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The Editors
of
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
are proud to announce
the winner of the third
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
of \$3,500
to
Sherman Alexie
for his poems
"Defending Walt Whitman"
"At the Trial of Hamlet, Chicago, 1994"
in the Fall 1995 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.

THREE POETS NEAR THE 92nd STREET Y

After his second Single Malt,
the Britisher lightened
his lecture to say

A poem

*is a party to which
you invite all the words
that you know.*

The Dubliner,
drinking Irish, raised
his glass:

*What's
exciting the more
are the gatecrashers,
the words you didn't
know you knew.*

The Maine kid,
beery on his first
bigtime reading,
grinned *Yeah,*

*but
the most fun is
seeing who goes
home with whom.*

AT THE NURSING HOME FOR NUNS

Sister Gladys is never supine. Her feet
never leave the floor.

Sneering at a Craftmatic bed she says,
 The day I lie in that,
 will be the day I die.

Back bent kyphotic, she stoops
a priestess crone at her bed table altar.

I have toasted the day old rye
one shade shy of the dark and bitter cup
of leftover coffee
she drinks with midnight meds.
Morphine scratches the muscle deep itch
of restless leg syndrome.
For opiate-stubborn stool,
bisacodyl stimulates intestinal motility.
For fluid volume excess,
Lasix coaxes urine
from turn-of-the-century kidneys,
and off to the side,
the chalk-white lava of a dormant volcano,
Milk of Magnesia.
Chin on chest, she signs the Cross,
blessing the tablets.
After amen, she takes a bite of toast,
 It's burnt just right, she says.
 Would you please warm-up my coffee?

Later, in her rocker, Sister Gladys jokes
that she is so old, she is old-old.

Blood too lazy to jog the path
back to her heart, loiters in her legs.

It's been four hours
since her last injection. Her legs jump.

Sister Gladys, I ask,
are you ready for your two two's?

That's two, 2mg tubexes
of morphine sulfate, a spike for each hip.

Bless you, she answers. We are two
great minds with a single thought.

Sister Gladys hikes up
her habit when the devil's pitchfork pokes.

Kevin Coyne

IN THE COMPOST

He had already turned half the pile
into the second bin; broken beets
and broccoli stems were sifting
into soil full of twigs and root skeletons
soon to become the rich dark food for
the earth for the rich dark food for all of us.
With the fork he lifted tomatoes and torn
shells of butternut tangled with clover
into the wheelbarrow and as he pitched
the softening matter in a solid arc from shoulder
to shoulder a garter snake
asked a clever question mid-swing, forming
the words by speaking its body, by being
the question itself, braiding its length like a river
around whatever resistance the air offered. This,
regardless that the fourth tine had pierced the pattern
of its belly; a stiff and awkward interruption.
Then he put down the fork and lifted the shovel
and sensibly stepped the blade into its neck. Still
the snake's blood-colored tongue hungered for air
and even this abbreviated piece of life continued to ask
quivering questions so full and complete
they answered themselves.

Patricia D'Angelo

A SILVER WATCH

Safety is, of course, here
and everywhere else is something else
we take on trust. Here
contains my silver watch, and I do know
that's real to me.

I pick it up
on its chain of beads from the deep blue
nap of the rug, and how strange it is
to find it open, its dial shining
like the flash of the mirror
behind a closet door when someone
swings it back – all that light
where no one would have expected it (and then
so quickly cut off) – or perhaps
it's more like the full moon leaping out
in a stormy sky as if she tried
to call to us hurriedly, to snatch
one instant from the darkness
before it takes her; or, no, I see it
all too well, I can't stop seeing the dial
turn into the white face of a Moslem woman
suddenly bared, her clouds
of black cloth torn away, her cheeks
blanched, her minutes numbered.

HER LAST WEEKS**Going to Market**

There is a good-looking Chinese girl taking the cash
at the Egleston Street Fish Market.
She catches my eye which also gets caught
by Carolyn who is wearing a smart red cap.
Aren't you, she says, one happy-go-lucky fellow!
I think she thinks I'm handsome with my
white beard and hair and small rosy face.
Back in the car she holds her hand out
and I am not nothing, and I take it. We visit
Venus Beauty Supply for false hair for braiding
and the fine dark hordes in the Farmers' Market.
Now there's a great bleating within me: bugles
and the deep contrabass bassoons, a parade
of horns and cars with their fenders bent
moving up Blue Hill Avenue. No notion
towards what bronze altar I am borne
nor who this David is who prances before the covenant
showing his hanging parts to Israel's daughters.
There is Haitian laughter, and then Carolyn is back
with the food carriage. Those Haitians, she says.

Boston Rehab: She Takes a Nap

In the slanted light her face is like a shield,
armorial, Spanish, bevelled by fatigue,
and the sunset rakes over the even canyons,
the waterless red earth, the dry high cheeks
shining, until I think I am at the limit of beauty.
Out of these near hills speaks the importunate God:
what further act of friendship I require.
No, I say. Thank you. You've done enough.
Really? he says, and then leaning forward,
What if I were to promise you that she
would die within the year? Please let me go,
I say. I am in terror. A black rain
is falling on this desert. The walls are down,
and the Vandals of adoration have my heart.

Rodney Gove Dennis

TO THE FIFTY-WINGED EGRET TREE ALONG MOSCHER SLOUGH

tree freely throbbing, morning heat
tucked into undermost boughs, and shining in the grass,
tree's heat in every bird's tense pulse, readily moving air
grips and flirts with wings of twenty-five egrets in upper black
branches. just one bird opening her wings to scores of other wings,
freeing impulse, a few habitually greet the air, and well up
like aprons, or line-dried white cotton sheets, lift,
swell, and billow, motion i track in a shebird's arched wings –
an egret's caresses free the buttons on my white blouse, even
silk panties from my gentle crotch, her motion,
heat to my body, my fingertips finger lace.
with a preening notion, I rouse black hair –
the rush, beginning in my buttocks, fills the backs of my knees,
and my heels, pushing through surface soil –
dazzling clusters of wings throb in the air,
twenty-five iridescent egrets lifting up,
up, upstroke of breeding plumage the fluttering between my thighs,
i tighten my pelvic muscles around the third finger,
easing the bird into my body, lifts me off bare tiptoes

Catherine Webster

HARVEST

He stuffs his ears with cotton
and hides in the cellar
so he won't hear the screaming
outside the barn. He left
the horses far in pasture.
The dogs are with him below.
I am still here,

peeling potatoes
for hired killers. I stand
by the sink, in front
of the window, looking out on
the knives, hooks, and boiling cauldrons.
This year a cow and pig.
Both he'd seen into this world,

the calf licked his hand with a tongue warm
as the midsummer sun. He cooked the pig
a final meal, scorched porridge,
and yelled at me for the stove's slowness.
Beneath these floorboards,
he drinks berrywine, waiting for safe word.
The child grows restless tethered in my womb.

Two Poems

THE GIRL WHO MARRIED A WOODEN POUNDER

*. . . if they do not arrange a real marriage before
puberty, then a substitute rite of marriage is
absolutely required . . . she can first be married
to an arrow or a wooden pounder.*

– Mary Douglas, in
Purity and Danger

All morning, and then through the rise
and sumptuous fall of the god

across the Dome Above the World,
the village women have made of themselves

the difficult machines that the difficult
tasks of home require: one is grinding

at the meal-stone; another slaps
her washing at the small rocks

of the stream with such repetitive abandon,
that her white cloth looks like foam.

Elsewhere, the men of the village are silently hunting
something with tusks, something with claws

they know can swipe the gut from a man
as easily as summer honey out of the hive. You

see? – where I live, all the wives and husbands
are hard things necessarily,

shaped to labor; so in this, mine
is no different. I admire the functional line

he makes against the sky – the rich,
traditional curve of him

I've polished with my intimacies. Surely
we've all known intimacies? At night

each couple lounges in its private dark,
they bring their difficult selves to this thing

larger than a self. And in the dawn
we see our flesh has known

again, has taken in, and grown around,
and given back in kind,

some splinters of the other.

THE OTHER WAY

It rains, and everything changes,
softens, warps. It freezes, and everything rain-damp
brittles and cracks like a glass pipette.
It snows. The elements bear more variation
than the possible dealt hands in any deck of cards:
it changes, it shuffles and fans out ever anew
and leaves us goggling. I remember the sharp-edged welter
of the peddler carts on Maxwell Street (the kettles
like trunk-up elephant acts, the splayed bouquets of wrenches
and towel racks and egg-whisks . . .) that
normally fractured the sun in their hundred particular gleanings, now
abstracted by a nighttime fall of snow. "No
vork today," my grandmother said; instead,
we met Louie at Siegel's Five-and-Dime:
they bought me a chocolate pop. I know the comfy perils
of nostalgia, and that I shouldn't indulge, but
hey. It splinters, it loses its shoe, it wakes
with gingivitis, and then one day doesn't wake.
I had a "children's book" called *Christmas in the Country*
– stringing popcorn for the tree, etc. – even then, in 1954,
the charms it plied were antiquated; now,
of course, the idea of "book" is. There's a gray Chicago stone
named Louis and one beside it, Rose, and
when they talk to me they say the wham-wham energy of everybody
leaping around the fires and measuring angles in the sky
is one more *poof* of flung confetti. Just don't
think that way, my wife says. So, okay, I'll think
the other way. Of permanence abounding
there are legendary stories, some aglint with stern nobility.

(stanza continued)

John tells me of the sailor in a one-man life boat,
lost at sea with days of rowing ahead, and the chill
of the season settling down; and what he did, in fear
fatigue would slump him useless in a huddle
at the bottom of the boat, what he did intentionally, was
freeze the palms of his hands to the metal bands of the oars,
and keep on. Not a pretty tale, but one bespeaking
fixity – a quality, I think, you'd need especially
in the borders-slurring fog, and the wavery air
of evaporation and condensation in cyclical wedlock. It
mirages, lambadas, and oscillates,
and it won't sit still for its portrait.
In the labs of the quantum physicists, this ocean-moil,
this slippery vista, is brought down
to the vagaries, dualities, and unpredictabilities
of photons – what's inside us and around us in a constant bath
is winking and changing its tie a dozen times a second.
But really this is one of our earliest lessons,
mutability. The zoo giraffe's inventive neck
can pretzel itself in sailor's knots or do
a beckoning hula sway or spiral like a drill bit,
and the chimp attendant can clamber a ladder and
sponge the spots right off it. . . . Then
it was bedtime: "turn those cartoons off."
At the end of a day of volcanoes and clouds, the universe
attends to the structures of every molecular bond in a rock.
I'd stay awake in the darkness remembering something
lighting my parents' faces; not that I understood it,
of course – not fully. But it was there, a look,
and my version of it was this,
that they would go to their room and lock their arms
around each other permanently,
and row our house into the morning.

Three Poems

LIBERTY'S TOKEN

*(Elsie Stevens, who was
married to Wallace Stevens,
in her twenties served as the
model for the Liberty dime
and the Liberty half-dollar.)*

And which of us resists
 beauty's thin rib
tossed up, answering a gleam?
Certainly not this budding connoisseur
 of gesture
when a single one might pluck
defiance of his father and his first
 objet d'arte
together out of Reading's bankrupt air.
Another modelled you with helpless,
 urgent hands
as if making the money beautiful
would save us. The connoisseur wrote
 sappy verses then,
said, "Elsie's my muse." But after
caching you amid French art, books
 bound by hand
and peonies as pale and mute
as silver's shine, *il s'amuse* :
 within his rose-lit
separate study, on long park walks alone,

in Key West, at the Canoe Club's white
napkined lunches
and country inns where cold martinis
poured into crystal for the men
he bonded with.
He picked up the tab, apologizing
because he couldn't, he said,
entertain at home.
The feathered words were his alone.
But coincident with Chieftain Iffucan,
a mind of winter,
which of us might not have rolled
equally on edge, into marriage fused
from obverse faces,
incapable of seeing one another?
He never saw his father again – in Hartford,
penance jangled.
"Blanched," one rare visitor described you.
Another said he treated you like ash.
Faced with that
etched gleaming, circumscribed,
and small enough to turn on,
your struck head
collects heat in my palm.

MY FAMILY, DYING

When my grandfather George
was dying in the hospital,
his liver having outlived
the doctor's expectations
by fifteen years, he talked
my brother into smuggling in some beer
whose effervescent amber my grandfather
poured into a beaker
left for his urine sample.
Then he waited for the nurse
to walk in before he drank it.

So when my niece, the only
great-grandchild George lived
to greet, was dying in the hospital,
the shortness of her twenty-six years
cheating all our expectations,
it wasn't surprising one day
when she was trekking to the bathroom,
dragging her IV trolleys after her,
an ascetic taper wavering
but refusing help from parents
there on vigil,
as soon as she was out of sight
beyond the bathroom door,
she stopped and rattled
the trolleys' metal tubing
in a clatter like a fall
and when my brother and his wife
went rushing toward her,
she poked her head around the corner,
grinned and said, "Not yet."

RED BARTLETTS MID-LIFE

I will bring you pears
they will glow in your

side window like leathered
elderberry leaves gone ruddy

they will smell like soap
their chancels will round up

and sequester light
and dark the stippled flesh

each stubbed off stem will bend back
always toward the tree.

K. J. MacLeod

Two Poems

ABANDONED WAREHOUSE IN THE AFTERNOON

Near its entrance, a bird peeps renditions
Of the shape and sharpness of its beak.

 Around, trees stripped
 To snags of wire.

The high windows
Concede to the winded day

 Only squared off shafts
 And shrugs of rags.

Tonight it will be charted
By constellations of cigarettes;

 Tonight within these walls:
 A low clear sky without a moon.

Men snipped from balloons of speech
Will gather, lean on oil drums, against girders –

 I cannot say that even now
 I am not filled with that nothing.

I imagine playing
In this puppet theatre

 Whose only characters
 Are clacks of limbs:

My heart pumps
Klepto-fast and my eyes

 Jag over a dark depiction
 Of fear and lust, or, fearless, hate.

But the wind shuffles cables slung from rafters.
A crow calls.

 In the light I've met no one,
 Leave with a sigh, not safety.

NEVER STRANGERS

It may be that I have nothing to add to the model train set of words
that passed to and of course fro between us – hand painted with
actual lights
in the windows where the peering and hopeful eye might catch
the shadow of Farley Granger discussing murder with a fellow
passenger
whose hat has only recently been removed.

Do you, I almost ask, have someone who would
parent-thetically speaking, be better out of
this cannot be finished, this phrase, its upturn gives it that
you-fill-in-the-blank horror-film clever-drop.

It makes a tiny bead of would-be sweat
dip down the bobsled run of your pit
over the tender moguls of your ribs
evaporating or just not felt, sliding bellyward, slow as a hand –

I repeat the question and this time the pause
and the break cause a kind of he-can't-be-serious smile
to pass over the face of the guy
who thinks he thinks your interior monologue.

Having got the better of my recently unbehatted self
you're sure that I'm mad
and you read the tennis magazine you conveniently brought.
I'm still talking, but of course
the crucial slips have been made – so you're silent.

Ever since a dream I had I've sat where I sit now, 4E, that is,
waiting for my 4F to come, who handsome and wife-heavy
would strike a deal with me, a deal which of course I'd get the
worst of;
but Farley, centrifugal force couldn't throw my voice
from the talking doll of your corpse – each word now, you speak me.

One day you'll finish a sentence to realize that I was not fooling
keeping my eyes on you through the serve and return, through
the whole tick-tocking volley – the switch will be thrown,
your little senator-to-be son watching his off-to-Washington train
will notice how in one window a deal is being made, a deal that
crushes
my body and leaves you to think justice,
not some sexy thing, has been done.

John Vincent

IN THE GULF, WITH BALAJI

He has never seen a live fish, so when he threads his hook with shrimp, he does not know what he is asking. I show him how to tilt the rod across his shoulder, how to run the line along the ball of his thumb.

The sea is flat silver. He stares at his float until his eyes burn. He has not learned touch, the way one small shift can quiver, from the tip of the rod to the palm. He is twenty-six.

Over dinner, he explained. How his parents will offer him three women, each a Tamil, a Brahmin, and a follower of Shiva. How, having finished his PhD, he will choose among them.

His rod dips. He pulls too hard and his hook comes home bare. He chooses a fresh shrimp, pierces its shell. He is patient as if he carved Laxhmi, squatting, oblivious to the fine shavings falling down.

But now his rod curves deep. He leans back, reels in. The new weight does not let go. I lift his netted catch. She rises, dripping. He wants to hold her. He runs a wondering finger along her side,

parting the gills. He compares her to the book. He says her name. *Sea Trout*. He is shivering, new to this classic dance in which, like the dance of Shiva Thandavam, even the movements of eyebrows have meaning.

Lola Haskins

BEDTIME FABLE

There were three sisters who looked up at the moon and saw their mother there, a blankness not quite featureless, teaching of sorrow, of waiting for three daughters to be born into the story she would tell them of the woman in the moon who loved a man who rode the mountains on a black horse, so black it seemed he rode a shadow that the moonlight followed, embracing every curve, every coarse hair of mane and tail, even the short clouds of his breath on cold nights. And the nights were always cold there where the woman lived. Hooftap or footstep made a grinding sound, something giving way. Now the mother had never studied story-telling, so her voice was unmodulated, she ruined the dramatic moments, jumbling the words together as if they were all one, so every night the daughters had to ask all over again why the woman in the moon would go on loving a man whose horse was so black it seemed a shadow. And the mother would say that one night the man had ridden hard, as if he knew something might give way, he might ride clear off into space, and the woman who loved him had trembled to hear him coming so fast, the hooftaps loud enough for apocalypse, but nevertheless had stood in the path waiting, and the man had come around the curve riding so hard now he could not see her, the horse so huge with panting its shadow seemed to double, blacking the woman out, so that the man rode straight into her, the force so great she flew into him like dust. And when he pulled the horse in, while the great beast stood glistening with sweat in the moonlight, the man slipped down and beside him was a shadow, his own, he thought at first, but then it began to brighten, even at that midnight hour its skin became luminous, and he saw that it was a woman he could love, the woman he had been riding toward, and as he reached for her, there was a

(stanza continued)

great whinnying from the horse, something falling away, and when he looked up the horse was gone altogether, there was nothing but three sisters sitting on a bed in Wyoming and wailing for that horse whose bones had been splintered into stars by the force of the man's reach, until there was no question of riding, there was only the rider waiting for a signal to step from the moon as he might from a cabin and rush down the wide road of stars into the room where their mother kept telling the same story over and over and then kissed them, never saying their names, as if there were no way of knowing who was who.

Lynne Knight

FATE

The cinnamon on her lips
was like dry blood. The words just hung on too long
and began to pinch.

Ignorant little soul.
Little white man.
Every night I light a candle
and imagine Siberia
for the sound it makes . . .

An ignorant, naked little man.
Small brown newt.

I have the pennies you gave me for luck
on my eyes. If I could see beyond this hardness . . .
but I'm a naked, bloodless little fiction
with a woman asleep in the adjoining room
who pretends she is my lost soul
and drifts alongside me serenely, the way forms
move through the body.

I pronounce the word *Siberia*!
Whispering it to freeze some part of feeling.

Leaving, waiting for the airport bus, I saw
a homeless woman move through the lobby
on the consoling weight of her hips.

She had tied orange roses to her shoes
and wandering in, dropped
irresistible petals behind her.

The coffee is free.
She stirs in 12 little bags of sugar.
I've nothing to do so I count them – light
pouring in the windows with a sweet rapt gaze,
but the darkness only gets heavy
like the world turning over to a heavier, sweeter sleep.

After she left
I picked up a petal,
one of the love-me-nots,
and let it burn my hand.
I held it for a long time as if
that were the detail that destroyed the rest.

It's much like a newborn's veil, the mother-wax
the surgeons wiped away in the blue room, leaving
its lost edges inside me
but detached from the world.

To hold you now in my hands . . .
do you not see me as a small brown newt?
A little white man and cold coffee?
A naked little man who burns himself on purpose
with his cigarettes?

The Sierras are white, hard edged,
his poor little candle is cold.
You must be close in the dimensions of spirit,
writing fast with an articulate blue finger.

Small brown words. Cinnamon words.
Detached from the world. Each from each other.
In what cup is our being kept warm?
Where's the willowy mother of all words?
What is the ideal form of loneliness? A word?
Is it the light passing over us
that squeaks and screeches on grappling hooks
toward the difficult openings?

In the Renaissance
winged figures arriving (serenely)
extend their arms to lovers, stretching as not-yet
stretches to no-longer. You asked was it
the one not-yet or the one no-longer
and choosing at all

(stanza continued)

I chose wrongly, as one being called
between sleep and consciousness has suddenly
to make a decision between them.
Which to dissolve into darkness.
Which to expose as the invisible petals of light.

Either way there is a beautiful death between them.
A cruelty without any edges.
Just a falling off.
A crawling back.

The little white man crawls back to his room
and tries to imagine the drift without veiling again –
writes fast to keep his fingers warm,
talks fast about places in California the way
some make love – fast
as if one or the other might momentarily change their mind
and begin to dress.
Thinking they are as naked as any newt.

How long have we been asleep?
How long have we lived in this blister?
– I don't know.
When did you begin to give your love poems away?
Take your time and answer slowly.

(The word *Siberia*.)

– “Siberia.” The magnificence, finding you
in this dream exhaling a blue light.

At the end, can I hold you
in no-longer? or in the immanent in-between,
can I hold you? the diaphanous word between us,
the word *Siberia*, whispered in your ear – will it hold you?
as I hold your hand, fast and true
like the True Nail.

Because wasn't it you who crossed with me at birth?
whose birth cry displaced my own?
whose lost wax dripped through my fingers?
who climbed the ladder to darkness
and took off her skis
at the top and
letting go,
waved goodbye. . . continued on. . .

Nothing. . . nothing. . . never mind.
I'm a white little man.
I can wait.
I can hang upside down while I wait.
I have my zero word.
Those who pass into my sleep, ignorant
of everything I've sacrificed to it,
they will be my dawn and my return.

Marlon Ohnesorge-Fick

CONCEIVING THE UKRAINE

It begins as usual with a line and ends,
no surprise, at a desk. A man behind it:
my father won't meet my eyes. His appetite
is immense. He takes it all, my Nikes, jeans,
the shot of him at my age on a farm, rifle cradled
in one arm, a quail dangling from the other,
the shotgun apartment my mother grew up in.
He raises his hand and my hair falls to the floor.
With one hand, he yanks the English out of my throat.
With the other, he picks up a wire hanger.
He drapes the one language I know on the hanger
like a narrow, passé tie, then hangs it on a rack.
He doesn't look up when he stamps his stamp,
just says *tickets are to the left* and I think that,
yes, they are: left to the leaving.

Someone gives me pants, another a coarse cotton tunic,
a third a length of twine for a belt. The freighter's exhaust
gets under my nails, soot flakes stick to my bald head.
I'm turning green over the railing for the third time
this evening and the woman beside me has my forearms.
How can this be? My grandmother's head is wrapped
in a babushka. She has a pillow between the railing
and her round belly. It's beautiful, lines of stitching
in orange, purple, lemon, crimson, always at the head
of her bed and once I asked her what all the lines of color meant
and she said. "You're American now, no need to know this."
Now she is moaning, calling out her sister's name,
"Anna, Anna, my baby, Anna, I want to die, Anna,"
her *ns* spilling out like peasants of a village
being razed by cavalry.

At the end of the gangplank, a man orders me to go
and I walk out of the port. I walk deep into the interior,
until the soles of my feet are either bruised or callused,

(stanza continued)

until it doesn't matter. The few people I meet I ask for directions to Zevrenchorod. Some shake their heads, others hurry by, a few point and one, a man who tells me his great grandfather was Gogol, buys me an entire carp for dinner.

Before we part he gives me a painted egg. "The wheat stalks mean growth," he says, "the black meander lines, an eternity of remembrance." I say I can't take it and he says, "I've never met a boy who needed it more. Besides I lay them all the time."

In Zevrenchorod, the woman who lives in the dacha puts a pair of men's galoshes in front of her door each night. Size 11—my mother's father's foot.

"So no one will come for me," she says.

Her husband was at Kursk and still is. Before I go she warns me, "The postmaster can't be trusted with parcels that smell.

His barn is full of them." At the new feed store,

he tells me his parents starved in Stalin's famine of 33.

"They came and made us dig. We had onions they said.

I was six. Next time I will give them onions."

Over steins of kvass, the school principal tells me I'm in time for the fair. He asks my name.

I say "Wyshynski." He says, "Nope, doesn't ring a bell.

Mine's Luther. Can you stay for the fair? It's wondrous."

Luther takes me to the town's graveyard by the railroad tracks.

The whole village is there. Men, women, kids work furiously.

Shovels glint, dirt and sod fly, a pick sparks when it cracks against rock.

I watch a man with a crowbar leap into an open grave.

There's a wrenching, wood splintering. I must look bewildered because Luther touches my sleeve cuff, says,

"Wait, you'll see. Now, come dine with me."

We eat holipchi and piroghies. The piroghies are in a cream sauce with onion and chunks of salt pork. A meal that makes me eight again, at the kitchen table sprinkled with flour as my mother and her mother roll out the piroghi dough, as they hold a circle of it in their hands and drop a dollop of mashed potatoes or cabbage in the dough before pinching it closed into an overweight moon. Outside, I can hear balalaikas and what I'd swear was a drum machine. "It's time," he says.

He takes me to a crest above the village's one road. We sit on two old packing crates. "Look," he says, pointing, "Lara has the lead." And I follow his finger to a girl about fourteen, her knees white, her legs pumping. She has a stack of kindling bundled in her arms. I poke Luther's arm, "What's with the wood?" "Makes a pretty postcard, no?" Before I can ask him to explain, he opens the crate he'd been sitting on, "You can't imagine how hard it was to get a hold of these." The box is full of bones. "Now hold out your arms." He stacks my father's bones one by one in my arms. I hold the skull in place with my chin. Then I feel his hand at the small of my back, pushing, "Go. You have much ground to make up. Run," he says, then harder, *harsber*, "Run."

James Wyshynski

THE SECRET HISTORY OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

Dogs invented it –
to irritate cats mainly,
but the prank took on a life of its own.
A basset in Maryland
grew tired of sitting up on his rear
begging for hors d'oeuvres at parties.
He was the first one to see
the power for suburban disruption.
No one knows for sure
how that hound passed
his slow rhythm to the second dog
or what form the thump took.
All that's documented is the whining
of the cats – hopping out
of windows all over America –
when they realized dogs
had the bomb and were willing
to use it. All any Abyssinian had to do
was connect the dots – dog to dog
then the whole world – an implosion
of teenagers at the other ends of leashes
taking the wagging and panting as if
it came from their own need
to start war and build malls.

Leonard S. Edgerly

ARACHNE GIVES THANKS TO ATHENA

It is no punishment. They are mistaken –
The brothers, the father. My prayers were answered.
I was all fingertips. Nothing was perfect:
What I had woven, the moths will have eaten;
At the end of my rope was a noose's knot.

Now it's no longer the thing, but the pattern,
And that will endure, even though webs be broken.

I, if not beautiful, am beauty's maker.
Old age cannot rob me, nor cowardly lovers.
The moon once pulled blood from me. Now I pull silver.
Here are the lines I pulled from my own belly –
Hang them with rainbows, ice, dewdrops, darkness.

A. E. Stallings

A Statement and Two Poems

THE ROLE OF THE POET IN TODAY'S CHINA

First of all, I am suspicious of the very concept of role. "Role" implies acting, and thus has nothing to do with the poet. Instead, the poet opposes being assigned any role. Only after taking off the mask can one become a poet.

Yet we could, perhaps, discover the significance and possibility for survival of poets by describing their dilemma in modern society. Poets are the legislators of the future, Shelley suggests, but for contemporary poets, such Romantic claims can only be beautiful echoes of a bygone era. Facing the powerful mass media, all that poets can protect is poetry; all they can protect it with is poetry. It is precisely for this reason that they make the necessary challenges to any form of monopoly over discourse – whether the ideological control of a totalitarian society or the one-dimensional guidance of commercial culture. Perhaps it is only poets, these vulnerable and strange plants, who have altered the landscape of the earth.

While I believe in Octavio Paz's idea that "technique is a moral test for the poet," I also agree with Miguel Hernandez's opposition to "poetry as a mere intellectual game." More often than not, it is careless writing that makes for pale intellectual games, painless and passionless.

A poet from a totalitarian country should be aware of his own dilemma, caught between literature and politics: He should neither reduce writing to a mere means for rebellion nor use writing as a word game to escape the pain and misery of reality. If poets cannot transform suffering into art, then they are not worthy of the title of Poet.

As poets float in language, they should maintain a precarious balance. Perhaps the only role poets are capable of, the only thing poets can do, is to write good poems.

*23 March 1995, for a panel discussion at Harvard University
on "The Role of the Poet in Present-Day China"*

AS I KNOW IT

not until those heading for the story
removed a mountain
was he born

setting out from the accident
I've just arrived in another country
the inversion of letters
lends meaning to each meal

standing on tiptoes to reach time's mark
war for him is too far away
yet father's too close
he bends to pass the exam
and steps onto the boundless deck

the wall has ears
I must catch up with him
writing!

he paints the road red
lets phoenixes land
displays dying gestures
those ambiguous road signs
encircle the winter
even the music is snowing
I take extra caution
under each word lies an abyss

when an immense tree
quells winds from all quarters
his garden
grows deserted through fantasy

casually, I look through
his unfavorable record
and can only believe in flowers from the past

he forged my signature
and grew up
switching coats with me
he steals into my night
searching for that which ignites the story
that blasting cap, that fuse

UNTITLED

people hurry, arrive
reincarnate, and fade into a bird's dream
the sun flees from fields of rye
but returns with a pauper

who contests height with the sky?
the singer, his death premature
flies in the weather chart
carrying a lantern into the storm

buying a newspaper
I get my change from days
and at the entrance to night
swing into another identity

those celebrated fish
swim through human tears
hey, healthy man upstream
how far are we from tomorrow?

Bei Dao

translated by Yanbing Chen and John Rosenwald

BOOKS IN BRIEF

The Poetics of Time: Part I

A poet enquired last week whether I had written anything about a “poetic” for our time. He had been impressed by a review essay in *Contemporary Literature* bemoaning the lack of such a poetic. “We tend,” he wrote, “to see some coherence in these ‘older’ poets; do we never see it in our own time?”

Now there’s a challenge! My first response was to agree that I knew of no one who had essayed a comprehensive contemporary poetic. Some of the best critical essays I’ve been reading address the “Great Moderns”: e.g. Louise Gluck’s thoughtful and graceful “Invitation and Exclusion,” on Eliot, Stevens, and Plath in her *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Hopewell, N.J.: Ecco, 1994, 136 pp., \$22. hardbound). My second response was a sigh of despair: the futility of trying to reduce the extraordinary vitality and diversity of contemporary poetry to “a poetic.” My third response rose from the scholar in me: the impulse to survey all the bits and pieces that have been written about contemporary poetry to discover whether there were common denominators. Finally I decided simply to adventure into the review copies before me to see what I could extrapolate from the texts themselves.

So here I go, with no idea where I’ll come out. Where to start? Certainly not with details of prosody, much as they engage me. No, I choose to start with the handling of time. And I’ll begin by testing a hypothesis: that living in an age where so much is being lost (and so much of it irrevocably) – individual lives, as dramatized by the AIDS epidemic; social stability, as the rich and poor are driven farther and farther apart; the natural world and the cultures that have lived in harmony with it – in such an age, I’ll hazard, the elegiac mode would dominate the poetics of time. Much of the work of Wendell Berry and W. S. Merwin leaps to mind, so different from “Oh Captain, My Captain,” or even “For the Union Dead.”

Immediately I find poems mourning the death of individuals. Galway Kinnell’s eloquent “How Could You Not” for Jane Kenyon (*Poets & Writers*, July/August 1995) manages to memorialize and console while balancing itself in an intensely-visualized present – a permanent today. Brooks Haxton’s “The Body of My Brother Osiris Is in the Mustard Seed” defeats time more complexly by three devices: relating the drowning of the brother first to the sprouting in 1955 of seed from an ancient Egyptian tomb, then to the myth of the drowned and recovered Osiris, and finally by the dramatic structure of the poem which ends, heart-clenchedly:

Through tears, afraid
 to pray, I told God
 he was swimming. Wait.
 He would lift his face.

(The Sun at Night [New York: Knopf, 1995] 82 pp., \$20. cloth)

Edward Hirsch's *Earthly Measures* (New York: Knopf, 1994, 98 pp., \$20. cloth), contains a bouquet of such elegies – for Celan, for Simone Weil, for (another category) the poet's lost youth – including an especially fine one, "At the Grave of Wallace Stevens." Like Kinnell's poem for Kenyon, this conjures up the poet before us, while acknowledging that "the stylist // of the void," "the ambassador of imagination" is dead. As in the pastoral elegy, Hirsch's Nature mourns the departed – the poet who "taught us to imagine the sublime/ In a bare space, filling in the spaces." The irony in this very penetrating poem is that even though it is an encomium for the poet-philosopher who taught that "the music of the spheres is silence," it implies as well a wry elegy for the world of myth and legend Stevens superseded:

Stars are the white tears of nothingness.
 Nothingness grieves over the disintegrating gods.

One final elegy for an individual: Allen Grossman's "The Great Work Farm Elegy" in *The Philosopher's Window and Other Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1995, 100 pp., \$12.95 paper), an elegy for "the author's nephew, David Grossman, a man of noble character who died of AIDS." Here is what a contemporary pastoral elegy looks like. The twenty-one ten-line stanzas begin "In Adam's house, in Paradise." They are being composed "on every watermeadow in the universe"; the poem's space is "the shore of the sky." After these extensions in time and space, "we write/ the long letters of mind," and this mind is mercurial, sweeping line after line through the Biblical, literary, architectural, mythological, agricultural palimpsest of memory and dream, all relating to the great work of getting in the harvest before the storm. The "crazed, pitted," but radiant earth, always in motion, is mourning. I have read this poem many times, always so spell-bound by the tapestry of sound that I end up wandering among the images and voices, in thrall but dazed. In the book as a whole there is a linear poem-to-poem progression, and in each section there are sinking and reemerging lines of narrative, but all time is at all times available to the poet, and the elegy moves beyond the traditions it encompasses, beyond the beloved nephew to the "dark myth emptied at your death."

Beyond the elegy for the individual I find elegies for the often nameless victims of the brutal violence of our century. Though they do not offer art's consolations of transcendence and resolution, and thus are perhaps not strictly elegiac, I read these as elegies for what Carolyn Forché goes so far as to call "the worst of centuries." One of the finest is in Eleanor Wilner's *Otherwise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 140 pp, \$11.95 paper, \$27.50 cloth). The poem is "Operations: Desert Shield, Desert Storm," which opens with a questionless question:

Who
 are these two women, walking
 through the great forum of the plain, walking
 under the sun's blinded white eye,
 under a hard, featureless sky, bright steel
 without a trace of blue. Two women
 their shadows tracing them
 like assassins.

Eventually we learn that they are Antigone and Ismene,

or so we might call them,
 these two women walking across this page
 of history, this page that is not
 a page, because no one can turn it, because
 it extends and extends, the smoking cities
 scattered like open lesions
 to the periphery of sight . . .

Linear time dissolves, and the poet projects images from Desert Storm on the landscape of Sophocles. The images fuse in the closing lines:

And after the cheering crowds have gone
 home, after the last yellow ribbon of sun
 has faded in the west, where shall Ismene hide
 when they open the cave where defiance
 hangs, when those swaying sandals
 brush her face, after they cut
 the body down, where shall she turn
 where all that is buried in the desert plot
 made for headlines and parades,
 a place too dry for even grief.
 Yesterday's news.
 Too topical for poems.
 Welcome home, this is
 America, welcome home.

The whole of Carolyn Forché's *The Angel of History* is elegiac in this way (New York: HarperCollins, 1994, 96pp., \$20. hardbound). More symphonic than lyrical, it orchestrates many voices, voices that seem to rise in a broken chorus from the circles of the inferno of twentieth-century history. As in Allen Grossman's book, the appropriate medium for this complex vision is montage. Forché's handling of time is significant. At its simplest, in a poem for Terence Des Pres simply titled "Elegy," she calls up the ghost of the writer and then sprinkles the page with images of the Holocaust. "The page is a charred field where the dead would have written/ *We went on.*" And it is thus that the past appears throughout the book: "The past is not where you left it, Svetko,/ It is a ruined city, spackled with grief." This "time," however, is relatively shallow, limited to the second half of the century. (I'll grant there is misery enough there for a shelf of books.) The first line of "The Recording Angel" speaks for the whole book: "Memory insists she stood there, able to go neither forward nor back." The witnessing poet, by composing this symphony of the past, nourishes Memory and perpetuates her. Bleakly, the poet projects this past onto the present and even onto the future. Thus her book moves from elegy to prophecy. A poem on Hiroshima ironically titled "The Testimony of Light" ends: "The worst is over./ The worst is yet to come." Farther on: "The earth is a school. It is a waiting room, a foyer giving onto emptiness." And most eloquently:

Their flesh like fallen snow
 Leaf shadows burnt into a post
 Burns of bamboo on bamboo canes
 These ruins are to the future what the past is to us.

I have enormous respect and, indeed, affection for the poet's courage in entering and immortalizing through the resonant music of her poetry the lives of the millions who have been lost to the violence and cosmic injustice of our age. I am grateful for her compassionate imagination. I too, inhabit the universe of "a sky washed clean by doubt" (Hirsch's words). Nevertheless I have been shocked and saddened by the unremitting hopelessness of this vision. Delusory though it may prove, I cherish the "thing with feathers" found huddled in the bottom of Pandora's box when the horrors had all been released. In an end-note Forché describes her volume all too accurately: "polyphonic, broken, haunted, and in ruins, with no possibility of restoration." After such elegy, what further poetry is possible?



It is, however, possible for the elegiac mode to extend more broadly and more deeply. Susan Stewart's *The Forest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 78 pp., \$10.95 paper, cloth available) confronts not only the

slaughter and violations of this half-century, but the possible “death of nature” as well. Unlike Forché, however, she struggles with the problem of “*how dread and hope are wound.*” In the gorgeously-wrought title poem she begins:

You should lie down now and remember the forest,
for it is disappearing –
no, the truth is it is gone now
and so what details you can bring back
might have a kind of life.

The forest, here, stands in for all forms of life, all ways of life, that are vanishing before our eyes. And it affirms the responsibility and implies the power of the poet to maintain them in the mind and, by extension, in the poet’s art. This poem has a mesmerizing music, almost every line recurring, weaving back into the shimmering fabric of the text. Here’s a swatch chopped out of the seamless web:

The flecked birds of the forest sing behind and before
no surface, skimming. And blank in life, too,
sing without a music where there cannot be an order,
as layers fold in time, black humus there,
where wide swatches of light slice between grey trunks,

Where the air has a texture of drying moss,
the flecked birds of the forest sing behind and before:
a musk from the mushrooms and scalloped molds.
They sing without a music where there cannot be an order,
though high in the dry leaves something does fall. . .

The art of the elegy here creates for the memory the music, the order, the texture, that are disappearing or lost. “As layers fold in time” describes the temporal structure of this whole book. Like most of the poets I’ve so far mentioned, Stewart has a powerful sense of history and draws on a wide range of sources, requiring pages of end-notes. Every poem is subtle and complex, demanding the devoted attention of the reader – “a tender kind of attention,” as she ironically phrases it in “Slaughter.” And she repays such attention lavishly with poems of lamentation and entropy that are paradoxically highly organized and extraordinarily beautiful – the sunken rock in the west-running brook. Her powerful long poem “The Desert 1990-1993” speaks of “the end of the long daylight of reason,” and “Slaughter” envisions “the breakdown of the fullness of the world.” “Nature,” she admits, “has no wit/ or symbol to console us.” She is inconsolable, yet not despairing. The introductory poem to the second half of the book is a lyric of exquisite wit, worth quoting in full:

*We needed fire to make
the tongs and tongs to hold
us from the flame; we needed
ash to clean the cloth
and cloth to clean the ash's
stain; we needed stars
to find our way, to make
the light that blurred the stars;
we needed death to mark
an end, an end that time
in time could mend.
Born in love, the consequence –
born of love, the need.
Tell me, ravaged singer,
how the cinder bears the seed.*

The seeds of much in *The Forest* are from Donne, Hopkins, and Eliot. "Medusa Anthology," working from documentation for Gericault's "Raft of the *Medusa*," echoes "The Waste Land," and quotes "The Wreck of the Deutschland" (has, indeed, thirty-five stanzas, like Hopkins' poem). But the cosmic view is bleaker and more disturbing than theirs. We know more and are certain of less than our predecessors. The wonder is the increasing richness of our poetry in the face of "a diminished thing."

The final poet in this sweep of the elegiac mode in new poetry is John Haines, whose collected poems are in *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Greywolf Press, 1993, 256 pp., \$25. cloth). Looking back on his lifetime work, Haines acknowledges in his introduction "a prevailing somberness, . . . a tone that might be called elegiac." Certainly the early poems, written when he was living under the spell (his word) of the Alaskan wilds, seem every year more like an elegy for a lost way of life – the life of the hunter-gatherer. There is one true elegy here, "Rain Country," which he writes

*in the brown ink of leaves,
of the changed pastoral
deepening to mist on my page.*

There is also an elegy, "The Head on the Table," (the head of a great bison) with its "tender attention" (Stewart's words) to "the deep presence/ of matter that does not die,/ while the whole journey of beasts on earth/ files without a sound/into the gloom of the catalogues." His lament for the extinctions so accelerated in our day is explicit and unanswerable:

*What will be said of you,
tree of life,
when the final axe-blow
sends your great wood crashing?
(“In the Forest without Leaves”)*

Haines was first trained as an artist, and among the splendid new poems in this volume are several on painters and sculptors. One, "Diminishing Credo," in which Delacroix appears inseparable from his great paintings, is an elegy for the artist who personifies the end of an era of heroic vision. "Age of Bronze" goes beyond the Rodin sculpture, its ostensible subject, to lament the passing of a passionate artistic and spiritual vision and to excoriate the "great spider of tin" that has replaced it. (In my past reading of Haines, a poet whom I have long admired, I had not before picked up this *saeve indignatio*, this rage beyond satire, at the atrocities of our day. It is right that Goya should figure largely among the latest poems.)

Looking at Haines's vision of time, I see that he has a strong sense of history: the history of sculpture in the title poem, the history of human civilization – narrative, mining, agriculture and more – in the haunting "Water of Night." In "Dusk of the Revolutionaries" he concludes, in lines so beautiful they almost mitigate their ominous vision:

history for us becomes
the dark side of a mountain,
as the great cloud-utopias
burn out in the west.

Obviously there is, as in Stewart, a leaning into prophecy, extrapolating from our ongoing history into our future. The poem titled "Prophecy" purports to address a type of Roman governor, but clearly speaks to a contemporary executive, "first among looters":

in spite of great wealth,
a good name, the obedience
of a wife married for reasons,

you will always be waiting
for what you do not know,
knowing that when at last
it appears you will not know it.

Haines casts the same cold eye on past, present, and future. And the poetic that has served him well throughout his career – the dream vision – is brilliantly appropriate to this cosmic sweep. Without an iota of sentimentality (he acknowledges early on "the blind face of Nature"), he maintains his shamanistic ability to enter into the owl, the tree, the stone. He moves from the cloud of foreboding this power inspires to the immediate dedication to "touching with sight/things that are smoke tomorrow" ("Alive in the World"), and then to outrage at and satire of the devastation in which we are all complicit (see "Tar" on our seemingly irreversible addiction to petroleum and its products, "Life in an Ashtray" for an emblem both comic and mordant). At times (though rarely) the anger at our suicidal ways breaks

over into pure savage hate, as in his vision of judgment, "To the Wall." Always, behind the Juvenalian flail, we feel the passion for the rich and diverse worlds we are losing.

And it is this passion working itself out through vision and song that makes these poems so exhilarating, despite the grimness of the vision. In "The Stone Bear" Haines speaks of himself as "a doomed and singing spirit." In "Victoria" he asks rhetorically, "Will we ever again be at home/ on earth?" and like Susan Stewart in "The Forest" concludes:

Wilderness survives at the camp
we have made within us,
a forest filled up with night,
its ancient sounds
and floating, starlit images.

And he leaves us at the end of "In the Forest without Leaves" with this transcendent image of, not eternity, but wonderfully conceived time:

A birch leaf held fast
in limestone ten million years
still quietly burns,
though claimed by the darkness.

Let earth be this windfall
swept to a handfull of seeds –
one tree, one leaf,
gives us plenty of light.



By focusing on the handling of time, and especially the elegiac, I have done a sort of disservice to these poets, since I have not, really, reviewed their books. Let me say that I selected for this essay only books that *taken as a whole* I found richly rewarding. Each of them deserves the close reading and extensive analysis of a full critical essay. Go to each of them for more wealth than I could touch on here.

Furthermore, the elegiac is not the only mode of time I found in the books I'm considering. In my next review I'll explore several other concepts of time in contemporary poetry.

M. K. S.

Editor's Note: It is our policy not to publish the work of our editors or to review their books. I should like, however, to announce the publication of Lee Sharkey's *To a Vanished World* (Orono, Maine: Puckerbrush Press, 1995, 92 pp., \$8.95 paper), poems in response to Roman Vishniac's photographs of Eastern European jewelry in the years just preceding the Holocaust.