

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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COVER: Judith Cordary, photograph, cross-section of tree, 1994.

The Editors
of
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
are proud to announce
the winner of the fourth
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
of \$4,000
to
Robert Chute
for his poem
"Heat Wave in Concord"
in the Spring 1996 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.

THE SUBURBAN ARGUMENTS

The deer leaves sign where she stands
eating the last tulips beneath the window.

Raccoons wash their food
in the next door watergarden and argue.

Garbage is sealed away; still a skunk patrols.

Now the heavy-bodied hawk moths browse;
a nightbird repeats itself.

Only the lawn has been fed;
all else is hungry.

Even the humans, sleeping in their hollows,
are starving,

but they drowse on. Canis Major leans down
from the cold spring sky as if to yap

at the end of its long stellar leash, but the world
spins away. Toward dawn, a train in the Basin
comes through the crossing but doesn't sound;
its funnel of light devours the track.

The owl on his small kill
calls. His mate in the last tall pine answers,
Where are you? What have you found there?

Jennifer Craig Pixley

Three Poems

SEA WASHES SAND SCOURS SEA

(for my daughter's wedding)

No hay camino. El camino se hace al andar.

– Antonio Machado

Walking the shore that day, each reaches down
for stones from time to time, the other talking,
her eye finding stones like purple berries,
his hand holding a cloud-light shell to her.

Seas they cannot yet see are ancient seas;
trees they will later pass are not yet trees.
Shore that he looks back to turns to haze,
and sand that she imagines turns to shore.

He says, "Sea washes sand scours sea."
"And sand drinks sea drowns sand," says she.
Voices of gulls call through them on the wind;
the dog circles out beyond their voices.

"All that proceeds recedes," he says at last.
"That you and I are here," she says, "is all."
The man watches the woman watches the man.
The woman loves the man loves the woman.

The day does not diminish other days;
they gain a newer language from the day.
Though wave by step their footprints wash away,
The day does not diminish other days.

WAKING UP SPACE

Find out today there is a third dimension,
that highways could be objects passing among other objects.
Or waves. First the car is in front of the bridge.
Then the car is painted over with a sign.

I may have known about space already
from practical use. If so,
I must have learned it after birth
but before memorytime.

The October tree once pushed air apart as it grew,
slapping space with its green hands.
On this day the tree foregrounds the forest.
The yellow leaves make a plane like ashes,
stretching off away from the tree,
learning another place.

The place we stand seems trivial,
but gulfs there are surrounding things, even leaves.
The years had flattened all these to a curtain
or a parade ground for the self, a page, not a book.

Try to think of space and objects like pages of a novel,
each page telling its own story, hiding other pages,
some stories on the backs of pages looking the other way.

Start with a close thing like a sign post
very near the roadside and try to see
how there is something that surrounds it
which you cannot see, but receptors tell you
is making something like a sound,
more constant than a chant or a dynamo.
Every year a tree blows bubbles
that look like leaves,
injects them with a juice,
waking space, waking up space.

GERANIUM

*"It is much better to say 'the geranium
in the window' than 'the flower
in the window.'" – Writing Down the Bones*

Do you think Natalie Goldberg would have offered such advice, had she known how we would write it on our sills, on steps, in window boxes, how so many of us would grow geraniums? For instance, Updike's "The Brown Chest" sets "a geranium on the sill shedding brown leaves when the women of the house forgot to water it." Or, for instance, Martinez's "Doppler Effect," where "the steps are lined with geraniums." Or Conoley's "Nocturne," where "lovers in third floor windows with their backlit hair and boxes of geraniums have it out."

And now, for instance, this poem, full of the same flower, pink or purplish, with palmately divided leaves, or red, pink, or white showy clusters with variegated leaves. Still, it isn't the flower but the word that hummers like the sounds of: not cranesbill and not storksbill but the jur of journey in the reign of terrain on the kneem of harmonium.

The plant that was before the word may drop dead,
for all we care, but we can taste the sounds
it grows on the tongue, in the warm soil of our singing:

Geranium Jane sat on the sill,
her knees wet with the rain.

Geranium Bill leaned on the rain,
as the wind swept down from the hill.

And the song that they sang in Geranium Lane
made such pure harmony of the sweet summer night
that the journeying earth, as it turned to the dawn
of a red-petalled sun, even started to hum:

er-r-r-r-ay-y-y-e-e-e-um-m-m-m

er-r-r-r-ay-y-y-e-e-e-um-m-m-m.

(This may be repeated to taste.)

Years later, when they open the safe
deposit box, maybe one dry flower
will lie among the papers. If her living
or dying raises questions, analysts may
label the unintelligible crumbs:
dehydration of geranium.

Tom Vander Ven

Two Poems

MAGDALEN RAG I

It was a ripoff. For me anyway.
I could go for the whole crucifixion
routine. Show his love. Show them all
wrong by sitting up in the tomb later.
Sproing! He's up! It's over. Talk about
The Second Coming! No, that was okay.
I handled the scene, grieving, not quite
convinced of the plan. No! what got me
was the *Noli me tangere* bit.
Don't touch me? Cling not to me?
Please! So we're supposed to go for
a resurrection, see the guy walking
the earth again and not touch Him?
Me, especially? Isn't that just like a man?
Rise a little. Tease a little. Make you
feel like shit for asking.

MAGDALEN RAG II

Okay, so I lost my head. Got swept up
in the moment and washed his feet.
With my hair, no less! Okay! So it was
a bit dramatic. But, girls, he was gorgeous
and he had such nerve. He let them
tell the story like he forgave me.
Forgave *me*?! He thanked me!
Knew right then that the world was taking
a patriarchal swing! Thanked me,
then turned to his secretary and said
Make that FORGIVE. I should have left
right then but I sensed possibility,
a partnership, maybe. Who knows.
Like I said, he was gorgeous. He was quiet.
You know the type. I'm always a sucker
for the silent ones. So I did it.
Anointed his head with oil like he was a king.
Knelt in something like adoration.
Since then, he's gotten great press. And me?
They know my hair. They think they know
my profession. Don't worry.
I'll make a comeback.

Susan Herport Methvin

Three Poems

DRIVING THROUGH NEW MEXICO

*When you go, you go absolutely,
deducting visible life from all things . . .*

– Louise Glück

What are the signs of a god's withdrawal?
Anywhere rain is one of the gospels
And gulch-bred weeds spread the news of its need,
The cactus becomes water's apostle, creed
Of thorns, and there's room at the campground,
If not the neon-starred inn. Here, outbound
And inscape lose their distinction. The word
Becomes fleshless: bleached pelvis, a shepherd's
Tottering shack, empty rock-ribbed arroyo.
I want meandering rivers, willow,
Cottonwood, the water-table's stone tablets
A still unbroken covenant, sunsets,
With their gold hosts and red glories, a storm's
Once-again-fallen angels, for form's
Sake, noisy, the too-frequent rainbows:
Within me, the divine keeps dying – slow
Turning of soil to sand, the sky's arbitrary
Grandeur arched over a cemetery.

CHACO CANYON

I came for the love of puzzles and ghosts,
A hunger for the holy, to confirm the boasts
Of the crystal-and-incense crowd whose ethers
Still carry the vibrations of vanished empires.
What's left, though, is more than a hum in the air,

Less than history: a wide valley, bare
Bluffs, and ruins of stone or adobe.
Both museum and guidebook invited me
To develop my own explanation
For why an extinct civilization

Smashed thousands of pots and built roads with no clear
Destination through drought-blighted frontier,
Their hub a monumental upthrust
Of rust-colored sedimentary dust
Whose cliff-face shadows were used as a calendar.

Tumbled walls and T-shaped doors, bizarre
Outcrops, views of the astronomical butte:
Blue vault, cloudless wind, tier upon tier of mute
Distances. Amid seers and sightseers, cameras,
Kivas, who wasn't avid for enigmas?

When alone, I kept feeling watched. The fall
Of light carved faces in the canyon's scalloped wall.
Everywhere I went new hauntings rose: sun,
The desert's famous thirst for illusion.
Later, exhausted by altitude, hunger, heat,

The nervous sidelong glance a habit, I ate
And joined other campers at dusk inside
A crude circle, seated on timber, our guide
A plain woman in park service khaki. The stories
Her campfire's flames inspired! – conspiracies

Of human and numen, the retiree's intricate
 Aztec connections, the tie-died advocate
 Of Atlantis. Our guide stood like a sibyl
 At the outermost edge of empirical
 Facts, propounding her mysteries: why
 The disappearance, the roads, the scrutinized sky?
 As the fire burned low, she scried its embers,
 Logs breathing an animal hiss. *Powers*
We can barely control, she said – call them “chemistry”
And we live in the world of cars and TV;

But “spirits” is an alien landscape,
Malignant. An elder once told me escape
Was the purpose of those roads – tunnels
Of safety through the supernatural's
Toxic air. The faces I'd seen, a tribal awe . . .

The flames had died down. In the coals I saw
 Orange feathers whirling toward the four
 Sacred quarters: sun priests imploring the weather.
 Masks pursued them as the river withdrew –
 In every light a new grimace grew

Bold enough to pop through some cliff
 Until the canyon itself was a river stiff
 As stone, flowing with features, the afterlife
 Building to flood stage. Soon, civil strife,
 Disruptions of the yearly pilgrimage
 From satellite cities, the harvest a wage
 For protection against holiness barely contained,
 The Gods' discontent. It never rained.
 Desiccated crops. The priests had to eat.
 Each year the terror evoked to cheat

Plebeian farmers of their maize increased. They
Couldn't be enticed to remain, stayed away,
Were pressed into building roads for safe passage,
Threw down their vessels at the first stage
Of the journey back: no stowaway spirits
To poison children and bread. At wits'
End, had the priests resorted to sacrifice,
The populace revolted? What good then to police
Them with invisible powers? They'd have fled,
Unpursued, to the mesas (canyons avoided,
New dwellings built) – mind charred in the flare
Of its own imagining. This I saw as I stared
Into ashes: the sacred is made of solitude
And a bare place, thin air, fatigue, lack of food,
The poet's primitive brain, precipice
Or prominent spire – anywhere loneliness
Turns the soul inside out, the eye downloads
Its demons, and fire, or a Rorschach landscape, goads
The dead to peer forth from flames, from an odd
Cliff-hung silhouette the pilgrim fears, a god.

NEW MEXICAN CEMETERY

Language is the body of the dead . . .

– David Kalstone

LA ENTRADA

You've come back, ascending on your mountain bike.
What brought you?

*I don't know. Remembered light,
The way it gilded the cottonwoods, like . . .
Like . . .*

Lost your tongue? Or simply too polite,

Considering your present company,

To say,

so much the contemporary

Poet,

a tasteless word like *eternity*?

What use have we for post-modernity?

The dead are post-everything already.

Just look around you: the plastic callas,

Plaster virgins, saintly dioramas –

Ready to study immortality?

This kitsch, you mean? I wanted atmosphere!

None can abandon trope who enter here.

LAS ÁNIMAS

Why me?

Why not? You're listening.

We'll try

To raise our voices from the oubliette
Of your subconscious.

But I'd have to lie –

I'm not . . .

Forget the Spanish alphabet:

Deceased, we're all one race – gone, idealized.

How come you're so articulate?

The dead

Are silent only when you want standardized
Pronouncements on the ever-misspelled Word.

But when we rant, it's with an accent – tongues
Borrowing the local genius:

thicket

Of thorns, a sidewinder's tilde gliding among
Our double R's, still trilled by crickets;
The *CH* that launches small grasshopper corps
Across the graves where our old grammar snores.

LA VIDA

Who doesn't want deeds that outlast the pale
Expected weathering of cross or face?

We die young here, conspicuously male.

Go ahead. Believe that bars or cars could place
Sufficiently the cause: a holy war
Where some inner self, or outer, bore
A social, suicidal hatred. No.

We felt trapped, the box-canyoned arroyo
Too often dry, dead-ended, indirect.
Age thirty had tamed and taunted us – abject
Meander through the Rio Grande. Our lives
Were slowing down, waves dulling into wives.

But death was like a raptor's blood-borne flight –
Plucked up, flesh-warm, strong strokes, and out of sight.

LAS CRUCES

The young ones are blond with plastic placards
Announcing who they are, four-limbed, erect.
Life throws corsages at their feet. Their dance cards
Are full of dashing hopes: Which should they select?

The middle years come. They're joined by partners.
Still thin, a little gray, they lean somewhat,
At home to occasional visitors,
Bored by the interminable plot.

Old age sets in. They've barely noticed how
Bleached their skin's become. They fall and
Break an arm. No one looks in on them now.
The lawn grows wild, the garden turns to sand.

Their neighbors stay put, but think it's a shame
Each day's sameness blurs even their names.

LAS PIEDRAS

*Here cairns of pumice, there a plaster lamb –
Why this clutch of silver-coated roc eggs?*

To say Death's a swooping overtaker begs
The question: whether or not it's lame
To believe that what it snatches will hatch
Into life or only feed it.

The talus

At the base of Purgatory tells us
The cold keeps harvesting its boulder patch.

*But spray paint? Admit it – they're absurd,
These hopeful bits of earth flung heavenward!*

What fire remains in the cinder cone
When its innards have been reduced to ash?

Nature leaves monuments to Process. Why trash
The human need to commemorate its bones?

LOS ANGELES

Don't look for us in concrete form.

We whir

In several species –

black-chinned, garnet-throated

Drones of the Afterlife,

bellies bloated

From harvesting a humdrum human nectar.

Mounds of earth and coffin-sized depressions,

Each row another decade of the dead –

We spread our unseen wings and dust the dread

With bird- and bee-brained pollinations.

So, in with the old and out with the new!

We proceed with our buzzing business,

Rhyme *tumba*, the sexual *rumba* –

‡

and bless

The perennial *womb* and *tomb*.

Our hues

Hover over your mournful cries:

The span's

Too short!

We thrum:

No End's our only plan!

LA MUERTE

Few men would think on passing through our gate:
Too many Virgins!

When are there enough
To satisfy volcanic appetites,
Or scour with cinders, refine with tuff
The brute buttes rising from a sunset table?
These mountains need someone to civilize them!

We'll match the heavens to our chastening hem:
Pure wedding dress of cloud, blue mantle.

Rocked to sleep in a caldera's cradle,
They'll dream of the Milky Way's Dipper.

Or of Cassiopeia, our diadem:
The nightly-seen-from-every-angle *M*,
That *My* in the sky that binds our Order:

All men must marry the Holy Other.

CAMPOSANTO

To honor this, our holy ground:

PLEASE KEEP

GATE CLOSE-DED. MORE PLOTS FOR SALE. PLEASE TAKE
YOUR TRASH AND BOXES.

Meaning the remains . . .

Of picnics? Artificial roses' wrappings?

Your marble stones and lawns where ivies creep
Are no less meaningful, though green.

But fake . . . ?

Mistake not love for plenitude of rain.

What elsewhere you'd call weeds, here, are offerings:
The black-eyed Susan's lack of sleep, sunflower's
Turning toward remembered warmth – these mute
Survivors.

Don't ask the desert who deserves
Grief's prickly pear.

After its brief bloom, it stores
The seasons' tears, a paw with thorns.

Its fruit,

When ripe,

renders tolerable preserves.

Kurt Leland

SAKHALIN

Under an impersonal permanent sun
Yerofeyev mixes home-made drinks
at his low kitchen table, pouring equal parts
eau de cologne and mouthwash
into a jar of Zhiguli beer and alcohol varnish
as penal colony ghosts wander
across his cracked concrete porch and the icebergs
click north around the island.
His clothes are grimed to the same brick color
and starched with stains and dirt,
his face burnt red by elements of fire and water.
His hands shake from years
of ingredients distilled from medicine cabinets,
tool shed piles and shoe-shine boxes,
the desperation cook-books of his exile.
But his body is calibrated by now
to the various toxins; they're old friends,
chemical signs on his personal
elemental table. So he aligns the bottles,
perfecting his time-honed recipes
(Aunt Clara's Kiss, the Spirit of Geneva, and
his favorite, Tears of a Komsomol Girl)
as the colony ghosts move in and gather
for apéritifs and conversation.

(stanza continued)

While they sew their ragged shirts and plug
up their rotten shoes and chat
about the Moscow opera, he serves them
bathtub gin and verbena
on a cracked picture of Stalin.

Ice-cubes knifed from the kitchen frost
play cold music in their glasses and soon
whole years have passed
into that single afternoon like lives played out
somewhere (**XXXX**) far away
beyond road-maps or proper names or tears or moons.

Amy Scattergood

Two Poems

WATERCOLOR FROM THE BRUSH THAT PAINTS THE GARDEN

Some hunt them at night with flashlight,
then smash with shovel-back
on flat slug-smashing rock;
or walk in a still-wet morning
lifting leaves, to slip them like abacus beads
into fingers themselves like opening flowers;
or bury, lips even with soil,
jars of beer: hungry,
with their one glue-foot, they'll bumble in.

Though I hear diatomaceous earth
cuts their coating so they leak from themselves,

I know eggshells don't work. I know
a lady who swears

by a mulch of chopped horsehair,
and Ann Lovejoy, who is sometimes
too cheerful, pays the kids

a penny a slug; yet I know a man
who attended a lecture where someone said
that freezing pains them least.

In his freezer we find, despite
his wife's objections, several
marked plastic tubs, inevitable
winter carried
into deeper sleep.

I choose morning before dew dries,
 pick them like fruit, like overripe
 berries that must
 be drawn by the barest of pressures
 off the briar that wants
 to keep them. I can't help it, I admire
 their shapes, one like a plumseed,
 but fatter, lines on the sides
 like the stripes leading back
 from the corner of a kitten's eye;
 one with the spotted grace of a leopard,
 slender as a salamander, lucent glossy brown.
 The ugliest's a raw lump, like a fingertip
 cut off, beginning to unform,
 or fresh uncolored matter left over,
 flung into lavender evening
 with God's last shake, before
 he ducked inside for dinner.

Yet the book, in diagram's black line, gives them all
 equally well-defined innards: a nerve-ring, a crop, a stemlike
 esophagus; and zooms in with electron-
 scan of radula – think of a belt-sander,
 but with teeth, rubbing the tenderest
 greens to eat.

"The first sign of courtship
 is one animal pursuing another, often
 eating its mucous trail."

"The genital atrium everts
 and can be seen as a bluish
 swelling on the left
 side of the animal." "The ecology of a partly subterranean
 and fairly sparsely distributed
 animal like the slug is never easy to study."

And though naming names,
Limax maximus, *Deroceras reticulatum*, *Arion rufus*,
 the book resorts at last
 to "gray field slug," and so

doesn't help me as in early spring I practice
seeing something small and young and new, something
barely figured on mica-flecked ground,
like dirt itself, and glistening, that even so,
grinds Black-eyed Susan before
she sprouts leaves to live, lets by
a few, eats those – she fails from exhaustion,
can't keep up. I learn to see pale crescents
like the nail-parings of infants, prick them up
with the tip of my own bigger nail;
and like dew, like seed-pearls, others stick
to my hand as it brushes a leaf,
as if they
wanted me.

Without them, would I rise
each morning, yard in danger
if I don't? Strawberry-red, the new rose
hangs a blurry sun above the grass.
Stems and undersides, contrasts
matte and glossy green, the soft blooms lean. By June,
easy to see, bigger than berries,
dry ground prevents them from travelling far,
though still I rise as if theirs is a sweet gift
of silver-trail, of every
rescued flower; what I love, after all,
I can't say, the new rose
half-blooming, half-eaten away.

NEITHER NOW

All summer I lived in the bees' house,
but by then it wasn't I,
it was what the bees flowed by,
what they danced
some distance from. What they didn't notice,
coming and going.

As if the house were a crystal trellis,
palmfuls of tigereye, amber
invested the walls.
Behind father's portrait grew singing,
his young face a surface of singing.
Humming made a halo of the frame.

Outside the hole, air like smoke,
the siding stained like smoke.
What did I do for bones,
given the house away?
I lived in a bowl of bees,
I lived where light
caught in hairs, like beads.

One day I followed two blue lines –
behind me the velvet poppy closed.
How occupied I bent there, filling my pockets.

But I never went home.
Saw shapes come and go,
one in a dark jacket.

Seedheads swell, the slightest wind
taps seed like spilling loam –
is that my hair, grown long now?
A dried petal
in my multiform eye?

Three Poems

MORNING AT THE NERETVA RIVER. NOVEMBER 8, 1993.

The world is one, but its name must not be one.
 And this is what your limestone strains to say,
 Crumbling, tempered fluency undone.

Pale bridge, ancient arc of translation
 Falling with the shells' fall from the sky. . . .
 The world is one, but its name must not be one.

You have reached over half a millennium
 And mirrored what few structures can convey:
 Good grace. Now fluency once tempered is undone.

And so your fifteenth century span's withdrawn.
 Neretva carries dust and stone away.
 The world is one, but its name must not be one.

How will the river mourn for the reflection
 Of its bridge? It swells. It cannot stay
 The mortar's dull soliloquy. Alone,

A fluid prostrate minaret – floundering guardian –
 Like stone would bridge and hold apart the shores. . . . *May*
The world be one, but may its name never be one. . . .
 It bears this unheard prayer downstream to be undone.

Note: On the morning of November 8, 1993, Mostar's 527-year-old limestone bridge was targeted and destroyed by Croatian forces. The bridge, which was not part of an important supply route and had no military significance, was a symbol of the multi-ethnic Bosnian city; it appeared on all memorabilia associated with Mostar. "Mostar" means "guardian of the bridge."

PUMP. OLD SQUARE IN CRACOW.

Filling this bucket is so sweet when the pump squeaks. Some days it might be sighing up high, but the square is filled with flower vendors, voices of buying and selling (brisk upside-down bunches of yellow and red lilies and peonies blur past), a good deal here, scam there – so when I swing the metal arm down low, the rising whisper of melody is

drowned out. I know when it's been getting lots of use. Because attention is a magic grease, the pump functions as it should – silently. (And yes, it's true after all: loneliness sets a song in motion; solitude is a pin-prick . . . the delighted blood-bubble wells up taut and tiny.) But today I'm almost alone here at the water pump. A young

girl plays tightrope on the low rail that encloses a statue of Sobieski. Women in kerchiefs shuffle across the cobbled plaza to visit friends, pharmacy, an icecream stand. They drift away, bucketless. I remember when I came to this Old World, this town, this square. It was dusk. I had been wandering in the cemetery in the old

Jewish ghetto, had seen the piles of pebbles on the gravestones, and the bits of notepaper scrawled with Hebrew lettering. And somehow I found myself at the old market square with its pale Renaissance facades – their permanent meanders, scrolls; I thought, it's so quiet, it's the absence of cars, billboards. And then I heard a thin (as if the frailest breath

became a flute – or no, a thrush, but some species unknown where I come from) lucent tone, intervals unfettered – a damp, diaphanous cadenza.

I had to see that bird, its open throat, or else the music might turn back to vapor. But all the perches were empty, the sky a blank. And the square was still, but for a young girl filling her bucket.

IN DEFENSE OF PARENTHESES (THANKS TO HERRICK)

Sometimes a sweet order in the mess
(an order that begins as extra sense,
grows from quibble to addendum to generality
until it reaches that intellectual excess
which is often such wild sensuality)

is what I want: explanatory confusion.
I've heard it said the lyric doesn't use them.
But sometimes, so I can lose
myself, I need an incognito rose
to explicate its etymology (the better to prove

forever an olfactory triumph over
the intellect?). Whenever we make love
with the lights on (two voices inside
the same brain rush, then linger and never
overtake or grasp one another

entirely) our eyes open wide,
then shut (a flickering strobe light
– now our will, now that of the gods) tight.

Joy Dworkin

HOLDING OPEN THE DOORS

for P.K., P.S.

How could it be
 you cut short your own life, my
 student of life, in a cold afternoon
of drizzle; or you, old colleague
 of words, ending yours in a late night rain?
 Even as the black-and-white-warblers
circled the tree trunks,
 even as the barred owl who-whoood
 through the dark? How could it be,
even as we paddled down the cold Wisconsin
 past the maples downed at the river's edge
 whose roots sucked air and whose
‡ beautiful drowning heads made music of water,
 one of you opened the bathwater tap, laid
 your head in that backwater?
And the other shut the garage against night?
 When the sun came out today and we entered
 our elevators saying *yes*,
too nice to be inside, but all
 that work to catch up, we could only
 hold the doors open minutes to learn
you had both gone from us, in spring,
 even as lilacs opened in wind
 and the scent trailed toward us;
oh, those among us who know
 how this could be, stand up,
 that we may know to hold onto you

Robin S. Chapman

Two Poems

HOW CAN A BODY CARRY

such light? I remember how we read
by this, sitting on the curb, the curve
where Quincy became Robin, where our thin
twelve year old limbs
leaned against each other in the summer's
dark which wasn't dark,
and you extracted from elastic at your
ribs, from your sleeveless
(my mother thought
immodest) half-shirt/halter, the
pamphlet, and page by page
explained to me the inexplicables of egg-
expulsion, the first doling out
of pearls, free, immaculate, my own falling
from fringed pouches, the trek
through tubes, lustrous, toward the un-
inflated room: ". . . your
womb," you say, your finger pointing
to this fig shape
on the page, the opalescence of your
nail with its small moon
the only light we read by.

“THAT WE MAY BE MADE

worthy . . .”
fills me with dread. Without
opening my eyes or mouth
these words from the HAIL HOLY
QUEEN enter my heart
nightly, the palpable pea-shaped lacquered
weight of seven
syllables, like the blushing
souls of the newly-
dead, pale at first, then scarlet,
like berries of Nightshade sure to seed
themselves, to sprout
a radiance of rootlets till I
may be made to appear
altered, arrested. Till I don't know
myself. This may happen.
This is the place
for petition, the pure
plea of a supplicant. As in
Mother may I. As in
pray for me, Tower
of Ivory, Gate
of Heaven.

Margaret Aho

Two Poems

VEGETABLE LOVE

*My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow. . . .*
– “To His Coy Mistress,” Andrew Marvell

She bought the eggplant because her lover
had said he was leaving, and she'd read
somewhere it was an aphrodisiac,
and she was willing to try anything,
even magic, even vegetables.

She could have bought the eggplant at the grocery store,
but because this was work that mattered,
she drove out into the country
and stopped at a roadside farm stand.
She chose the eggplant with care, the way
she might have picked out a baby or a puppy. . .
She found the perfect one, long, globular,
and so purple it was almost black.

On the way home, she planned how she might prepare it –
in a cold ratatouille, cubed and sauteed,
split and charcoaled over the grill,
or sliced and marinated in lime juice –
and if it worked, and she knew it would, she'd buy more.

But already it was too late. He was gone.

She remembered how it had been back
at the beginning, when he used to come home
with an armload of greens for salads,
how they would rip, shred, grate, then toss,
and feed each other, and how she had loved him.

She kept the eggplant in the refrigerator,
because although he'd said she'd grown strange,
she hoped he'd miss her and return.

It began to soften, then turned to mush.
It liquefied and leaked all over the shelves.
It grew mold and began to stink.
Each night when he did not come back,
she looked at the sodden mess, noted the changes,
told herself it was just beginning to work.

†

MY HUSBAND DISCOVERS POETRY

Because my husband would not read my poems,
I wrote one about how I did not love him.
In lines of strict iambic pentameter,
I detailed his coldness, his lack of humor.
It felt good to do this.

Stanza by stanza, I grew bolder and bolder.
Towards the end, struck by inspiration,
I wrote about my old boyfriend,
a boy I had not loved enough to marry
but who could make me laugh and laugh.
I wrote about a night years after we parted
when my husband's coldness drove me from the house
and back to my old boyfriend.
I even included the name of a seedy motel
well-known for hosting quickies.
I have a talent for verisimilitude.

In sensuous images, I described
how my boyfriend and I stripped off our clothes,
got into bed, and kissed and kissed,
then spent the whole night telling jokes,
many of them about my husband.
I left the ending deliberately ambiguous.
Then I hid the poem away
in an old trunk in the basement.

You know how this story ends,
how my husband one day loses something,
goes down into the basement,
and rummages through the old trunk,
how he uncovers the hidden poem
and sits down to read it.

But do you hear the strange sounds
that floated up the stairs that day,
the sounds of an animal that's caught its paw
in one of those traps with teeth of steel?
Do you see the wounded creature
at the bottom of the stairs,
his shoulders hunched over and shaking,
his fist in his mouth and choking back sobs?
It was my husband paying tribute to my art.

Diane Lockward

SPIT BATHS

Can we talk now about spit baths?
The mealy touch of the handkerchief
after my Aunt Linda tongued
the flowered corner, the warm saliva washing off
the dirt caked at the edge
of my lips. Even then I knew
of the unseen, the sins no ablution
could wash away. But my Aunt Linda's spit
on my cheek was not in vain. My eyes
closed as she rubbed it in, first known lotion,
first thought of the two-way river of sex, first smell
of the interior of bodies, the dried crust,
flood and drought, the outward wince
and hidden maw of pleasure.

Daniel Bourne

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Strong Music

The Best American Poetry 1996, Adrienne Rich, editor; David Lehman, series editor (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996, 318 pp., \$13. paper, 0-684-81451-X). This valuable series becomes even more valuable with this selection by Adrienne Rich. Not taking *best* or *American* very strictly, Rich casts her net widely and gathers poems that to her appear "especially urgent, lively, haunting, resonant, demanding to be reread." In her eloquent introduction she says she was looking for "music, for pulse and breath, for nongeneric voices." She sought "poems with a core (as in *corazón*)," poetry that could "rouse me from fatigue, stir me from grief," poems "good enough to eat, to crunch between the teeth . . . unmicrowaveable poems." "We need," she says, "poetry as living language . . . something that is still spoken, aloud or in the mind." And she of course has a generous eye and ear for the poets underrecognized by the poetry establishment, for the poets, in Lehman's words, "committed to a vision of social justice or radical change"; she performs a "rescue of the imagination" in more ways than one. Deploring the proliferation of poems "personal to the point of suffocation," she claims rightly that the poems in this anthology are, "in one way or another, victories, because they don't flinch at the materials and they don't stop at the personal."

This year's collection is a glory of discovery (only nineteen of the seventy-five poets have appeared in the seven earlier volumes). These are almost uniformly strong, and for their richness, their music, their diversity, range, and eloquence we are much in Adrienne Rich's debt.

Rich names **Patricia Smith** as one of the poets to whom she turns for "poetry that flickers and articulates all around the edge of a common language, yet whose core of heat is right there between poetic and political urgencies . . . a poetry of embodiment more than pronouncement." Yes. Patricia Smith is an important poet, and I recommend her two most recent books: *Big Towns, Big Talk* (Cambridge, MA: Zoland Books, 1992, 114 pp., \$9.95 paper, 0-944072-24-0) and *Close to Death* (same publisher, 1993,

120 pp., \$10.95 paper, 0-944072-35-6). Smith is a first-rate reporter for the Boston *Globe*, and she brings to her poems the reporter's unshaded gaze at everyday reality. She has been a music critic, and she brings to her poetry not only a knowledgeability about music but an unerring musical ear. She is one of our most distinguished performance poets, one of the remarkable few whose spellbinding verse carries over from the slam floor to the printed page. Of course it can't carry it all over. Anyone who has heard Patricia Smith say her poems (she does not read them) shares something of the lift nineteenth-century Italian audiences must have felt at the performances of their *improvvisatori* — poets who could improvise a whole evening of gorgeous poetry. But Smith improvises only in the sense that she appears to be recreating the poem in the presence of her audience. She is an artist of many voices and an authority on the living languages of black urban America. Among them, hers is an important voice. The next best thing to being in her audience is to listen to a cassette tape of a live performance, and Zoland has that tape, *Always in the Head* (\$10.95, 0-944072-36-4). It is a fine representative selection, ranging from her high-energy romp "Doin' the Louvre" to a tribute, "Sweet Daddy," to her father, dead of a gunshot to the back of the head. But her poems "don't stop at the personal." She is adept at imagining and presenting a broad range of voices. (Indeed, *Close to Death* is almost entirely a gallery of black males, because "young black men in New York City are wearing clothing emblazoned with the logo 'C2D' — Close To Death. *Because so many of them are.*") Her tape ranges from her chilling presentation of the point of view of a skinhead, to that of the gang member who explains

you know all the
time now you got to get 'em in the head,
gotta bust that brain, man, don't shoot
'em in the head most likely they won't die,
and if they don't die you might as well kill
yourself cause soon as they can stand up
they be stalkin' you big time, man, might as well
blow yourself away.

And perhaps most moving (and dramatic) of all is "The Undertaker," spoken by the man who has to try to meet the im-

possible need of the mother of the victim, who presents his high school picture: "*Fix my boy; he was a good boy. Make him the way he was.*"

It may seem anticlimactic to call attention to the poetic skill with which Smith makes even the most shattering lines sing, but the fact is that the poet's voice does merge with the voices of her dramatic characters to transform what might look on the page like a transcription of the reporter's tape into a pulsing, syncopated blues. Hear her in person if you can, but at any rate open yourself to the tape and the books and become not only more knowledgeable but larger-spirited as well.

Another poet who might have been in Rich's anthology had she published the right poems at the right time is Jamaican **Lorna Goodison** (*To Us All Flowers Are Roses* [Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995, 88 pp., \$11.95 paper, 0-252-06459-3]). Goodison has in abundance the pulse, the breath, the nongeneric voice Rich sought. She also writes poems "good enough to eat." Her "Songs of the Fruits and Sweets of Childhood" is luscious and tangy with a five-page catalogue of textures and flavors that make the largest North American supermarket seem impoverished indeed. I know nothing quite like it except parts of "Goblin Market" and Kinnell's Avenue C poem. The gusto and energy surges through all Goodison's poems. Derek Walcott has praised her for the authenticity of her language, "fresh in its wit and pain and in the high, spiritual gossip of its leaves." (What reviewer can hope to match that!) I am especially interested in the way Goodison conflates time and space. She is intensely aware of how slavery shaped the West Indies, and some of her most eloquent poems rise directly out of that soil. Here's a bit of "Inna Calabash":

Inna calabash
 Inna calabash
 tell them that the baby
 that count in them census already
 Inna calabash

One slave child
 that count already
 while it inside my belly
 tell them that the baby
 Inna calabash.

She show me
 Quasheba show me one day
 when I faint in the field of cane

When I cry and say
 Why can't I be like missus
 siddown and plait sand
 and throw stone after breeze. . . .

For the rest of this folk wisdom, and another, "Birth Stone," you must get the book. Its lyric energy is unflagging. "Coir" is the narrative of the man who in beating a mattress stuffed with coir beats out the history of injustice and pain. It made me long to hear Goodison read it aloud, to dissolve the barrier between the page and my ignorant ear. But even on the flat page, these poems make me salivate and dance barefoot and dive so deep I'm breathing another medium — and longing for what Carruth says is the one true subject of poetry: justice.

A very different sort of sensuousness informs the poetry of Lucia Perillo (*The Body Mutinies*, [West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1996, 92 pp., \$12.95 paper, 1-55753-083-1]). The body in these poems, sometimes excruciatingly sensitive, mutinies in various ways against its protective upbringing, its mind's knowledge, and its spirit's moral imperatives. These are poems of gallant and often painful conflict, reported with conscientious candor, meticulously accurate language, and a comic spirit that wryly admits the distance between the poet and the poems' narrator. There are poems that seem to have been written for the healing process of confession. But Perillo's ironic vision precludes confessional self-indulgence. When the contradictions of expectation and experience are insoluble, she forces them to no comfortable resolutions. It is enough that they are confronted imaginatively by the artist's inquiring mind.

This is a poet of the unexpected image. In "Inseminator Man" the Lilies and Buttercups who receive his ministrations (from a long-dead bull called, of course, Festus) avenge their fate by kicking a pail or stomping his foot:

Blue welt, the small bones come unknitted,
 the big toenail a black cicada peeling off its branch.

Although the body flinches from extremes of stench and atrocities — and may be immobilized, too, by news too awful to bear — the poet courageously records the flinch and the immobility, proclaiming “Still I want to know.” In “Kilned,” she begins:

These days when blood refuses to be talked into the
stone,
when the legs twitch like hounds under the sheets,
and the eyes are troubled by a drifting fleck —
I think of him: the artist
who climbs into the lava runs at Kalapana

and, scooping from where “the earth’s bile has found its way to the surface,” obtains the material for his sculpture. In Perillo’s imagination he becomes the archetype of the artist:

First he tries to see what this catastrophe is saying.
Then, with a trowel in his sweaty, broiling hand,
he works to sculpt it into something human.

Perillo in poem after poem tries to see “what this catastrophe is saying.” Her own raw material is human enough to start, but in her vision she presses humanity to its frontier and then expresses it and expands it in her wry and subtle music.



Seamus Heaney and A. R. Ammons need no reviews from me, but their most recent books have given me so much pleasure I want to recommend them. Heaney’s brilliantly titled *The Spirit Level* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996, 82 pp., \$18. hard-bound, 0-374-26779-0) delivers what it promises on its dust jacket with its elegant photograph of an antique spirit level. Simple sensuous delight is the message of the first poem, “The Rain Stick,” which begins:

Upend the rain stick and what happens next
Is a music that you would never have known
To listen for. In a cactus stalk

Downpour, sluice-rush, spillage and backwash
Come flowing through. You stand there like a pipe
Being played by water . . .

This lusciousness of sensuous response is all the way through this book, especially in poems like "The Gravel Walks," and — to redress the balance — in a poem of pain, "The Butter-Print." Having had the pleasure of reading most of this volume aloud, I can urge that pleasure on every reader. Try the word-wallowing "To a Dutch Potter in Ireland." If you become that pipe being played by the poetry, your whole vocal machinery will spring to life wonderfully.

Heaney's last volume of essays, *The Redress of Poetry*, prepares us for the temper of balance that dominates these poems. After liberation from war, "In a pearly clarity that bathes the fields/ Things as they were come back." There is a dialectic dance in many, perhaps most, of these. The watchman in "Mycenae Lookout" (remarkable verses subterraneously linking Aeschylus's torn world with contemporary "killing-fest"s) is "balanced between destiny and dread." In the most delicate webs of nature the watchman "felt the beating of the huge time-wound/ We lived inside." A little four-liner, "The Poplar," condenses this impulse:

Wind shakes the big poplar, quicksilvering
The whole tree in a single sweep.
What bright scale fell and left this needle quivering?
What loaded balances have come to grief?

Stratis Haviaras, the editor of *Harvard Review* (#10 [Spring 1996] 254 pp., \$10.) has produced an issue devoted to an "Homage to Seamus Heaney" — many reminiscences and reviews, generously illustrated with photographs and drawings — which provides much pleasure and some insight into the poet, the teacher, the man of letters, and the friend.



Another major constellation in our literary sky is **A. R. Ammons**, who has a voluminous new volume, *Brink Road* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996, 230 pp., \$23. cloth, 0-393-03958-7). This is a bounty indeed — over 150 poems, none of them before in a book, and most of them *considerable* poems, demanding

and rewarding close reading. In the few inches here I can't begin to do justice to this wealth and variety, but here's a start. You'll find poems of intense close observation ("A Sense of Now," "Strings," "Rain Gauges") each with its own delicate music:

The ice-bound spruce boughs
point downward
as if to
slide their sheathes off ("Enameling")

There are poems of pure fun ("The Land of the Knobble-Jobble Tree") and many of comic vision ("God Is the Sense the World Makes Without God"). One could compile an anthology of *ars poetica* poems (such as "Saying Saying Away"), including many where the evolving metaphor applies obliquely to the process of composition ("Nitty Gritty," with its lines that perfectly describe much of this poet's work: "focus condensation/ to a boil"). In their art, these poems exemplify the contemporary principle of concentration — mental and verbal — that eliminates weak stresses and crystalizes harmonies. Some here are frankly homiletic ("Next to Nothing"); some are witty aphorisms ("Cognoscenti") or shine with polished wisdom ("Prisons There and Not"). Desire and vision maintain a generative tension in "Safe."

Though not simply a "nature poet" (most of the pages in this volume explore our species), Ammons, by scientific training and by temperament, casts a cold eye on the natural world, observing accurately, without anthropomorphising. No pathetic fallacy here. Still, he relates what he knows to human experience. One of his simplest poems is the grimly titled "Killing Stuff Off":

These geese flying over now will be late
geese, the territories north already split

up and claimed: they'll have to fly
farther (north, north) till lichen's

the ground brush and chill never leaves the
nest: I wonder if geese do go that far,

lay eggs in frizzled moss and shrivel through
cold summers: geese mostly squabble over

at about the right time, error kept low by high
mortality among the very early and late: the

extremes are costly as usual, I'm afraid, even if
that's where persistency's invention cuts

most sharply new, necessity permafrost:
but there's no use to worry: things shape

themselves: still, in the short run, when
I hear the geese going over this late, my heart
swerves, my throat jumps, late, late.

These are poems written over the past twenty years, and there are only a few hints to date any by (the 45-page "Summer Place" that closes the volume appears to have been written journal-fashion 5-21 July 1975). Whenever they may have been written, some of the most valuable poems are those that explore the implications of approaching the end of life, living, indeed, on the brink. Ammons is unsparing in the level gaze he directs at the future, but "Superstars," (Coleridge would call it a poem of "fancy") is a rollicking reincarnation hymn to plenty, "profusion, profusion," and opulence. As in Shakespeare, the most homely may, nevertheless, be the most moving: "A Part for the Whole" near the end of the book — the poet's address to his "feet, good feet" — really got to me. Consider also in this light "Spike-Tooth Harrows" (Ammons' titles are worth a review to themselves!): also "The Incomplete Life" — for all its stripped-down elegance one of the most expansive of poems in its ironic energy. I am constantly delighted to observe how many of our strongest poets continue to strengthen their poems (and their readers) as they journey on from middle age.

This catalogue of excellences is not going to mean much until you get the book. So to conclude let me toss in one more poem whole, taken almost at random from the middle of the volume, to illustrate many of the qualities I've mentioned:

MUSEUMS

The brook, running dry, will stop running, dry:
(it worms now like a lost rope down the slate roughs,
but it wrestles bank stones harshly after

downpours): slowed, it clears skinny dusk mirrors
with overhangs of branches that shade through
the stone bed into sky: the brook doesn't represent

beauty: it tears off a piece of shore moss, the soggy, threaded
bottom dangling in a strip: it sorts spill down ledges,
wears what it wears away, arcs in ice-like fangs or, skimming,

idles scum-floats: it doesn't fall apart representing
style: it means nothing but a sum of forces reacting
along a line to a sum of forces from whose sums the mind

makes up a day's subtractions, recollections: nothing
keeps it or wraps or hangs it up: but keep this
poem, this reminder not of keeping but of not keeping.

M. K. S.