

BPJ

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Wendy Kindred, detail of drawing, conté crayon and gesso,
42"x16", "What Is It Exactly That You Do For Him?", 1994.

→

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

BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE БЕЛОIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO AWARD
THE EIGHTH
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$4,000

TO
MARGARET AHO
FOR HER POEMS
IN THE SUMMER 2000 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.

MARGARET AHO

Deep chrome-yellow flesh of winter

squash

with its dark

corrugations

halved baked scooped out and packed in-

to slim black-lacquered

boxes:

that's the dream. But

bottomless

and lidless. And open-ended. Not really

boxes: sides

of boxes then ... Attenuating like sleek

piping in the dream, japanned

and splaying

spoke-like, stay-like, edging

the wedge of this, framing the fulgency of this

flesh gored flesh

raying out, doing what rays do: expand

extend

enkindle ... And the fully fanned-out

brins camber

→

and tremble. As if they might

quietly

begin to burn.

He walks to the back of the house he's lived in all his life and finds a room that he's never entered. He opens the door and feels along the wall for the light switch. How strange to work both his palms over something cold, flat, vertical, and in the pitch of darkness, extending to the infinity of corners. For a moment, he's falling upward, sideways, and down. He secures his feet to the floor and turns. Something long and thin brushes his cheek. He spins from vertigo to fear. Quickly stepping back, he swings his arm to defend himself and his hand tangles in the pull chain. A dusty bulb shrouded in cobwebs ignites, as if a clod of earth were glowing from the low ceiling.

He coughs from the musty odor of things sealed and undisturbed. From floor to ceiling, he is surrounded by shelves. On each shelf he sees old glass canning jars. Thousands of Ball jars crowded into rows and labeled, the hand-lettering faded beyond reading. A surviving "e" here, a "cl" there. He looks for pickles, peas, pears, parsnips. It's not what he finds. From the top shelf, he pulls down jars packed with cirrus, cumulus, nimbus, stratus clouds, all of them sealed tight. He sees all the faces and animals and the grotesqueries that ever came to him, lying on his back in fields staring up at the passing days: the flocks of sheep, herds of buffalo, legends of Roman soldiers, flotillas, armadas; the islands, archipelagos, continents where he wanted to spend his summers and falls; and the dancing Katchinas, the spirits that surely must be behind it all.

On the lower shelf are jars of wind. There's the one that softly dissolved him as he sat on the porch one long late afternoon. In the next is the wind that pushed waves into his boat as he crossed a lake, and the gust that caught his kite, breaking the twine, and releasing him to blow across the field. The other jars are aswirl with what hasn't arrived.

There are jars of snowflakes, each classified according to its intricate frozen lattice. There are sunsets packed like colored sand in shot glasses sold in stores along the highway in Tucumcaria and Yuma. Jars of light rain and mists, deluges and floods. Forty days and forty nights of jars. Jars of extinct bird songs, jars of grackle crackle and sparrow twitter, so many he can't reach sitting too far back.

He finds the shelf full of his breathing: the very first one that burned his lungs into life, the longest one when he fell from the oak breaking his arm, all of those from the hospital waiting for his father to die, all those inhaling the fragrance of another's hair, the new jars appearing at that moment to take in the breathing of this room.

WALTER BARGEN
Around the Flat World

Denmark

It's a phenomenal world. The man
sinking in his bathtub knows this.
He calls out for help, the coordinates
somewhere in the Baltic Sea
west of Bornholm Island.
Rescue ships are dispatched
but it's not where the man in the bottle
is floating, soap in his eyes, the water
tepid, even a little cold. Time to turn
the faucet on, regain an amniotic
warmth, hear in the water's gurgling
and splash the turbulent waves
sweeping across his deck, one man
already washed overboard and lost,
the claw-legged tub listing forty-five
degrees. How will he ever stand, not slip
on the shifting tiles, grab a towel, hold
steady by the sink, reach home port,
face his stranded nakedness.

Belgium

No one said it wasn't heavy, straining
the suitcase, and the carrying. Scottish customs
wanted to see the dark object smudging
their scanner: explosives, uncut gem,
lump of uranium, mad-cow meat, contraband
cheese, but just a stone. It was nothing
that caught anyone's eye, there on a cold,
windy hilltop at Clava Cairns, the buried bones
centered in stone circles, a moss-encrusted
celestial calendar so old he remembers
forward. What a primitive, earthly souvenir
to say he was there and still there, though
across the channel in Brussels. Back home
with the stone, his daughter breaks both her legs,
he loses his job, his wife falls seriously ill.
This is how stones are called home, through
the mail accompanied by unsigned letters of witness.

Spice Islands

Their gods can't live in the same village,
in jungle or tropical paradise. They can't
walk down the same street, even opposite
sides, headed in opposite directions.
Their gods spit insults. The clothes
they wear are all wrong, too much
of this color, not enough to cover that.
Food is spiced to offend.
Finally, their gods can't live
on the same island in the same country.
One of them must die or leave on a ferry
to escape the piked heads, the rapes,
and when the storm pounds the strait,
only a dozen mercilessly survive.

Iran

Who would dare to write so rarely
that the raw words would uplift
only to imprison the reader, though
the readers in the city of Mashad
never read more than the satanic title.
A mere million dollars is not enough
for a writing life, as if any largess
could offer us more than the time being.
Now five hundred citizens have proffered
their kidneys, right or left, the difference
unimportant, to increase life's bounty.
The tolling already rung for publishers,
translators, and booksellers. Oh God,
what price is paid to stop another page
from being written in this phenomenal world.

SHARON CHMIELARZ

Where She Is: Nannerl Mozart in the Hinterland

Where she is, her clavier is
unstrung in the practice room overlooking
the frozen lake. Papa knows it, he and the repairman
will come and fix it but
it's the getting out there in February, “. . . no fun
being thrown around in an open car
for six hours in cold and wind.”

Don't I know it, Papa!

Where she is, the 30th of March is now
impossible. In Salzburg, Papa is
busy with Gluck's *Orfeo*.
But yes, yes, he'll come as soon as he can.

Understand, I have no instrument out here to play, Papa!

Papa knows that, but at least four
rehearsals with music are needed,
and Papa and Gluck must be present.
Ditto Herr Altmann the librettist,
who can't be left on his own,
he doesn't know how to write poetry or edit.

Heading toward April now
where she is. After Easter?
Whenever Papa's free,
the repairman isn't.

*I am without music, Papa, hours
drag through the house—
what if I sent Berchtold's coach?*

That won't help; schedule's
too tight. What she needs
to practice is patience.

Of course, Papa. Come when you can.

SHARON CHMIELARZ
Leopold Mozart: On the Cross

Don't alibi for him, Nannerl. It isn't the Archbishop.
Wolfgang wants to be rid of me, his own father, his teacher,
his one true friend. The old man is useless, throw
the work and suffering and sacrifice to the wind.

God only knows how Wolfgang will pay
for nailing me to this cross. But he will. Debts of
honor and duty; over one thousand gulden
squandered while your dear mother was alive.

God forgive us all she died, chaperoning him,
alone, sick, in a stinking Parisian hotel room,
bled insufficiently, on a fast day. And Wolfgang
pays the bleeder for it after she's died!

In the very next letter he's mentioning that
slut Aloisia Weber. He will "make her career."
Make *her* career! The puffed-up *Gogelkopf*.
The idiot! I tell you, I get so angry. . .

chi va piano, va sano, I tell him. Who goes slowly
goes sanely. But not Wolfgang. No. Luck
is with him. In Vienna he will make us at least
a thousand a year. Ha! A thousand promises.

He's sending me a stick, Nannerl, a walking stick
that I should "use instead of him and always
carry it." I could break it. I could break the back
of this house with it had he not already broken

mine. Oh, Nannerl, he will eat his words.
And we, hapless, misguided mice shall starve
with him. Under the eye of the Arch LummoX,
long-toothed, laughing on his Mönchsberg throne.

"*Improvisator!*" he called me once. The name
rolled down to my feet. Yes. I improvise a rock
to build my house on, and it turns into a walking
stick.

R. FLOWERS RIVERA
Late Night Ramblings

I. Secrets New Englanders Keep Quiet

Here's what they won't tell you. Almost
Nobody has central air.
Don't have to
Believe me. Ask'em.
It's all done with smoke and mirrors,
Portable fans and window units.
I promise they'll shrug they shoulders
Back at you—like
You shoulda known—as if
This kind of tomfoolery is normal.

II. Ice Water & Heat

Butt
Nekkid. I gyrate
Myself into a glistening
Peignoir, a flimsy contraption
Made of nacreous
Sweat.
I work that *Kilo's Best*
Cassette so hard
Even Josie B. in her heyday would've
Blushed.

III. Yes, I Should Be Sleep

It's not that I can't
Cook. More that I shouldn't
Be allowed. I'm absentminded
Have this habit of burning
My forearms, of getting
Flecks of ice
In hot grease.
Happens so often. No need to
Bother
Putting butter on it.

IV. Standing on One Leg with the Refrigerator Open

(No matter what your granny told you,

Yall know that don't work.

Right?

Best be sticking your arm under the tap.)

Myself, I prefer swiping a slick yellow stripe

Quick as sunshine down the center of my

Tongue. *Keep in mind,*

Safety first. If you have a choice,

Always go for that last little devil

Egg with parsley and paprika.

STEPHEN MALIN
Suzuki Warm-Ups

Pint-size Paganinis everywhere,
Sawing guilelessly away on those
Midget fiddles with half-bows as they
Perch or pretzel-sit, stand absently
About, scratching calf with foot; staring
Wide as jars, stroll off, then wander back,
Seem not aware of shaping notes nor
Any part of something larger, but
There in colonnade, here on lawn, by
Nearly any yonder, these tots' all-
Unlikely presence and their playing
Festoon the world entire. Saul Steinberg
Must have loved them; as for any Marc
Chagall, they'd float right in, and welcome.

LISA FISHMAN

Cows

The cows are lowing and the moon is a crescent.
It is the 21st day of July.
The year doesn't matter. The weather
doesn't matter. The nighttime hardly matters.
I could listen to the cows
with my own mouth pressed to the block, how animals
know what is happening to them
even when it hasn't. How the back of someone's neck
can be a window to the soul—forget the eyes
which are practiced. I could keep listening
to the lowing my friend detests.
He has a skeptical
sense of the sacred
and the cows are ugly
he says. I think they are beautiful
like Beethoven
or a Chevrolet. I want to kiss them
under the crescent moon
in my neighbor's pasture
and tell my friend how sorrowful
it all was, there in the weatherless
night where I do not know
what matters and I do not know what will happen.

LISA FISHMAN

Lunar One

So it starts to matter it being the blank

sky without the stone-

gray, white-gray moon I mean the sky

before you saw it, you who do not exist

outside the place of invention

And if it were to end now, all of it

coming down softly, soft as an idea

of rain without the need of rain

and it has and you haven't

So it starts to not matter

to blanket the sky the blank sky a blank's I

dear one

who has

no need

of rain

to matter

and the moon

→

LISA FISHMAN

is new

this week

Nothing was invented.

KURT LELAND

The Adolescence of Orpheus

Fatherless, surrounded by women, with
the blood of his gift building the body
to house it, his mother, the Poem, said:
*Boy, even if everyone knows your myth,
it hasn't begun yet. That means you're free
awhile, before that trip down to the dead.*

*Your aunts and I think this home-schooling thing
goes only so far. We want to send you
down-mountain to socialize. I know what
you'll say—humans just aren't as amusing
as we are, and their horses can't fly. But who
better to teach you pain—not the mere cut*

*or bruise: the kind that catches a god's ears
and might even bend them. You'll need that pain
or no one will listen—and the story
will be told of someone else, all those years
of practice wasted. Remember, the main
thing is not to disappoint History—*

*or I'll never hear the end of her
at-table I-told-you-sos. So off he went
with no argument (hadn't she taught him
poetry was argument?—in other
words, he knew better: that to argue meant
he'd have to know better words). He was slim,*

handsome, a boy of fifteen with a tip-
to-toe tan. At first he slept on the loam
by the river, improvising each day.
A young man named Musaios heard him rip
through his riffs, asked: Would he mind coming home
to supper, his folks—would he sing?, would he stay?

Well, he had to live somewhere, why not with
an angry old man who could vote, his wife,
the picture of badly aged vanity
and sudden miraculous kindness. The myth
would certainly forgive him if his life
stagnated awhile in the backcountry

as orphan, ephebe, and erstwhile elder
brother to a gangly, giggling tomboy
and budding herpetologist by the name
of Eurydice. It was no small matter
to keep his divinity secret. Ploy
after ploy was required so that his fame

rested merely on tireless practice. How,
after all, could he criticize the men
in masks trying to impersonate gods
in voices whose volume was meant to cow
the crowd and maintain concentration,
but couldn't prevent occasional nods?

Only he knew that the simplest word breathed
by his peers would thrill human nerves beyond
willfulness, fill them with service, command.
And the plays' ridiculous dancing, wreathed
in smokes—Aunt Terpsichore was hardly fond
of their *To the right, stand, to the left, stand. . .*

and all that murmuring that made it too hard
to keep count of anything complicated.
He liked small off-stage parts, though. One time—
brek-kek-kek, koax, koax—the poor bard
wanted frogs. Orpheus simply waited
till everyone else was on stage, said a rhyme

Pan had taught him for summoning what beast
he wished, and filled the outdoor theatre
with loud leaping green lumps of slime. Comic
beyond words, the piece was a hit—not least
for frog-happy Eurydice. Whether
anyone suspected the mantic

origins of this so-called coincidence,
its romantic impact had a certain
result—though not yet for Eurydice.
The only member of the audience
who saw him do it was her brother. Smitten
by the same charm that had drawn the frogs, he

obsessively followed the boy, listened
endless hours to his playing. Meanwhile,
Orpheus, in the cot beside him, would wake
from nightmares in which a half moon glistened
on a river, a rapt singer, the smile
on each face of several loves who would take

some part of him away, until only
the head remained, still singing, the passion
and sweetness of its song slowly dying
into discourse and dry philosophy.
When he screamed the whole household would run
to his aid—the wife, Eurydice, stroking

his hands, the old man's *When I was his age*
He'd calm down, they'd leave, and then came the cure.
Musaios would discuss with him music
and painting, the "magic" arts of the stage,
would hold him and teach him a pleasure
no muse had yet hinted at. Athletic

training had accustomed him to naked
bodies in the gymnasium's plain air.
What they felt like in darkness made that world
a child's. But the best was lying in bed
afterwards, nose on his friend's neck, hair
in his hand, and the deep breathing that swirled

them both into sleep. He couldn't stay long
after that. He knew he'd forget where he
came from, not want to return. When he strode
back up to the Pierian Spring, the song
sung for his mother was surprisingly
sad. That was it: parting. His new abode

had worked its way through him like an illness.
Home—*either* place now—was where he was not.
Everything seen seemed like tarnishing brass.
His aunts cringed at the dissonance distress
pulled from the lyre. Even Apollo thought
his risks were ungodly extreme, the crass

noise of mortality the best human
singers tried to eliminate, and the worst
divinities would never fall prey to.
Orpheus left them, angry, confused. When
he got back to his step-family's in a burst
of speed and emotion, five years had passed through

Musaïos, crazed with pain, absence. What he
tearfully told chilled Orpheus to the core—
how their home had been hit by disaster:
parents dead in a fire, Eurydice
safe with an uncle, the men called to war.
They embraced, found a place on the road where

they'd stay for the night. By dawn Musaïos
had risen and drowned himself in the same
river they'd met by. The outcry of the ox-
drivers who found him was loud—and so close
that Orpheus reached them in minutes, a name
on his lips, and clasped his lover's wet locks

to his breast: *Why did he do it? Would no
kiss ever satisfy after a god's?
Or did fate or my myth make Musaïos
irrelevant, our love a teenage show
of defiance? No, we weren't such clods,*
thought Orpheus. *We did just what Eros*

demanded. The corpse was placed on the bed
where they'd slept. All that day and the next he played,
the lyre in his bloodless white hands. He tore
at the strings, eyes closed so the tears he'd shed
would be pure pitches, unstrangled—afraid
at first of his dead love and loved ones. The more

grief entered his song, the closer they came:
He could feel their reach through the sinewed strings
each time the flesh of his fingertips struck.
They were there behind his eyelids—so tame
and obedient, with the large clipped wings
of their well-rehearsed pasts, or with luck

new flights imagination might lend them.
That was the meaning of music: late loves,
to bring them so close, bound in chords like sheaves
with an undertone to tie them and stem
the flow of tears—see, they scatter like doves
when the eyes come open or the chest heaves.

The myth began. He wed Eurydice,
had a son—Musaios—played endlessly,
was at home jamming just when his wife's field
studies turned deadly. Out hunting snakes, she
was grabbed from behind, fought free, turned to flee—
and dropped what she'd caught. It bit her. She reeled,

was dead when Orpheus found her. *No more*
loss, he thought. Was he god enough to raise
the dead? Poem, argument—he'd wield his
pain like both weapon and prayer. If the door
to hell could be found and passed through, he'd praise
all of its powers and craze them—he'd quiz

even its king till his fingers bled. Art
made all of creation storm up in his strums.
Mad with grief, lost in his own music's long
maze, he failed: There's no Hades but the heart.
Nothing that has ever gone in there comes
out as itself—if at all, as a song.

T. ALAN BROUGHTON
Ballad of the Comely Woman

As I walked out one day
I met on my path a woman
ugly as sin and walking a dog.
She stopped me and said, "Young man,

would you lie with me here
in this field where we're alone,
only my dog as companion?"
The dog went chasing a squirrel.

I placed a hand most gently
on her arm and said, "Old woman,
I've a wife and loving son
dearer to me than my life.

I could not betray such presences."
"Then," she said, "how like you this?"
and stepping to me her limbs grew slim,
her bare breasts brushed my chest.

O love, more than my hair stood on end,
and the grass looked so very green
I could not resist lying down
with her beneath me. "What if,"

I said between our kisses, "you change
again?" "I'm always the same," she said,
and therewith I was left with my face
in the sod and my own restless heart.

ADRIAN BEEBEE

The Bride

The bride lets down her hair and the crowing rooster announces the groom's arrival at the family estate.

The bride hears through her curtained window. She removes her jewelry. The heavy knocker on the front door proclaims the entrance of the groom into the house.

The bride removes her shoes. The wooden floor reports that the groom has passed the waiting room.

The bride removes her bridal gown. The stairs note the passing of the groom.

The bride removes her familial lineage.

The groom discovers the house is strangely quiet.

He pauses several steps from the bride's door.

But didn't they say it would be like this?

He moves to the closed door. The brass doorknob announces that the groom is entering the bride's room. The bride has removed everything but her status as bride.

Lastly she removes her presence, and the groom is just clearing his throat. At first confused by the absence, he then remembers they said it was always this way.

He gently takes the absence in his arms, and whispers to it that he is here.

Or,

the bride is in her room. She hears the rooster.

She hears the door, the floor, the stairs,

the doorknob. Her door opens.

Nothing happens. The bride wonders at the emptiness for a few seconds. But didn't they tell her

it always happened this way? She starts

whispering: *The groom crosses the bride's floor.*

The groom takes the bride in his arms.

He tells her that he is here forever. . .

CHRISTOF SCHEELE

Outside Budapest

At three a.m. his elbows buckle once
and straighten out. He nods his head, jerks back
as if he'd just discovered he was rich
or found his thumbs detached, then hiccups, gulps
a breath. He holds the shaking handlebars
too tight, looks up, stops pressing on the pedals,
swerves past a sprawling willow, scattered trash
and off the wide, dirt road into the ditch.
The wine sways in him like a tripping waltz
or *csárdás* reeled out after the band has gone.

Unconscious through his short, easy careen
he lands next to his bike, its front wheel spinning
slowly by his ear. Pleased with the ground, face up,
he rolls onto his side, muttering *ja*
hát igen, opens his eyes, closes them
again. His day is done at last. The stubble
on his chin is one week old, the corners
of his mouth so finely creased and slick with drool,
his tongue so small and sudden. When he stirs
the pointed, blue beret shifts on his head.

His fingernails are chipped and thick and square
and click when he taps time on any bar.
Each finger twitches in its callused dream—
a *forint* coin unearthed, a dead limb down,
the dry skin from a lip, a cookie crumb.
At four the early rooster crows. The air
is cool and tinged with diesel smoke. His own
dream passes over like a long, gauze cloud.
When he walks home at five-fifteen, he stops
(the bike!) turns back, and starts to sing.

CHRISTOF SCHEELE

Outside Nyíregyháza, Hungary

Before the car lurched down the choppy drive,
skidding between two fields of shattered corn
on ruts slashed into mud and frozen hard
by nineteen days of dry cold after rain,
before the headlights cut the seamless dark,
before the engine raced, the doors clicked shut,
one last goodbye called out, *Na, szevasztok!*
before each face turned west out of the wind,
before the handshakes, kisses on both cheeks,
the huddle by the door, the long last drinks,
dessert laid out among the bones and scraps—
the tortes, the cookies, seven kinds of cake—
the thick espresso poured, the wine as sweet
on cracking lips as honey thinned with milk,
the soup meat sprinkled with coarse salt, the chops
sauteed in oil spiked with *paprika*,
before the soup itself, the sausage fried
until it popped (the *kolbász* red and sharp,
the *hurka* stuffed with liver, onions, rice),
the shots of *pálinka* chased back with beer,
before the toasts, before the tables filled,
the fire in the tile furnace glowed,
before each plate and bowl and glass was set
and water ran on numb, chapped hands till dirt
and grease had turned the lather brown,
the cloying scent of pig fat in the sink,
before the hams and ribs were cut and hung
in the cold room, the stomach, heart removed,
the coiled, slick intestines opened up,
emptied and washed and cooked clean in a drum,
before the hatchet bit into the skull
spitting bright shards of bone like splintered wood,
the brain so small, deep in the heavy head
split lengthwise like the body on its back,
before the shovel scraped against the hide,
the skin intact, before the bristles burned
under the propane torch and acrid smoke,
before the torch was lit, the legs' first twitch,
the stare turned dull, the stubborn breath, before
the hiss of air let out the drowning squeal,
the windpipe drawing blood into the lungs,

→

before the knife blade stabbed into the vein
and slid out warm and brought the first sharp scream,
before the rope around the right hind leg
was jerked until the left flank hit the ground,
before the sun came up, before the gate
flew open on the killing yard and eight
hands dragged her kicking from the pen—

the sow woke up, rolled over, sniffed an ear
of corn and fell asleep again.

LOLA HASKINS
In The West Riding

1 Malham Cove

Cliff swallows swirl above the Cove, then change direction, as if, together, they were one scarf. It would be possible to see the countenance of Jesus where water has darkened the rock's face. I could lay flowers here, as if this cliff were a death. Which in a way it is, since rain in time dissolves even stone, not like a chipped edge snaps a climber's rope so that he falls all at once and lies broken in the beck below, but like the chance remarks that year after year fray what holds him, so he dare not shift his weight but dangles with his life under the ledge that overhangs his fingers, just out of reach.

2 The Cliff at Gordale Scar

Water streams through the stone eye. My boot-soles slip in its abandon, unlike the rows of listeners who last night watched Rusalka lean into her harp, Debussy after Elgar, and did not move their heads, unlike the puns that fend the yearner off, the way museum guards assure that worn chair-backs or painted cheeks will not again be touched. Someone here did not care. Someone opened the sky and said, *the hell with you Charlie, let it rain*

and slammed the door. *And you*, said Charlie, and went away, came back knee-deep, with breath so strong it stirred the curtains up and down the road, until every upstairs window had a face in it. But hers, for she slept on, through the rain's pounding at her window, and the bright lights, and the storm.

3 Bolton Abbey

The stepping-stones small children hesitate between and older children run across are growing dim. Soon, deepening under the curly water, they will drown.

In Wellies by the river's edge, a little redhead squats. She is crying because she thought the stones were moons. She has seen them out her window at night, and who will visit her now? Who indeed, says the rain. And will she wake one morning, her hair trailing across her cheek, her legs bare, where her nightgown has bubbled up and floats above the surface like a white balloon?

PHILIP DACEY

Thomas Eakins: Painting President Rutherford B. Hayes

My insistence on displaying his sunburnt face
most disturbed the President's supporters.
Wasn't he a leading voice for temperance
and wouldn't foes be quick to see him flushed
by drink, a hypocrite and perfect symbol
to hang around his party's neck in '80?
But August in the capital was hot,
and I began my portrait in September.
The fact was he was red with summer, and I
loved facts. What dishonor to a man who lives
in a certain time and place to paint him so?

It was my first commission. I'd been back
from Europe for a half-a-dozen years
when the Union League of Philadelphia asked me
to do for Hayes what I'd done for Dr. Gross—
an American hero, beacon of the modern.
But Hayes said no to posing, a photograph
would have to serve as basis for the work.
Our compromise: no posing, but my right
to observe him in his White House routine.
For two weeks, then, I stalked our President,
my hunter to his animal, or else
I was an animal, too, predatory
painter, sketchpad my ready teeth and claws.
Off to one side, my back to the available
light, I attended meeting after meeting,
tete-a-tetes and larger, or watched him move
for long periods of time through stacks of paper.
I heard much, and what I heard meant nothing,
all my being trained to alertness through the eye.

To honor him as one of us, a worker,
I chose as genre a portrait d'apparat,
the subject among his identifying tools,
the setting as self-extension, like Gross,
the instruments and operating theater,
or Dr. Rowland in his physics lab,
spectrometer vivid in his hand. Therefore
Hayes appeared in paint where he mostly appeared
in flesh, bent at his desk over a spread

→

of papers, their shifting sea of national sway,
and wearing what he clearly liked to wear,
an old alpaca office coat, all comfort
and service, fingers around a pencil stub
and sweat on his brow—humidity or the cramped
space duty fashions for us, its airlessness.

Back home, I felt the press of that same space
and labored long to give my Hayes a high finish,
one befitting the occasion of a first and public
commission; I was all will to succeed.
So when the League's directors took one look
and said they'd pay, as promised, but not accept it,
I didn't know a pattern was beginning
but only, after a deep breath, stirred some paint and thought.
They wanted someone Roman, iconic, unreal,
but wasn't democratic man enough,
the leader level with his countrymen?
I hadn't yet met Whitman, but I knew.
And, then, of course there was that sunburn,
lit emphatically by a shaft of light,
the rest of Hayes, except for a hand, aswarm
with shadows, literal, and a little more,
forces inside and out that would devour
him, but for his strength, matching to standoff.
Politicians apparently prefer
unnatural light, sign of divine election.
As to that hand . . . it was my father's, too.
The writing master. And my lifelong friend.
How many years I watched his hand move slow
across the page like Hayes' and like my own
following Hayes' contours as he sat writing!
I've always had a love affair with hands,
those so central extremities. Did you know
a hand takes nearly as long to paint as a head?
Hands painting hands as portraiture of men . . .

I brushed my best self onto, into, that canvas,
as I tried to tell them, Hayes' League followers,
all our town's professional Republicans.
After huddling a week, they hung the painting,

→

though not for long. Don't blink! One day it was gone—
the few critics who saw it flash across
the League's wall praised it for its chiaroscuro,
comparing it to Rembrandt portraiture—
replaced by a mediocre likeness of Hayes
by W. Garl Browne. You can forgive
yourself for not remembering his name.

Later, wanting to retrieve it for a show,
I learned it had been sent to Hayes, a gift,
according to the story, but no one on his staff
could find it. A rumor indicted Mrs. Hayes,
but I suspect the president himself
gave orders and the painting disappeared.
I see a knife or fire or both doing their work.
In any case, he didn't save it, and thereby
may have made a long-lasting mistake.
Now, in 1900, his star's fading fast,
or, worse, he's sometimes known as Rutherford.
Who'll remember him in 2000? But if
the painting were intact, perhaps he'd hang
in New York at the Metropolitan,
and some future citizen would be able to say,
Hayes? Hayes? Oh, yes, our nineteenth president.
I saw his portrait just last year, a striking piece.
Such a figure of character and force!

*She tosses sand over her shoulder, making a well
in her body's shape so she can lie
unnoticed in the dark. She shifts into it,
slowly, but dry grains and broken shells abrade
her skin. Knees and elbows ache,
from the friction of weight itself.*

*Some pain
is a flash, a fleeting gasp, an intake of breath
as at sudden joy or unexpected death,
but hunger
lingers, a mote in the eye long after
the irritant is gone.*

*She thinks of the time postpartum
when too weak to go for food
she waited for others, holding the child
with nothing else to still her trembling hands.*

*Now she makes field notes—
hour, date, exact location—and leaves the sheet blank,
expectant.*

*Sandfleas have found her ankles,
their prickling at least an antidote
to other nights in odd and violent places
she'd hoped to purge from memory.*

*She feels forward as currents
tending to shore rise dense
with crushed shells,*

*seameal
released in a steady stream
along the simmering strand.*

midnight /

Nothing much magical about a cup
of coffee, bite of chocolate, a break
from voices. Stripping her headset, she'd shaken
herself free like a tired horse looking up
when bridle and bit are gone. It just makes clutter,
she thought, the more new orders you can take
per shift, the more crammed closets, boxes raked
together for salvation armies, junk

clothes sellers to the poor in Africa.
On a thousand kitchen counters magazines
lay heaped; riffled pages breathed garments clean
as ghosts raising arms in a glossy breeze.
Shivering in cold light of the smokers' area
she heard the whispered riches of their sleeves.

*After midnight: spring on the coast at Shackleford,
dunes gleam in the full moon's light
as the loggerheads, graceful in water,
heave themselves, suddenly heavy,
along the sand. She holds her breath,
praying she's taken the right place,
that a hardened and hesitant beast
will come to her sights
and lay her first clutch
in the spotting scope's infrared hands.*

one /

In houses up and down the street, windows
went dark. She looked across back yards where shapes
of hedges and the leafless trees had made
a net of shadow. She could've leaned into it, borrowed
time, swung in that hammock between the maples
humming their own slow tune. But tomorrow
loomed—the old problem, what to do, the boy
home, sick again. She crushed ice, grappled

with how to call in sick herself. The tray
she gripped with both hands, not to spill it, damp
cloths for his forehead and ice chips to spoon,
to get some more fluid in him. She made
a smile, a face calm as a shaded lamp,
calling his name on the threshold of the room.

*After one: she dozes.
The female lay like a rock
on shore for hours,
part of the landscape,
spent from a thousand miles
of gulf stream.*

*She smiles in her sleep,
could she be dreaming
of eggs falling like meteors
gone in the ocean's wet.*

two/

Three hours into first sleep, their eyes opened.
Whatever waked them had gone quiet already—
the gray cat chasing the coon cat's too heady
scent or the neighbor's new light, tripped by motion
of possum, fox or deer. The sole commotion
beat in his temples as his wife sank heavily
to sleep, drifted quietly and gravely
as turtles sink, taking new breath to ocean

deeps. But propped on the bed's edge, on the city's
margin, he had to tell himself, there's nothing
out there, only the too bright spaces of the park.
All the old animals, gone past his pity,
lived in his head; their hot-eyed fury, touching
a nerve—flared—failed in the weakened dark.

*After two: she starts
awake, her cheek impressed with her wedding rings,
her hand still prickling and stiff with sleep.
The turtle has left the trail of a heavy plastron
up and across the dune. Sea oats shake
in the wind, making papery music
to mask the sound of sand
raining on sand.*

*She moves one
step at a time; the fresh made path
collapses into her shoes.*

three /

In a straight chair behind the high counter
in the convenience store, a clerk met sleep.
Three a.m.—she had been on her feet
since eight and her weight had settled around her.
As the late shift clocked in across the street,
even the teen-aged boys whose bodies scared her
had gone where they go, home or out to barter
themselves, hurling sense in a ruthless deep.

In a harsh light tingeing the air with green,
she slumped, recovered rough breath through half-open
lips. She never saw them come but they swept
down on her, laughing. Their hard eyes, migraine
bright, raked her skin, their limbs too fast for hope
heaved her aghast in a tightening net.

*After three: they had strung barbed
wire days ago
and emphatic signs,
Do Not Disturb, Nesting Area,
had posted the simple version
in two languages, por favor.
But high voices
have drifted over the dune.
As she breasts the rise
their lights shock
her eyes. Hey look, Dad,
he says, I got another one.*

four /

Who'd want to hear about her job, soiled beds,
embarrassed and incontinent old ladies,
their big-knuckled hands gripping her as daylight
crept under shades. Four was too late for meds,
a dry-mouthed slide to oblivion, a dazed
and shaky sleep. She hated those last begging
insistent buzzers, voices cracked at edges,
and the first shouts from drugged ones who had waked

to find themselves, again, again, not at home.
She'd almost gotten fired when one had gone
after her. She'd been rough and scared, but God
alone knew what to do—she'd left with arms
bruised all over and heart wrung dry as stone,
like them already gone home in her head.

*After four: she lies on the sand, looking up.
What else can she do. The turtle has launched herself seaward,
or back toward a landfall who knows where—
perhaps she remembers the lost years,
when adrift on rafts of sargassum
she and other small ones
learned currents, learned
to feed.*

*Her back warmed by the sand,
she traces dark lanes
in the Milky Way, easing aside
images that come to her,
her daughter safe in her bed in New Haven
nested in plush animals and sleep
while outside the young who hear voices
drift from parks into dirty streets;
she looks for the cross, the swan,
the bird's eye, the old
violent sign, though night has begun
to blanch at the edge of the sea.*

five /

He never carded them, guys who got off work
at five and bought a sixpack. Every night—
or call it morning—as he caught sight
of them, their slumped shoulders against the door,
he saw his father's hands, his jacket worn
at cuffs and collar, a Budweiser bright
with promise in his grip, ready to fight
all comers. Quickly he unlocked the store

and they brushed past his handiwork, the piles
of fruits, imported melons with skins like silk,
the teas and coffees with expensive names.
He felt their heavy progress in the aisles,
taking beer first, then coldcuts, bread, milk.
Blunt fingers creased with loom grease reached for change.

coda /

Let it fall, let it come down as deep snow,
and let it pool in corners, drift waist deep
and blow in swirls and eddies until trees
themselves are covered, still, bent taut as bows
and steady.

Let it rise from grass and streets,
from roofs, from cars, from aquifers below
the places I imagine, and run in hollows,
in storm drains, overflowing banks of creeks:
let it be flood tide quick with dark.

Like mole-
skin of a supple shape and softness dancers
would use to keep their toes from bloodying
satin shoes, like hairs on delicate flesh,
cilia of warm nights from dirt's pores rising,
let good dark spill over the spinning earth.

1

In which you never say *And then*
but we know it will come knocking again. In which (somewhere)
the groom enters the bride
again, again. Abelard says
a woman's body is a humid house, what enters
quickly dispelled, thus the nuns are permitted
to drink wine with their bread; it will not
go to their head, will leave as blood leaves,
as semen leaves, as sap expelled from the tree
by leaf or saw or pestilence. A friend of mine
has come to believe the wolves
are coming for him: paw-fall
in the night, dog-like nails
on the driveway, click
and drag as if
a hurt limb somewhere in the nearing
pack. Calls his wife who's abroad, who says
Come here then.
Yet even on the plane the howling.

2

Love, your thighs are blessed tree trunks. I'm trying to remember
in what hotel you gave me this
model canoe, Christmas gift.
On the bottom: *Olive to Ida, 1901*. I don't know
on what homestead, by what Idaho river
Olive gathered peeling bark and stitched
this craft so frail I am afraid of it, here on my mantle
as dust comes in.
Oh Olive oh Ida: I'm thinking winter
went like this, that they cooed, cocooned.
How spinsters vanish: wholly, and yet
this gift, what she took of the tree, what she rose in the night
to stitch and stitch. Filled Ida with gentle fingers
then crept gently out, etc.: winter went like this.
Today the landlord screwed deadbolts to my door
as dust came in. Love,
you are the forest I must not forget.
Lap heavy with gatherings, door barred
and yet.

3

Abelard on desire: *if these things are done
when the wood is green, what will happen
when it is dry?*

She is the green, he the dry, long-
wounded. What she has left of him
she writes down, *moderates*
what is difficult or rather impossible
to forestall. Here, love,
this small ship, the wolves are howling.
How *forest* (thus *wolf*) became myth: cleared
and burned until only far-flung patches
stood and children heard stories
from men passing through
who called it not *forest*
but *wood*
to name what it was made
into: chair, ash, paper, house
that will not stand,
beam that will fall
from weight of snow, tall ships planed and sealed
to sail where trees grow thick in ground
ceaselessly wet
and men think men who build
such vessels are gods, are myth,
and Cortes says *burn them*
by which he means
fixity, that his crew may never see Europe again, says
wormwork, fearing mutiny,
the acre of masts
lit, ghosting the bay, the men left
there on that side of the earth which in truth
we had not fully believed to exist.

Rita Dove is the editor, with **David Lehman**, of *The Best American Poetry 2000* (New York: Scribner, 2000, 285 pp., \$30 hardbound, 0-684-84281-5; \$16 paper, 0-7432-0033-0). Every year I look forward to reviewing the new volume in this provocative and sometimes controversial series, confident that each guest editor will cut her or his distinctive whale-path through the ocean of contemporary American poetry. I anticipate learning what tides are running, and I hope to gain fresh insight into the spirit of the age from its unacknowledged legislators.

This year's anthology includes Karl Elder's "Alpha Images" and A. E. Stallings' "Asphodel"; we congratulate them both and thank them for giving us the privilege of first publishing these fine poems. It has many other pleasures as well. Among them are several prose poems extraordinary in their structure, their language, their various musics, and their leaps of imagination—those qualities that earn works with justified margins the title of poem. Curiously, three of these take fire from specific texts: Richard Blanco's "Mango, Number 61" from the Cuban numerology system, *la charada*; Linh Dinh's "The Most Beautiful Word" from a U.S. manual for field medics; and Mark Jarman's "Epistle" from Saint Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews. Each is just wonderful.

Also interesting are the poems that work (sometimes labor) to "make it new" by plunging into the language itself as subject and object. Dove sees this impulse arising not so much from political principle as from a need to supersede small talk. "The Most Beautiful Word" (*vesicle*), mining a medical text, dramatizes the ironic relationship between language and "reality." Gregory Djanikian in "Immigrant Picnic" revels in the malapropisms of his family's colorful speech. Michael Palmer anatomizes English in "I Do Not," another cadenced prose poem, a rollicking litany of social and political paradoxes, playful and mordant. In "Welcome to Ithaca," Rebecca Seiferle anatomizes the function of metaphor in dehumanizing victims—in this case, the serving girls in the *Odyssey* strung up like game birds. In these poems the poets drive toward a language beyond language—something more profound than Wordsworth's "renewal of words"—testing the limits of their tongue and self-consciously violating those limits. This is the subject of Quincy Troupe's "Song." Here are the first three stanzas:

words & sounds that build bridges toward a new tongue
 within the vortex of cadences, magic weaves there
 a mystery, syncopating music rising from breath of the young,

the syllables spraying forward like some cloud or mist hung
 around the day, evening, under streetlamps, yeasting air, where
 words & sounds that build bridges toward a new tongue

gather, lace the language like fireflies stitching the night's lungs,
 rhythms of new speech reinventing themselves with a flair,
 a mystery, syncopating music, rising from breath of the young

Although Dove in her introduction claims that "gratuitous anecdotes grated on my literary nerves," by my count thirty poems out of the seventy-five are anecdotes, either in the first sense of an interesting or humorous short incident, or in the second: "hitherto undivulged particulars of history or biography" (good old *American Heritage Dictionary*). Not one, I might add, is gratuitous. Some of these are "external" narratives, classic anecdotes, especially Paul Violi's irresistible pair of comic stories, "As I Was Telling David and Alexandra Kelley." In his notes to the poem Violi quotes Disraeli: "Theories come and go, but anecdotes last forever." Lest his tales be condemned as gratuitous, the poet subsumes them to Augustine's consoling assertion that "I err, therefore I am."

Most of what I am calling anecdotes in Dove's collection start as exterior narratives and move inward, so that what actually happens is in the mind or memory or imagination of the speaker. An amusing example is Billy Collins's "Man Listening to Disc," in which the narrator, walking downtown with Sonny Rollins on his earphones, visualizes the whole five-man ensemble strolling along with him. Some poets imagine a moment in history, as does Julianna Baggott in "Mary Todd on Her Deathbed." But unless the poet tells us, we usually can't guess what is an account of a real event, internal or external, and what is a flowering of the imagination. Ammons's engaging "Shot Glass," he tells us in his note, is pure fiction. He sure fooled me. Some poems are memory-work: Erin Belieu's "Choose Your Garden," B.H. Fairchild's "Mrs. Hill," David Kirby's "At the Grave of Harold Goldstein." One of the most complex of the internal anecdotes is "No Palms," by the ninety-year-old Dorothea Tanning, where a desert drive at the turn of this millennium morphs into an enactment of the poet's consciousness, progressing from

guilt to gaiety. This is one of the most exhilarating poems in the anthology—recalling Dove’s quotation from Rilke in which the world “outside” is transformed “into a handful of inwardness.”

Because of its obliquity, however, I could not feel comfortable with Tanning’s “No Palms” until I had her note to provide the necessary context. Indeed, I found the poets’ notes in this volume more than usually interesting and useful. Whether they were really essential to my appreciation of the poems is a question I’d prefer to duck. I have always agreed with Coleridge that the poem should contain within itself all that the reader needs. Yet . . . yet . . . many of these poems didn’t light up for me until I had the writer’s key.

Some of Dove’s strongest choices are, at least at the outset, dialogue poems. I’d single out Thomas Rabbitt’s “The Beach at Falmouth Heights,” in which a woman drives to the beach with her daughters’ wrangling voices in counterpoint to her meditations on her marriage. Rabbitt tells us he is intending “an imitation and an homage” to Jarrell’s monologues spoken by women. Another strong meditation in the form of dialogue is Elton Glaser’s “And in the Afternoon I Botanized.” Contemplating “calamity and the end of things,” a middle-aged couple envision themselves as characters in poems by Frost and Eliot and Yeats and—is it Amy Lowell?—then as characters in Restoration comedy or Greek tragedy. With wit and some very funny dialogue they talk themselves through to a way of “being buoyant in the undertow.” Susan Stewart’s quietly heartbreaking “Wings” begins with an older person asking a younger, “If you could have wings would you want them?” and moves through an astonishing dialogue that reveals a longing almost too deep for language—except as Stewart finds the right words in, of all places, Euripides’ *Andromache*. And then we have W. S. Merwin’s “The Hours of Darkness,” in which the poet answers the speaker who inquires:

[. . .] have you considered
 how often you return
 to the subject of not seeing
 to the state of blindness
 whether you name it or not
 do you intend to speak of that

→

as often as you do
do you mean anything by it

These five poems confront with courage and often humor the question of what to make of a diminished thing. I find myself returning to them, moved by the way the poets command language commensurate with the integrity of their inquiry. I can only hope that I have said enough to send you to the book to read and reread all these poems for yourself.

There's a different kind of integrity in a half dozen poems in this volume, what Beckett calls "the integrity of incoherence." Here is part III of Brenda Hillman's "Air for Mercury":

Monsters of will and monsters of
willelessness [*sic*] confront the garden; a dragon

crow greets the dusk with its
prow. Rhyming is a tool of

friendly desperation. The spirits will return
though they're not here now.

I can hear this as a lyric: repetitions (*monsters . . . monsters*), rhythmic paradox (*will . . . willelessness*), subtle rhymes (*garden/dragon, crow/prow/now*), and prosodic felicities (*friendly desperation*). In the notes Hillman assures us that "what I intended is irrelevant" and "I had given myself an assignment to count numbers of words per lines, and to make rapid shifts in types of reality." Hillman's title comes from a misread license plate. Other titles seem to be telling me more: Robert Siken's "The Dislocated Room," full of disjunctions and contradictions; Marsha Janson's "Considering the Demise of Everything," beginning: "What if the 5:30 train shaking the trees at the edge of the woodlot—/ What if the yellow flowers blooming in the swamp—/ What if I can't find what I'm looking for?"; Laurie Sheck's excerpt from her "Black Series," conjuring nightfall as a "soft town," a town of "inconclusiveness, encryption," where "I am our citizen, though I am knot and barb/ among your wanderings, and can feel the fraught circuitries/ first calm then slash themselves in me." When I am baffled by a sentence like "Asleep the clear-lit custody of knowing," I am consoled to turn to her long note in which she explains that clarity, "though we may long for it, is also constantly in danger of being too reductive—a form of imposture or disguise. The speaker of this poem is

interested in concealment and encryption, and so experiences nightfall in a particular way.” All right. That helps reassure me that I’m not misreading, except as I’m possibly supposed to misread. But, finally, it leaves me less interested in the poem. Sorry. I am more interested in Paul Perry’s imitation of Celan, “Paris,” where the pantoum form contributes to a lyric so luscious that I can love it for its surface luster. I don’t know Celan well enough to judge this homage, but I do understand his appeal to poets who respond to the disjunctive and bitter music. I can’t find in Perry’s poem much of an English equivalent to the linguistic complexity I know is in the German, except for the implied pun in *refuse*. But I can recognize the allusiveness, the darkness, and the nightmare climate of Celan translations. And I can see throughout Dove’s collection poems that embrace the disjunctive, the ambiguous, the bottomless, the arcane as the expression of a bleak contemporary vision of the human condition. In most of them the firm lyrical form lifts even despair above the undertow of cynicism and depression. Of these, the poems that I will remember longest are Robert Pinsky’s limp “Samurai Song” and Merwin’s “The Hours of Darkness” for their power of transformation.



Editor’s Notes

Karl Elder’s “Alpha Images” also appears in *The Pushcart Prize 2001 XXV*, as does Philip Dacey’s “Recorded Message,” originally published in the Fall 1992 issue of the *BPJ* and reprinted last year in Dacey’s *The Deathbed Playboy*.

A Fine Excess: Fifty Years of the Beloit Poetry Journal, our 450-page retrospective anthology (Fall 2000/Winter 2001, Volume 51, nos. 1 and 2), is still available (\$15 plus \$2 postage each, or as the first two issues of a new subscription: \$18 for one year, \$48 for three). More information about *A Fine Excess* is available online at www.bpj.org.

For the Spring 2002 issue we plan a special selection of poets under twenty-five. We invite submissions, which should note “for poets under twenty-five issue” on each poem and must reach us by October 1.