

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

VOL. 52 N°1, FALL 2001

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Subscriptions

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

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

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$5.40.

Add for postage elsewhere outside the U.S., \$13.

Submissions

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

Address all correspondence, submissions, and orders to

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).

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ISSN: 0005-8661

www.bpj.org

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Wendy Kindred, "Pear," 2001.

→

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

EVIE SHOCKLEY

possibilities of poetry, upon her death

ars poetica, rough ship, drag
 me from world to brutal word,
 mental passage. (write.) be
a wail of a sound, surfacing
 to fountain water found in
 valleys of shadows of breath.
i will brook no evil, for
 thou art not gone, gwen,
 and poems made of fears
evaporate. when the drops
 dry, scrape gray lines of salt
 and dreams from brown faces.
(rite.) melt like a verb into
 this rich white earth of paper.
 grow an oeuvre from a need.

—*gwendolyn brooks (1917-2000)*

EVIE SHOCKLEY

hartwell dam

—*for aline*

i wondered if effortless lives were the inherent
property of whiteness, wondered if i might
marry into it, the expectation of a life of days
like today, a birthday celebrated in cool shade
and blond sunshine, beneath and beside two
of the bluest blues that georgia could produce,
as atmosphere and lake vied for bragging rights,
a bottle of wine chinking solidly against the rough
stone of the table after each tour of our plastic
cups, the last slice of pizza releasing its last
heat, the air whispering through the thin stack
of napkins, exsiccating any chance of sweat, as
if to say *at your service*,

though even as i let
myself imagine privilege as a sort of genetic
trait, i imagined my favorite harlem renaissance
figures in picturesque settings or elegance, once
upon a time, du bois and fauset in white gloves,
white pearls, with the handles of ivory teacups
in their careful, almost-entitled fingers, lightly
held, or tightly, with digit-numbing control, like
me, perhaps, a little chilled, from apprehension
as much as my breeze or their too-conditioned
air, the tiny goose-bump-inducing fear that we
may be asked to leave, politely or not, id'd
by dna as uninvited and escorted to the door
by unapologetic maitre d's,

or in my case, more
likely shouted back to africa by confederate-flag-
waving rabid young men with red faces, passing
by our little spread on the way to their pickups,
squaring the round face of the mother across from
me, whose rejection could freeze me cold, far
more than any rebel's, whose own presence here
might've elicited a spit-out wish that she go home
to france, if nationality were visible from a stone's
throw away, whose son, with his two-homes-or-

→

none-at-all transatlantic blues, is the man for
whom i've fallen like a swooning southern belle
in blackface,

making her, the happy birthday girl,
the woman who could make my life hell, if she
wanted, drawing my gratitude for what should be
par for the course, my inclusion in this intimate
family lunch, the teasing and confidences, straight-
forward questions and good-humored acceptance
of my eccentricities, my determination to plant
myself in a nearby swing and pump my brown legs
into the more distant blue, while they dregged
the wine,

which left her sated and comfortable
enough to stretch out on the bench, even able
to nap, where i never could, her arm above her
head, with nothing but the autumn sun for cover,
while her son and i tramped the embankment
together, holding each other as if we were meant
for it, trying and trying not to disregard what
we've inherited—skin, hair, culture—not to shut
some door we can't reopen, stumbling through
the sunlit darkness toward whatever love can do,
returning to lure his mother from her feral sleep,
hoping, each of us, that such strange days would keep.

NANCE VAN WINCKEL

The Republic of the Small

The dolls were all gowned-up with nowhere
to go. Waiting out a storm adrift
over the Alleghenies. The Mistress of the Room
stabbing a tiara atop a half-bald head. *There.*
Furious from her father's fury. From having had
to eat on the floor. The little ladies love
hail against a window. All for them
is the bitten-down. Happy hour of the Armageddon.

The Mistress going deeper into her domain.
Ground down by the journey: pettiness begets
pettiness. If she'd had a dog's manners, she should,
by God, eat down there where he ate.

The dolls convey curtsies toward the window,
where the hand of someone drowning
waves. It's wearing the Mistress's ring. Royal
insignia. Going, gone. In the big bowl of the rain
now she's the snail who licks the walls.

JEFFREY L. DYE

The Dynamic

Begins with *brie* and *pinot grigio*,
With *baisers*, *poires d'Anjou*,
Chocolat and Bach.
Strong winter light
Ignites Palladian windows
Arching above and behind us
And just where they should be
Two comfortable chairs,
Sometimes a fire,
The dark stair
Artfully arrested
By a gracious entry.
She speaks and I listen
And I speak and she listens.
And what I want to hear
I believe I hear her say,
And what I mean and intend
I believe I say
And believe she understands.
But over and again our gaze
Strays to the offering of lilies
Staged almost between us.
“Meaning” and “intention” are clowns,
Chimeras, miscreant children
Who smile but never hold place.
They fade, slip away, hide,
Pretend they don't hear,
Change
Constantly, inexorably—
Much the same way the late-day winter light
Rushes past plum to ash,
Now fire in ruin
On the rim of her glass.

ALISON PELEGRIN

After the Death of Lucy's Opossum, Parrain's Threat

I know the sound of lizards nailed to the fence,
the tangle of copperheads kicked into fire.
I started young. At your age I'd skin a cat,
stir an ant pile, and toss the living cat across.
Now I track meat through the smoke of the marsh.
In my hipboots I prowl the trickster shadows,
hands locked to my gun like the roots
of grandfather cypress trees draped with moss.
I hunt man-sized catfish by the throat, thrash
with them in milk-yellow creeks, a beast myself.
I'm numb to wide eyes and the tick of a heart,
and you would steal joy from my sweet girl?
Blood-sport boys. Your bludgeoning sticks
smashed opossum, left him to stiffen in the street.
How dare you breathe? Your mothers will weep
as they comb your hair and iron your coffin suits.
A opossum is a laughing pet, true, but Lucy
warmed its milk and peeled the grapes it ate.
She lined a tray with velvet for its bed,
and now she decorates its shoebox grave.
After I pack opossum in our backyard earth,
I'll kill you with my hands and use your flesh for bait.
Hide anywhere you bastards. My alligator sense
will track you down. I'll snatch you from smooth banks,
beat you into the kingdom of belt buckle love.
If not dead, I'll strike you worrisome and mute.
Outside of wrath there's nothing left for me.

ALISON PELEGRIN

Slow Time

Lost Baby anniversaried the year.
LaDonna marked her calendar week one
to term, but with no quickening, no birth,
she says the year's a waste of slow, dead time.
LaDonna wears the look of ash. She moves
as though she can't remember moving,
spits out the blades of my black letter name
to say the bad blood stinks between her legs.
In the kitchen she curses the stock pot,
hammers the dough as it sours, each lump
her disobedient body failing to rise.

The part of me who is the man she wants
suffers to taste the root of her sadness,
to spackle the blemish on the bedroom wall
she paints over and over again white.
LaDonna said she felt it from the start—
not illness, but the pain of mystery,
the weight of every bird's omen, soaring.
Who's the baby gonna be? she asked of finches
as they cast a speeding concrete shadow.
What's folded in this buried point of growth?
LaDonna said she understood slow time,
how life moves suddenly and not at all.
Inside slow time a river swells its banks,
the seasons rot and resurrect and rot.

In such a daze our infant seed took root.
Forget slow time. LaDonna—bang—ballooned
with mango breasts, tired feet, a sloping back.
She dropped her guard and bought a book of names
to say to every breath of summer, called
into a dark that droned with amber wings
and snapped twigs shuffling. She took to resting,
dozed every evening on the porch swing
among the moon's patchwork of silver calico.
We almost breezed the first trimester by.

ہوئی تاخیر تو کچھ باعیش تاخیر بھی تھا
آپ آتے تھے، مگر کوئی عیناں گیر بھی تھا
تم سے بے جا ہے مجھے اپنی تباہی کا رگلا
اس میں کچھ شائبہ، خوبی، تقدیر بھی تھا
تو مجھے بھول گیا ہو تو پتا بستلا دوں
کبھی فتراک میں تیرے کوئی پٹنجیر بھی تھا
قید میں ہے ترے وحشی کو وہی زلف کی یاد
ہاں کچھ اک درج گراں ساری زنجیر بھی تھا
بجلی اک کووند گئی ہر آنکھوں کے آگے تو کیا!
بات کرتے کہ میں لب تشنہ تقریر بھی تھا
دیکھ کر غیسر کو ہو کیوں نہ کلیجا ٹھنڈا
نالہ کرتا تھا، ولے طالب تاخیر بھی تھا
ہم تھے مرنے کو کھڑے، پاس نہ آیا، نہ سہی
آسرا اس شوق کے ترکش میں کوئی تیر بھی تھا
پکڑے جاتے ہیں فرشتوں کے لکھے پر ناحق
آزمی کوئی ہمارا دم تحریر بھی تھا؟
ریختے کے تھیلے استاد نہیں ہو غالب
کہتے ہیں اگلے زمانے میں کوئی تیر بھی تھا

GHALIB
I Stay Awake

translated from the Persian by M. Shahid Alam

If a thing's delayed
there are things delaying it.
 Not you, your suitors
 slowed you down a bit.

It wasn't fair pinning
my troubles on you.
 The furies fate kismet
 each had a hand in it.

If you cannot place me
shall I jog your memory.
 Once you snared a fawn
 and grew rather fond of it.

Captive I stay awake
thinking of you all night.
 It's true my shackled
 feet also hurt a bit.

I hadn't asked for this
blinding burst of light.
 I wish He'd talk to me
 my heart aches for it.

I'll say it I was pleased
when I saw him in pain.
 My rival sank before her
 and she hated him for it.

I stood ready to die
but she drew back from me.
 She is a sharp shooter
 an arrow too would do it.

We are tried and convicted
on the word of an angel.
 Was there another witness
 a man who saw us do it.

GHALIB

Sir *Ghalib* you don't have
the crown of the ghazal.

It's rumored that one *Meer*
has a stronger claim to it.

Note:

Meer Taqi *Meer*: an Urdu poet of the eighteenth century, regarded by some as a greater poet than Ghalib

TOBY LEAH BOCHAN

How it is:

A Valentine Sestina

You speak: Love gallops like an antelope in the red
kitchen of my heart. All the hooves beating
the floor, the floor. The yellow mouths
of fire break open, bright enough to burn.

You

Speak again: In iron pans, the oil

is beginning to smoke. And all the smells in the oil:
rising chords of cumin and coriander, red
spices, saffron—how can I explain it to you? You
who would take a caliper to measure the swelling beats
of the heart. How do I love thee? 7 millimeters! Burn
that to hell—this is a job for a mouth,

not metal. I think of your mouth
and curry seeps into the oil
of the air, brings the burn
bursting in the butterfly lungs. The red
wings beat
in the wind of you.

How can I write of you
when all the sounds from my mouth,
when under each beat
of this poem, under the oily
black print of these letters, there is this red—
this blood beneath these black marks I burn.

Listen. All the trees in my body are burning
their branches with the thought of you.

A bright red
resurrection, an internal mouth-
to-mouth. You've given my veins an oil
change, beaten

the dust out from my frayed nerves—beat
that! Better yet, burn
this poem, this awful oil
spill on the snow. I want anatomy to be our alphabet. I need you
to look at my mouth
as a place where no sign can be read.

You are an eruption of orange leaves burning
out the mouth of evening. A spattering of oil
paint, the beat still wet on the canvas. Red.

TOBY LEAH BOCHAN

Smoking Card

Included in each box of nicorette gum is a wallet-card on which you are supposed to write "my main reasons for quitting smoking are:"

The first time I quit I got my wisdom teeth pulled.
You can't smoke for 48 hours after having teeth removed.
Something about how wounds heal.
And pain medications can be lovely.
It was a warmer cold turkey, and you were arriving in two weeks.
I put up signs with the date.
When I thought of smoking, I thought,
The perfect girl does not smoke.
I know, I know.

MARJORIE STELMACH

light

at its ordinary speed
can't conceive
of leaves,

of the waiting of those
innumerable teeth,

of a dis-
integration,
a sweetening thirst,

of a second *waving*,
requiring *wind*;

and so, there's no fear
in its luscious flight,
nor is there

whispered, ecstatic word
of Paradise Forests to come—no,

the portion of light
that will grow to refuse
(and so, blaze) *green*,

is simply luminous
in its spill:

let be.

ROBERT WRIGLEY

After the Coyotes' Song

Now night is clearly darker than before
and smells more still, its star wick trimmed
audibly down. Now all rodents are emboldened,
all owls through their talons knowing,
down the limb-bones and capillary fretwork
of roots and holes, that every living thing's
about to bolt,

 even the tiny dumb animal
of my sleep, having for how many hours now
covered under the rock of possible dreams—
look, there it goes, a whip of tail
running for its life, and the owl soars up
as silent on its nightmare wings as sleep's breath is
to the sleeper.

DANEEN WARDROP
[Variations on a Pear]

1.

The honest pear on the counter.

Smudge of pear *in* the counter.

Cobweb hangs like a prayer that didn't
quite make it through the ceiling,
sun-clipped.

Sways,

Germanic somehow in its insistence, its intellectuality.

Barely sways, fully radiant.

I don't know how there's so much *breathing* in it.

My daughter is pleased that she can wand with a spoon
a shadow the cat jumps at,
the right prey

in this house of missed brooms
and rags best
for the shapes they dry into.

She points to the pear,
presence without word for her.

No *cum*, no phylum,

A thing voluptuous in its place on the counter
that she wants

to slide into her hand.

2.

The tea-bag for this room,

it fills a cup
lined with windows and frames.

More, the progress
of infusion—

comes to more—

sunray finding at every moment of day
exact, immaculate angle,
penetration.

The pear its yellow arms.

These arms don't reach, they deepen.

Aroma, desire's vaporous state.

A housefinch troubles the ray of light,
and that's infusion, too.

3.

It's an ahistorical pear I bought.

Just one, the only one looking, apt, from the bin.

If one dreamed only of pears, would ethics
become taupe, ontology taupe,
desire topaz?

Columbus believed the world was pear-shaped,
with a nipple on it.

But my pear, no history.
Chronology for other still-lives.

Columbus enters this poem only as an eater of pears.

Imagining the Garden of Eden to be a nipple

he sailed near, no sextants working
and compasses spinning radii of ovals,
hexagons and bird-shapes—

imagining
time-lines into tangles

or dreams of a pear in a strong hand, thumb-pad fleshy,

or dreams of a pear dominating its gem-fruit basket,
or dreams of a pear taking light into itself exactly

in the dimensions of its pear-being.

4.

She says, Go,
and the windows, a tympanum,
plate the crisp *go* on glass
and the pear, too, prints waves

bending like a conversation in the other room
listened to from inside a bathtub,
underwater.
The conversation is of whattodoabout
something, usually nothing
that can be,
like still life, one fruit short,

or placement that leans when it should bristle.

Would she say *go* to me
on Tuesday? Wednesday?
Would my body register the guttural stop,
then the release of vowel, opening out
like a ripening
for every afternoon of sun
or overcast with drooping
eaves? Can an utterance
open so far
it begins to erase?

5.

Biting the pear is another matter.
Teeth tracks across plump side.
Tracks even and raw,
to fill with seeping-in
juice-water.

Taste sweet, slightly burnt.

Another bite,
water more than thought
gathers groundwelling into itself.

There is no core, no pit
delineated exactly, flesh eases into seed, seed into
seed, and you never reach

nothing. The bite is imagined,

the seed is good,
the center,
redundant.

6.

Then there's the matter of Caravaggio—
why should he get to paint

them all? so none are left
and we can never eat the humblest
Bartlett
without his oil smear on it—

Ah yes. Ah, children. We children. The dangers
of after-image,
and a post-post world. What enters,

on this plate,
blue-edged lattice design,
the sliced pear,

celadon rind—
crisp pulp—
light slumps about today

as a child
who is tired but will not let on—
perhaps because fatigue lets you
stick your head in a doorway you don't have
to remember. You can go
nonsyntactical. You're not responsible

for progress

of the rain that may be convening
in the gray balloon

above sharp rooftops.

An iris wouldn't change this.

Not even a purple one

with private colors running into the undeniable center.

Skin of silk so passionate

it needs no bones

to shape it—

only air.

Perhaps these slices can be eaten after all.

We become what we cannot remember.

7.

From the fuse end

the smell crystallized sugar, and something piercing.

From the flower end, a fuller and louder chord
of juices—amber cellos, green violas, and at the upper end
housefinches tweedle.

For once I want to stand

in that axis, could I

please? from stem-end to

—pick it up, look—

ruffle-end, a tiny nest in the middle of dessicated ruffle.

Mid-week to week-end, would I tip,
a degree's filament, with it

as it crushed inward toward its pole,

one curve of the pear slightly more lost

than the others in this second's

almost unnoticeable wobble, of us?

Would it follow sun in the windows,

south-east to south,

as if it had a tree

still suspended to its stem?

8.

How many times do I mistake you, my daughter,
for the way sadness every so often
climbs up out of itself

and the world forms
not to the inside of an urn, but the out? and you

infuriate proportion—

membrane propped in the curvature

of a bubble you blow
from a plastic wand

sailing not pear-ward but window-ward

round as zero,

indigo outline,

blind eyeball, blind glass . . .

9.

And if I stood in the pole of the pear,
rode its axis like a roller coaster
through the day,

would sun return to me, juice,
full, unction, utter,

as I if beyond any judge, fury, utmost, or ever
any metonymy?

I'm trying to say the part
does not exist.

I'm trying to say Columbus does not exist—

that we may sail
often on the line of his sextant,
but not on Tuesdays or Wednesdays.

The car parked in my window,
tree branches its curtains,
the gray loft fully and evenly gray
despite the sparrow hurtling
wings through it,

spreads tales of rain

that the pear has heard before.

10.

Rind the water

of a small lake, cross-currents of wind
hashing the surface. Untroubled wind.

Around a brown gouge hashes elongate.

Body of pin-scaled water
wrapping a ewer.
Strange: the water

on the outside.

And the sea rearranges
its affairs one day to another
slash, another gouge that pulls
wash into its vortex. Or the same gouge

that pulls stronger, its stretched skin
back into itself

No ewer pours
No cry starts

that the looking can't be part of.

11.

Caravaggio's angels twisted in sheets—

like the one come to give Matthew a bulletin,
its ringlets astir—

these angels have fed on Caravaggio's fruit

twisted in its own sheets
of pearskin, denuded of leaves
not quite happy in the bowl

where light bundles.
It has its own message.

A lip of gold
and gold freckles
defies the porcelain bowl with dragons
writhing and firing the inside arc.

Matthew fought dragons, coins, and the folds
of his robe.

The angel has done its job—
—blood faucets behind and before—
swish of linen—

tosses its ringlets.

Takes a bite.

12.

Sun takes its turn on the sideboards,
the near edge of the dining table.
Now the far edge,
telephone table.

Should I chop the light?

I could cut it with window blinds—

Sentences of pretend.

My daughter makes boats

out of throwrugs, boxes,
pedals them across placid wood lakes.
Says *go*, and cats scatter.

You can feel molecules slosh against the walls.

Infrared heat photographs of Vladimir Malakov dancing,
effortless *battement*, *pas de chat*:

and red flares in his shoulders, pectorals, groin.

The flash of our living room in red cat streaks,
red wake of the boat,
red pear in the bowl.

Oh, but it's gone.

The scaphoid hold among apples and grapes.
Is unscaphoid.

The sun in my eyes
that was my throat.

Taste, taste.

Rowing without surface.

13.

Columbus walks ocean froth.

Caravaggio's pears

unpaint him.

If something recites sun in your hands.

Dear, dear.

Entelechy, I'm telling you.

The stem, more stumped than apple-stem, squat,
brown, and

when the pear is this ripe,
frighteningly
easy to pull out.

Entelechy of holding.

This is the it,
and the else, too.

14.

No pear ever garbled the light.

Columbus orders his men not to touch any Indian
hut or possession within,
yet takes, randomly,
Arawak women for the Arawak men
on the return trip to Spain.

Clear a space, clear a space.

He wants gold, wants to rake
gold the Indians never had.

Clear a sound
and the dulcet rounds of apples, the straggled vines
of grapes, worm-strafered leaves

will tremble, too
before they crush back in on themselves.

Chiaroscuro of good and not-as-good.

The evil is in the brush-lines?

The evil in the hair's-breadth
of pause that you know, I know,

when we look away.

When we look:
the gold the Indians never owned to be stolen

floods your cheeks.

15.

Caravaggio, some say, painted under artificial light.

What does that do to the pear, here
in front of me, under sixty-watt bulb?

Columbus, some say, feathered his own journal,
but he also left its
transcription to Las Casas, who later hated him.

Does the pear remold with that information?

Caravaggio wanted tragic effects candle light alone couldn't give.
Las Casas wanted to redeem the Arawak natives
Columbus had redacted into strokes and curios.

All for gold
of the streak below the stem—
(scumbled gold and ochre)—
stem still carrying the hard, shrunken leaf.

Columbus demanded the unnamed world look and smell like Andalusia
in the spring— of course—
what he thought to be the unnamed world—
even the snakes incapable of coil.

Unnamed: not many things.

Cherish them,
hold them in their unnamings.

Precolumbian Indians earnestly wearing anything
but gold
in their ears.

16.

Caravaggio's angels,
angels on a mission.

His Anjou, tapir-shaped in a basket with lemons, apples,
grape leaves
exhausted.

Siennas sent by luminous envelope.

I can't figure if it is less than,
or more.

My daughter wants whatever doesn't move
so she can move it.

The cat wants her motion.

You want, perhaps, rolls of light.

Take the edge off a little:
fin of sun.
Pear fish-speckled.
Before it putrefies.

Platforms of darkness, glacéed skin.

Take the edge, a little.

According to paramathematics, there are figures
that can trace one unbroken line
both inside and outside the bottle,

Grab a bottle made of canvas.

Start drawing.

Don't stop until outside becomes in.

Drink beyond drunkenness.

Dark and light.
Light and rain.
Rain and daughter.
Boats, air

deliquesce. A cobweb swings itself through paces.

I smell burnt sweetness
or is that the memory of burnt sweetness?

Can a pear differ?

I want what is not tantamount.

MARGARET AHO

stick out yo neck, lilly gal: a sequence

(an arbor

throws

chevrons on the wall above the

door: a frieze of v's,

vermiculate, a

vatic row

of ...)

rickrack

says ...

(get up and walk)

walk to the window where these letters

enter

(2x4's

stretch from their brackets on the house

to meet the crossbeam)

o wide-tooth-comb

(no vine no vintage)

o posts that prop the whole thing

up

(the whole thing ...

a kind of ...)

cage

(take it down?)

take out the window too say

lilacs ...

and alyssum ...

and the linden ...

(this could be ... this is a ...)

door

say door go

through

it

(exit?)

enter

say I am

entering

(entering)

the garden

MARGARET AHO

stick out yo neck, lilly gal: a sequence

Like camels have a hump for storing water

she had a hold, a stow of
breath compressed
there in the smooth swell
of her throat. Subtle. No wattle
pendent like a scrotum, nothing
goitrous; it was
quirky, unpredictable. Laryngeal.
Though her skin tried
to stay loose (her eyes stay
peeled) over this pent
sus-
piration, this glottal
stop (sporadically) ... this small adamic
orb of apple-
breath (randomly, as if in-
cised) ex-
pelled (out of the blue, out of her mouth)
a hissing:

ThiSS ... (it said) and thiSS ...

→

(and this) ...

As if whatever her sore eyes

fell upon

was it: the unexpellable

garden.

MARGARET AHO

stick out yo neck, lilly gal: a sequence

ketch yo' breff

crush hys-

sop (dis-

perse) over lumps of compressed

dust (dis/per se) douse

strike the match *'kaze I'm gwine*

ter bobbycue you dis day/sure/sho'/so

(salt the meat)

even lamb

sputters/spits hysss-

sop ... even the psalmist sizzles so's

'e kin spout (purge) me purge

phlegm from the lungs *yo' breff*

(expelleth) grief-gall

from *yo' body*

bags/purses/sacs o ... *sacky-*

fice (smoke)

laps the lintel, laps the door

with the press of ... propellant of

(mint!)

min ... mi ... mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm ...

(bee-magnet-blue) *hizzzzzzzzzzzz-*

zup, hummin', soundin' ...

like huz-

zahs from here ...

(mint-breath, bee-breath, preserver ...)

I would place in the hive of white coals

on a skewer:

yo' life, lilly gal?

(stick out your neck) my

neck

the globe in my throat *dat ol' worl'?* (hysss

o hysss) the stringy laryngeal

meat, the kebob

of my tongue ...

gittin' hotter en hotter (hush)

air ... give me ... I can't catch my ...

hol' still, hit'll come ...

(wind) *breff* my windbag/pipe's ...

kotch fier?

(brisanee!)

'bout time

(disperse)

bust up blazin' bust up!

huzzzzzzzzzz-

ah ...

MARGARET AHO

stick out yo neck, lilly gal: a sequence

South of Erie, 1949:

each night my

sisters/brothers/me

we stretch out. Dad reads to us: BrerFox, sezee,

how you git out

de fier?

We're dumb as turtles. Sezee, you doan know fier

frum fryin', git, stick out

yo' neck.

Los Alamos is hot. Uh-huh. And high. Uh-huh.

Accountant: wanted. Tallyman ...

tallystick-

man ... ; who wants dis

job? Dad holds out his/my/our

lives. Hol' on, clime up, stretch out ...

Mother reads from Butler's **Lives**: a man

is stretched, his sinews

snap over a slow

fire. Bobbycued, sezee. Bingo! Right here

a weldment:

→

us/BrerFox/BrerTarrypin/SaintLawrenceOnTheGrill

stretch out no-shell-no-fur-no-head-no-

trunk-with-limbs, just

flesh: a stretch of it, swollen and burning and

I feel it

in my neck, like a neck like one long stretched out

neck

burning at both ends, like a stick

of tallow

like a hollow

log

hollering,

swallowing the fire ...

like a way

out.

BOOKS IN BRIEF:
A TRANSPORT OF DELIGHT
Marion K. Stocking

Curious Reader: There are a lot of publishers and poets who'd like to know how you choose which books to review.

MKS: Fair enough. First, I really do read through every one that arrives (some, I confess, very quickly). If I find one I can't resist I set it aside. For this issue I read through about two hundred and set aside fifty. Then I went through those fifty slowly, luxuriously, making notes and winnowing.

CR: And these final few, what makes them irresistible?

MKS: I've been thinking hard about that. My usual approach is analytical, but I find my profoundest response is subjective, like love. Fairfield Porter claimed that love means "paying very close attention" and that you can only pay close attention to something "because you can't help doing so."

CR: Can you explain what might command that attention?

MKS: I can try. One easy answer is simply the Wordsworthian imperative: it gives me pleasure. Energy. Delight. If Blake's devil is right, energy is from the body and is "Eternal Delight." And if Frost is right, poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom. I'll go for the energy and the delight and hope for the wisdom. A corollary of energy would be intensity, including Yeats' "intensity of personal life." I've been rereading Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*, and I'm taken by her sense of a poem as "a transfer of human energy" from the poet into the poem and then into the reader—ideally a reader who is capable of a total response. I want to be that reader. And then I want to involve *my* reader in that "transport of delight."

CR: Yes, but what exactly transports you?

MKS: Well, it varies. Music, certainly. Sensuousness, and many senses of *sense*. Sometimes just playfulness. A sense of humor. A dramatic sense—the poem as an action. A sense of discovery, something that changes me, moves me somewhere new—sensuously or intellectually—somewhere I'd never had a language for.

CR: For Flanders and Swan the transport of delight was "a BIG six-WHEELer, SCARlet PAINTed, LONdon TRANSPort, DIESEL

Engine, NINETY-seven HORSE power OMniBUS.”

MKS: Exactly! Which reminds me that I should be directing all this to actual poems.

■
I'll start with an easy one—**Seamus Heaney's *Electric Light*** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, hardbound, 98 pp., \$20., 0-374-14683-7). Here's his “Perch,” complete:

Perch on their water-perch hung in the clear Bann River
Near the clay bank in alder-dapple and waver,

Perch we call “grunts,” little flood-slubs, runty and ready,
I saw and I see in the river's glorified body

That is passable through, but they're bluntly holding the pass,
Under the water-roof, over the bottom, adoze

Guzzling the current, against it, all muscle and slur
In the finland of perch, the fenland of alder, on air

That is water, on carpets of Bann stream, on hold
In the everything flows and steady go of the world.

I delight in the language, the freshness of it and the music of it. I feel the immediacy of the energy—a muscular energy. The physicality of the *uhs* in line 3 and *bluntly* and in the *guzzling* line. The slant rhymes. The playful little puns. The tricky syntax in the last line. I love the echoes of the prosody of *Beowulf*: the compounding, the balance within each line, the subtly structural alliteration and assonance. And then the tension between the control of the meter and the flow of the river, culminating in the open vowel-stream of “on hold/ In the everything flows and steady go of the world.” I delight in the way the whole flow of our poetic tradition enters the poem, from the Anglo-Saxon compounding and harp-stroke rhythm to the linguistic luxuriance of Hopkins. I love the poet's spell-bound attention to the fish, compelling my following attention. And I respond to the broader human implication of the last line—Hopkins' devotion, but without the explicit religion.

■
Another, very different, delight is **Mary Leader's *The Penultimate Suitor*** (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001, 82 pp., cloth

\$29.95, 0-87745-7654; paper \$13, 0-87745-48-4). No one poem can represent the exuberant imagination in this volume, but here's the last part of a sonnet, "Rowboat on the Seine (*After a photograph by Irving Penn*)":

at first

One assumes that the boat is receding. But then you realize—
Right—you're way ahead of me—if we see the—yeah—
Rower from behind, of course: the boat's approaching.

This then, is what she is to be given: a growing
Of the dark coat-back, the boat's dark hull, its banded
Rim: narrow red / broad blue / narrow red: coming,
Reflection breaking up. . . oar-splash, loudening, close!

And what she is not to be given: his face, his body,
His mind, mating hers, that blurring, when apertures flare.

First, as with Heaney, I admire the close attention, drawing the reader in. Then the imagination, penetrating the flatness of the photograph. Then the dramatic immediacy, involving the reader in the action (that lovely slither from the *One* to the general *you* to the specific *you* of the individual reader). The energy, the dynamics of the verse! And then (since it really is a sonnet) the couplet that explodes the image: the poet and reader have entered the viewpoint of a woman—a vital, intelligent, sensuous woman—whose doomed relationship to the rower is encapsulated in those two lines. No reader will have run ahead of the poet to anticipate the erotic flare of those last two words. Every page of this zingy, funny, heart-breaking book serves up such epiphanies.

One of the distinctive forms in the poetry of our time is the sequence or series, sometimes extending to a whole volume. Mary Leader's book is rich in this genre. Reading her "Album of Eight Landscapes & Eight Poems" I imagine each section as enacting the process of artistic attention that enables a painting. Vivid. Further, I read each as a letter to a strongly loved teacher. The expression of that passion intensifies as the sections progress, climaxing in images of furious destruction, then a salvaging, at the end, of the force—the wisdom—of the teacher's words: "*The double-edged nature of all/ profound encounters// Revealing and confusing, / regenerating and/ destroying.*" Each of those five phrases applies to Leader's own work throughout this book. Her "Sequence as Op-

posed to Series” swirls through the end of an erotic relationship in which the mentor is the lover—eight sonnets (one of them only the wicked couplet). Then follows her “Series as Opposed to Sequence,” with its very different surprises. I’ll leave it to the reader to discover what Leader performs in this musical-geological-botanical-photographic score. And then what miracles she works with a photograph of a dozen roses, with the music of Gerald Finzi (in “For the Love of Gerald Finzi,” which garnered this magazine’s Chad Walsh prize in 1997), with delicious narrative in “Orange Rose and Blue Reader.” If you are like me you will soon be running around looking for someone to read the whole book aloud to—someone to share your delight in the arts and passions and lyric extravagances of this mercurial poet.

■

Another mercurial poet is **Anne Carson**. We have three new books, each with its own cargo of delights. Because I had a long career as scholar-teacher, I take an especial pleasure in her scholarly writing. I enjoy her use of other languages (so flatteringly that I can pretend that I am reading the originals). I relish the tint of poetry in her prose (one critic refers to her scholarly books as prose poems). So it was with anticipation that I opened her ***Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)***, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999, 156 pp., clothbound, \$29.95, 0-691-03677-2). Carson claims that Simonides was “the smartest person in the fifth century B.C., or so I have come to believe.” He was the first poet to be paid for his writing (principally epitaphs), and so stands at the point where a gift economy gives way to that commodification of energy that fuels our present economy. By contrast, Paul Celan was the German poet so appalled by the acts of the Third Reich that he suffered profound alienation from his own language, in which he continued to write with an economy and repressed energy that makes his work for poets today simultaneously obscure and hypnotically appealing. Carson takes her reader through poems by these two poets, placing them in their necessary contexts, translating and analyzing them, and making their significance lucid, though finally I could not feel confident that the analogies between the two were very significant. That is a miniscule quibble about a book that deals throughout with things that matter: memory, death, grief, language, economics (including the implications of

commodification), the rhetoric of politics, and the function of poetry as “a mode of knowledge.”

I value this volume, too, as one way of approaching Carson’s own poetry. Her introductory “Note on Method” begins: “There is too much self in my writing.” She confesses that she has “struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out into the landscape of science and fact where other people converse logically and exchange judgements—but I go blind out there.” For her the alternative is the windowless room “cleared of everything I do not know.” The clearing takes time and is a “mystery.” She cites Lukács’ claim that it begins with the “intent to excise everything that is not accessible to the immediate experience (*Erlebbarkeit*) of the self as self.” This tension between the academic and the self-absorbed artist informs much of Carson’s writing. “Attention,” Carson says, “is a task we share, you and I.”

Next in the Carson canon comes *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000, 168 pp., hardbound, \$24, 0-375-40803-7), an astonishing miscellany. As in *Economy of the Unlost* she likes to throw apparently disparate characters together, just to see whether a conversation occurs—for instance, “Ordinary Time: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides on War.” Hokusai and Audubon confront each other in adjoining poems. Quotations from St. Augustine attach themselves to paintings by Edward Hopper (no conversation that I could hear, but worth a try). Like John Cage, Carson delights in defying expectations. I certainly didn’t expect to find here a scholarly article on “Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity,” but here it is, and it’s simply wonderful. If there are still freshman anthologies, this essay should be in them, not only for its insights into the roots of our gender culture but as a model of graceful academic prose and meticulous documentation of research.

Another distinctive Carson approach is what William Matthews has called “imaginatively colonizing”: projecting one’s consciousness into some thing or other self in the real world. A poem titled “Freud (2nd draft)” begins “If you go to Iowa visit the Raptor Center.” The poet’s rapt attention to a crippled bald eagle there so engages the reader that we finally slip into the mind of the

bird. Here Carson's world of facticity and her windowless room of self coalesce. Her colonizing the consciousness of another produces one of my favorite pieces in this book, "Irony Is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve (2nd draft)." I was pleased to read in Melanie Rehak's interview in *The New York Times Magazine* (26 March 2000) Carson's explanation: "I saw this movie, 'The Thieves,' about Deneuve being a philosophy teacher in Paris. . . . In it, she had a sweater just like one of mine. Afterward, I went home and began thinking about what it would be like to be Catherine." The result is this strong prose poem, which dramatizes in a series of mental scenarios the development of an erotic relationship between a teacher and a student. Here's just a sample:

Deneuve has a sense of being flicked on a hook. Girl starts to talk about her love in Paris. Who thinks her too dependent. *You?* Deneuve says, hitting the bottom of a volcanic pipe at top speed, all her diamonds going the wrong way. *Toujours comme ça.* Beauty departs. Later at home Deneuve sits by a window. Smell of night so different than smell of day. Frozen darkness like old tin. Like cold cats. Like the word *pauvre*.

As in Mary Leader's "Album of Eight Landscapes & Eight Poems," the work may well be fiction, but it tells truth about a relationship that many a teacher will recognize. John D'Agata, in a fine critique of *Men in the Off Hours* in *Boston Review* (Summer 2000), mentions that he published the first draft of this poem as a thirty-page spread in *Seneca Review*, where it appeared spaced out (sculpturally) as verse. Queried, Carson enlightened him: it needed to be less airy, she said, more claustrophobic, and so evolved into this eight-page sequence of prose poems. Scholars of the future will doubtless require both versions.

Despite Carson's elaborate fictional frames, sometimes the personal appears very close to the surface, as in the beautiful "Father's Old Blue Cardigan," where she puts on his sweater and, recalling a look on his face, imagines his consciousness as he drifts into what I take to be Alzheimer's:

as a small child who has been dressed by some aunt early in
the morning
for a long trip

on cold trains and windy platforms
will sit very straight at the edge of his seat
while the shadows like long fingers

over the haystacks that sweep past
keep shocking him
because he is riding backwards.

The final poem in this volume appears to drop any screen of fiction to address the death of her mother. "Appendix to Ordinary Time" turns to Virginia Woolf's diaries for consolation and finds there Woolf's reflection on the death of her father, when "forming such shocks into words and order was 'the strongest pleasure known to me'." And to seal us into ordinary time Carson ends with a snapshot of her mother and herself—the mother laid back, the daughter, about two years old, erect, gazing tensely, toes curled, into the camera. Prose or poetry, fact or fiction, it is the intensity of the attention, the energy of the language, the brilliance of the imagination, and the humanity of the impulse that draw me into each new work of hers.

And the newest is *The Beauty of the Husband: a fictional essay in 29 tangos* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001, 152 pp., clothbound \$22, 0-375-40804-5). The jacket flap informs us that this is an essay on "Keats's idea that beauty is truth," that it is "also the story of a marriage," and that a tango "(like a marriage) is something you have to dance to the end." It's a "fictional essay," yet we know that the poet had, herself, an early marriage that led to divorce, two decades ago. That is all we know about the background and perhaps more than we need to know.

We learn right away that the fictional husband's appeal is his irresistible beauty and that he is a compulsive liar (our latest Byronic hero?). The irony of the message of the Grecian urn ("beauty is truth, truth beauty") is immediately apparent. Carson introduces each tango with a brief quotation from Keats—nearly all from his obscurer writings. His imitation Jacobean drama "Otho the Great" provides many of these epigraphs—a play that portrays a madly infatuated lover married to Auranthe, a woman of dazzling beauty but treacherous mendacity.

More useful (for Carson's work as a whole, even more than for

this essay) is what Matthews called “colonizing.” She makes it clear that she is aware of this process by her quoting from Keats’s marginalia in *Paradise Lost*—the passage in which Satan addresses his fellow fallen angels: “one of the most mysterious of semi-speculations is, one would suppose, that of one Mind’s imagining into another.” The ironies are rich: in Satan, beauty and mendacity coexist, yet Blake and many others consider him to be the most “true” of all Milton’s creations. We also need the passage in an 1817 letter in which Keats writes: “What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not.” Or remember jesting Pilate, who asked “What is truth” and did not stay for an answer. Carson, imagining a scene between the husband (never named, never described) and a friend, has him say “I never lied to her. When need arose I may have used words that lied.”

Although there is some intellectual pleasure in pursuing such questions as what is beautiful about truth and true about beauty, in *The Beauty of the Husband* I take more delight in the “essay” as a work of art. The genre is chameleonic. The sculpture of the lines on the page says “poem.” The line lengths vary extremely. Read aloud, much of it might well sound like prose. Yet there are surges of cadence that make a complex rhythmic music and some delicious poems qua poem. Although the poet refers to “Fair reader,” I can imagine this as a film script: the camera tracking a woman, early middle age, talking to a childhood friend. The camera flashes us back to earlier scenes, to snatches of conversation—both remembered and imagined—including takes of the husband when the wife is not there. If this is an essay, it is an intensely dramatic one. And, I’d insist, a very poetic one, with a distinctive lyric elegance.

■
It was lyric elegance that drew me in to **Gjertrud Schnackenberg’s *The Throne of Labdacus*** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000, 101 pp., hardbound, \$23, 0-374-27686). Without even thinking about what it’s saying, listen to the opening lines, where Schnackenberg establishes her flexible couplets. Listen for the cadences and pay attention:

The first warning passing through Thebes—
As small a sound

As a housefly alighting from Persia
 And stamping its foot on a mound

Where the palace once was;
 As small as a moth chewing thread

In the tyrant's robe;
 As small as the cresting of red

In the rim of an injured eye; as small
 As the sound of a human conceived—

Schnackenberg, like Carson, explores the timeless appeal of classical literature. Even someone who doesn't remember that Labdacus was the father of Laius, thus grandfather of Oedipus, will immediately recognize where we are (and if not, the poet provides exemplary end notes). She guides us on a complex intellectual adventure into the labyrinthine implications of the Oedipus legend. In the lines above we enter first from an anonymous scholar-poet's superior position, recognizing those first most delicate foreshadowings of the tragedy to come. Like Milton and Keats, this poet engages in that "most mysterious of semi-speculations," of "one Mind's imagining into another." Before we are through we will have entered the consciousness, not only of Oedipus himself, but of the Thebans, of Laius, of the shepherd who chose not to expose the infant, and of Apollo, the god of poetry and music, conceived here as responding to the first performance of the Sophocles play. Schnackenberg brings her readers to that play by way of the archaic roots of the legend in Babylonian cuneiform, whispers of it in "gossip, folktale, rumor, dream" during the silences between the shattered clay tablets and the invention of the Greek alphabet. We watch it emerge into our tradition, where we continue to ponder why this strange narrative should so survive and haunt our own consciousness.

In this poem the poet's self is merged—submerged—in her contemplation of the meaning of the legend. Everyone who has taught *Oedipus Tyrannus* can list a swarm of possible "meanings"; we encounter a catalogue of them here, but Schnackenberg enters new territory by considering the implications of the lacunae (another critic might say *aporia*) between the "terra-cotta crags" of the earliest cuneiform records, smashed to fragments,

“the meaning pouring away/ And leaving the story, in jagged pieces, behind.” Out of that historical silence emerges Sophocles’s tragedy, where Apollo himself is frightened by the self-blinding and by a story

The meaning of which nobody knows,

Or whose meaning *is* that nobody knows,

a story that had been sent to the god by “Faceless Necessity.” (Perhaps after all *aporia* is the right word.) Behind Apollo rules snowy Zeus, like George Meredith’s “army of unalterable law.” And beyond Zeus (who in this version *is*, not *does*) stands the force of Necessity, beyond “the bourn of right and wrong,” expressible, it would seem, only in music. The shepherd who chooses not to expose the infant on the mountain can enter that realm beyond words with his flute. And finally Apollo, identifying with the shepherd and touching his harp strings

With a gesture of flight,

Turns away from what happens below;

Rapt in unfolding insights

About snow—

Not justice, not law, not destiny,

Not sacrilege, not consequence,

Not causes and effects,

Not oracles—

But rapt in a glimmering cascade,

A barely audible arpeggio.

What are we left with as the god of poetry abandons us to silence? In my reading, *The Throne of Labdacus* leaves us with two imperatives of the human condition. For one, we have the character of Oedipus, suspended between the oracular “*Ill-starred man, may you never know/ Who you are*” and the Delphic demand to “Know Yourself.” We last see the old king hauling on his back a “Nameless, placeless, invisible throne” that he means “To carry to the heart of things,/ To set it down, to clamber onto it, and,/ With bandaged eyes, to sit in judgement on himself.” For another imperative, we have the shepherd’s words, echoed later by Apollo:

to be presenting a singularly naked account of her emotions—naked except for the images and the carefully orchestrated music of the verse. The subject is often painful, but the poetry is powerful—as grief and joy appear inseparable (William Matthews used to say he couldn't tell those two emotions apart). The opening poem (first published in the Fall 1999 issue of this journal) plunges us into "The Dreams We Wake From"—dreams that

are dams bursting, oceans suddenly swallowed
by seas of blowing sand.
 With lizard and jackrabbit skeletons, with cracked satellite
dishes revolving
like blisters on the glazed shell of the planet
 now all our newsreels are nightmares.

(Poems that portray the shattering of sensibility take this scattered form on the page. More meditative or celebratory poems take more regular form. Goedicke's command of syntax and prosodic organization deserves more attention than I have space for here. It is masterly.)

In the title poem of this volume and in "The Dreams We Wake From" the vision of entropy renders ironic the familiar line in that 1817 letter where Keats compares the imagination "to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth." The truth we wake to here implies, like the dream, that even the most beautiful things (in nature, in human relationships) are moving toward dust—literally cosmic dust as well as household "grey fluff."

Goedicke is wrestling with ultimate questions. Most of her poems are too long to quote here, but I'll select one of the shorter ones, "From the Beginning," to explain what I am responding to. It is another of the entropy poems.

Up to the eyeballs. Choked in it. Our
selves, minds compleat
 of mud. Shapeless, are we?
Even as I sluice toothpaste, rinse,
 what spins in the glass
every day is intangible
 vanishings.
 What we eat, *think*:
boiling water for rice.

→

And washing napkins, clear
 phlegm. Hair balls in the corner.
 Outside
 berries, seeds in bear scat.
 Or pieces of metal, loose screws trampled
 into sludge. Heavy garage floors whirled
 like glaciers around the world, giant
 glittering monocles winking
 in the Eye that imagines All,
 massifs or
 mites. Refractions of the most distant
 galaxy but one,
 bigger, smaller than
 EsMiss EsMoore at the railing
 bound outward, wandering
 waterfalls of stars, stars.....
 Motes on a glass. Sleek wriggles
 on the vast slide smear of heaven.
 Arms, legs, *human beings*, oh
 never to know you
 again would be
 such waste wild, wild
 the proximal cold mulch
 of rain forests, Peruvian
 fire ants and faces,
 the green globe cracked open
 like an overripe pumpkin, enormous
 wet maggot heap
 of trashed statues,
 what we do to ourselves, were done to
 from the beginning, lost
 or gobbled up, for Whose appetite
 invisible atoms, minced angels ground
 to pieces in the universal blender?

First you should read the poem aloud, thinking what every space of silence suggests. Savor the concentration of syntax and image in the first three lines, with the sarcasm that results from the first two line breaks. The tone is slithery. The poet speaks not for herself alone but for all of us. She has that double vision Thoreau speaks of where as we act we observe ourselves acting (a habit of mind, I might add, conducive to a sense of humor). Some of these

lines suggest that humorous distance. Check the syntax: first, short stutters of image enacting a distracted, choppy energy, keeping the reader off balance. When a sentence uncoils over several lines, each line is a surprise—those whirling garage floors leading to the silly monocle image that sets the wry tone for the reference to some sort of cosmic “Eye.” Halfway through the poem we have learned to adjust our eye to the zoom lens that switches from infinity to the microscopic and back in a twinkling. Like Mrs. Moore in Foerster’s *Passage to India* we begin to lose hold of the quotidian. What is that “most distant/ galaxy but one”? As we drift outward into the cosmos, words fail. Two more flash focuses of the zoom lens and suddenly the camera comes to rest on “Arms, legs, *human beings*.” Goedicke’s voice rises startlingly from the ironic scientific to the human wail of metaphysical protest against the waste of all the vanishings. “Oh/ never to know you// again would be/ such waste, wild, wild.” The *you*, in the context of this book, is first the husband but also what Frost reminds us Lucretius meant by Nature: “the Whole Goddam Machinery.” Here follows a catalogue of natural images, modulating into “trashed statues” (an image fortuitously fortunate!), and the uniquely human (“*what we do to ourselves, were done to*”). The poem concludes with three lines of almost unbearable existential rage, mitigated only by the question mark. I recall Wordsworth’s note to “The Thorn,” where he warns that “the Reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings; now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequacies of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language.” As *Earth Begins to End* expresses a broad range of speculations and emotions, including some powerful love poetry. I may by my examples have made it seem more grim than, taken as a whole, it is. Patricia Goedicke’s book is a manual of how passion and intelligence, coupled with meticulous candor, a self-observing sense of humor, and powerful language can make a glory and a delight from our mutable physical and metaphysical condition.