ammons wants a poem to help the reader understand behavior. This one is itself a significant action and also compels insight into the action.

Third is James Merrill's "Family Week at Oracle Ranch," an ironic counterpoint to the Disch and Duhamel poems – twelve chapters, in abca stanzas, leading the reader gently through a momentarily successful detox regimen. It is from tesserae like these that we may be able to construct a corner of the mosaic of our social malaise. But it will be only a corner, since none of the poems in this book takes a global look at the sources of our political and economic and social and individual distresses. These are American poems, and America comes off, in some of them, as not only profoundly disordered but psychologically insular.

Not all the strong poems are pathologies. I'll just mention four that are for me pure joy. W. S. Merwin's "One of the Lives" is explicitly autobiographical in cataloguing the fortuitous events

that have brought him to where he is. The poem is sensuous, swinging in long rhythmic units to its limpid conclusion. And every reader will be able to translate Merwin's instances into his or her own – and thus universal – story.

And I would praise Roald Hoffman's "Deceptively Like a Solid," reprinted from *Glass Technology*, with its exuberant celebration of the lore and language of glass. It's a delight to read, and it's wonderfully refreshing to savor a true poem in which the ego of the poet is not the overt or even covert subject of the action.

When it first appeared in *The New Yorker* I spent many days, literally days, working with Jorie Graham's "In the Hotel." I can only testify that they were days well spent, resulting in my profound respect for the integrity of her endeavor to record, more thoughtfully and sensitively than anyone has done before, the response of the body and the active intelligence to a period of wakefulness in a strange place.

Finally, in complete contrast to Graham's inward intensity: Kenneth Koch's "One Train May Hide Another" ("*sign on a railroad crossing in Kenya*"). Here are the opening lines:

In a poem, one line may hide another line,
 As at a crossing, one train may hide another train.
 That is, if you are waiting to cross
 The tracks, wait to do it for one moment at
 Least after the first train is gone. And so when you read
 Wait until you have read the next line –
 Then it is safe to go on reading.

The poem could have stopped there, but Koch's fertile imagination elaborates with two more pages of examples, the literal constantly somersaulting into metaphor. I had thought of tricky enjambment as a fairly recent device, but Kate Barnes calls my attention to Spenser's

Unhappy verse, the witness of my unhappy state,
 Make thyself flutt'ring wings of thy fast flying
 Thought, and fly forth unto my love . . .

Even better than any of Koch's examples is the opening of Duhamel's "Bulimia":

A kiss has nothing to do with sex,
she thinks. Not really. That engulfing, that trying to take
all of another in for nourishment . . .

On the level of the trains Koch's advice is fine. And it's apt and amusing at the first level of metaphor – poetic enjambment. It works very nicely, too, at a second level of poetic reading, to slow the reader down, to encourage closer attention to each line before moving on, though in rushing through a poem one is more apt to suffer from misses than from hits. As the cornucopia of Koch's other readings spills down the pages, wit and wisdom dance together – as they do throughout this really excellent anthology.

M. K. S.