

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

Winter, 1998-99, Vol. 49 N°2

Karl Elder

Alpha Images 6

Rex Wilder

American Passenger Gold 10

Peter Munro

A Fisheries Scientist Sights
A Large School of Myth
Swimming In Shallow Water
In Southeast Alaska 16

Janet Holmes

Partch Stations 28

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Fin de Siècle

Marion K. Stocking

Mark Strand, *Blizzard of One* 41

W. S. Merwin, *The Folding Cliffs:
A Narrative* 44

Cover

Robert Shetterly, ink drawings on handmade paper,
(front) "disguise," 1997; (back) "purveyor of masks," 1996.

→

An arrow at the bottom of a
page means no stanza break.

BPJ

CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE

THE EDITORS OF
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO ANNOUNCE
THE FIFTH
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$3,000

TO
LUCIA PERILLO
FOR HER POEM
"THE OLDEST MAP WITH THE NAME AMERICA"
IN THE WINTER 1997/1998 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.

KARL ELDER
Alpha Images

A

In the beginning
God climbed Louis Zukofsky's
pocket step ladder.

B

We see from above
she faces east, her bosom
of the matriarch.

C

No great mystery,
he that rears on one hind leg,
Pegasus' hoof print.

D

Alfred Hitchcock as
pregnant with the devil as
with a certain air.

E

Where is the handle
and what hand stuck this pitchfork
into a snowbank?

F

Stand it on the moon
for a nation of ants, who
know not where they live.

G

Balancing a tray
with one hand, the other hand
poised to pluck the veil.

H

The minimalist's
gate to hell and heaven, these
corridors of light.

I

Blind to what's ahead,
behind, the ego takes this
pillar for a name.

J

Take pity on this
tattered parasol—too chic
for junk or joy stick.

K

What looks like a squawk
is to the ear a moth or
butterfly, clinging.

L

Lest we should deny
the ethereal we have
the hypotenuse.

M

Dragging its belly,
a mechanical spider,
its nose to the ground.

N

A scene from Up North
on a postcard, a timber
frozen as it's felled.

O

The rim of the moon.
Peephole into an igloo.
Shadow of zero.

P

How you choose to hold
it determines the weapon.
You may need tweezers.

Q

Might this be the light
at the end of the tunnel,
the visible path?

R

Head, shoulders, and chest—
who's the cameo inside
this dressmaker's bust?

S

Suppose our hero
tore the spent fuse from the stick.
Say the sound of it.

T

Though you can't see what
road you're on, the sign ahead
reads like calvary.

U

More mind than matter
is symmetry's mirror. You
should be that lucky.

V

V is for virgin.
Whether spread or locked, her legs
are the point of view.

W

Symbol of tungsten
and the filament itself,
its light is the white.

X

North—as if a place
as much as idea—four
needles pointing there.

Y

This flower has bloomed,
become so huge as to dwarf
both stem and petals.

Z

Swordplay with air—zip
zip zip—stitches which seem a
bout to disappear.

REX WILDER

American Passenger Gold

Vultures circle beneath
the jaundiced eyes
of Second Mate "Dazha" Danilovic.
A weedy sadness eddies
in the deep sockets.
He's dead (like his radios)
to the world.

☞

A gale like an overmatched team of destiny
in the World Cup Finals thinks it's now
or never for the big time. Thinks *Hurricane*...

☞

It's time for chow; more Babel.
"Il Cuoco" (Sicilian) has duct-taped condiment
holders to the sticky tablecloth,
generally battened hatches down.

☞

A substantial pearl necklace hung
from the thick neck of dowager wannabe
passenger Krauss swings like her moods.

Dazha, the freighter's navigator,
looks astray, askance; the ship's red wine,
like Dazha's poor heart,
tries to leap from its container.

☞

It's her!

☞

The low sun escapes clouds long enough
to squeeze its head between Krauss
and her companion, then rises (ship heeling)
to return to its cabin, for something.

☞

"Don't want to be seasick...don't look out
the window," the captain advises in ugly English.
(Captain baits, torments passengers.)



Daylight is leaving slowly, disbelievingly,
like too many of Dazha's friends and relatives
back home; it confers a softening,
earth-tinted curse on diners facing it
while haloing those who are not.



The long window is bleary, scratched up, as if clawed,
athletic sea creatures had gotten wind
of the view, and are desperately trying to get inside.

The View.

Let's put it this way: plunging is the precipitous
word of the stormy hour.

As in neckline, décolletage.

As in bury your head, Dazha, like a common dog
in that bosom-
sporting by one Vanessa Gold, nee Kibrick .



Her husband died in love, January, pain.
She is a cut flower now, pretty but daily.



Though she sits
perfectly still,
the sea's heaving
is enacted
in miniature
on the smooth deck
of her breasts.



Dazha prays, while Father Tom, a retired priest
from St. Louis, leads the table in grace.
Bearings are what he prays for; deliverance.
He stares at, blurs his clasped, ship-greasy

hands, wonders if Ms. Gold's polished nails
drawing lines of longitude down his sweaty
back would solve anything.

■

The entree, risotto, is served.
Il Cuoco beaming.
He removes a full helping of minestrone
(not exactly full, as pasta, carrots, beans,
and broth have been tossed
like unwary seafarers from the shallow
deck of the bowl) and replaces it with
Dazha's favorite dish.

■

Finished, Ms. Gold?

In a moment.

She's mopping up the remains
with a torn piece of bread—
a cherished practice, since her husband,
a well-bred Spaniard, had cherished it.

■

The sight of the woman's
plump lips, shining with warm liquid,

and her tongue here and there
darting out to remove a crumb, keeps spirits high
as the seas among the starved officers.

■

Dazha feels his country's soul
shaken by the tempest;
families in city and countryside sitting
perfectly still as their conflicting
allegiances are enacted in miniature
on the deck of the ship.

■

Meg, a cozy, varicose woman from Bermuda
vaguely suggestive of Elizabeth Bishop,
suggests Vanessa bring down her cocker spaniel, Maxwell.

■

Maxwell is how this normal, attractive
young woman came to be
traveling aboard a freighter, whose roster
is filled, on the passenger side, by what
children (and the Captain) would probably
call freaks, and whose crew,
so far from shore and long at sea,
could not be blamed for
stowing away, in a sullen locker,
an inflatable mermaid or two.

■

Maxwell sadly hadn't any options.
Airlines and cruise ships alike
would consign the epileptic dog to a hold.
A hold. Who would hold *him*
if he had a seizure? How could she,
Vanessa, live with herself
if Maxwell, should, heaven forbid,
pant his last in a kennel?

■

The dog was as far as she
and her husband ever got
to having a family.
Pathetic. Dazha, as usual for a sailor,
doesn't know how lucky he is.
He has a wife back in his seaside town,
and three healthy children.

■

Two of his children (Ivo, Ljobomir)
will die
when the war surprises Split before
Dazha does, fearless to the last

because Papa would save them,
surely Papa—

“Pretend the jeep's front tire is a pillow.”
Translated by Mama.

“Do it!”
Mama's voice,
then another's.

Mama letting the Serbs penetrate her
until she rips as if in childbirth in exchange
for sparing her children.

The little skulls crushed anyway.

✽

Imagine two uniformed men who
keep one third of their word,
penises back at ease, raising drinks to toast their integrity...

✽

Il Cuoco, in almost a tango, clears the table.

After disposing of the Italian newspapers
(it's too dangerous to walk the deck and dog),
Ms. Gold returns with eager Maxwell;
she hands him over to those who need something
to keep their minds off the storm.

Don't worry, Dazha insists,
though nervous, too;
his confidence in the ship is taking on water.

✽

The ocean will not snap out of its grand mal;
the waves thrash in a loneliness even the ship
can feel, which throws its head down again
and again in emphatic sympathetic anger.



Who will hold the sea once it is calm again?



No one knows how we will act in the last moments of life, whether courage will break through the topsoil of dread like a crocus or despair cut back mangroves of dignity our sweaty nights have bred from childhood.



Dazha, simply, invites Ms. Gold to his cabin.

Ms. Gold, simply, accepts.

And neither has any way of knowing how dramatically peace will be restored aboard the freighter, that stout Krauss herself, in flowing white, will be taking the air on the bridge a quarter turn of the globe from now, with the stern Captain murmuring something under his garlicky breath, and the sun itself riveted on its path like a Rhodes scholar.



In total ignorance then, in Dazha's cell, with its Italian girlie posters, and strewn dirty clothes, and its sentinel lamp by the shaving mirror, the Second Mate and American passenger Gold, with not so much as a single kiss, undress and wade into the riptide of his small bunk, where they hold each other perfectly still, and let the motion of the ship in the lame duck gale enact in miniature the outside world inside them. Both are terrified.

PETER MUNRO

**A Fisheries Scientist Sights A Large School of Myth
Swimming In Shallow Water In Southeast Alaska**

for Theodore Roethke

*Who rise from flesh to spirit know the fall:
The word outleaps the world, and light is all.*

I Cut The Outboard

Silence opens out.
Mosquitoes whine.
Dolly Varden trout shine their silver
messages in the mouth of the river. Myth-
like, the silence fills with silences. Slapped red,
flattened when its drill said hunger to skin,
a mosquito dies.

The river runs thin,
sighs through the salt marsh, a voice
almost alive under a heron's harsh cry.
Over gravel, in the clear shallows,
a school wheels to travel up narrowed current.

I Remember The Journey

Sitka is behind me now. I face
home each way I point my bow.

A story keeps singing in my head, no words,
the thin, red whine of a mosquito.

I find my way by fish and water,
by myths the current utters,

a voice almost alive, blind with tides.
Sitka is behind me now.

After The Chainsaw

Silence is the dark blue that dwells in the clear-cut,
in the juice of huckleberries swelling their taut skins
to split between the teeth of brown bears.

Silence is the redolence of brown bear shit
speckled with huckleberry seeds and the sloughed, blue-
black skins of huckleberries, fecund in a green tide,
the light sluiced by alder and devil's club in summer.

The Season Of Myth

After winter's infinite night begins to break
and herring school their ninety ton clouds of silver
up from the fjords to lighten the nearshore shallows
with goutts of roe and milt on kelp; after the thaw
discolors the streams, and the mountains
shed another year of gravel and silt, scattered over
tideflats; after alders spread a green space
above stream-beds and devil's club unfurl leafy tents
over blown down spruce; after ruby-crowned kinglets
wage turf-wars in antiphonies that rise like rejoicing,
like praise through the vault of quiet gathered
in the limbs of cedar; after humpback salmon leap
to slap salt a last time in the estuary at the far end
of each fjord, gathered for the failure of the infinite
day named "summer," the females' bellies taut with roe,
the hook-nosed males hunched to the taste of fresh water
("water marked" the purse seine skippers call it); and

after the first ticks of snow needle
icy among lodge pole pines that straggle
runty in the muskegs or huddle in clumps
and the long dark filters down out of the north.

I Try To Sing

Because there are no claws,
because there is no bear
to tear out the belly and feast on roe
and guts, because there is no hunger,
I have made noise
within my space of myth.

The Myth Of Herman Kitka

I know a Tlinget ancient in his bones.
When he kills he kills with grace, speaking thanks
to salmon dying in his seine. He hones
his prayer on net twine and hydraulics, yanks
knots tight to mend web, hard as little stones.
I know a Tlinget ancient in his bones.

I do not know all killing in the world.
I do not know the beast that preys on hope.
I've seen a killer, his fingers curled
to a net needle. His meshes are tropes
on fins and scales when his power block groans.
I know a Tlinget ancient in my bones.

His silence fills with fish. Their gills speak blood.
The language of dying has no meter.
I know a Tlinget whose boat slowly scuds
the fjords with thanks. He listens to water.
He tells me water, tells me I am known.
I love a Tlinget ancient in my bones.

I do not know the dark grounds where hope schools.
I've dragged my trawl in hundreds of fathoms
for knowledge. I've killed fish bright as jewels.
I've danced wild upon the ocean's rhythms.
The beast that preys on hope hungers alone.
I love a Tlinget hunting through my bones.

I Have No Totem

I am a white man.
If I say I have a totem I steal
someone else's myth. But, in a hard
time, when I walked among spruce
and hemlock down to the alders
on the bank of Indian River to pray,
a kingfisher chattered at me
from a dead branch above
a clear, green pool.

The Myth Of Faith And Then Kirk Died

The kid next door and I learned faith
together casting for Dolly Vardens, working hammered
nickel spoons over the tideflat in front of our houses,
throwing brass lures all winter long for starving trout.
Faith is bitter, unsafe, off Necker Cape,
our skiff down in the trough, the sea
cresting so high that the mountain tops,
though right above us, vanished.
We had to believe
she would carry us
back to protected water.

The Problem Of False Myth

I would speak the unspeakable
language if I could,
the bitter sting of a hook
barbed through a jaw, the soft whistling
as raven feathers climb the shadows
under spruce, hemlock, and cedar,
the itch as a mosquito zings its wet,
red song worded in salt and hunger.

This is the myth I would kill:
Because I was not loved
well
there is nothing in me
to love.

The Myth Of Fragments

There is a cracking of self and my fingers curled
around the outboard's tiller. The anchor line
smacked between its hitches to fore and aft cleats,
every little whitecap slapping nylon rope at fiberglass.
My old skiff and her beach-eroded bottom
beat back the weather like an animal.
My ass always ached after her rough ride.
I have pounded her hard against waves.
I have driven her the length of Peril Straits:
Kakul Narrows to Poison Cove to Sitkoh Bay.
I have rounded Povorontni Point and skimmed
Dead Man's Reach. The strength
I've taken from the cold
and from the rain
helps me to know that silence
fills with silences and mosquitoes
whine harmonics to a song
beyond sound, beyond violence,
beyond hate, where killing and healing
are spoken from the same mouth,
where the fragment of self who hates
the Self is loved and I can love.

There Never Was A Sitka

Sitka is behind me now. For twenty years I've grieved
a town that never was. I have dragged
my trawl into hundreds of fathoms and killed
and believed my killing righteous
because it is easier to love
killing than to love living
and the loss of hope
that what is false is not
false.
Sitka is behind me now.

The Myth Of Fishing

I step into Katlian River, work my streamer
along the far bank where Dolly Vardens
hold in quiet water, resting in the back eddies.
The main current thrusts
heavily against me and parts, a bow-
wave curling white at my thighs.

A Dolly strikes. I kill it
and lumber ashore.

When bear-stench shuffles through underbrush
a few paces behind me I kneel
to wash the Dolly blood from my hands.

The Scale Of Myth

Tiny singing of mosquitoes
wings the Vast close to an ear.
Their silky rubatos

rise up on the rain-softened air.
Blood thrums like a tympanum.
The Vast swings close to an ear.

Mosquitoes needle venom,
stitch thirst into salt.
Blood thrums like a tympanum

as they harvest red silt.
This is the source of myth:
thirst stitched into salt

by an insect's lancet mouth,
a song across distance.
This is the voice of myth:

wordlessness distilled
to mosquitoes' tiny singing,
distance brought close
in their bloody rubatos.

Unsuccessful Myth

Suddenly white socks had been eating Kirk all day. The cigar he'd clenched in his teeth, a boy impersonating a man, had failed to ward them away, though he'd thoroughly stunk himself up. White socks bite so silently, inject such potent anticoagulants, that blood trickles the cheek and dries to a fine brown long before the itching begins. The prey gain awareness only well after white socks have landed, bored through skin, pumped their gut cavities full, and labored off heavy with platelets and hemoglobin. When Kirk shambled back down river skunked, not even a single Dolly, his face was so swollen and blood-crusting that I thought he'd been slugged by a brown bear. Sick with cigar smoke and insect spit, he curled in the belly of the skiff while I skimmed us home, sliding through the summer twilight drawn out between Old Sitka Rocks and Halibut Point and on south, into dusk without end.

The True Herman Kitka

Tlinget-stubborn, my hero still fishes hard
 but I don't think he runs his crew
 too well anymore, those wild boys.
 He should quit but his cancer'd
 kill him for sure if he did.
 I think he'd rather die making one last
 set on some August humpies or, better,
 autumn dogs in hard, slanting rain.

When I was a boy, eighteen, working my first job
 for Fish and Game, editing landing records
 from the canneries and cold storages and tenders, Herman,
 ancient even then, often stopped me on the floating
 docks in Crescent Harbor where he moored the *Martha K.*
 He'd bend my ear for an hour at a time, how my boss
 should open up Peril Strait and Hoonah Sound,
 stuffed full of fish. That tough old bastard scared
 me and I nodded my head, oblivious to honor.
 He knew I was just a kid. He knew he'd get
 no satisfaction from me. He knew I was blind
 to his honoring me, how, simply by butting
 his big broad head against me
 as though I was strong enough to butt back,
 he was forgiving me my not knowing how to honor
 him, his ferocity at the helm of his purse seiner,
 the weight of his clan dark upon his shoulders.

To this day I don't know if Herman was Raven
 or Eagle. I have not seen him in fifteen
 years, since the day I thought he would die
 in his bed in the Indian hospital
 and he named me "friend"
 in front of his family.

The Myth Of Knowledge

I've dived my trawl into the dark, filled her bag
with data, and winched her back heavy with cod,
bulging with soles. I've danced her among snags,
torn out her belly, and brought her back wrecked. Flawed
cable has parted overhead. The richest drags
are so rough I lose my gear every time. Only God
knows what schools gather over those rugged grounds
where lampfish glimmer like sapphires in a crown.

I take this cadence from a man named Roethke,
an ancient two-step younger than the Self.
I take it and I keep the damn thing, though risky;
my dance with dark and light is just as deft.
I cuss my words for wind, which burn like whiskey,
when my trawl tears loose to drift at that black depth
where lampfish mutter light thinner than a caul,
where I lose myself to loss and gain the All.

The Myth Of Safety

For a long time, when Herman yarned
of gales piling waves like walls
across the entrance to Lituya Bay,
I could only nod that yes I believed
him. But, even though the *Martha K* is a big,
cape boat, Herman's still a salmon guy,
a coaster, a nearshore boy, and now
I range far beyond the horizon to sound
water deeper than the *Martha K* can sink.
If Herman could make sense of this noise
I think he'd be proud of me.

When I misjudged the wind
at Tree Point and slammed my Fish and Game vessel
against Herman's, cracking *Clupea* to *Martha K*
starboard to starboard, the seiner's net under strain
in the water and she couldn't maneuver,
Herman scowled from his flying bridge
at the stupid white boy fucking up his set.
But he never said a word, not even back at Sitka
where he asked if I thought we'd open
Katlian Bay for dogs and I shook
under gusts of shame and made a fist
in my jacket pocket that hurt so badly
it stopped my tears.

The Myth Of Danger

Stay in your boat, never go ashore. You will be safe
from bears. You will be poor. The clear-cuts drip
with huckleberries. Streams chime light in the valleys.
Always the stench of brown bear,
unexpectedly immanent in a thicket,
a rustling soft as the voice of God.
Such is the taste of panic, sudden,
beyond logic. Silence hungers in the devil's club,
watching, a sow and her cub, while I labor upstream
and the river muscles a white wake around my legs,
the tops of my hip boots dipping nearly under.
The silver current clamors down from high
cirques, through midnight-blue fruit and fern-
haven, icy light that burns the thighs,
that burns, like a voice almost alive.

The Myth Of Hunger

I go where I am drunk
by mosquitoes and white socks,
their saliva thinning my blood.
In the shadow of the bear I seek my hunger.
I listen to silence open out and fill
with silences, with killing.

I go to a pool where Dolly Vardens
stack themselves along a sunken hemlock,
the speckled, sea-run trout fanning flame-
trimmed pectoral fins, green-flanked,
stippled pink, their sea-silver fading.
They hold position easily, the pool a stretch
of glass as pure as the cold,
lit slowly by a light that slips
from the deep, round, smooth, grey stones.

Here, in the infinite green center of water
I set my hook in the mouth of the Holy,
the sudden strike flashed out of nowhere

and I am caught.

Harry Partch, 1901–1974

I. He Appeareth Before the Audience, Is Condemned

*You only put that music on to annoy people, she said.
–I've forgotten who. Friend of a friend, some party,*

but a thrill roils from it: when Partch sets Li Po

*I heard someone in the Yellow Crane House
playing on the sweet bamboo flute
the tune of falling plum flowers*

he doesn't score a flute's song, but a man
reaching to describe his memory of it
with a vocal imitation,

his *who-hoo-oo-oo*s in a high voice,
higher than he would usually use;

a man telling a story about something
he *heard*

and wants you to hear, too . . .

*Much of that which is man-made we ignore, such as
the music of speech. Well, I'm not ignoring it.*

The plucked viola like a long-legged insect
picks its way around the fallen petals.

Nobody likes this, she said again.

II. He Faileth to Be Born in China

Forgive him in his wishes and delusions: he is beset.

Chinese lullabies (the only ones she knew) from his missionary
mother;

Mandarin from his gone-atheist father, faithlost in Shantung Prov-
ince;

furniture of black bamboo, Sung Dynasty paintings they'd bought there;

*more books in Chinese, accordion-folded, with ivory thongs,
illustrated
by gory colored lithographs of the beheading of missionaries,
than books in English;*

these he remembers from childhood:

they so stamp their impress that he claims he, too, sparked to life

in China—conceived in a Boxer prison camp—or later, at sea,

learning in the womb for all time his mother's queasiness as they
fled—

but no:

alone of his siblings he is Californian, all.

He would have accepted that from his parents: birth in China

(perhaps *only* that).

It would have explained many things—

Occupant is a Heathen Chinee, the note on his last door sang.

III. He Consigneth His Music to the Fire

*"...in pursuing the respectable, the widely accepted,
I had not been faithful."*

He has been unfaithful,
and thus does he purify himself:
the piano concerto
the string quartet

→

the symphonic poem
the popular songs
everything he has written

hideously unsuited to his needs

ash in the depths of a pot-bellied stove.

Take that, self.

And here too the sinning arm, which wrote it: burn.
And both transgressive ears.
Ambitious heart—
All burn.

*As late as 1960 I was still pulling out bits of ideas
from that pot-bellied stove, ideas stored away
in memory—
that mysterious structure of cells and spirit—*

Everything must be proven in the fire.

Here spark a few live cells—

What is tempered? What dies?

IV. He Heareth the Voice

*I see little evidence that poets have studied
the sounds of their own voices...*

He liked to cite the Emperor Chun (from 2300 BC):
Let the music follow the sense of the words.

The unborn listen for months
to their mothers, and born,
they turn for that one song



conducted through bone,
through fluid and dark:

it's different now—harsher—
and the world all glare—

and some search years
for that wordmusic,
the mother's filtered tone
speaking inward, to *one*—

Harry insists *all* speech
holds melody and rhythm:
not hers alone.

I needed other scales and other instruments.

Li Po speaks unaffectedly;
and Hobo Pablo in his letter, the newsboys
crying through the fog of San Francisco:

he heareth the voices, that we may hear.

V. He Stretcheth a Viola by the Neck

Partch is peevish.
There isn't room on this fingerboard
to find all the notes.

Should be 43 in each octave:
they all mush together.

(People are already laughing somewhere.
Forgive them—)

Edward Bentin helps him:
fixes a cello fingerboard to the viola
and Harry marks the stops with fractions and brads,

cradles the soundbox between his knees
gingerly, to calm it.

Two over one: the diapason,
the octave. Greek first, then the Latin.
Three over two. The diapente.
Sesquialterate.
In just intonation, a "perfect fifth." And so on.

Translation:

First he hears the Beloved speaking low.

The song comes.

To write the song down
he must invent notation.
To play it, he must become
a carpenter, building new instruments
that respond to the melodies he hears.

To perform the song
he must teach all the musicians
and all the singers who will ever present it
the notations, the instruments—

You see where this is leading.
You have been there.

He is a long time alone—

VI. He Dreameth the Kithara

Old woman copied the kithara from a Greek vase in the British
Museum he wanted it.

She found someone to build it for her during the war, there was no
wood, the guy used an orange box somebody threw out it got a good
tone.

She let him examine.

Partch was thinking, *I could get an orange box.*

She figured out the tuning, being an expert on aulos and Greek harmoniai, but he wanted his own tuning and more strings arranged in chords and wanted it bigger.

I must have one. Also the design could be improved.

Plectra on every finger—

He awakens in Anderson Creek with a redwood timber from the wrecked bridge, thinking *a base for the kithara—*

Thinking that dream was so real I could smell taste touch it.

VII. He Wandereth as a Hobo

Getting a ride in California: could take days,
counting the gone cars slash by slash in pencil
with a rail through for the fifth

like this railing preventing the cars from diving
down from the asphalt, wrecking, their drivers thrown
and dead, the bum still stranded

in Barstow, California, still without prospects.

February 1940: cold, waiting.

He fingers the smooth rail: reads

two months' worth of hobo graffiti inscribed there—
where handouts are good, where someone is headed
if only a ride would stop;

or who wants a husband or a wife—*eloquent*
in what it fails to express in words. Music
hides in this everyday speech:

Harry is homeless when he hears its lost singing,
one voice, the tradition of China, of Greece,
India, Arabia,

the words matter, guiding the music; the singer
accompanies himself on an instrument
like an ancient Celtic bard.

He rideth the rails all through the Great Depression;
he dishwasheth, picketh California fields,
readeth proof for newspapers—

a week, a month at a time. In the Wilderness
he hones his theories, he dreams his new works
unhindered. And moves along.

VIII. He Buildeth the Chromelodeon

*A six-2/1 harmonium from which the old reeds were removed and into
which reeds of the forty-three-degree Monophonic scale were placed,
in sequence, so that the new 2/1 covers a much wider keyboard
extent—three and a half octaves.*

All along he had heard it in his head,
never aloud.

Now *you* can hear it.

Your hand can't make an octave on these
multicolored keys

(not that *octave* means anything anymore—).

All the surfaces in his room covered, you notice,
with pill bottles.

He's on a weird diet, too: he mentioned it.

Bowles, attending an early performance, wrote
The audience

convulsed, asked for it again, whereupon the piece,

*which had given one the impression of being
an inspired*

improvisation by a group of maniacs, impossible to reperform,

was repeated

as exactly as if it had been a playback.

At the verge of the room, with its striped keys numbered,

it beckons you. *Go ahead and try it,*
he says.

IX. He Wandereth with His Instruments

Wisconsin	Two tons of instruments on his back,
to El Centro	the hobo in him can't settle
to Gualala	just anywhere:
to Oakland	needs
to Mills College	space
to Sausalito	and isolation
to Urbana	for rehearsing musicians,
to Yellow Springs	proper storage conditions, cheap rent.
to Chicago	Fifty-
to Northwestern University	five times he
to Urbana	relocates his private and fragile
to CoEd	orchestra. Fifteen times in sixteen years,
to Springfield	he counts up on a scrap of paper (why?).
to Petaluma	As a hobo, he carried a viola case:
to Del Mar	for viola and
to L.A.	clothes-

X. He Playeth the Marimba Eroica

The instrument requires a player with robust shoulders, back, arms.
If he possesses this equipment, and is also something of a percussionist,
the playing of the instrument is not difficult. . .

It is his *visual* aspect that the Eroica player must cultivate.
He must give the impression of a sure winner.
In exciting and furious passages
he must look like Ben Hur in his chariot,
charging around the last curve of the final lap.

XI. He Hangeth the Cloud-Chamber Bowls

Or, he taketh a turn toward percussion.

As in, he maketh many marimbas

from bamboo, pernambuco wood, hormigo,
padouk, rosewood, redwood, and Sitka spruce.
Sands them to tune them.

He has already rejected electronic possibilities.

Prefers his harmonium to an electric pump organ
for its deferent response to the performer.

We observe here his moment of crossing-over:

a temptation of Pyrex carboys
from the Berkeley Radiation Lab.

Let he among you who could resist, etc.

Besides, they were a gift.

Sawed in half they made the most
delicious gongs
(deep bells).

When he stands behind them, playing,

their curved transparencies surround him
like so many noisy haloes. . .

XII. He Vieweth the Gourd Tree

The future needs the sensuality and corporeality in music of the same kind that Walt Whitman gave to poetry.

Literally in a trashpile.
A eucalyptus branch
scavenged, dragged home dead:

he made a base for it, made
a tree of it, with fruit
of Chinese temple bells

hanging ripe-like papayas,
he thought, *the smallest*
at the top... It looked

almost alive, colt-awkward,
gangly. Oddly passive.
Conceived

in dynamic relationship
with a human body-
who glides around it

and strikes.
Dance and song
and an instrument

accompanying:
an Ancient, come back,
would recognize.

XIII. He Speaketh to the Audience

The creative artist acquires a shade of anarchism

that after several decades of weathering, begins to bear
the strange patina of the recidivist, the unregenerate criminal.

We as a people give loving attention to details of individual crime
from a perfectly logical envy of the criminal: crime is one area

where individuality is taken for granted.
This is hardly the case in the creative arts.

I am a profound traditionalist, but of an unusual sort.

We are trapped by our own machines,
which tend, progressively, to remove us from nature.

My instruments are absolutely primitive.
They are visual, as are those at a Congo ritual.

The players move in a way to excite the eye.
This is not an abstract communication

but something that will agitate our Cro-Magnon genes.

XIV. He Wandereth After His Death

*Tell me Ulysses, you say you've traveled around the world,
have you ever been arrested?*

*Nobody likes this music, somebody says—
there's less
conviction in her voice*



His vagrancy gone chronic,
the ashes tumble piecemeal to the Pacific.

Here at the last station you can barely
make out his white hair.

The instruments, without him, travel
familiar patterns of eviction: they circle.

✪

Let not one year pass—I now say to myself—when I do not step one significant century, or millennium, backward.

✪

There are rides on the highway at Green River, but they go right on by. There are rides on the freights at Green River, too, but the Green River bull says:

“You exclamation mark bum! Get your semicolon asterisk out o’ these yards, and *don’t* let me catch you down here again, or you’ll get thirty days in the jailhouse!”

✪

In Petaluma, the tune of falling roses
and camellias
echoes eighth-century China, vibrating
the steel strings.

✪

I hold no wish for the obsolescence of our present widely heard
instruments and music.

I feel that more ferment is necessary to a healthy musical culture.

I am endeavoring to instill more ferment.

Notes

Harry Partch (1901-1974) was a composer whose microtonal works were largely performed upon instruments he invented. He was homeless for about eight years of his life; his hobo experiences during the Depression are reflected in several of his works. Sources for the poem include *Genesis of a Music* (Harry Partch, U. of Wisconsin P.), *Bitter Music* (by Harry Partch, edited by Thomas McGeary, U. of Illinois P.), *Enclosure 3* (edited by Philip Blackburn, The Composers Forum), and *Harry Partch: A Biography* (by Bob Gilmore, Yale Univ. P.). Instrument names (Chromelodeon, Cloud-Chamber Bowls, etc.) are Partch’s own.

- I: Li Po quotation from *Seventeen Lyrics by Li Po*, Harry Partch.
- II: quoted from Gilmore. Note on door reproduced in Blackburn.
- III: epigraph and quotations from Gilmore.
- IV: epigraph from Blackburn (from a Partch letter to David Bowen, Oct. 3, 1960). Other quotes in Partch, *Genesis of a Music*.
- VII: quotation from Partch's article "Barstow," printed in the *Carmel Pine Cone*, Sept. 16, 1941, reprinted in Blackburn.
- VIII: Chromelodeon description from Partch, *Genesis of a Music*. Long excerpt from Paul Bowles, *New York Herald-Tribune*, Apr. 23, 1944, quoted in Blackburn.
- IX: list culled from Partch's notations, 1964, reproduced in Blackburn.
- X: quoted directly from "Manual on the Maintenance and Repair of—and the Musical and Attitudinal Techniques for—Some Putative Musical Instruments," 1963, reproduced in Blackburn.
- XII: epigraph: Partch quoted in *Women's Wear Daily*, Jan. 17, 1967. "Papayas" quotation adapted from Gilmore; "dynamic relationship" passage adapted from Partch quotation in *Art in America*, No. 6, Dec. 1964, excerpted in Blackburn.
- XIII: adapted from Partch's address at Columbia University, April 9, 1952.
- XIV: epigraph: quoted from *Ulysses Turns Back from the Edge of the World*, in "Three Cups of Wine with Partch" by Les Scher, *UCLA Daily Bruin*, May 4, 1966, reproduced in Blackburn. "Let not one year pass..." from "Fragments from Partch, for BMI file, 1968," reproduced in Blackburn. "There are rides..." quoted from *U.S. Highball*, included in *Bitter Music*. "I hold no wish..." excerpts from "Plans for Work," Guggenheim application, Sept. 11, 1942.

Here we are: at the *fin de siècle* for our lifetime, and it is my pleasure to be reading strong new books by two of the most honored American poets of our day and to be reading them in this timely slant of light.

Mark Strand, *Blizzard of One* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, 59 pp., \$21, hardbound, 0-375-40139-3) is my first candidate for Man of the *Fin de Siècle*. The poems in this collection seem to have been composed explicitly to illustrate *Webster's Collegiate's* definition, relating to "a literary and artistic climate of sophistication, world-weariness, and fashionable despair." Granted: that definition refers to the end of the last century. But listen to sample phrases from *Blizzard of One*, and decide whether that definition may not still be viable. "The lavender turns to ash." "[I]n the faded light [of sleep] discover the bones,/ The dust, the bitter remains of someone who might have been/ Had we not taken his place." "Desire has fled, // Leaving only a trace of perfume in its wake." "[W]e seem to be waiting/ For something whose appearance would be its vanishing." "The ruined moonlight fell across her hair." Many poems move from the sketchiest of images toward abstraction: "The houses, the gardens, the roaming dogs, let them become/ The factors of absence, an incantation of the ineffable." Turning his back on "the advocates of awfulness and sorrow" who push "their dripping barge up and down the beach," the speaker of "Our Masterpiece Is the Private Life" advocates solipsism.

Although the speaking voice seems not to be satiric, I hear the tone of the whole volume as gently self-mocking. But the artistry is seamless; nowhere does Strand lower the mask, if mask it be. The tone is sustained spiritual torpor, that soul-sapping ennui the medieval fathers called *accedie*. The elegant villanelle, with its compulsive repetitions and its tail-in-the-mouth closure, lends itself brilliantly to the enactment of this condition. Here is the end of one of "Two de Chiricos," about "The Disquieting Muses"—blank-faced muses "in their fluted evening wear":

What happens after that, one doesn't care.
 What brought one here—the desire to compose
 Something about the silence of the square,

Or something else, of which one's not aware,
 Life itself, perhaps—who really knows?
 Boredom sets in first, and then despair . . .
 Something about the silence of the square.

As readers of Samuel Beckett know, such a *weltanschauung* does not preclude the production of art. To make it tolerable, Beckett imposes on vacuity an appearance of order: "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."

Strand's obligation to express gives us here several poems of memorable art. "Five Dogs" articulates with heart-breaking humor the longing that, however futile, must erupt in song. Moreover, in "The Delirium Waltz," the masterwork in this volume, sophistication (in all three senses), musical virtuosity, and imaginative invention captivate and capture the world-weariness and despair. The poem is devastatingly beautiful.

It opens with the first and longest of four poetic after-death dreamscapes in cadenced prose:

I cannot remember when it began. The lights were low. We were walking across the floor, over polished wood and inlaid marble, through shallow water, through dustings of snow, through cloudy figures of fallen light. I cannot remember but I think you were there—whatever you were—sometimes with me, sometimes watching.

And the introduction ends:

I think it was clear that we had always been dancing, always been eager to give ourselves to the rapture of music.
 . . . The rooms became larger and finally dimensionless, and we kept gliding, gliding and turning.

The poem then moves into the first of three sections of four-line stanzas in an ingenious interlocking line-pattern related to the villanelle, in which each line repeats once before it disappears. Rather un-waltzlike, the lines have usually four stresses, with variations for the dips and turns. The music is hypnotic:

And the dance was slow
 And into the hall years later came Tom and Em
 And Joseph dear Joseph was dancing and smoking
 And Bill and Sandy were leaning together

And into the hall years later came Tom and Em
 Holding each other and turning and turning
 And Bill and Sandy were leaning together
 And Wally and Deb and Jorie and Jim

Holding each other and turning and turning
 Then came Jules tall and thin
 And Wally and Deb and Jorie and Jim
 Everyone moving everyone dancing

Nine stanzas in this section, then another prose interlude, nine more hypnotic stanzas, moving into a more waltz-like three-stress line, then a prose passage echoing Yeats's "Byzantium," then nine stanzas that carry the dancers into the next generation. No summary can suggest the compulsive, hypnotic drive of these sets, their incremental power. Thus the final stanzas come as a shock without surprise:

There was nothing to do but dance
 They would never sit down together
 And Nolan was telling them something
 And many who wished they could

Would never sit down together
 The season of dancing was endless
 And many who wished they could
 Would never be able to stop

The poem ends, even more chillingly, with a repetition of some of the opening prose lines, closing the circle and beginning *la ronde* again. *Delirium* is the right word here—the manifestation of a febrile vision. Strand's triumph is to enact the dance and to whirl the reader into it. Perhaps "language is error and all things are wronged/ By representation," as Strand speculates in "A Suite of Appearances." But language in dramatic action, as in "The Delirium Waltz," implicates the reader—or better yet the listener—as surely as if he or she had been one of those named. What is terrifying in Strand's vision, as he waltzes us out of this century, is the lack of alternatives beyond the artist's calling as observer and composer.

W. S. Merwin, *The Folding Cliffs: A Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, 336 pp., \$25. hardbound, 0-375-40148-2) takes the reader back directly to the end of the last century. It opens with a Hawaiian woman, Pi'ilani, on a treacherous night journey alone to the graves of her husband and son. The narrative moves in her consciousness back and forth in time, but the book as a whole recounts her life from birth to middle age. Merwin calls this just "a narrative" and declares it fiction, but if, as Frank O'Connor has said, the principal character in a novel is Time, which is allowed to "establish its majestic rhythms," which are the rhythms of life itself, then *The Folding Cliffs* is in that sense a novel. If Mark Strand's world dances into timelessness, Merwin's moves in time as history does. Although the narrative does not extend beyond the nineteenth century, the mind of the artist is free to consider a larger frame—back to the birth of volcanoes—and (wordlessly) to imply the future.

We have here a narrative in seven chapters, each with forty poems of about a page each. Each poem alternates indented lines—easy to follow. The lines are not strictly metric, but they are more or less the same length, with about five stresses to a line—a wisely flexible invention for so long a poem. As usual Merwin eschews punctuation, except for dashes to mark dialogue. I think one could sight-read this aloud with no difficulty—indeed, with intense pleasure. The style is for the most part unornamented. A glossary of Hawaiian words, maps of the island of Kaua'i, a list of characters, and an author's note on his historical research further support the reader. Most important, the poet's narrative skill in moving the reader through the story, coupled with the engaging history it recounts, made it virtually impossible for me to put the book down once I had opened it. But so powerful is the material that I confess I rationed it to a chapter a night to protect myself from emotional exhaustion.

Merwin makes his modest verse form serve many purposes. Here, for example, is a simple narrative of the Americans who had come into a remote valley to remove or exterminate the lepers there and to burn their houses:

Larson and King and Pratt sat up late in the tents
 at Camp Dole writing their reports in the night heavy
 with damp smoke and the aftertaste of smoke Larsen
 fought it off with cigars and each of them at some point

→

looked up at the shadows on the tent wall and heard
 the owl hunting down along the valley over
 the charred remains . . .

Here is a passage of gossip about a Hawaiian who has the temerity to bring a court charge against Mr. Stolz, who has been exercising a sort of *droit de seigneur* over Hawaiian women:

—Holi has charged him—
 Ho'ona said—with what is termed Mischievous Sleeping—
 —Mischievous Sleeping—Kepola said—Now what is that—
 —You know what it is—Ho'ona said—I am not sure
 I do—Kepola said—You will have to explain—
 —It means adultery—Ho'ona said—With Holi's wife—

And here is how the poet expresses the point of view of Pi'lani. The passage is from the night of the death of her husband; they have been hiding out high in the cliffs of a remote valley:

And it was in the night that he had died just as
 the I'a The Fish The Milky Way was turning
 and Pi'ilani after his breath had stopped when his pulse
 was no longer there had put her head down on his chest
 with her hair across his body and had listened
 to the darkness below her and the darkness above her
 while the last embers of the small fire among the rocks
 at their feet went out and the cold of his hands deepened
 and her tears kept turning cold when they ran down unto him
 she heard the darkness of the mountain under her
 all the way to the underside of the sea floor

The closest we come to hearing the voice of the poet is in meditative passages that begin several of the chapters. Here is the beginning of "The Mountain," a passage that will let you hear the incantatory quality the poem sometimes rises to and also the rich and complex relationship of language and time:

The mountain rises by itself out of the turning night
 out of the floor of the sea and is the whole of an island
 alone in the one horizon alone in the entire day
 as a word is alone in the moment it is spoken
 meaning what it means only then and meaning it only
 once with the same syllables that have arisen
 and have formed and been uttered before again and again
 somewhere in the past to mean something of the same nature
 but different something continued and transmitted
 but with refractions something recognized in its changes

→

something remembered from what is no longer there
 and behind it something forgotten as the beginning
 is forgotten and as the dream vanishes the present
 mountain is moving at its own pace at the end
 of its radius it is sailing in its own time
 with the earth turning away under it as the day
 turns under a word and it came late as a word came late
 with a whole language behind it by the time it is spoken

To get to Pi'ilani's story, one has to move through several screens. First is the screen of the reader's preconceptions about Hawaii and its people. Then one has the often transparent screen of the poet's language. Next is the screen of the poet's sources. Merwin worked with scholars in Hawaiian archives, especially with the oral history that Pi'ilani spoke to a devout missionary, published in Hawaiian. Merwin reads it through the screen of translation. And then there is Pi'ilani's uneasiness, as reported in the poem, that her story, even recorded and published in her own language, no longer sounds like hers, passed as it is through the pious mind-set of the missionary. The wonder of *The Folding Cliffs* is that these five screens seem to vanish as the poet carries us directly into the consciousness of the woman. Merwin is intensely sensitive to this problem. (In Strand's words "all things are wronged by representation.") In the last lines of the poem Pi'ilani muses to her mother about the storekeeper who came to see her after the book of her life was published.

. . . Did he think I would tell him something else
 after all of the others he has listened to
 what does he know now about what I remember
 maybe he only wanted to see for himself
 whether I was the one in the book he had been reading
 where he told me that some of the words were too crooked for
 him—

As the saga of one woman and her family, this might seem like Strand's "Our Masterpiece is the Private Life," but Merwin's narrative goes much deeper. It carries the reader into a culture of community, where the individual life has meaning as it exists in the organism of the family, the village, the language, and the land. More than that, the period of Pi'ilani's life is the period of the Western exploitation and appropriation of the Hawaiian lands, the deposition of the ancient lines of native authority, and—central to this story—the appalling cruelty of the

deportation of all lepers to the concentration camp on Moloka'i. From our vantage point at the end of this century, we can look back and watch as though we were there the juggernaut of expansive capitalism roll implacably over the individuals, their culture, and the natural world. We can simultaneously suffer the powerlessness of even the wisest and most humane people to stop it, while observing how the machine is fueled by the greed of individuals for money and power. The island of Kaua'i's story is a synecdoche for the whole history of colonialism, still today evolving globally with new leprosies, new deforestations, new economic and political and cultural imperialisms.

What an astonishment to discover at the end of our century this true epic poem. Graduate students may sit down with their *New Princeton Encyclopedia* and point out how exquisitely it fulfills the conventions of the form. Others may read it for the sweep of its narrative and the legendary power of its central characters. Some may become enthralled with the virtuosity of the versification. But above all we must cherish it for its moral vision: its clear-eyed portrayal of the values we need for survival (individual, national, and global) and its indictment of the rapaciousness and arrogance that continue to threaten the natural world and the communities that depend on it.