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AGAINST MYSELF

She would part my hair in rhythms
using the pointed tips of grass
sharpened with her own teeth
making my scalp a canvas of walking patterns
with roped braids
standing only to be seen and glorified
carrying the deftness of the puppet master's mystery
her fingers –
when they still gave form to her hands –
kept the promise to hold my ease
but then the braids would loose their ropes
my reason would follow the moon
covered in heads of corn flowers
in limbs of uprooted lemon grass
her eyes
pushed closed from the weight of sunbeams
screamed “we had been girls together”
while I sung and swung amid the red hibiscus
hacking my friend whose belly was rounding itself with joy
whose fingers had not touched me at all
“Jesus!”
she pleaded with the calm of the spirit-filled
for Jesus.

Octavia McBride-Ahébée

Two Poems**OF**

Of the angels Of the parson made from the spinal bone of a horse
Of the parson's painted face, its eyes worn off and, behind the cassock,
the black painted wings

Of wings that swoop at dusk The turning bats diving for small stones
Of stones that fly of themselves when no one sees That soar in flurries
over grasslands and forest in search of ponds

Of someone's buttocks, smooth-skinned as river rock And white, because
they have all these years kept secret Of the sudden white someone's face
turns, covered by hands, as the surgeon comes sadly, stripping his mask

Of the mask of powder mother wears Of the mask's red cheeks its lipstick
of Fatal Apple Of the sparse black lashes of its eyes Of the mask mother
tilts upward to be kissed Of her daughter, whose heart sinks

Of what hangs folded behind the daughter's dresser to emerge at night
Of what beats across the daughter's face no matter that she shrouds
herself in her sheets, pretending death Of how the bats know otherwise

AGAINST

Against gaud, the poet who slings words like drops of water the way
a dog shakes his fur, who slings so hard even fleas spin out
Against this: the dog who slings off all that is not-dog

Against dark, the reversion always to the easy choice, dark the one glass
every night always the dry, so careful never to choose the sweet,
what would they think

Against the unfaded rectangle of wall where I allowed the picture too long
until it burned its image there, peach rising, moon-fuzz over the lapping sea,
and how shall I cover that space, having no picture larger

Against the brain-coral, because it is no longer in the sea and is a lie,
because it gathers dust, my grandmother's body-dust who died
so many years before she died, against the black-red in me, my fury
like an angry horse at her going to bed to wait

Against the rough and pitted stone, because I hold a carnelia with its
blood lights year after year, because I polish it with a cloth whose emery
wears my hands away, because I passion this thing I do and you say
I should be satisfied, that I should not need you

Against my low and matted hair, my bitch-bones, against the food
I serve you raw, the fetching that I do Against you

Lola Haskins

THE SEVEN SISTERS

Her hands work, pushed up by her belly
pushing up on the fabric under her hands.

The seven sisters rise from the quilt, calico red,
calico blue, six circling the seventh, circling
the cream muslin, translucent as mica. She calls
them with needles, each thread asking. The callus
widens on her thumb, pin pulling skin, forcing
closed cells open, scarring them white. She offers
her pain for protection; an exchange, her hands
for a hand to cast her into air, lift her through cool
black, hide her among stars. Each stitch tightens
this wish, pulling back to the moment before
splitting inside her began. Seams mark
the quilt, passages between flat lands.

* * *

Anger chews her nails. Jagged
and catching, they ache. She swallows them.

The bitter taste splits in her mouth and spreads
while her belly stretches shiny with oil, slicked
to prevent tears, moist as steam
from the iron. She wonders about cutting across bias,
whether once pulled fabric can hold shape, about cutting,
how sharp a blade should be, about the meeting
of steel and skin. She wonders whether a template
repeats the same pattern. Or if instead it varies the shape,
transforms earth into sky,
sisters into stars for protection.

* * *

She seeks them, night swirling above her. Cold, glassy
in their new selves, safe from pursuit, from pain.

The Pleiades, less sharp than the stars on the quilt,
as swollen with light as her belly. They know punishment
is determined by sex, that the sun restores vision, that escape,
frozen in the night sky, steals as much as it gives.

They tell her she is lucky to have her arms still, her legs,
the dry smooth of her hair. Lucky she has not collapsed into
blind round burning. They tell her that to be woman,
even torn, is better than being light. Suffering ends; burning
eats you, like anger, from the center out. Ripples
through body until body is gone.

* * *

The needle through the fat of her thumb. Thumb
to her lip, thin blood in her mouth. Needles reach
inside, nosing fibers apart, opening seams
thin enough only for thread. She lets go, rests

her hands on her belly, rubs the swelling, testing
for cracks, open seams, the movement from salt to fresh
water,

waiting, dilation, opening, the tearing of fabric for scrap.

Nicole Stellon

AT HOME IN OUR IGNORANCE
AS IN A CANOPY OF TREES

Strange beauty mingles with the menace here:
 Cerulean lizards blink in the hearts
 of scarlet flowers. Jack fruit hang, obscene
 udders, on the squat trunks of trees. Drooping
 banana's sex, red, sleepy phalli waking.
 Marabou storks crowd the abbatoirs,
 gliding to roost on hills of carcasses.
 Fear of bandits. No one stops at stop lights.
 No taxis at night. No one walks alone.
 Guards roam the clinic grounds, useless
 as shadows, pointing their bows and arrows.
 Mothers sleep beneath the beds of children
 dying of tumors blooming in their throats.

We bunk in a lab where three deep freezers
 keep Kaposi sarcoma tissue cold
 at seventy below (ice cubes in a flash).
 Jasper Semwanga's sister is a nurse.
 She wonders, would we visit him at home?
 Sick with pneumonia, he batiks old sheets.
 Mozart's violin concerto rises
 from the one warped record he owns, turning
 on a tumble-down, wind-up Victrola.
 He pants softly. Sweat drips from a head bent
 black as a plum above the wrinkled cloth.

New to Africa, we buy bracelets braided
 of elephant hair, necklaces of ostrich egg,
 still oily from the skin of desert women.
 Beetles roll their little suns of dung.
 And we roll stogies, the ganja so good, we
 don't think to ask why there isn't enough
 money to keep Uganda's vaccines cold.

Amin calls a party for his coup.
 Israeli pilots, hired to train his troops,
 strap bushmen in jets, buzz high over
 hills shining white with alabaster shrines.

I hear them say, "The Third World can't conceive
a Third Dimension at the speed of sound."

Jasper paints with the shredded ends of sticks.
Invited to Sunday Rugby at a Club
where ex-pats knock their teeth out for some beer,
we play field hockey with some Sikhs. They kick
our butts. Empty mugs stagger down the bar.
Amin's party is all the talk. Rich *wazungus*
are packing for the coast. Would we like to
sit their house a while, make ourselves at home?
Jagged as sharks' teeth, broken bottles spike
the jaws of concrete walls, barbed wire and sirens, and
two red Dobermans we are to feed,
morning and night, five pounds of frozen meat.

We sleep in their sandalwood-scented rooms
lounging like pashas on their pillows. The dogs
mistake us every meal, tear for our throats.

We heave the meat like hand grenades. Amin
tears up main street for his tanks, Uganda's
anthem coils ceaselessly from the telephone.

Fires flicker, drums stitch the valley's lips.
Everyone's at the party when you sink
into the quicksand of the bed. Fever.

I'm no doctor. All I know is you curl
into the cold, and bruises like dark stars
are risen on your skin. I throw bloody joints

to a snarling yard, check and recheck the locks.

My white feet look like plaster casts.

Two days slide by on silent pullies.

At dusk some restlessness infests the trees.

What I thought leaves swarm through the night to feed.

Doctors said I'd have to wait to be a widow.

In that place, for a while, I came to know
how it feels to live without recourse.

Jasper Semwanga died. His painting hangs
above our bed. In the rhythm of its dance,
a young couple strolls in a timeless space,
her hand on his back, his arm at her waist.

INSIDE DACHAU

1. big lies, small lies

Having lied to our German hosts about our plans for the day, Diane and I visited Dachau instead of searching for rare albums in Munich. Only a dozen visitors walked through the camp because we were months away from tourist season. The camp was austere. The museum was simple.

Once there, I had expected to feel simple emotions: hate, anger, sorrow. That was my plan. I would write poetry about how the season of winter found a perfect home in cold Dachau. I would be a Jewish man who died in the camp. I would be the ideal metaphor. Munich

would be a short train ride away from hell. Munich would take the blame. I thought it would all be simple but there were no easy answers inside the camp. The poems still took their forms, but my earlier plans seemed so selfish. What could I say about Dachau when I had never suffered through any season

inside its walls? Could I imagine a season of ash and snow, of flames and shallow graves? Munich is only a short train ride away from Dachau.

If you can speak some German, it is a simple journey which requires coins and no other plans for the day. We lied about visiting the camp

to our German hosts, who always spoke of the camp as truthfully as they spoke about the seasons.

Dachau is still Dachau. Our hosts have made no plans to believe otherwise. As we drove through Munich our hosts pointed out former Nazi homes, simply and quickly. "We are truly ashamed of Dachau,"

Mikael said, "but what about all the Dachaus in the United States? What about the death camps in your country?" Yes, Mikael, you ask simple questions which are ignored, season after season. Mikael, I'm sorry we lied about Munich and Dachau. I'm sorry we lied about our plans.

Inside Dachau, you might believe winter will never end. You may lose faith in the change of seasons because some of the men who built the camps still live in Argentina, in Washington, in Munich. They live simple lives. They share bread with sons and daughters who have come to understand the master plan.

2. history as the home movie

It begins and ends with ash, though we insist on ignoring the shared fires in our past. We attempt to erase our names from the list that begins and ends with ash.

We ignore the war until we are the last standing, until we are the last to persist in denial, as we are shipped off to camps where we all are stripped, and our dark bodies lit by the cruel light of those antique Jew-skinned lamps. Decades after Dachau fell, we stand in mist that begins and ends with ash.

3. commonly asked questions

Why are we here? What have we come to see?
 What do we need to find behind the doors?
 Are we searching for an apology

from the ghosts of unrepentant Nazis?
 We pay the entrance fee at the front door.
 Why are we here? What have we come to see?

The actors have moved on to the next scene
and set: furnace, shovel, and soot-stained door.

Are we searching for an apology

from all the Germans who refused to see
the ash falling in front of their locked doors?
Why are we here? What have we come to see

that cannot be seen in other countries?
Every country hides behind a white door.

Are we searching for an apology

from the patient men who've hidden the keys?

Listen: a door is a door is a door.

Why are we here? What have we come to see?

Are we searching for an apology?

4. the american indian holocaust museum

What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.
We are waiting for the construction of our museum.

We too could stack the shoes of our dead and fill a city
to its thirteenth floor. What did you expect us to become?
What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We are waiting for the construction of our museum.

We are the great-grandchildren of Sand Creek and Wounded Knee.
We are the veterans of the Indian wars. We are the sons
and daughters of the walking dead. We have lost everyone.
What do we indigenous people want from our country?
We stand over mass graves. Our collective grief makes us numb.
We are waiting for the construction of our museum.

5. songs from those who love the flames

We start the fires
on the church spire:
ash, ash.

(stanza continued)

We build tall pyres
from children's choirs:
ash, ash.

We watch flames gyre
and burn the liars:
ash, ash.

We watch flames gyre
from children's choirs:
ash, ash.

We start the fires
and burn the liars:
ash, ash.

We build tall pyres
on the church spire.
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We build tall pyres
and burn the liars:
ash, ash.

We watch flames gyre
on the church spire:
ash, ash.

We start the fires
from children's choirs:
ash, ash.

6. after we are free

If I were Jewish, how would I mourn the dead?
I am Spokane. I wake.

If I were Jewish, how would I remember the past?
I am Spokane. I page through the history books.

If I were Jewish, how would I find the joy to dance?
I am Spokane. I drop a quarter into the jukebox.

If I were Jewish, how would I find time to sing?
I am Spokane. I sit at the drum with all of my cousins.

If I were Jewish, how would I fall in love?
I am Spokane. I listen to an Indian woman whispering.

If I were Jewish, how would I feel about ash?
I am Spokane. I offer tobacco to all of my guests.

If I were Jewish, how would I tell the stories?
I am Spokane. I rest my hands on the podium.

If I were Jewish, how would I sleep at night?
I am Spokane. I keep the television playing until dawn.

If I were Jewish, how would I find my home?
I am Spokane. I step into the river and close my eyes.

7. below freezing

Dachau was so cold I could see my breath
so I was thankful for my overcoat.
I have nothing new to say about death.

Each building sat at right angles to the rest.
Around each corner, I expected ghosts.
Dachau was so cold I could see my breath.

Everything was clean, history compressed
into shoes, photographs, private notes.
I have nothing new to say about death.

I wanted to weep. I wanted to rest
my weary head as the ash mixed with snow.
Dachau was so cold I could see my breath.

I am not a Jew. I was just a guest
in that theater which will never close.
I have nothing new to say about death.

I wonder which people will light fires next
and which people will soon be turned to smoke.
Dachau was so cold I could see my breath.
I have nothing new to say about death.

THE GREAT PROJECT

"To become what one is." Nietzsche

I take it Nietzsche means
I am not
what I am.

I must become
becoming
as it were.

Or is it that
I was not what I was
when I so purely was
what I am not?

Though that cannot be it
for if it is
then I becoming faint.

Ain't it raggedy ass
that I can pass
for what I am

without becoming
what I will be soon
(as Shakespeare quaintly says

who mocks me with me
after I am gone)?

We slip through doors
we seem to be
yet not for any man of reckoning

because the raw account of us
the merely you and me
gathers so pure a cold.

(The helpful nature of *to be*
must often serve
in a progressive way:

my wife was once becoming
 becoming what she is
 this very day.)

But maybe meant
 is to cast off
 the very what is not
 so sobering to us

which nethers us
 so that we cannot be
 what once becoming was
 to our Ur-isness
 (surely a famous choir is singing this).

Oh anyone be walking down the street
 or be on tippy toes reaching for N's
 where few can spell his name
 and not this secondary source in the low B's
 sweet in the closet
 chlamydeous up close.

It could be we are never
 what we are
 unless we are becoming
 what we were

which leaves us in a lyric nonny flux
 that poets of the Renaissance prefer

because you see
 to be
 so sadly am
 (I speak from a rejoicing long ago)
 is very nearly what I wish for least.

So if I truly were
 then I could hardly be
 (I might be me
 but not the jocund me
 which is the very object of such be).

(stanza continued)

I hesitate to get to Buber's thou
or straighten out the nails in Dugan's you.
The shack I have is hardly fit for two.

To be so purely me
as shapely as all that
established without diet or dissent
creates a flaccus in the lung
a sibilance so dwarf
I wish to speak in tongues
are not my own.

(You see
I wanted to be oh
more than anything
something not me
has been the long rowing of my life.)

The setting out is always difficult,
one starts with sex and ends with Seneca
(*coeo ergo sum to gaude discere*):
it is a wash destitute of laundry,
a sweet rain and singing of regret.

Yet know I not the source of all my joy,
the moment that I am not what I am,
a happy bowler, say, when fire soothes the wood
as Eckhart choicely said to the Beguines?

Oh dearest reader
ever as you are,
be not becoming
that you cannot be,
be Chaim or Christ
and wild as you are free,
be anyone
and so surviving me.

YOU REACH OUR PERUVIAN HOME

and a lucid maid leads you to your room
in nothing but a bustle of flowers, a float of poppies, daisies, and
sweet-smelling morning glories.

You hear us glorify her, direct her to the laundry,
and call her Girl-Slave.

*Leave us some flowers and pick up our laundry
and call us by name. Mulatta let us call you Girl-Slave.*

Our family doesn't listen for an answer,
but, instead, watches her pass quickly
leaving us her scent.

A scent we wear like a robe,

a scent we wear embroidered on our upper lip the day we suckled milk,
a scent that stayed in our hair after it was shaved on our first birthday.

Now, grown, we hide in a curtain of color,
of bosom and blossomed taffeta,
we have no flowers in our hair, no body stocking,
just Girl-Slave's milk in our bones.

*Where are your children, and
who did your body think the milk was for?*

Now, and still,
her body moves about the house,
her old body, her young body.
She made men out of our brothers in the early morning.

*Who sent you into our brothers' rooms
when they were fourteen?*

She sleeps in a shack on the roof
next to empty soda bottles,
she folds towels and irons linens,
she sweeps the cement courtyard
and replaces the flowers in her bustle.
She is docile. She is nude and unwanting.

Has she ironed your shirt and called you to the table for coffee?

NATURAL HISTORY

Pliny the Elder says pearls are formed by drops of dew falling into the oyster when he is yawning. Can't something be done about that man?

– Will Cuppy

1.

As for the elephant, “it is the largest of land animals” (which is verifiably true), and “it mates in secret because of its modesty” (debatable at best), and “it is attested-to that an elephant has learned to write with its trunk in Greek” (which is surely a ring-tailed doozy).

And an ox *can't* speak.

The bodies of crabs do *not* transform into scorpions during a drought.

And what of the “stars

that alight on the yardarms and other parts of a ship, with a sound resembling a voice, and hopping from perch to perch in the manner of birds”? – well, yes: St. Elmo's fire, a “real” “phenomenon.”

That's the way it always is with Pliny, and probably everybody: first, the dry, inarguable display of his metallurgical knowledge, term by term, ore by ore, and before long “there are men with dog's heads” introduced with insouciant assurance – “they bark instead of speaking and live by hunting and fowling, for which they use their nails.” Pliny

inveigles – *infinagles* – our trust

by toe-dunk stages into the warm bathwater shallows of what's soon oceanic depth. I've been in his books-length history over my head, amid the snake that suckles at a cow's distended udders, and the rain of milk and blood, and the Astomi “who have no mouth, and so no food or drink, but live from the emanations of flowers and apples that they carry (they can be killed by a vigorous odor).” And:

"For speech, the dolphin moans like a human being."

T () F ()

"A copy of Homer's *Iliad* once was writ on parchment, small enough so that it was stored inside a nutshell."

T () F ()

"The pelican feeds its young its breast-blood."

T () F ()

"The crocodile bird struts into that monster's gaping mouth as it sleeps, and cleans its teeth and its throat."

T () F ()

"Through drinking of wine beyond a specific limit, the secrets of the heart are revealed."

T () F ()

– And so

we see veracity is compromised by dubiousness

in increments as subtle as infant breath;

and only our own

nose-in-it experience is dependable

– if that.* *Do I believe*

that "boiled cabbage prevents insomnia"?

No – not at Casa Goldbarth, it doesn't. *Do I believe*

that "the eyes connect to the brain by a vein,

and also to the stomach"? Probably

– Goldbarth and Pliny say medical research

sorely lags behind in this embracingly explanatory notion.

And that "Marcus Lepidus . . . is known to have died

because of the stress occasioned by his divorce"?

Yes, *that*, at least, is ascertainable, *that* one verity

I can swear to. I have burned at the base of that great

asbestos heart, I have sat beneath the tree

whose seed is a flake of ash, its leaves are ashes,

and its flowers, I have sat in the ashen fall of its pollen

deadening the air. And there are friends of mine,

* From a 1940's hardboiled detective story: ". . . he had gotten to the point where he didn't believe what he heard even when he was talking to himself."
(Norbert Davis)

a painter of airy lakescapes and his mergers lawyer wife,
 whose interior world just now, if translated
 into the images of the nightly news, would be a nest of snipers
 and the wounded being carried away in long lines over rocky ground.
 "This alone is certain," Pliny says, "that there is no such thing
 as certainty." Yes. And as for "the vapors
 the Nile does" (or doesn't) "give off," and as for "the rays
 like minds beam unto each other,"
 I'm sorry but none of it,
 no matter its attractions, is beyond sane disputation
 . . . any more than the accepted definition of *I love you* is engraved
 on a bar of plutonium in an hermetically sealed tubule of eterno-gas
 in an underground vault in Stockholm
 under Truth Police surveillance.
 – No.

2.

The lake's an oolong brown today,
 and gives itself away in rising mist. He views it
 thoughtfully, this painter of water and shore; or
 anyway, as thoughtfully as overriding marriage angsts allow.
 And we can roll our eyes in tight ironic circles
 at this common, sitcom-style brand of grief, but
 no one's pain has ever registered
 any less urgently for that. He thinks
 Who's Right (or Wrong), Who's Guilty, Who's the Stinkeroo in All of This
 – those categorized ponderings that seemed as architecturally defined
 as a row of obelisks or equestrian statues
 yesterday as they devastated each other with gall-and-adrenalin bombs,
 but now . . . somehow . . . it's all more
 like the lake, a scene of fog and indeterminacy,
 a moil of accusation, noodgying, disaffection, and longing
 they've been walking through as if through billowed haze
 until they're both half-haze themselves. Now in the midst
 of a life he once thought he could think with his knuckles

and hear ring back in an absolute way . . . today
 he lifts his hand and almost sees it
 flicker, reappear, then flicker once again. . . .

And so tonight,

part-dozed on the back room bed, he's not surprised
 to see a smoky spectral-self rise out of himself
 and float off, with an ever-extensive tendril
 of smoky connection remaining between. (From Pliny:
 "Heromotimus of Clazomenae used to leave his body
 and wander about, reporting many things from afar.")
 The journey is long and fast – the planet
 smudges by, below – and then he lands at the edge of a meadow
 men are walking across (it's late noon here), their catch
 of wood-duck and ptarmigan tied like skirts about their waists
 . . . these snouted men with the sensitive, tent-like ears.
 He's here in the land of the Dogfaces. Wow.

They lead him,

not ungently, to their village (his necessary thread
 of attachment-back-to-home still trailing from him). None
 speaks "words," but they have throaty rumbles, aspirates, and yips
 that are clearly a pliant and intricate language. Soon
 he learns to distinguish individual members of the packtribe;
 and, as in the world he comes from, brutish looks can hide
 a sympathetic heart, or open faces mask conniving.
 He meets the sachem of these people, a gaunt and ocher-eyed
 old dogman; and he's given a room in the sachem's
 sprawling mega-hut, with walls of mud-daub thatch
 made appealing by tapestries showing hunting scenes,
 some amorous entwining (a tug of the home-thread here,
 a sad, insistent tug), and what appears to be war
 with a scatter of humanoid enemies. He never "gets"
 their other-larynxed language, quite, and yet a mix
 of body-moves, good will, and mutual grunts and sighs
 allows him understanding enough to walk the village
 comfortably and accepted.

With the royal house's
 seneschal he indulges in smoking "dream leaf"
 out of a shallow-bowl ceremonial pipe. With the childrenpups
 he chases ribboned hoops along the rough streets.
 With the women he learns to pound meal. When the sachem's
 lady (something like their Queen) falls ill with fever
 he's able to ease her plight by humming T.V. theme songs
 at her cot. The sachem's concern is a grave
 and admirable thing. (So then, again, that gossamer
 pull of his "real body," toward his "real home.")

One night

he sees the warriors stuffing woven bags with shit.
 A truce is broken, they're at war once more
 with their age-old foes the Astomi – who are fierce and sly,
 but pungent smells will fell them as surely as spears will.
 He can join the men in battle, but first he needs initiation
 at the god-hut, to symbolically remove the skins
 of his earlier life – the mall-skin (*bei!*)
 and the clock-skin (*bei!*) and the job-skin (*bei!*)
 and the book-skin (*bei!*) and the wife-skin
 – and before he can tell them *no!* the home-thread
snaps; and he's abandoned here.

Do *you* believe in "the rays
 like minds beam unto each other"? He
 still doesn't fully understand their doggish talk,
 but some days it's as if he's stopped at a light
 and one of the Dogfaces pulls up right alongside,
 they're listening to the same song on the radio,
 both singing it, both of them seeing
 that they're singing it, so singing it louder
 and crazier, rocking the wheels now, *baby, oh, oh, bay-beee,*
 howling it, and howling it.

3.

Do *you* believe
 that Danny Harper, blind for 16 years,
 regained his sight “when he was hit on the head
 by a falling chicken carcass”?* – *Well,*
maybe. In any case, my friend, the *Daily Telegraph*,
Europa Times, and the *Daily Mirror* reported this.
 Do you believe that lightning fatally blasted a woman
 in Scotland when it hit her metal-wire-reinforced-bra?
Okay; why not? Do you believe her name
 is Elotta Watts? *No I don't; do you?*
 I'm reserving judgment. Do you believe
 it bounced from her and struck her friend
 who had been confined to a wheelchair from multiple sclerosis
 for 24 years, and she rose to her feet and walked?
 – a Mary Stryke. *That crosses the line.*
 What *is* the line? The little green men. . . .
 The fall of raw meat from out of a clear blue sky. . . .
 “I do not for a flame-ass minute believe
 my own 17-year-old daughter is capable of driving
 a stolen vehicle *at all*, much less a car
 with a thousand dollars of stolen jewelry in the trunk,”
 said Lady Kaye, the topless dancer at Obsessions,
 in a fluid mix of tequila and tears, and with
 such monolithic conviction as surely withstands
 the scowls of the dunderheadedly doubtful,
 why? – do *you* not believe it?
 Angels. Water of Lourdes. Perdition. Anti-matter.
 Satan. Neutrinos. In Omiya, a suburb of Tokyo,
 “in 16 separate incidents, 150 pigs' heads
 have been found by puzzled residents.” “BullSHIT,”
 he says, “if you think I'M going to swallow
 men ever walked on no moon.” We can only

* *It smelled a bit off*, said the woman who'd dropped it from her 10th floor apartment.

keep our credibility wary (open),
open (wary), and walk the dappled light of our time
with a show of appropriate
wonder.

“The one who wonders,”

Admirans, is what the King of Spain as a joke suggested
Columbus should be called (instead of *Almirante*,
“the admiral”) – such was the effect
of the seemingly endless New World marvels
on his toughened sensibility;
yes, empirically pragmatic though his purpose was, Columbus goes
continuously gaga over every further twist of possibility
on these shores. It’s from about this time
the notion of a “curio” – a souvenir of grandeur or of freakishness –
is born; and *fifteen centuries*
after that oh-so-compendious Roman observer’s inaccuracies,
the pastor/explorer Jean de Léry in 1578 could say
“I have revised the opinion I formerly had of Pliny
and others when they describe foreign lands, because
[he’s just returned from Brazil] I have seen things as fantastic
and prodigious as any of those – once thought
incredible – that they mention.”
If the rhinoceros: why *not* the unicorn?
If the manatee: why not the merfolk?
If the flying squirrel: the griffin, the roc.
The armadillo: *anything*.
Is a buffalo any stranger than a basilisk is, *really*?
Or for that matter, is the amoeba?
is the ovary?
are your spouse’s dreams?

Do you believe these marriages
announced in daily papers? – Storm-Flood;
Beers-Franks; Long-Cox; Sharpe-Payne; Stock-King;
Good-Loser. I’ve seen the clippings. Do you believe *this*
marriage? – annulled in 1995, when one Bruce Jensen
of Bountiful, Utah, discovered Leasa Bibianna Herrera,

his wife since 1991, was truly Felix Urioste, a man who "had enrolled as a female student at the University of Utah and had worked as a doctor in four Salt Lake City hospitals, alternating between male and female aliases" (*The Fortean Times*, as culled from the *Ogden (UT) Standard-Examiner* and *Meriden (CT) Record-Journal*).

Ab! – there is no woolly poppycock, no tommyrot flambé, to match the straight-to-the-astonishment-gland details of actual happenstance. One of the Egyptian king Menephta's victory monuments in 1300 B.C. lists 13,240 severed penises from conquered Libyans, Etruscans, and Greeks presented as trophies. / Lee Herman, entomologist: "We sometimes dissect insects under a microscope with scalpels we make from tiny pins. Sometimes the pulse in your thumb will cause the scalpel to jump. . . . You learn to dissect between heartbeats." / "The gecko's [pupil] looks like a string of four diamonds, the skate's a fan-shaped Venetian blind, the fire-bellied toad an opening like a piece of pie, the armored catfish a horseshoe, the penguin a star that tightens into a square, the green whip snake a keyhole, and others resemble teardrops, bullets, buns, crescent moons, hearts, hourglasses, boomerangs. . . ." (Guy Murchie)

So why do we heap such retrospect contumely on this man who said that "lettuces . . . increase the volume of blood," who said "the hair will grow on a corpse," and who, among his best encyclopedic tries, gave us the manticore: "the face of a man, a lion's body, a tail like a scorpion's" – in *this* life, in *this* world, a not unthinkable proposition.

4.

As to painters' verisimilitude, Pliny tells us:
 "In a contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius," the former
 "produced so successful a representation of grapes
 that birds flew up to feast there." Plump with pride
 at this deception, Zeuxis very disdainfully indicates
 the curtain hung in front of his competitor's inferior entry
 now be drawn aside – *then* realizes the curtain *is* the painting;
 "and he conceded the prize."

My wife says

"You're not *listening* to me," when of course I am,
 I'm just not *agreeing* with her. This
 makes her mightily pissed, and I can't blame her:
 all of us, everybody, little two-bit
 zeuxises and parrhasiuses, expecting
 that *our* version of reality will be,
 in any contest, all-persuasive. This explains
 the martial loggerheads of nation-states,
 as well as the deep assumption behind most "couples counseling,"
 sure; and even so, such knowledge doesn't assuage
 a man up walking late one post-misunderstanding night,
 a man who's tossed in the crosscurrents ambience
 of totaling his transgressions, and hers (first gingerly
 separating them out from each other) . . . if he's anything
 like me, he'll stare this conscienceful endeavor
 straight in its stony face, and try, he'll *really*
 try . . . but after a difficult while of ethics,
 anger, melancholia, the heebie-jeebies, sneers, nobility,
 meanspiritedness and sighs, it segues
 into escapist fancies. . . .

He's an artist,

remember. So here's what he does. With globby smears
 of animal fats and oils as a base, he trial-and-errors together
 a make-do range of paints by mixing-in various berry juices
 and riverbank clays. The hairs and handles for some brushes
 aren't difficult to rig, and he talks the tribal skinner

how the "blue" of it was dozens of colors, really,
 if you really looked. . . . She knows
 that you can't love a man for his art any more
 than for a tight tush or a fatass roll of banknotes.
 Still, . . . (*and now she's lost in reverie*) . . .
 She has /not good but hopeful/news from the clinic
 about the lump. *He used to hum those T.V. theme songs*
by my side when I took sick
until I smiled through the hurt. And she goes downstairs
 to the back room bed as he opens his eyes from sleep
 and he says – *a weird thing, almost*
as if he'd been away on a journey –
 "I'm back home now."

What *are* we going to do with that man?
 He'll feed us any gee-whiz scrap of balderdash
 and he won't go away, he won't remove
 his ancient foot from the door of the 21st century,*
 he knows the tiny oh-wow bone in our ears
 is evolved exactly to relay /zap zap zap/ astonishment
 that the other bones, the payroll-bones and the mortgage-bones,
 reject. Because of him I've looked in a woman's face
 and seen the ox that speaks,
 and the people who turn into wolves, and the bees
 that by their flight predict the future.

* From the February 5, 1996 issue of *Time*: "Writing his *Natural History* in the first century A.D., Pliny the Elder reported that when water rises into the atmosphere to form rain clouds, it sucks up with it shoals of fish and sometimes quantities of stones. Fish and stones hover above us in the sky. Elsewhere, Pliny offered an item about a woman who gave birth to an elephant. He was, occasionally, a supermarket-tabloid sort of Roman. A Pliny pattern persists. The scientific side of the observer's mind demands objective evidence, as the great naturalist usually did; but the brain's mythopoetic, magic-thinking side is lured to marvels – to alchemy, to spells, to bat people on the moon or aliens on other planets. Can these matters be addressed with a whole mind? Can the two instincts of the brain – Einstein and Elvis-sighting – be made to fit together like compatible spoons?" (Lance Morrow)

I've looked in the mirror and seen
 the proof of that great truth of his,
 "the heart is the seat of the mind."
 The two-inch goby fish attaches to a rudder
 and stalls a galley ship of 400 rowers.
 The human embryo wears hair, like a beast.
 The Arimaspi have but one eye; that, in the middle of the forehead.
 There are days when I can almost believe
 the marriage will last, will seam itself
 and last, and stars will sing of this
 to starfish, in the language that they share
 because they share a shape.

Today they browse together through one of his books
 of fifteenth-century art. The anonymous painter
 shows us Pliny's dog-faced tribe the only way he knows:
 as credibly-rendered, yes
 and set with weight and history and desires
 in the hill land of a credibly-rendered world.
 They trade their formulaic greetings and they sell their busheled grain
 no more implausibly
 than the hundreds of thousands of fifteenth-century saints
 conduct *their* nimbus'ed business.
 On the next page, a companion piece – and equally
 convincing: Pliny's "headless people,
 they have their eyes in their shoulders, and their mouths in their chests."
 And once we're past a sort of pink cartoonishness
 attending them, we see that they're complete
 unto their needs and their fashions – simpering, valorous,
 dour, gleeful, every one of them
 somebody's child, somebody's neighbor,
 every one of them rumped at night one way or another
 by love. The nipple-level smiles are genuine
 endorsements of a happiness, for some; while others
 wear theirs as a burglar might his mask.
 Some are slovenly, others are dapper; voluptuary;

teetotaling; – consider the spectrum of “character”
run through fully. They argue the merits of the printing press,
and other abrupt newfangledness. They can’t
believe it. They rumormonger. They have
their dragons and seraphs and pucks. A few of them
are walking out of the frame of the painting
hand in hand, among the lemon-yellow flower-bearing trees
and spaghetti-like grasses, they’re going to test the line
between endurance and mismatchment.
Haven’t we all, at some time, lost our heads?
They go their own encoded way,
like any confused human beings.

Albert Goldbarth

Two Poems

HOW THE DEMONS WERE ASSIMILATED & BECAME PRODUCTIVE CITIZENS

The demons were more beautiful than the angels.
They had no qualms about plastic surgery.
They took to wearing black: didn't show dirt
In the city like Innocence, which anyway
Couldn't be worn between Labor Day and Easter.
They tired of grudging angels their gilded hair
& had theirs done. Their complexions were so pale
The blond looked natural, only more so.
They shrunk their wings into fashionable tatoos
So cashmere suits draped better from their shoulders.
Elocution lessons turned hisses to lisps.

The demons converted. They became Episcopalian,
Name-dropped high-ups in the Company of Heaven.
As for Evil, it became too much trouble:
The demons started to shirk the menial jobs
Which like good deeds, took one among the poor,
And bruised the manicure of rose-petal nails.
They preferred to stand by & watch Evil happen,
Or offended by odors & noise, even turned away.

They had become so beautiful, even the angels
(Who never looked in mirrors to comb their hair,
Afraid to be called vain, & never bought clothes
Since the old ones didn't wear out, just got shabby)
Left the lovely demons to languish, dropping all charges
On the spoiled creatures. They were that good.

THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T PLANT WILLOW TREES

Willows are messy trees. Hair in their eyes,
They weep like women after too much wine
And not enough love. They litter a lawn with leaves
Like the butts of regrets smoked down to the filter.

They are always out of kilter. Thirsty as drunks,
They'll sink into a sewer with their roots.
They have no pride. There's never enough sorrow.
A breeze threatens and they shake with sobs.

Willows are slobs, and must be cleaned up after.
They'll bust up pipes just looking for a drink.
Their fingers tremble, but make wicked switches.
They claim they are sorry, but they whisper it.

A. E. Stallings

PAINTING ONE

for Abby Shahn

"Fuck the painting," she said, her brush working.

what we had. Anyway,

I was out of fresh moves. Too much
was happening – black crosses flying over, small fires breaking out,
crop circles turning up, sudden riffs of stones
smoother than jazz.

Abby kept painting, moving green
across borders, quick strokes parting worlds, marrying energies –
I couldn't take it, this white wheel at the center picking up speed,
everything
feeling like Franz Marc's red horses about to escape the barn, and yes
I wanted to slam shut the gate before they left the page.
"Maybe we ought to stop," I said.

"Fuck the painting,
it's wreck and rescue!" she said, riding past bareback
on a red Clydesdale. I grabbed her shirttails, and we leaped
the fence together, big country under our brushes.

Me, I wanted to keep

Martin Steingesser

HERE'S A STORY

Here's a story:
remember before you were born and
you lived in a cave.

It wasn't always dark, what
with the magic cat and flashing
bits of sun touching your mama's
hat. It wasn't always silent be-
cause of the bees. A farmer came
down to check his root cellar. He kept
old newspapers down there and
crawling potatoes. You and mama
nibbled on them when no one was looking.

You didn't know me then. I
tended goats on the far side of your
hill, which explains the bells you
sometimes heard through tiny cracks.

One day it was dawn and
pink. You tapped your foot on a
rock which quickly crumbled. Mama
ran and caught you. My
happiest goat was nuzzling a
treeroot which happened to be
friends with the hole in the
ground. Tell me the rest.

Michael Hoberman

QUIETUS

The word is quietus,
leaning like a tree.
A tilted tombstone
uplifting earth,
a slow shovel's delve.

Quietus: trembling branches
on which ale-colored
shadows tremble.

Late afternoon
birds land on
the word,
bend its q's and u's
and quake its t's.

The earth swallows
the sun like a lozenge,
again. On another side
of the word, sun
swallows earth.

Quietus, a typeface,
looping script on stone,
is a sieve we pass through
like the letter q,
a lasso rose,
or a butler with a rose lapel,
helping us out of the formalwear of flesh.

Gerry Gomez Pearberg

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Contemporary Poetics: From the Poets' Prose

Philip Booth, *Trying to Say It: Outlooks and Insights on How Poems Happen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996, 158 pp., \$39.50 cloth, \$13.95 paper, 0-472-09586-2 and 0-472-06586-6)

Marianne Boruch, *Poetry's Old Air* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1995, 160 pp., \$39.50 cloth, \$13.95 paper, 0-472-09584-6 and 0-472-06584-x)

Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York: The Library of America, 1995, 1036 pp., \$35. cloth, 1-883011-06-x)

John Haines, *Fables and Distances: New and Selected Essays* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1996, 286 pp., \$24.95 cloth, 1-55597-227-6)

Donald Hall, *Principal Products of Portugal* (Boston: Beacon, 1995, 286 pp., \$23. cloth, 0-8070-6302-2)

Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995, 230 pp., \$22. hardbound, 0-374-24853-2)

David Lehman, *The Line Forms Here* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992, 264 pp., \$39.50 cloth, \$13.95 paper, 0-4722-06483-5) and *The Big Question* (1995, 160 pp., 0-472-09583-8 and 0-472-06583-1, same press, same prices)

In my ongoing exploration of contemporary poetics, I here examine seven books of prose by living poets, plus one by an earlier poet who continues to command respect for his essays and talks as well as his poetry – Robert Frost. I will describe the volumes and hope to toll my readers to the books themselves – for their instruction and delight.

An Education

All these writers (except Frost) provide critical essays on their fellow-poets. Because they kept sending me back to their subjects, I have felt I was giving myself a course in the web of enthusiasms and influences that inform today's poetry. Although Heaney does not include in this collection of the lectures he delivered as Professor of Poetry at Oxford the one (published elsewhere) on Robert Frost, nevertheless Frost's prose crops up so regularly in these lectures that I suspect that Frost would have

the largest block of references, were the volume indexed. Indeed, Heaney has so assimilated phrases like "a momentary stay against confusion" that they sometimes appear without quotes. Because Frost's work also figures substantially in the volumes by Booth and Boruch, I have included the definitive Library of America edition of Frost's poems, prose, and plays in my list. It is excellent to have the whole canon, in (finally!) reliable texts, complete with chronology and both textual and informational notes, all in one compact, well-printed volume. Anyone concerned with contemporary poetry should be familiar with Frost's "The Constant Symbol," "Poetry and School," and "The Figure a Poem Makes," at the very least. This excellent volume should be in every library – public and private.

Heaney's lectures survey the broadest landscape of any of the works under review; he discusses no living poets, but his commentaries on poets from Marlowe and Merriman to Thomas and Bishop are richly appreciative. Hall gives us shorter appreciations of poets from Andrew Marvell and William Dunbar to Ernest Lawrence Thayer, whose "Casey at the Bat" merits a perfectly delightful essay. Boruch's commentaries on Bishop, whose poems "all mime the agile mind thinking," on Dickinson's "emotional intelligence," and on Oppen, Stevens, Hopkins, Plath, Moore, and others, are meticulously worked through, sparkling with fresh insights, and elegantly-written. Lehman's wittily-titled *The Line Forms Here* would be worth acquiring for his valuable essay on Ammons, "Where Motion and Shape Coincide." (One should probably read "The Pleasures of John Ashbery's Poetry" after Haines's acerbic critique of Ashbery.) Haines is rather more appreciative of such various poets as Jeffers and Forché. Booth brings personal authority to his essays on Frost, Lowell, and the Oppens as well as to brief but intense appreciations of Williams and Stevens.

To study these various essays, along with the poets they seek to illuminate, is to give oneself the richest kind of entrance into the wealth of today's poetry and the roots of that poetry.

How Poems Happen

If reading these poets on fellow poets can be like a stroll through the Louvre with Cezanne, even more absorbing, even

more of a privilege, is to hear the artist talking about his or her own process of composition. Haines, sharing the background and evolution of "The Eye in the Rock," illustrates "a convenient working principle: that by following what the poem suggests to us at any moment, we can shape it toward a possibly unforeseen conclusion." We learn how the "craft" dimensions of the poem – the syntax, the echoing syllables and consonants, the colors, the tone and viewpoint – all turn into vision. In a discussion of his "To the Wall" Haines demonstrates how "no discussion of verse measure, of lines and stanzas, of formal structure, is of much consequence unless joined vitally with the substance of the poem."

As the title of Booth's book, *Trying to Say It*, suggests, this poet is also concerned with the process of composition. In two interviews, Alberta Turner asks about specific poems, "Eaton's Boatyard" and "Dreamscape." Of the former he tells how "in the process of writing, revision after revision, how constantly the implications expanded," and he assumes that how deeply a reader will see into the depths of the poem will depend on "how well my syntax presents my sense of relationships." He helps us see what *revision* really means. And he reveals his awareness of the multitude of meanings in even the simplest words when he refers to his "inclination toward 'infinitives, relative objects.' *In all possible senses*" [my emphasis]. The things Booth tells the interviewer about this poem provide valuable directions to the reading of all his poems. He speaks of the influence of jazz and of how such influences "work in me now as rhythms of my body language driving the poem to find its own music." And he identifies the accumulation and use of the boatyard's culch with his own *bricolage* in creative action: "the inevitable process of giving one's life, or one's poem, to what comes of feeling down into the materials at hand." Booth explains his process of composition by *abstraction*, which he relates to Stevens's "it must be abstract." He means this quite literally, in that it "*takes away from*" in the sense of paring away everything save what prove to be the essentials." Most valuable of all in the discussion of his own poems is the sense Booth gives of the relationship between his living and his art. His commentary on two of his poems on the role of dreams in the poetic process clarifies this relationship

helpfully. In his poem "States" he is concerned with "the practical relation between two aspects of imagination. The dream and the poem came out of the same sea, yes; but the dream is still free-floating in primordial ways, and the poem, no less instinctually, seems to want to establish its own territory on the littoral." (Some poets, we see, write wonderful prose. Fernando Pessoa may well be right when he says that "to write good prose a man must be a poet because a man must be a poet to write well at all.")

Primers of Poetics

The discussions of craft in these books will be invaluable to anyone trying to define the poetics of our age. Lehman, in "Poetry, Verse and Prose: The End of the Line" (in, of course, *The Line Forms Here*), summarizes contemporary opinion on lineation and examines the line, if line there be, between poetry and prose. (Booth and Boruch also have wisdom to share on lineation.) Beyond discussing the line, Lehman comments accurately on Jorie Graham's "way of contriving a set of formal operating procedures out of the interruptions, hesitations, repetitions, and white noise that make up the music of our daily discourse" (in *The Big Question*). More significantly (in *The Line Forms Here*, "Notes on Poetic Form") he describes Graham's meanings as "inextricable from the effects she obtains through her experimentation with form" – effects that are the result of formal choices. This is a fruitful approach, and I'd have welcomed a more extended exposition of how this happens.

All the poets I'm reviewing here would, I'm sure, agree that form and substance are inseparably related. *How* is the interesting question. Here's Hall on Edwin Arlington Robinson: "a master of verse and poetry, of metric and diction, syntax and tone, rhyme and understanding, ethics, metaphor, and the exposure of greed. The last nouns in this series are not disconnected from the first: Dead metaphors are unethical, and forced rhymes are corrupt."

Booth has more to say about the strategies of his art than most of the other poets under review. The word *concinnity* (look it up) is important here. He sings "whatever is well made." Any practicing poet or critic can glean wisdom from his discus-

sion of measure, rhythm, impulse, diction, pace, lineation, and the notation of strophes. He has good words on "syntactical tensions," on the positioning of recurrences, on figuration and relationships ("always one thing in terms of another"), and on ceremony and openness. On the subject of field notes and journals, including the dream journal, he provides generous examples as well as an accounting of how he uses them in his writing.

None of these poets has much to say on the perhaps dead controversy over New Formalism. But speaking for themselves, for their own practices, Booth, Boruch and Haines write eloquently for openness in form and content. Boruch mistrusts closure: "what we often conclude these days is our own inability to conclude." Elsewhere she says: "if you think as I do that longing makes the poem in the first place, longing built somehow into image and language, the whole design pitched at that forward angle, then that term – poetic closure – is largely fake, an oxymoron." Haines comes at it a little differently: "In the end, the only acceptable attitude toward art, as toward existence itself, is that of openness, of an inborn susceptibility that can otherwise be described as a capacity to see and to listen." And in a recent essay, "On a Certain Attention to the World," he moves from composition to epistemology: "The mind is a replica of what we see out there, and in its order and disorder, its capacity for expressive forms and its incapacity for any final understanding, is a reflection of that world, the only one we have." Booth has a similarly heroic view of art and life: "if your inclination is not to *impose* limits, but to stretch the limits of your own ability, to proceed with them offshore, perhaps in fog... with no particular course in mind, because the weather feels right to be out in, or..." At which point the interviewer, Stephen Dunn, interrupts with "That's a philosophical position, isn't it, as much as it is a compositional one?" And Booth responds, "Sure, it isn't simply compositional. Because what is unknown *must* be confronted." Instead of tucking a poem in at the end, he is now inclined "to leave it more open-ended, more ambivalent. The horizon or edge or margin seems more terrifying now, but more wonderful."

Thus any discussion of strategies – of syntax and pace, of metaphor and rhythm, of architecture and voice, of meter and

tone and “musical trueness” (Heaney’s phrase) – comes down to poetics in its largest sense. And it is for poetics thus broadly conceived that I find these books most valuable.

Principles, Purposes, and Powers

I’d like now to touch on some of the distinctive concerns of each of these books.

Lehman’s *The Big Question* surrounds a potpourri of short readable critical essays and reviews with light-fingered articles on theoretical subjects. The first is a witty and well-illustrated description of postmodernism. Others, in a chapter of “Criticism and Controversy,” take on deconstruction and political correctness. For all his breezy wit, Lehman is serious about the mission of the writer, and he defines his position with clarity and conviction: we write, he says (in a “Twenty Questions” interview in *The Line Forms Here*), out of the tension between the principles of pleasure and necessity, “since we write not only to find out what we don’t know (or what we don’t know we know) but also to clarify our feelings and try to understand our mysterious inner conflicts.” The principal instrument for Lehman is irony, a structure in which “oppositions coexist and paradoxes can prevail.” “Irony,” he writes in the Preface to *The Big Question*, “acts as a restraint on passion that paradoxically sharpens and augments the passion.”

Hall’s delightful volume collects short essays on a wide range of subjects (lots on baseball), and those on poetry are a joy, especially “The Unsayable Said.” Here’s how it starts: “Poems are pleasure first: bodily pleasure, a deliciousness of the senses. Mostly, poems end by saying something (even the unsayable) but they start as the body’s joy, like making love.” And it ends: “The poets we honor most are those who – by studious imagination, by continuous connection to the sensuous body, and by spirit steeped in the practice and learning of language – publish in their work the unsayable said.” I’m often asked, What are editors looking for? Hall here provides as good an answer as I know.

Heaney’s splendid collection differs from the others here in originating in a series of literary lectures united by the concept

of *redress*. He means this in many ways, but first he would agree with Hall, saying that poetry "cannot afford to lose its fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language as well as a representation of things in the world." Beyond that it can function as redress: "as an agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices," and as a redress of "poetry *as* poetry... an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctively linguistic means." He says, for example, of Herbert's "The Pulley" that it generates "that compensatory pressure which all realized works exert against the surrounding inconsequentiality." Another sense of redress comes from an old meaning of calling back (as hounds) to a proper course, a course where (as in poetry) "something unhindered, yet directed, can sweep ahead into its full potential." Heaney's lectures illustrate this equilibrium between energy and responsibility, and they are a joy to read.

This brings me to the three books that have been for me the most valuable in my ongoing consideration of contemporary poetics. First, Boruch, who writes thoughtfully about time in the poetic process: "Really what we are up against here is time itself, how human thought unfolds in a poem, how it is held privately then released moment by real moment, how sound is a key measure of that release, not only orchestrating the order of our realizations but to a large extent their nature." Boruch writes elegantly, each essay thought through from its roots in her personal experience and extensively researched. She worked with a beekeeper before she wrote about Plath's bees. Her study of ornithology unfolds into a lavish and brilliantly accurate metaphor for poetry. And her essay "On Metaphor" alone is worth the price of the book.

Haines' volume includes several moving autobiographical accounts that, together with his reviews of books about Alaska, would be valuable to any study of the sense of place in contemporary poetics. More important – indeed essential to the deepest investigation of the role of the artist today – is his attack on the solipsistic and irresponsible narrowness of many contemporary American poets and the "absence in their work of social and political comment – indeed of any intellectual content." For Haines believes that "poetry, the real thing," has within it "a power that

might change, if not the world, at least the life of an individual." Poetry "can on occasion recall to us the original meaning of things, and restore, if only for a moment, something of the lost vitality in our connection to the world." He notes that "we are *in* nature and never out of it" and are "in some way an expression of nature," though at times "almost, a parody of it." Though profoundly discouraged about the direction of life on the planet ("I will not attempt to be a prophet here, if only because it is essential to avoid despair"), Haines retains a faith in the power of art: "We do not know the extent to which a single creative act may strengthen a positive force in the universe. It does seem believable, however, that any creative work in itself partly redeems us from the wrong we otherwise do." In 1983 he wrote: "In times of extreme peril, confusion, and insecurity, there seems to be something ineradicable that we can draw on; and one face of that capacity is a belief in the power and sanity of the creative act." In his ethical passion, in his planetary scope, and in his poet's command of language, Haines seems to me to be writing here with the vision and power of the best of our Nobel laureates of literature.

Because Booth has sailed steadily through his career toward the outer edge of what poetry can do (not *avant-garde*, but *en tranchant*, out on the cutting edge) and because he is, as his book's title suggests, intensely concerned with the techniques of poetry, he has a great deal to offer the practicing poet. But he has even more for whoever is concerned with poetics in the broader sense. Booth would stand beside Haines in his conviction that art has the power to change the world. It is no less than a matter of survival: "It always has been individually, and now it has... become a universal issue for the planet." In his prose, as in his poems, he suggests how we are to live in this threatened environment. Like Haines, he provides encouragement to the creative artist: "I strongly feel," Booth says in an interview, "that every poem, every work of art, everything that is well done, well made, well said, generously given, adds to our chances of survival by making the world and our lives more habitable."

Booth's rule of thumb for the creative artist, we learn, is a Wordsworthian one: "Honor thy subject in whatever complexity of perception is necessary." Clarity does not preclude complexi-

ty. Both clarity and complexity distinguish his sense of place – both literal and expandingly metaphorical: “Life of any kind literally ‘takes place.’” In his own case, it is “a matter of mooring myself in a known harbor, in order to sail out from it.” And *in* from it, too, into internal space. “No matter where we experience being in place,” Booth writes, coming close here again to Haines, “we immerse in our deepest selves when we begin to write. It’s from instinctive memory, from the wilderness of imagination, from a mindfulness forever wild, that Art starts.” Significantly, Booth’s language for the creative process, rooted in the natural world, expresses the organic source of his vision. Like Coleridge he understands that “in the process of creating Art as part of our relation to past and present, our Art is a deepening and furthering of Creation itself.” One of the most delicious sections of *Trying to Say It* is “Distances/ Shallows/ Deeps: Field Notes from an East-Facing Window at the Cold End of a Long Maine Winter,” on art and nature – epigrams, paragraphs, and wide-ranging meditations, including the exquisite “Short Course in the Evolution of Ecology,” comprised of quotations from Hopkins.

Any broad-based exploration of contemporary poetics is going to have to consider the role of dreams in poetic composition, and this book will be central to any such study, since Booth, a scholar of inner as well as outer weather, is attentive to the processes by which the “free-floating” dream becomes *informed* in a poem. (*Inform* is a central word for Booth.) Floyd Skloot, who has had to learn to write again after a devastating neurological disease, brings clinical authority to his understanding of dreams and poetry: “My sleep was fragmented; temperolybic dysfunction had robbed me of slow-wave sleep and therefore dreams, which are regulated in the brain in part by the anterior hypothalamus and the diagonal band of Broca, sites of damage for people with my illness. I think it may be impossible to write without dreaming” in *Crazyhorse*, #50, Spring 1996).

At a more philosophical level, Stephen Dunn, in a really splendid interview, leads Booth to speak of “how well the voice in the poems embraces uncertainty,” and of how the composition of the poem, the form that it grows into, is an expression of the poet’s epistemology. Like Hall, Booth writes toward “a verbal contact with the unsayable,” involving, as for Boruch, the art of

discovering a form for the ambiguous, for the poet's "doubleness of vision," for even his ambivalence. I leave for the future and for other readers the profound pleasure of learning how the epistemologies expressed and implied in these volumes illuminate the poetry of their writers.

Caveats:

1) We wouldn't be reading these books at all were they not by strong poets. Go to the poetry by these writers before, during, and after the reading of their essays. That's where the music and the Promethean fire reside.

2) These books I've reviewed are merely the ones I happen to have just now on hand. By chance they illustrate a sort of subliminal fellowship, with more similarities than contrasts. But there is a world of significant prose by other poets out there, some radically different in their assumptions from those I've been discussing. For example, the current *Chicago Review* (Vol. 42, number 1) has a generous section on quite a different poet, Ronald Johnson, with some of his poetry, an interview, and Johnson's advice to young poets, along with appreciations by Thom Gunn and Robert Creeley. For an introduction to a radically different strain of contemporary poetics, see Marjorie Perloff *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (University of Chicago, 1992, 264 pp., \$27.50 cloth, 0-226-65733-7). Here is a well-illustrated treatment of the interpenetration of media and art, as John Cage and the Language Poets and various "post-modern" artists have conceived it. The one poet who shares the admiration of Perloff, on the one hand, and Booth and Boruch on the other is, interestingly, George Oppen. Boruch is one of the younger generation of poets who are turning increasingly to Oppen, and Booth, though of an older generation, has always been drawn more to the literary "left" than the "right." Any serious consideration of contemporary poetics will have to comprehend the radical diversity in theory and practice in this rich and various age.

M. K. S.