

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL.50 N°2 WINTER 1999-2000

Editor

Marion K. Stocking

Editorial Board

Ann Arbor, Brian Dibble, Brian Hubbell, John Rosenwald, David Sanderson,
Lee Sharkey

Editors for this issue

Ann Arbor, Brian Hubbell, John Rosenwald, David Sanderson,
Lee Sharkey, Marion Stocking

Supporting Staff

Al Bersbach, Anne E.B. Stocking, Frederick B. Stocking

Subscriptions

Individual: One year (4 issues) \$18 Three years \$48

Institution: One year \$23 Three years \$65

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$4.

Add for postage elsewhere outside the U.S., \$5.

Submissions

are welcome at any time, but must be accompanied by a self-addressed
stamped envelope.

Address all correspondence, submissions, and orders to

The Beloit Poetry Journal

24 Berry Cove Road

Lamoine, ME 04605

Retail Distributors

B. DeBoer, 113 East Centre Street, Nutley, NJ 07110

Ubiquity Distributors, 607 Degraw Street, Brooklyn, NY 11217

The Beloit Poetry Journal is indexed in *American Humanities Index*, *Index of
American Periodical Verse*, and *Poem Finder* (CD-ROM/Roth).

Copyright 1999 by The Beloit Poetry Journal Foundation, Inc.

ISSN: 0005-8661

www.bpj.org

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
Winter 1999-2000, Vol. 50 N°2

Annie Finch

Over Dark Arches	6
The Menstrual Hut	7
Iowa Barn	8

José García

The Young Fisherman	9
Fragments of a Letter Written by an Unknown Delphic Priest, Sometime After 363 AD	10

John Allman

Syntax	12
--------	----

Hillel Schwartz

Markings of Law	13
-----------------	----

Cali Linfor

Ardith's Feast	14
----------------	----

Julian Edney

loose items	16
cello	18

E.J. Miller Laino

Yes	20
-----	----

Nancy Dzina

Why I break lines & other ontological considerations	22
---	----

Michael Clark

Empty Orchestra	24
-----------------	----

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Marion K. Stocking

Robert Bly and David Lehman, Eds. <i>The Best American Poetry 1999</i>	25
Philip Booth, <i>Lifelines: Selected Poems 1950-1999</i>	29
C. D. Wright, <i>Deepstep Come Shining</i>	39

COVER

Wendy Kindred, "Quizzer," woodcut.

→

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

BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO ANNOUNCE
THE WINNER OF THE SEVENTH
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$4,000

TO
JANET HOLMES
FOR HER POEM
"PARTCH STATIONS"
IN THE WINTER 1998 /1999 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.

ANNIE FINCH
Over Dark Arches

Naked and thin and wet as if with rain,
bursting I come out of somewhere, bursting again.
And like a great building that breathes under sunlight
over dark arches, your body is there,

And my milk moves under your tongue—

where currents from earth linger under cool stone
rising to me where my mouth makes a circle
over your silence

You reach through your mouth to find me—

Bursting out of your body that held me for years,
as the rain wets the earth with its bodies—

And my thoughts are milk to feed you

till we turn and are empty,

till we turn and are full.

ANNIE FINCH
The Menstrual Hut

How can I listen to the moon?
Your blood will listen, like a charm.

I had a way to feel the sun
as if a statue felt warm eyes.
Your blood can listen, every time.

Now I am the one with eyes.
Even with ruins on the moon,
your blood will listen, every time.

ANNIE FINCH

Iowa Barn

Light and shadow
frame a window
that comes reaching
past a roof-edge
and becomes a
hole where sky goes
funneling to
any darkness,
cut by warped
wooden framing,
long-abandoned
by the glass that
could reflect us.

JOSÉ GARCÍA
The Young Fisherman

—*A Minoan Wall Painting, Akrotiri, Santorini, 1500 BC*

Here, mind is shore:
is shell and stone

and word
broken,

smoothed
sand into surf. Here

without a name
he works. In each hand a rope of clustered fish.

It is the time before Kore:
the time before innocence is named, lost.

Naked from the sea, he stands in the Egyptian manner.
At each pore of him, sunlight.

Skin, taut, ochre-red. His shoulders,
parallel to mine, to everyone's at the railing.

As we look at him, no one speaks.
How did we forget

that this earth,
this skin we stand in,

not skull-noise,
is our home?

JOSÉ GARCÍA

**Fragments of a Letter Written by an Unknown Delphic Priest,
Sometime After 363 AD**

*The laurel tree does not grow.
The spring has dried up.*

This oracle, the last given at Delphi, stated it plainly, if not unequivocally: the death of our Gods. For us, worse than this (because most had known—had been resigned to their death for some time), was not only our loss of influence, but our fear of persecution, our fear of being hunted and murdered by the people—having knowingly duped them all, for so long, for our advantage. As you well know, others now perpetrate the same deception in the name of Jesus Christ.

Briefly we hid ourselves, but this was unnecessary. Then we began to think together: how could we regain our influence? Could we create the illusion of the Gods' return? After much discussion, it was agreed that I would go to Delos, to speak secretly there with those who would share our aim.

■
Throughout my travels, when expedient, I disguised myself, as it were, as a Christian. I am not proud of this now, but I became quite good at it, and, for my amusement, even baptized a number of credulous peasants.

■
Each island we passed appeared wholly barren, as if a precinct of Apollo: that is to say, each place so haunted by the light that no mortal should dare trespass.

■
Even at Delphi, I have never seen the light shine so clearly.

■
This sea and this light exist in their own time and space.

■
I am ashamed of the life I have lived.
I do not know where I will go now, or what I will do,
but I am certain that I will not return to Delphi.

■

Between Andros and Syros, something began to happen to me.
I'm not sure I can explain it.

Swimming along side the ship, seven, maybe eight, dolphins.
No one speaking. The sunlight fierce, diaphanous.
Suddenly—this uncanny awareness of my body standing:
of it being a thing.
Of it being meat and noise. Of it being separate
from *this observing*.

■

Not music, but like music's order and otherness,
the dolphins—leaping, diving. Sheens of water
fanning down the smooth bodies as droplets.

■

This clarity—immense, difficult to bear.

■

There is only the unlanguageable sense of *is*.
The deathlessness of *is*.

■

This body and its person—belonging only to death.
All around me, death
and this noon
within knowing that is no one's.

Reeds, mud grip, shell that forms only
upon shell, this marsh rising and falling
to sea-pulse, moon-drag: news of itself
the only front-page effort worth its
time. I'm bored with self, the drop-out
ego abashed at how little it confounds
the tide's addiction. I'm fed up with
a name lifting itself into the breeze
of opinion, the sky's azure only air
that curves to authoring roundness.

Nothing steps out of nature. Nothing
returns from the vast water that does
not crave its tidal beginning. Look
across Calibogue Sound, at the three-masted
dredge adding ocean floor to Daufuskie Island:
spewing sand and broken bi-valves, cracked
carapaces, torn whip coral, stag horn
weed, the sea's waste like the mind's
creaturely ideas sinking to the bottom,
pulverized into voiceless god-ground poverty.

A turning over. Shuck and thrust. Hurled
column and collapse. A foothold reappearing
further from tidy lawns and a porch
filled with tourists in peaked caps, their
glinting binoculars tilted to a sight-line
low as this row of belly-wet pelicans
close to white-caps, profiles pterodactyl,
their glide precise as a hand moving over
text, without hesitation, instincted
to its course. Sucking sound. Fume-moan.
Stinking blackness. Shuddering belts,
sudden fling: the given-up now the only
given.

HILLEL SCHWARTZ

Markings of Law

godwit, it whistles, godwit
from estuary flats, white/
brown back cryptic
with markings of law,
what guides call marbled;
like other pipers it plays
on the slip edge, long
beak thin as stylus,
and when it flies
it shows cinnamon
under the arch of its wings.

godwit, it whistles this
winter, godwit, like those
boys I teach, waiting
at water's edge for fear
of the deeps they have
night terrors of, long
bills turning up at the end,
sixteen, seventeen, eighteen
inches from tarsus to crown,
godknows what's there for them,
a friend flies from car to coma
to pebbles on caskets.

godwit,

it whistles, must be something
beneath these shallows, something
past the tablets of mud, don't
tell us, they say, we'll find it
on our own and what the fuck
do you know anyway? godwot, godwot
tagged across their black jackets,
and when they fly they show cinnamon.

CALI LINFOR
Ardith's Feast

I startle when only four fingers emerge
from the weight of the flour. Grandmother.

*The bomb has eaten us
down to the heartbeat.*

Kneading fry bread, her right hand disappears
into the dough slapped flat as the Salt Lake Valley.

*I tug on your skirt
and try to pull
your tongue out
of silence.*

She always keeps her other hand carefully covered.
“The sight of two shriveled fingers would frighten you.” She whispers.

*Tell me the story
of how you have sex
with one hand.*

But, my thumbs are meager too.
Each hand holds only a caterpillar of bone.

*Tell me how
your sister nursed babies
without arms.*

“You want the whole story in the time it takes me to make bread.”
She rolls out the dough. The muscles at her wrist pulse.

*Tell me, you are a woman
just the same. Tell me,
you can hold your man*

She moved back into the red rocks, the Mormon trail and the snow
and left the stares of California. Winter keeps out strangers.

*with your hips,
the round adobe curve.*

She climbed back into the wet shelter where everyone knows
her story. Her brothers and sisters drop with cancer.

*My hands hold the bomb
your mother swallowed
one hot atom at a time.*

She transforms atomic dust into children and grandchildren, into me.
My hands
are our hands twisted with our genetic truth. Why are parts of us
missing?

*Tell me
how you made it here
when the star spun you out
of its nuclear heart.*

“Eat the bread while it still shivers with the heat, love.”

JULIAN EDNEY

loose items

we three—four
with my .38 short—quiet
but for my uncle's breath
and my uncle's prostitute.

when you're sleeping
with your uncle for food,
his hands upon your spine
and you have to listen
to their kissing, birds
in sooty trees

three of us all in one room,
my passion for her,
his indifference

last time I fired it
the sky became the room,
thrash shackle
and shrieks and bits
of hanging plaster

she's swerving color,
scarlet silks; her eyes
flicker like casablanca fans

three—four, counting this
wickless candle, a small mouth
always surfacing in the dark
and nipping for air,

her rouge: deft touch
of the illusionist
but I'm not sure she can distinguish
between a good idea
and a clever trick

her manicure plays him nightly
plays at mishandling

so nightly when it's quiet
I watch my uncle's prostitute
for any smile—
for any hint of opening
and if she smiles
to her the pistol, its trigger
for the meticulous
for the impeccable

in the imperfect light
from broken exit signs
we'll be two again.

JULIAN EDNEY

cello

malign and moan, cello's bi-pupiled eye
cello's breath grunting and caught
lopes over passages of bare earth

first notes like gray sheep
in unselective groupings, barely legible.
cello's dragged breath, adjusted. draws
wet birds to flight, metered
from the point of departure.

you can move again avoiding
abcessed walls and predatory lights
but always in this hotel the night begins
meticulously quiet in quiet hallways

then cello recalling first promises,
cello sumptuous, Italianate, figurative
apertured, translucent and high strung

all evening, falls to writhes and daubs
its little fricatives, garrotted breaths
always in the next room

the dividing corset.
this is what happens between fathers and daughters
cello's stuck open, breathing
and on, the way it moves, this is
what happens between brothel habitues and dancers

as silk moves under silk by transom light
cello's elegant as secrecy
and in the darkness of the interior.

so sling your arm with confidence around a cellist,
feel the bow as caliper lowering
on melancholy horizontal fields,
lowering on a sunset.

light and assemble candle lights: the bow
moves slowest in a moving horizon;
her clothes: the bow's
a slow blade that's cut lilies into deranged white,

and metering the cello's breath
place your fingertip along the strings
feel the cello's wood grain shudder, mauled
and the cellist vibrate.

E.J. MILLER LAINO

Yes

My mother never said she loved
my father unless her three children
asked in unison: *Do you*
Do you Do you until the "D"
in *Do* shaped itself into
a perfect bow and *you you you*
a magical quiver of arrows.

Picture it.
She sits at the kitchen table
smoking a cigarette
and looking older than our toaster.
Do you, huh? Do you?
She turns the page of her magazine.
And pretends not to hear us.
We know this
but we still check for deafness:
MOMMEEEE, DO YOUUUU
LOVE DADDEEEEEE?
One of us picks up her orange
melmac ashtray and drops it
onto the linoleum floor.

Now she's looking up
or maybe she isn't
or maybe she's standing
or maybe she's crying
or maybe she's dying
or maybe she isn't.
And what are we doing,
her three children?
Do our entire lives depend
on her answer?

If ours is a world where justice prevails
she begins her own chant:
does it does it does it,
Does your whole life depend on it?
Wouldn't we have kept on
coloring, or dressing our dolls,
setting up forts and fortresses?

But my mother
must have said yes.
Do you think she said yes?
I say she said yes.

NANCY DZINA

Why I break

lines & other ontological considerations

Twentieth-century poetry, or what is most essential in it, gathers data on the ultimate in the human condition and elaborates, to handle the data, a language...

—Czeslaw Milosz, “Theology, Poetry”

*He stood on the street corner. He had blonde hair. He had
black hair.*

He looked like me. He looked like you.

*He would get into fights because he knew something was wrong,
but he didn't know what.*

—Anonymous teen in South Boston, “Portrait of a Drop-Out”

1.

I don't want. To live in the city.

In which you love me. I want.

Love. Though. Don't get me.

Wrong. (*Lots of bass. Guitar. Loud.*)

“Old Mother Hubbard/Went to the cupboard/To fetch her poor doggy/
A bone” *Doogadoogadoo*

It's not that, really: I give
you a bone; you take, & eat,
remembering. But I am not a saviour.

2.

cottage cheese

skinless mashed potatoes

white rice

peeled apples

skim milk

navy beans

If it wasn't white. Elvira Perez wouldn't eat it.

3.

Giuseppi loves to encounter
cow paddies, especially ones
that form near-perfect circles.
This morning, after locating
one such round, he gathered
three sticks to say: *PEACE*.
Unfortunately, though, the stick
that split down the middle was a bit
short, so that without meaning
to, he actually said: *MERCEDES*.

4.

Translations, sometimes, vary:
Cinderella's slippers were fur
in the original. Does this matter?
What perspicacity does the mind
go after while a woman across the road
clings to her cat in the doorway,
watching her husband drive off
with their bed? Why spend so much
time in the head? When, in some other
version, the woman helps her husband
carry the bed to his truck, then sends
him on his way with a gesture
that resembles the swift placement
of a folded sweater on a high shelf.

5.

Meanwhile, Kinnell tells me: "Be here,
now, in words." & I write: "moments we make
meetings in the centers of our bodies shoot
straight out every pore toward another."

6.

Meanwhile, Genet writes: "Limits, boundaries...
Frontiers are not conventions, but laws. Here,
my lands; there, your shore—"

7.

After all, the center defines itself
by margins.

MICHAEL CLARK
Empty Orchestra

Take delicate steps; the sea has yet to grind these shells to powder, the ribs of a scallop can peel a toe-knuckle in the dark, and no one is wearing anything you can tear into strips for a bandage. Aim your body North but watch the moon, white as a coma, endlessly scribbling on the surface of the water, until the muscles of your neck are solid. Say nothing but your lines, eat the dark and spit it out again, no one will hear half your words anyway, caught in the breeze and gibbering. Find the flat sand, hallucinate a ghost crab, or find one to step on. Slap your feet, dig with each footfall, your heels will juice the cold sand, watch someone's footprints glitter briefly in starlight and go dry. Fling a lit matchbook into the surf. Your pupils may feel the size of half-dollars, apertures stretching to accommodate the grains of the galaxy dumped across the black; try not to see the figures moving on the sand in front of you, the wiggle of phosphorescent tips of surf rods wedged in the wet sand, the faint orange of cigarette-pulls. Stifle your shriek when the voice comes: "Watch out for the shark." Control the spin of all the fainting light as someone cuts on a lamp and beams a four-foot fish in a shallow pit; blue-gray, dredged in the dry sand, crumbs clinging to its eyes, it will thrash toward you once and open its mouth, a frown of sawblades. Be still. No one else will hear your heart pound unless you laugh, which you will. Extinguish lights. Move on. Step soberly, whisper your lines: the surf is the murmur of a crowd, the hiss of disapproval, the cacophony of instruments being tuned, the steady drumroll. Throw yourself into the sand, roll there, feel the grit in your hair, between your legs, in your mouth. Stop. Be silent. The stage stretches on and on, the curtain is up, you are before the beginning and the end of everything. Wait for your spotlight.

Robert Bly, with series editor **David Lehman**, edited *The Best American Poetry 1999* (New York: Scribner, 1999, 224 pp., \$30 hardcover, 0-684-84280-7; \$16 paper, 0-684-86003-1). Lehman describes the aim of this invaluable series as “the greatest diversity consistent with the highest quality, with each year’s edition serving as either a complement or a corrective of any and all previous editions.” I like that. And Bly both complements and corrects his predecessors.

In his introduction Bly condenses his criteria for choice to, astonishingly, one word: *heat*, in contrast to the “cool and empty” verbiage of the computer. He excludes poets who consider it not good to have “inwardness,” “intensity,” “layers of meaning,” “pungent phrasings,” or (this *really is* Bly) “the heat of that sort of language that springs from the fight between God and the donkey.” He identifies four categories of heat. First is the “heat of arrival,” contrasted with “the coolness of mediocre poetry that wanders among pages of reminiscences.” He recognizes when a poem has arrived “by a certain feeling in the gut.” His second is the heat of language disciplined to a prechosen form. In the third an image passes from the poem directly “on to the soul.” (For examples here he needs Rilke’s panther and Stevens’s jar.) The fourth, which he misses in most recent American poetry, is the post-war European and Latin American tradition of “a series of tiny explosions” of the sort one gets in Ungaretti, Vallejo, and Neruda.

Fine. We know where we are. My only problem, as will become apparent, is the subjectivity of most of these criteria. What kicks Bly in the gut may just tickle me in the ribs. But I welcome our differences. I especially appreciate that over two dozen of his seventy-five poems are from little magazines that I don’t otherwise get to see, with names like *Alkali Flats*, *Blasts!*, *Figdust*, and *The Bitter Oleander*, though all but a half-dozen of his poets are familiar.

So what is the work like? David Young, writing of Coleridge’s conversational poems in the Spring 1999 *Harvard Review*, describes accurately the sort of poem Bly goes for: “the informal, shirtsleeves style that is still one of the most popular rhetorical possibilities for working poets. The casual assembling of odd details that add up to more than the sum of their parts,

even to an unexpected wholeness.”

How do the poems shape up? Very unevenly, in my view. Let me deal first with my problems. Mary Oliver’s “Flare,” the longest selection in the book, begins, “Welcome to the silly, comforting poem,” where, as Bly ought to have noticed, she “wanders among pages of reminiscences” and even preaches in a voice that at one point sounds like the Prairie Home Companion parodying Mr. Rogers. Another problem for me is the itty bitty poem that condenses to an itty bitty epiphany. I don’t mean to imply that these events were insignificant to the poet, and I’m willing to allow that they may well hit Robert Bly in the gut. But consider an example, Peggy Steele’s “The Drunkard’s Daughter,” in its entirety:

I got drunk in college once
and crazy. Turned over to a friend
I could trust, I found a line
that held great meaning.
My father walked the town.
My father walked the town.
It seemed deeper than all Shakespeare.

Reading this by itself I thought I could appreciate it. Haven’t many of us, young and inebriated or waking from a dream, had some such experience. I read the tone as ironic. Laughing at the last line I was laughing at myself. Then I read the poet’s note in the appendix. This little verse elicited a full half-page of effusion about how profound and serious and life-altering the epiphany had been for her. Oops! Pardon me!

I wouldn’t want to eliminate the poets’ comments on their chosen works, but I do also have some problems there. Chana Bloch’s eleven-line totally self-explanatory “Tired Sex” precipitated three paragraphs of explanation. Jennifer Michael Hecht goes on for a full page about her good little “September.” Nevertheless, many of the poets’ notes are valuable. Philip Booth’s and Philip Levine’s explanations of the role of fiction in the process of composition are salutary. Interesting information about the sources of the poems, though not necessary to their understanding, enrich the comments of Ray Gonzales, X.J. Kennedy, Molly Peacock, and some few others. Some comments are disarmingly candid: David Wagoner’s “The poem is based on an incident in Thoreau’s *Journal*. It seemed to me like an

experience I wanted to have myself, and so I wrote a poem about it.” All the same, I would encourage David Lehman, with his excellent taste, to exercise more editorial authority on the contributors’ explanations and on the biographical notes as well. Do we really need to hear about a poet’s “gregarious golden retriever” and those other pets honored in these notes? I’d thought that sort of self-indulgence was symptomatic of amateur poets’ cover letters.

Enough of this carping! Despite some poems that I can only describe as feeble, I found a great deal to enjoy in this volume. There are many telling anecdotes: a teacher’s dilemma by John Brehm—sad and comic; a student’s dilemma by Myra Shapiro; a sinister war story by Diane Thiel; and best of all Hayden Carruth’s memoir of Sidney Bechet, a comic and affectionate tribute that the poet turns, disarmingly, against himself.

Bly is a master of the prose poem, and he has selected six fine examples for this volume. I am fond of David Ignatow’s richly cadenced “The Story of Progress,” recording the development of the poet’s ego, beginning with “The apple I held and bit into was for me. The friend who spoke to me was for me. My father and mother were for me” and maturing by stages until “when I looked up at the night stars, for me remained silent, and when my grandmother died, for me became a little boy sent on an errand of candles to place at the foot and head of her coffin.” Those who consider “prose poem” an oxymoron should read this. The dean of American prose poets, Russell Edson, also has a beauty, “Madam’s Heart,” beginning, “She had fallen in love with her doctor’s stethoscope; the way it listened to her heart.”

Among other strong poems is Donald Hall’s Horatian satire of a perfect suburban woman, “Smile.” Marcia Southwick has a wry and wrenching elegy for her former husband, Larry Levis, “A Star is Born in the Eagle Nebula”—carved with a double-edged knife. *Wry* is the word, too, for Kay Ryan’s crisp lyric, “The Will to Divest.” Richard Wilbur’s little memory album, “This Pleasing Anxious Being,” though it takes no risks, plays engagingly with shifting perspectives of time.

If the preeminent poetic mode of our day is the individual experience teased or plunged or labored or—sometimes—danced

into verse, then Bly's anthology is a useful showcase of the range of this sort of poetry. Listen to some opening lines:

Sometimes I think I'm the only man in America...
 The guy picked me up north of Santa Fe...
 My father came home with a new glove...
 My father got up and put on his dress.
 All afternoon my father drove the country roads...
 Once when I was teaching "Dover Beach"...
 Mitch was a classmate...
 Am I cool or an asshole?
 In my dream I was the first to arrive...

When the language, the music, the discoveries in these poems transcend the personal, we have very fine poems indeed. And for the general reader they are very accessible. (*Accessible* is not a dirty word, despite what you may have been told.) Molly Peacock, in the commentary on her deeply disturbing "Say You Love Me," responds tellingly to those poets who boast that they never use the pronoun *I*: "*who else's experience belongs to me but mine?*" Prosody also belongs to me, as rich with possibilities of expression as I could ever care to use. Structures of line, sound, and vocabulary, combined with the storyteller's art of delaying experience to replicate the terrible tensions of real time passing, let me make art of what happens to me, as I think in some way all poems have since the days of cuneiform."

In Bly's collection the best of these poems based on personal experience unfold on repeated reading like irises in time-lapse photography. Philip Levine's "The Return," like Booth's "Narrow Road, President's Day," uses the imaginative resources of fiction to organize experience into the verbal equivalent of a universal human response. Adrienne Rich's "Seven Skins," one of the most moving of Bly's selections, begins in choppy linear narrative:

Walk along back of the library
 in 1952
 someone's there to catch your eye
 Vic Greenberg in his wheelchair
 paraplegic GI
 Bill of Rights Jew...

and immediately begins its extension in time:
 while the loneliness of lonely

→

American decades goes aground
on the postwar rock.

Rich's narrative continues to move inward: "And this is only memory, no more/ so this is how you remember." Then memory, "shooting its handheld frames," moves out of narrative at the point where the narrator has to decide whether to go back to the veteran's room with him after dinner. The poem shifts into an intense lyric mode, questioning through a concatenation of metaphors what might have happened—more inwardly than outwardly—had she accepted the challenge. The question stretches the poet's imagination through thirty-four lines of brilliant, rhythmic improvisation, moving significantly from the *I* to the *we* to the *you*.

■

I'd now like to look at two of our poets at the height of their powers. I have picked them to dramatize the diversity and vigor of contemporary American poetry. They are male and female, boreal and southern, lucid and obscure, and in their prosody they represent two poles of compositional technique. They arise out of different traditions. They represent different epistemologies. And they answer in different ways the questions Bly's anthology raises about the role of the self in today's poetry.

■

Philip Booth's *Lifelines: Selected Poems 1950-1999* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999, 292 pp., hardbound 29.95, 0-670-88287-9) is more than a new-and-selected. It is a careful crafting of a lifetime's work into an elegantly integrated organic whole. The young saxophonist James Carter has advised, "Listen to yourself and learn the tradition." Many young poets ignore the latter part of Carter's admonition, to their impoverishment and ours. As Bly's anthology illustrates, listening to the self is one of the most fertile wellsprings of today's poets. But this source, as we know, can overflow into self-indulgence, pathetic fallacy, even solipsism. But it need not. T.S. Eliot, arguing in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" for the depersonalization of poetry, would have us subdue the self. He had his reasons. They need not be ours. Yet there is much to be said for Eliot's ideal artist, aware of the presence of the past, who writes "not merely with his generation in his bones," but with the sense that "the whole of the literature of Europe from

Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." Philip Booth is such a poet.

"Listen to yourself..."

Lifeline, the dictionary tells us, has several meanings, one of which is the diagonal line on the palm that supposedly records the length of a life and its principal events. This book, chronologically arranged, traces just such a line. Despite Eliot's call for objectivity, most of the poetry of our day (and for me our day begins about 1798) has been self-conscious, which does not, I hasten to add, necessarily mean autobiographical or "confessional." In looking through the poems Booth has chosen to omit I had the sense that he was eliminating many that seemed to ask for a personal reading. What he has included nonetheless provides the history of a life-long exploration of consciousness, disciplined by a rigorous and musical prosody, governed by the imperative "not/ to tell/ lies," fueled by his respect for each word and all its possible meanings, propelled by the powers of close observation—of memory and of dream as well as of the natural world—and enriched by his sensitivity to the joys and miseries in the human condition.

In the title poem to *Letter from a Distant Land*, Booth's first volume (1957), the poet accepts Thoreau's challenge that every writer give "a simple and sincere account of his own life." Sincere, yes. *Simple*, not so easy. And sincerity, though commendable, is never enough. The delicately erotic "Nightsong" that opens the book introduces the private lover, hoping in love "to prove/ there is no dark, nor death." Ah, not so simple, as the poet has yet to learn. (Let me be clear: as I refer to "the poet" in discussing this book I mean something like a persona—the verbal projection out of a private life into a well-wrought artistic form. A poem, even for a Wordsworth, is a net of words, a *true* fiction.)

Although it is impossible to separate artistry from content, I'd like to say something first about technique. Booth's earliest poems show him already a master of traditional form: rhymed sestets, terza rima, blank verse, and lyric nonce form. He has great skill in the subtle ways of striking and softening rhyme. From the start he is an artist of the integrity and the music of

the line. Furthermore, like Auden he practices the poet's calling to protect and purify the language. This respect for his tools does not prevent the poet from juggling them, as in "Shag" (a local name for cormorant):

as if
 on vacation from knowledge:
 six black shags, shagging;
 August fog, me, a Maine ledge,
 and the seventh shag, lagging.

He has a knack for memorable epigrammatic conclusions, as in "Chart 1203," which modulates from precise sailor's knowledge to an implied *ars poetica*:

but where rocks wander, he
 steers down the channel that his courage
 dredges. He knows the chart is not the sea.

Other poems define Booth's distinctive poetic. "Supposition with Qualification" begins "If he could say it, he meant to," and includes these striking lines:

He meant to give himself up:
 to how it could be when he gave up

requiring that each event shape
 itself to his shape, his hope,

and intent.

This rigorous discipline of the ego protects Booth from the lure of sentimentality and helps define his moral stance.

In the service of this discipline Booth brings to his poetry the skills of a fiction writer, not just in the selections and rearrangements that transmute personal experience to art, but in the ways the writer engages the reader by withholding and releasing information, and, more significantly, in entering into another consciousness. For some idea of the range of his narrative powers, read the nightmare dreamscape "Crosstrees" and then the little masterpiece "Species."

All such skills serve the poet well as he evolves from them new and organic forms and fresh angles of vision. Here is the beginning of a later poem, "A Two Inch Wave," in which the poet pays such meticulous attention to the shoreline that the lap of

her proximate stars
 are already bound
 to brighten and seem
 to rise, as they
 even now tip to ebb,
 angled into the sea
 on their own inviolate wavelength.

Here is a the sensuous intellect in motion, with form wed to function, and with the total integrity of that informed intelligence open to the mystery of the voiceless, the wordless, the unknown. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Booth is not an elegiac poet (even his poem on the death of Robert Lowell is more an ambivalent letter to a lost friend than an elegy). He is a poet of the here and now, which is of course constantly retreating into the *there* and *then*. The poetic technique is the expression of the movement of the mind.

Not all of Booth's poems have the self-contained serenity of "A Two Inch Wave." This is not a poet who follows the traditional modernist path toward the isolation of the individual, with its dangerous attraction to an authoritarian ideal of order. He has to forge his own relationships to family, to other individuals, to community, and to the global society where literal wars are fought. The organic unity of *Lifelines* lies in the process it dramatizes of the growth of the poet's consciousness. In tracing that growth we can learn how the self serves the art. As with his life-long mentor, Thoreau, the self is Booth's primary source. But in *Lifelines* we can follow the transformations of that reclusive self over a lifetime, until the poems seem to resonate beyond the voice of a single life. For example, Booth wrestles early on with his relationships with his parents. In one of his most courageous early poems, "Storm in a Formal Garden," he explores in intricately-rhymed formal stanzas his agonized relationship with an ill mother. Flouting Wittgenstein's dictum that "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence," the poet essays the unsayable through thunderclaps of metaphor, working with determination toward his future. Years later this powerful and painful mother/son relationship will produce its antithesis: one of the most frightening and moving of the poems of the self, "Half-Life." Then in a beautiful new poem, neatly titled "Coming To," he achieves finally a resolution. Other poems dramatize the poet's history as lover (as in the lyric

*I approach nothing
at a constant rate,
the process, as
we close, seems
to accelerate.*

In the tension between the existential moment and awareness of the abyss, the poet joins the tradition of Samuel Beckett.

This bleak vision does persist. Among the new poems in *Lifelines*, it surfaces in "Views," with "[o]ver us all,/ daylight's invisible satellites, shamelessly/ bouncing back from space the emptiness we feed them," and in the somber "Late Wakings": "[w]e wake from nightmares to nightmare newscasts." But the poet does not give bitterness the last word. I remember with a wry smile that Wordsworth, laboring on his massive poem on the growth of the poet's mind, titled the fourth book of his *Excursion* "Despondency Corrected." How does a poet today survive in these deep waters? One way, as "The House in the Trees" suggests, is to reconcile conflicts of consciousness through art. Another is to sustain respect for the power of the natural universe. In "First Lesson," back in the fifties, the poet says to a daughter just learning to swim, "lie gently and wide to the light-year/ stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you." Almost a half-century later, the last of the strong new poems that crown *Lifelines*, "Passage without Rites," gives itself over to the act itself:

Homing, inshore, from far off-soundings.
Night coming on. Sails barely full.
The wind,
in its dying, too light to lift us against
the long ebb.
My two fingers, light
on the tiller, try to believe I feel
the turned tide.
Hard to tell. Maybe,
as new currents pressure the rudder,
I come to sense
the keel beginning
to shape the flow of the sea. Deep
and aloft, it's close

to dark.

→

natural world, and also love and community combine to support the lonely individual. This poem throws out a lifeline to all who navigate deep waters.

... learn the tradition.”

Listen to yourself, the young saxophonist advises. Listen to yourself, certainly, but learn the tradition. Booth starts out as a traditional poet in the old sense of a master of the inherited forms. Beyond form, his work is a quiet conversation with his forebears, including Homer, the Bible, Sophocles, Melville, Hanshan, Cézanne, and Bach, not to forget jazz and the blues. Among his new work, the long poem “Reach Road: *In Medias Res*” follows a rural mailman’s meditations as he goes his rounds. The poet gracefully circles back, now in a fiction, to the letter to Thoreau in his first volume (Thoreau thought he might end up as a mailman in Peru) and in the process pays tribute to the literary and other intellectual figures—including Marvell, Dickinson, and Paz—who have empowered him. In this poem, as in the earlier “Rates,” the poet explicitly acknowledges his tradition.

I can imagine that if I were to ask Booth himself he’d say he’s working within—and wrestling with—the puritan tradition, though he certainly does not fit the narrow dictionary definition, denying pleasure. Puritan for me always invokes John Milton (a poet Booth never, to my knowledge, names). In some respects Booth is polar opposite to the Milton of the grand style, the sectarian absorption, and the Cromwellian commitment to holy war. On the other hand, there is the Milton with whom we plumb the deepest personal dark (“Methought I saw my late espoused saint”), celebrate with wonder the beauty of creation, engage the tangled world of politics (*Areopagitica* and Book Two of *Paradise Lost*), and cope with radically changing views of the cosmos (Book Eight). Booth shares, what’s more, the Miltonic dedication to art and to the puritan ethic of unmediated individual responsibility.

Traditional in several senses, yes, Philip Booth is, centered in the cadences and the philosophical concerns of our richest heritage. But he is in two ways most profoundly a poet of our era: in the transformation of an individual self, through the rigors of artistic composition, into a literary power, and in the

invention and reinvention of forms and voices for confronting the old dark.

■
 Eliot, again in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," comments on our tendency as critics "to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles any one else." Despite his hostility to this approach, I am certainly attracted to it in an era where the work of so many of the poets I consider for review, however accomplished, is virtually interchangeable. Now I am fascinated by an extraordinary book, **C.D. Wright's *Deepstep Come Shining*** (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 1998, 112 pp., \$22 cloth, 1-55659-093-8; \$14 paper, 1-55659-092-X). This is one long poem, divided into chapters by double-spaced prose poems, and by occasional pages of what may be electronic tape—columns of the letters STKPWHRAD EUFRPBLGTSDS, with random omissions. The main text appears to the eye like prose snippets. Paragraphs? Stanzas? How are we to read this? I'll try to suggest several approaches. Begin with the opening lines:

Meanwhile the cars continued in a persistent flow down
 Closeburn Road.

The refrain to the rain would be a movement up and
 down the clefs of light.

Chlorophyll world. July. Great goblets of magnolialight.

Her head cooling against the car glass. The mind
 apprehends the white piano, her mother. Who played
 only what she chose, who chose only to play "Smoke
 Gets in Your Eyes."

A stadium emptied. The ruby progression of taillights.
 The eyes' ability to perceive a series of still images as
 continuous motion. Time lapse.

Wright's abrupt shifts from stanza to stanza seem baffling and even irritating at first—leaps from the fanciful to the earthy, the terrifying to the foolish, the colloquial to the literary, the lucid to the opaque or esoteric. Just as post-Webern music eschews key and beat, Wright eschews rhyme and meter, except for such

small chimings as “[t]he refrain to the rain.” How then is this poetry? These first lines provide hints, but it isn’t until we move page by page through the book that we realize that most of the seemingly unconnected words, images, and topics are going to turn up later, often in modified form. *Magnolialight* and *tail-lights* will be echoed in *pianolight*, *onionlight*, *leglight*, *lotuslight*, and, in Wright’s words, “on and on and on.” The structure of the work emerges in these recurrences—recurrences of language, of voices, of images, of subjects. Light in myriad sources and intensities is one of the main patterns in this fabric. Related to it is the image of the eye, in this opening passage the eye engaged in the mechanics of visual perception—specifically in a film, Kurosawa’s *Smoke* (smoke gets in your eyes—something’s burning). Light and night and eyes and many forms of blindness together create an intricate (forgive me; there’s no other term) leitmotiv.

Blindness is the most arresting subject of the poem: blindness in many degrees and from many causes, blindness from birth, blindness treated by folk healers and by surgeons (both prone to failure), Gloucester’s blindness (as he sees “feelingly”). One of the most vivid sections, “Trusting in the Haptic Sense” (the sense of touch), is in the voice of an old blind man who certainly does see feelingly:

Chicken hearts are good for the eyes. Full of zinc.
 Mmmhmm.
 Vitamin A help your retinas adjust.
 Carrots and tomatoes are good, spinach, sweet potatoes,
 pumpkin.
 Mmmhmm. Come sit alongside me
 on this plasticky couch.
 Let me put my arm up here.
 Let me rove over to my good side now.
 Let me see how large you are.
 Let me squeeze your upper knee.
 Let me inspect this velvety damp stuff. Unhuh.

Another approach: *Deepstep Come Shining* may be easier to discuss in musical language than in the conventional vocabulary of poetry. It is like a long polyphonic suite, formally intricate, with strange melodic strains. It has recitatives (for example, a catalogue with “the hopeless objective of receiving the

marvels that come to one by sight, sound, and touch”). And toward the end of the book are coloratura arias in southern diction and syntax. Themes and their variations recur irregularly but frequently enough (almost like refrains) to give the reader the pleasures of anticipation. Wright displays musical energies in her style, and music as a subject sounds throughout the text. “The white piano, her mother,” a regularly recurring motif, suggests in its condensed syntax that it is not only the mother’s piano but, indeed, the mother herself. In the sensorium—Wright’s very apt image—sight and hearing and touch interpenetrate. “The refrain to the rain” is “a movement up and down the clefs of light.” Another striking example: “[t]he noise of the retina as you get older.” In one comic moment, a blind man “wanted to learn to play the piano by sitting on the brailled score. It made sense; playing with one hand, braille with the other is pretty inconvenient.”

Another way to enjoy *Deepstep Comes Shining* is to see its structure as avant-garde dance. Here is Joan Acocella reviewing Merce Cunningham in the 9 August 1999 *New Yorker*: dance “works by development. You lay something down, and then you vary it, extend it, build on it, and that’s your piece.” *Deepstep* precisely! Yet another way to visualize the structure is as collage, which has been called the twentieth century’s dominant mode. This book is a gold mine for students of intertextuality. Wright assists with a dense page titled “Stimulants, Poultices, Goads,” listing fifty of her sources, ranging from Newton’s *Opticks* to the Fort Lauderdale radio ministry. Because I happen to know about the college at Milledgeville and the fact that Flannery O’Connor lived nearby and kept peafowl I was able to understand some passages that otherwise would have been wasted on me. I assume I miss a good deal by my unfamiliarity with the contexts and sources. As is true of most poetry (*pace* Robert Creeley)—the more you bring to it the more you garner. Nevertheless, no one but the poet is going to make all the connections. We should expect to take a great deal on faith. This poem’s power does not depend on our familiarity with the sources. The astonishing complexity of the collage of voices and the force of the gothic and comic subtexts would be clear to any reader who is open and attentive.

I have, moreover, come to see this poem, unconventional as it

certainly is, in the context of several traditions. Although Wright is in the process of inventing new conventions, including a new prosodic grammar, her work nonetheless suggests to me a family relationship with that of other artists who evoke fresh responses by the arrangements of previously unrelated elements. I think of surrealism (“Cold eyes are bad to eat”), Dada (those odd tapes), theater of the absurd (suggestive discontinuities of speech in Beckett), Robert Rauschenberg’s richly-textured collages, and more recently in the uses of texts by Susan Howe (see her latest—*Pierce-Arrow*). Behind all this, as Lee Sharkey has reminded me, lies Gertrude Stein, where “the subject of language is language” and the vital principle is repetition.

Deepstep Come Shining is also wonderfully at home in the American comic tradition, sometimes rollicking with levity, sometimes simply jokey. If you happen to know Henry Miller’s *Air-conditioned Nightmare* you’ll be amused to hear about the host who will wait up to admit her guests “into her air-conditioned nightgown.” And you’ll smile again six pages later when a deadpan voice protests, “You lied. She doesn’t have air-conditioning.” More often we respond to the spirit that recognizes the human comedy in our incongruities and paradoxes and inconsistencies. This spirit is the stock in trade of native story-tellers everywhere, here made savory by rich southern language.

It’s also rewarding to read Wright’s poem in the light of recent social and anthropological theory. Russell Jacoby in the April/May *Boston Review* discusses recent work by Richard Rorty and other followers of the influential anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose “thick descriptions” are ethnographic works—in Rorty’s words, “private and idiosyncratic.” Jacoby sees “thick descriptions” as neglecting broad moral and social issues for “modest observations describing small happenings,” encouraging “immersion in the stuff of everyday life,” and producing “history and anthropology that has more the feel of literature than cold science.” This approach produces “layered portraits” by scholars like Geertz, who is “satisfied with swirls, confluxions, clouds collecting, clouds dispersing,” texts capable of leading on “to extended accounts which, intersecting other accounts of other matters, widen their implications and deepen their hold.” This sounds very much like Wright’s *Deepstep Come Shining*. Jacoby

objects to “thick description” as an aesthetic pose, crippling to political thinking. It may or may not be an appropriate method for the social sciences, but for literature it appears richly fruitful, making room for the ethnographic and the ecstatic, the frightening and the fantastic, the gruesome and the giggly, the medical and the magical, the memory-work and the dream-work.

I like this notion of a layered portrait. In contrast with the linear structure of other traditions, Wright frustrates a narrative reading. Although there are hints throughout that this is an “on the road” story, the ghosts of linearity haunt a text that ultimately portrays a consciousness holding the entire fabric of the poem simultaneously in her mind, as the reader comes to do. Don’t misunderstand: the order of presentation is anything but random; much of the impact comes from the satisfactions of recognizing variations in broadened contexts as the themes resurface, so that without a coherent narrative the poet still charms us as a story teller. This suggests another paradox in Wright’s effect—at least on me. As we read along, following little black marks on the white page, acutely sensitive to the blindness that lurks behind all vision, ironically we accumulate a store of vivid visual images. Yet we see no speaker. We get everything, curiously, as if through the ear. We hear these many voices as if we were blind, unable to know who is speaking from one moment to another. What a radio series this would make, given the right voices! But it seems designed to render irrelevant the search for a central voice. It decenters us, linguistically, episodically, epistemologically. And yet, and yet, there is an “I” here, who emerges at least three times in the prose poems, sounding like “the poet.” There is a “we” who seems to be one of a party on a road trip. And the “I” is the speaker with the mother/piano.

What does it all add up to? One of the words repeated through the first seventy-eight pages is “WHOLE,” as in “To see to feel WHOLES.” Yet in the last twenty-eight pages that WHOLE eludes capture. Wright leaves us with dispersal, obscurity, and paradox. STKPWHRAO EUFRPBLGTSDS. We may turn back to the book cover, where an aged genderless face leans toward us with great dark eye-holes (I-wholes?). Around the neck of this shamanic figure is a cord with three dead hummingbirds

knotted in—a brilliantly unsettling image. Below this portrait we may puzzle out a fragment of a manuscript poem, interlined with a Spanish translation, with the first line “And though my birds be torn to rags of Smoke.” The last page of the book hands us all the conclusion, resolution, all the wholeness we are going to receive:

In the hither world I lead you willingly along the light-bearing paths. In the hither world I offer a once-and-for-all thing, opaque and revelatory, ceaselessly burning. Anyone who has ever been through a fire knows how devastating it can be. The furniture lost, books collected over thirty years, the mother’s white piano. I was there. I know.

There is that *I*, in the strongest position in the book, echoing two earlier occurrences, as definitive as the brush stroke that achieves Lily Briscoe’s painting in *To the Lighthouse*. The contradictions and the mysteries persist. Everything is at once clear and mysterious, “opaque and revelatory.” The absolute of the “once-and-for-all thing” flickers in the light of the “ceaselessly burning” fire. We are left with this mercurial language. Is there a moral center here? Or does it, like Geertz’s “thick description,” eschew broader ethical and social matters in favor of aesthetic breadth and depth? For all its engaging mysteries, *Deepstep*, whatever or wherever that may be, does, undeniably, *Come Shining* along that “opaque and revelatory,” light-bearing path.