

BPJ

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**COVER**

Design by **Mary Greene**  
from photograph, "Glacier: For My Father," 1997,  
by **Ann Arbor**



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

## EDITORS' NOTE

Becoming editors of the *BPJ* has led us to reflect briefly on what makes it worthwhile to do the daily work of producing a poetry journal. We don't intend, we hasten to reassure you, to make a habit of editorializing, as we value the *BPJ* policy of letting the poems we publish speak for themselves.

Even as we assume new responsibilities at the *BPJ*, we maintain a long tradition. We benefit from the wisdom of Marion Kingston Stocking as editor of reviews, as inspiration, mentor, and friend. Whether topical or textual, her essays exemplify how to combine the particular with the general, literary analysis with social commentary. Despite our continuing commitment to an absence of biographical notices, we feel compelled to append a comment to Marion's review in this issue of *The Best American Poetry 2003*, edited by Yusef Komunyakaa. We note with sorrow the suicide/murder of the poet Reetika Vazirani and their child. When we are guests in a house death has entered, it seems inappropriate to ignore its presence.

At our quarterly meeting in July, the editorial board had the pleasure of considering a greater than usual number of fine manuscripts, including the six long poems and poem sets that follow. In the aggregate and individually, they illustrate what we long for as we sift the contents of the dozen or more envelopes that appear at our new address each day: complex visions broader than the merely personal; fresh music; language that makes us laugh and weep, recoil, resist—and pay attention. The aesthetic and moral universes of these poems make no simple harmonies with each other; they stand on their own, and we feel we're more alive for having entered them.

—John Rosenwald and Lee Sharkey

# BPJ

THE EDITORS OF  
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL  
ARE PROUD TO AWARD  
THE ELEVENTH ANNUAL  
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE  
OF \$3,000

TO  
MARY MOLINARY  
FOR HER POEMS  
“FROM EVE’S EPISTLE TO LILITH” AND  
“ASHES OF BURNED MANUSCRIPTS  
ADRIFT IN THE WIND, SO”  
IN THE SPRING 2003 ISSUE.

HONORING THE POET CHAD WALSH,  
COFOUNDER, IN 1950, OF THIS MAGAZINE,  
THE PRIZE IS THE GIFT THIS YEAR OF  
ALISON WALSH SACKETT AND PAUL SACKETT.

**KARL ELDER**  
**Anna Banana**

A. B. C. D. E. F. G. H. I. J.  
Bird. What's a J-Bird, anyway? How'd it  
come to be naked? Maybe it's a she.  
Does she live in a tree? A. B. C. D.  
E is for Eve, whose apple isn't just  
for her, the teacher, especially when  
getting her pupil's goat's more savory.  
Here's a little ditty: 1. 2. 3. 4.  
in a boy child's best prepubescent voice.  
Jump rope's like that. They've got you hopping, then  
K-I-S-S-I-N-G in a tree.  
Lust? Ask around. On any playground *like*  
means love. Love is yuck. Strictly for grown-ups.  
No respectable kid carves or draws hearts  
on oaks or walks if the object's not to  
pimp your buddy. As for girls? Few are the  
queens keeping to an airy castle while  
royalty's right ventricle's still AWOL.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow  
them, female and male, Jill and Jack, up, up,  
up the hill and back, back, back until all  
virtuosity they once lacked appears  
without warning to dance, dance away doom.  
X, God knows, is but one sex chromosome.  
Y is why it takes two to fandango.  
Zoom in. Zoom out. Big and small, they're human.

**KARL ELDER**

**Everything I Needed to Know**

Ashes, Ashes, we fall on our asses  
because the teacher has us. Rodeo  
clowns make about as much sense, but then they  
don't graduate from kindergarten  
early either. Neither did they have  
for their teacher Mrs. Cunningham, whose  
grave countenance no kid had the word for:  
Her is no bull sitter. Her is squeezing  
in chair, knees together. Her is a locked  
jaw with lips like a bad ventriloquist's.  
Kind of like a lady Clutch Cargo. Or  
like the bride of a Nordic Frankenstein,  
motherless but blonde, beautiful, and big.  
Nobody here knows she has another  
occupation but me. I'm her little  
Picasso, her baby ham, and cunning.  
"Quit staring, Karl Curtis," she says, looking  
right at me. She knows I know for a split  
second she disappeared and does not want  
to reveal her secret identity  
underneath. I know she knows I draw some  
very naked ideas. Later, when  
we go around and tell in tones like the  
xylophone's, girls always first, what it is  
you want to be when you grow up, I say  
Zorro because a poet needs a mask.

**KARL ELDER**

**Original Sin**

“A ain’t just for applesauce,” the alpha  
bet Adam, who bemoaned the fact they were  
classmates, of the same school, no less, Adam  
dumb as he was, as Alf was smart as. “In  
each of my hands,” Alf then posed, “I hold peach  
fuzz but no peach. Now *what*,” he said, “have I  
got?” Adam’s eyes jerked side to side as if  
his head were caught in a vice, the riddle  
inside, as if Eve might have the answer,  
just over his shoulder, mum. “My word, what  
kind of conundrum have these two cooked up?”  
lisped Adam as though a condom sheathed his  
mother tongue or a code invaded his  
nose. “Come home hungry and what do I get—  
original thin and a thickening  
plot, as though Elmer Fudd’s become my lot.”  
Querulousness being father of prayer,  
right away the Good Lord God Almighty  
spoke: “Good grief, man, as though that knot in your  
throat were not enough, you’re clueless, too. Your  
ewe is lost, your luck is fucked, dah dah dah /  
dit dit dit dah / dit / dit dah dit.” Adam  
wished he’d been born all alone. Now, rated  
X, with no recompense, he in his myth  
yammers on, stewed with the sour juice of  
Zeus—how *he* might have made him president.

**KARL ELDER**  
**Agnostic Radio**

Agnostic Radio. Maybe there could  
be commercials like HBO's got on  
CBS, and Christian Radio would  
devour late night spots. It could lend the  
emergency broadcasting system's trill  
fabulous new meaning. Somewhere, with time  
gone by, angels might be ripping off their  
headsets at the shrill memory of fear  
inherent in a mindset that includes  
Judgement Day. Instructed to stand by, to  
keep their hands off the dial or—in a more  
lavish era—the scan button, they knew  
mothers would be separated from their  
newborns, husbands from wives, that their lives would  
officially be over before the  
program manager administered pop  
quizzes even, let alone returned to  
regularly scheduled programming. Sow  
seeds of doubt in sentient creatures so  
traumatized, and souls will sprout where are holes.  
Under like circumstances the human  
vole might not be angels' alien, but  
with its own blind though visionary and  
xenomorphic metaphysics of forms  
yet see itself as beings before souls.  
Zookeeper beware of tunnels in air.

**KARL ELDER**

**The Chills**

Awe, we know, is opposite of *ennui*,  
beauty being the form, the good worm to  
churn the soil of even the darkest souls.  
“Dig, thus, your own grave to dance upon it,”  
every poet I’ve dug from Poe on down  
forewarns. Yet it’s not lore for which I bore  
goosebumps today, the first time in months, nor  
horror before a mirror, but love of  
inspiration, insight flying blind like  
jagged lightning, mind to mind, across a  
kindred sky. Alone on my way home, a  
lull in an otherwise dull day at work,  
my finger hits the PWR button and,  
now, like the air bag went off, something like  
ozone fills the van, liquid emotion,  
perfection in the raw that saw—you can  
quote me—hair stand in my ear to then lean,  
reaching for the origin of the storm,  
speakers speaking in tongues, licks electric,  
tons of nuance and that shrill demand you  
understand: “I am what I am, Edward  
Van Halen.” I thank God for the goddamned  
wonder of it, that energy, the gift,  
*x* for all your problems solved if only  
your answer were not a mystery, that  
zone more like home than the earth where you live.

**KARL ELDER**  
**The Resignation**

Ace-deuce-tray-lady-kink—another hand  
busted before it began. If the whore  
could have only come up a four, your king  
down, dirty as it may be, might have been  
enough to best the better, to call his  
flush or shush a bluff in this two-fisted  
game named stud—misnomer if ever you  
heard one. Pud poker would be more like it—  
aye, Mate, even Watergate, a ship you'd  
jump but didn't dare with a stroke weak as your  
kick. See, the captain—alias luck—has you  
lashed to her mast. You're her chump, her Richard  
Milhous Nixon, not one known to know a  
noose from a knot. Still, once upon a time  
once a month while a sailor in the South  
Pacific, seemed you sent home every pot—  
Quaker or not. It's how you financed the  
race, your California congressional  
seat. It's how you came to be beat then won  
the presidency to lose it again.  
Us? We all were winners and losers too—  
voters with a voice, finally, as you  
waved the sign for peace, arms a V then an  
X, that nix, that quick fix, ducking from sight.  
You understood the Law of Averages.  
Zapruder, after all, might have filmed you.

**KARL ELDER**

**A Mystery**

A pox on talk of the Apocalypse.  
Bears we thought haunt the back yard to put a  
crook in the shepherd's hook (erected to  
dangle seed and peanut butter) aren't the  
enemy. Neither is it we. Nor the  
foraging bull (moose?), who, like the bears, we  
get glimpses of on TV. You'd think our  
hour was now, seeing us at the window,  
indoors, of course, watching the bird feeder  
jiggle and bob, though these cockcrowing,  
kamikaze squirrels can't be the culprits,  
leaping, even, off rooftops. So the pole's  
mangled though the seed's not scattered. So no  
neighbors, though nice and nosy, know of noise—  
onomatopoeic onanism—  
poised now with their shades raised on all sides to  
quash its reoccurrence. As for us, we  
rise early as light allows, hoping to  
see no garden gargoyle gone nocturnal  
turned hell's owl, to kill two birds and test our  
unambiguous, unified theory's  
veracity: this is the work of no  
wind, no wombat. Plotted on a graph the  
x-axis's our understanding, flat. The  
y? That is the question—despite how few  
z's we get—that will never go away.

**KARL ELDER**

**The Haves and Have Nots**

Aye, even Shakespeare would plumb trade for my  
bones. At this minute I gots a robin  
crowing in clematis crawling up and  
down my mailbox planted here at good ole  
eleven-seventeen Robin Road you'd  
figure patrons might wants to know, 'cause I  
gots symmetry and I gots syllables.  
Healf? I gots healf in a handbasket 'cause  
I gots grandma's shawl 'cause I somehow gots  
June pneumonia, gots antibiotics,  
killer medicines, pills white as the doc's  
light enough to spook hoarse out of horse barn.  
Mrs. I gots too—nurse as well as wife.  
Now tell me. Is I happy? Is I free?  
On count one I gots poetry. On two—  
poll the citizenry. Folks here'd sooner  
quarantine creator than creation.  
Religion? Heaven knows—if it ain't gots  
swing, then I ain't gots a godblessed thing  
to sing, so you knows I gots religion.  
Understand this ain't just ink you read but  
veracity come to dwell for all the  
while in the sad city Felicity.  
Xuthus, great grand chile of Prometheus,  
yearns—even Will pines—for what I gots, by  
Zeus, be it but birdsong in borrowed light.

**VICTOR LODATO**

**The Lost Paintings of Vermeer**

(Other than the titles, as listed in various seventeenth-century inventories, no descriptions of these paintings exist.)

**The Visit to the Tomb**

The light—lavender, crepuscular—  
strikes the pale hand of the mourner.  
The fur cuff of her blueblack gown,  
a bristling halo. A citrine ring  
barely remarks on the scene,  
jaundiced eye, sleepy,  
worldly possession made other-  
worldly, made sick with sorrow  
as its heart-going-out glimmer  
falls onto the polished wood  
of the deathbox.

I know who's in the box  
and I have seen myself in  
the crinkum-crankum gown  
the mournful pose  
too many times

*goodbye, my love*  
*goodbye*

**A View of a House Standing in Delft**

Red brick, of course—midday shuttered,  
olive-green shutters, and one red.  
The red one is open, so we may see  
in shadow the idea of a woman, seated,  
bowing her head to the idea of white cloth.  
It may be your mother, especially if she is  
dead—then it will be her, in shadow,  
behind the red shutter.

Stand back. See the whole house.  
It is standing in the city of Delft  
where the light will suit you  
even if you do not love the woman

→

behind the red shutter.  
The house is standing in the ice-blue light.  
It is not waiting, it is not loitering.  
The house is standing  
because a long time ago a seed fell  
from the hand of the Angel of Houses  
flying through the ice-blue sky.  
From this the red bricks grew,  
and now the house stands in its own  
divinity—and it cannot be destroyed  
because it is forever lost.

Inside, you can be sure  
there are mirrors on the walls  
and maps and framed landscapes  
and in blue and white bowls  
on draped tables  
apples from the clean shops  
of iron-fisted old women.

**A Gentleman Washing His Hands in a Room with Sculptures**

It is not in a museum  
nor in the studio of a sculptor  
where the man in the grey velvet cape  
pours water into a white basin.  
The man is alone, he is not  
as young nor as beautiful  
as the naked white figures—  
though there is a resemblance.  
The man does not look at the figures,  
young men with inscrutable archaic smiles.  
He almost seems ashamed,  
looking down at the electric  
line of water—lead white—  
falling from the pitcher.  
He might be the cupbearer Ganymede,  
fallen—but this is not a painting  
on a mythological theme.

→

Look at the rosy hand  
poised over the basin,  
ready to enter the water  
and darken the yellow silk sleeve  
the man has neglected  
to pull away from his wrist

*Can you imagine your own death?*

Water basin, blood basin.  
Private gesture in immortal gloom.

*God be with him*

**A Gentleman and a Young Lady Making Music in a Room**

It's not what you think.  
It never is.  
The woman in the pale blue silk  
cradles her golden cittern,  
but the man in the slitted jacket  
looks out the window,  
his viol on the floor beside him.  
Who will drink  
the single glass of wine on the table?  
Who will take down the silver-  
framed painting of Cupid  
when the lovers grow old and poor?  
It's not what you think.  
It never is.  
My father never loved  
my mother  
    the woman at her playing  
looks up at the viewer—what can I do?  
*Mother, what can I do?*

**The Portrait of Vermeer in a Room with Various Accessories Uncommonly  
Beautifully Painted by Him**

He looks like me  
when I am smiling—  
which I rarely do,  
even in the old photos.  
It is not convincing,  
a true lover would not be fooled  
by our upturned lips  
pinned into place.  
We wear a lamp-black beret,  
insouciantly cocked—  
masters of disguise,  
impostors in our own portrait.  
The wall behind us is troubled  
by a fire of ochre and orange.  
We are seated, *contrapposto*,  
on a chair with lion-head finials,  
lustre-topped with dots of Naples yellow.  
Our beautiful left hand  
rests atop our beautiful right;  
together they lie on a book,  
moss green, cream pages.  
Beside us, on a round table,  
various objects—what?  
It appears there is a silver cup,  
the reconstructed bones  
of a cat—or perhaps it is  
a maquette of a temple.  
There is a little bell,  
I want there to be  
a little bell

*good morning*

Who can tell anymore  
what these things are?  
It's getting dark.  
I want there to be  
a little bell

*good morning*

**KATHLEEN DALE**

**Unframed Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman**

*for A.P., poet, 1942–1997*

the edge where artists are always leafing,  
showing you how to frame the snapshot and  
suddenly you're out of the picture too, missing

from all the glassine sleeves, the heavy albums as if  
your children had no mother,  
your husband no wife.

As it should be, you said, that first evening I came to you, sobbing  
my story into the folds of your green silk robe, if women are  
to be artists, so we both roped off rooms of our own,  
painted them white, allowed no one on board.  
At least that was the plan.

*O tell me all about Anna Livia! I want to hear all about Anna Livia. Well, you  
know Anna Livia? Yes, of course, we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell me  
now. You'll die when you hear.*

We were like Picasso and Braque, you said.  
So different. Sure, you had many lovers, but allowed  
none access whereas a husband and children  
flowed over my cordoned craft, dotted my shores,

watched me solemnly, waving from the centers of  
photographs, shielding their bright faces from  
view with small outspread hands.

With the right frame you  
can distance yourself from most  
anything.

There's the one where

*She must have been a gadabout in her day, so she must, more than most.  
Shoal she was, gidgad. She had a flewmen of her owen. Then a toss nare  
scared that lass, so aimai moe, that's agapo! Tell me, tell me, how can she  
camlin through all her fellows, the neckar she was, the diveline? Casting her  
perils before our swains*

you celebrated my one miscarriage but hooted and danced  
with my living daughters, drawing out their giggles  
on long golden threads. I drew myself up to your clean

uncluttered table, loving your laughter and  
your elegance, your green candles snuggled into  
silver dragonsticks, the flowing blueriver of your cloth.

*Soft morning, city! Lsp! I am leafy speafing! Lpf! Foltly and foltly all the nights  
have falled on to long my hair. Not a sound, falling. Lisprn! No wind no word.  
Only a leaf, just a leaf and then leaves. The woods are fond always. As were we  
their babes in. And robins in crews so. It is for me golden wending.*

*I am leafy, your goolden, so you called me, may me life, yea your goolden, silve  
me solve, exsogerraidier! You did so drool. I was so sharm. But there's a great  
poet in you too.*

You said poems were like babes, that  
you needed to dry the birth mucus  
before they were presentable.

So did I revise, but would not let  
you dry my daughters or my life.  
I fled before you on the leafy currents.

*All Livia's daughtersons. Dark hawks hear us. Night! Night! My ho head halls. I  
feel as heavy as yonder stone. Tell me of John or Shaun? Who were Shem and  
Shaun the living sons or daughters of? Night now! Tell me, tell me, tell me, elm!  
Night night! Telmetale of stem or stone. Beside the rivering waters of,  
hitherandthithering waters of. Night! Alma Luvia, Pollabella.*

So, then, are families snares, nets, or sails?  
*Build me a boat that can carry two  
and both shall row, my love and I.*

You said when your daughter was born breech,  
you felt her sweet wetness for only a little while between  
your legs before they snatched her away. Better not  
hold her, they said to you, nineteen, if you are going to leave.

The next time you left, in August, you'd shown  
me the giant sun, its head of kernels  
listing, hanging on a thin stem, waiting

for me to reap while you were gone.  
I did not want to harvest that. Dreaming,  
the disc bleached and thinned, most

of the slender spirals of seed were flown. Only  
a closed circle remained, mandalamanda  
la, I did not want to remember you, hid  
my face when you came back nicking, knocking.

*As you said. It fair takes. If I lose my breath for a minute or two don't speak,  
remember! Once it happened, so it may again. Why I'm all these years within  
years in soffran, allbeleaved. To hide away the tear, the parted. It's thinking of  
all. The brave that gave their. The fair that wore. All them that's gunne. I'll begin  
again in a jiffey.*

You sailed away to other Amazons.  
I wove and unwove what it meant  
to stay, amazed at how we worked separate  
strands of lonely into one lovely leafy basket where  
tributaries flow together, stray apart. Amator, amator.

*I can seen meself among them, allaniuwia pulchrabelled. How she was hand-  
some, the wild Amazia, when she would seize to my other breast! And what is  
she weird, haughty Niluna, that she will snatch from my ownest hair! For 'tis  
they are the stormies.*

Older now than you ever became, I hear you hissing  
from the corner of my leafing, creaking, weathering craft,  
more difficult to sail this winedark sea than ever I thought

*and this loneliness won't leave me alone  
it's such a drag to be on your own*

in that frame where you burned your journals,  
ranting that all was charred anyway by flames of ego and libido or the frame  
where Sonya Tolstoy burned her journals so her famous husband

wouldn't spy them, that snake, that charmer, or that final  
one where her tense eyes peer through the rippled glass  
of the train station to spy his dying.

*That done, a dawg of smut to her airy ey, Annushka Lutetiavitch Pufflovah, and  
the lollipop cream to her lippelenns and the pick of the paintbox for her pommetts,  
from strawbirry reds to extra violates, and she sendred her boudeloire maids to  
His Affluence, Ciliogia Grande and Kirschie Real, the two chirsines, with  
respecks from his missus, seepy and sewery, and a request might she passe of  
him for a minnikin.*

Denied access to. Her hands frame her face as she  
strains to. See through the dusty streaked pain.  
Exhausted by all the rounds of. Years of. Consigned to

all the everyday earthlies. For pure poverty's pieties he abandoned to.  
Hoping finally to glimpse, on tiptoe, his expiration date,  
the dissolving boundary of. Her sorrow.

And then there's the crimped crampy frame inside of which you were never  
recognized, would never be. Famed. They told us

that the first rope didn't hold, so you'd returned  
to the store for one thicker, knotting it tight

in your basement before you jumped

from the chair. With the right distance,  
you can frame yourself for most anything.

Check the stays for frays, loosen the thick  
bowline, lay the bitter end down, shove off from shore.

*Ho hang! Hang ho! And the clash of our cries till we spring to be free. Auravoles,  
they says, never heed of your name. But I'm loothing them that's here and all I  
lothe. Loonely in my loneness. For all their faults. I am passing out. O bitter  
ending! I'll slip away before they're up. They'll never see. Nor know. Nor miss  
me. And it's old and old it's sad and old it's sad and weary*

In the corner of my old craft you hunch,  
become an even greater scold than ever.

Tongue leafing thorns you warn  
against giving up, which, I now know, is

not the same as to surrender. Know how:  
craft teaches the difference. Condone. Condole.

*Can't hear with the waters of. The chittering waters of. Flittering bats, fieldmice  
bawk talk. Ho! Are you not gone ahome? What Thom Malone? Can't hear with  
bawk of bats, all thim liffeying waters of. Ho, talk save us! My foos  
won't moos. I feel as old as yonder elm.*

Contractions: you were river-driven that summer, finally married.

Then mourned. On the same leafee bank.

Together we sang *the river is wide I cannot see*  
*nor do I have light wings to fly* with your new shadowed husband.

Your living daughter. Found. Fullgrown at 35, wideeyed babe riding her hip.

Condolence exhaled, blew me from your wake back to craft:

for there was nothing for it save going back, I saw then,  
back to that bare boat bobbing at the dock

waiting to exile, to excise, to lop off all unnecess'ries, to steer, lob  
like lithium tween exhil'r'tion & ter'or, to

rid, ride, rid'le, strad'le the hip of sorrow  
without tipping o'er the edge. Inhale:

*Many rivers to cross and it's only  
my will that keeps me alive*

*Onetwo moremens more. So. Avelavel. My leaves have drifted from me. All. But  
one clings still. I'll bear it on me. To remind me of. Lff! So soft this morning, ours.  
Yes.*

*Yes, tid. There's where. First. We pass through grass behush the bush to. Whish!  
A gull. Gulls. Far calls. Coming, far! End here. Us then. Finn, again! Take.  
Bussofilthee, mememormee! Till thousandsthee. Lps. The keys to. Given! A way a  
lone a last a loved a long the*

everyday, I condone you genteely, still coiled and hissing in the coroner like  
a rope,  
the everyday was, has been and always is to be the only muse:  
that mun-dane moon-dame, note the dumpy dumpty distaff dame, plain as  
an egg, as a colonel,

needing only someone to sea her, board her, border her beautifully,  
to turn her into the wind and luff her, knowing you must leaf her,  
falling off,  
falling off, that radical mastectomied tit bit of oldwives who dare

carry that hearted heathstone with them next  
their emptied breast, all a-quiver, having long left their guardens,  
appled or not, alone, or not, comoelle sappelle?

amazia amar-zones snaking sneaking snacking their way down the  
river till she leads them through her silky, silty, sewery mouth,  
to setsail toward the blessed boundary waters of

who they be them sylphes, framing that neckst unknown  
with spotted largenockled hands, trying nots, fearling  
the rightround of resistance tween their calloused punny pomes:

drastic as yon yung dim dusty adam, fanatic as old leo toadstool but  
these still riding ribbing riddling the earth which hides neath the great  
waters of miss shee  
gan, riding that hard-urned terved edge of their fertility, mortality. Eve

was framed, so you said. But I say sometimes placing the placid frame as  
pleases you or  
sea sawing the famous fwame in to is all you need to be fwee, to

*river run, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us  
by a commodius vicus of recirculation back*

to when we were both still in the picture,  
still lives, still laughing, me looking at you, but you  
turned sideways already moving away always toward

—with thanks to James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Other excerpts are from "The River is Wide" by the Kingston Trio (traditional), and "Many Rivers to Cross" by Jimmy Cliff.

**GARTH GREENWELL**  
**Portrait with Hood and Bindings**

*semper vagi et numquam stabiles*

Hooded—his face two leather coins, a slit  
for a mouth—he hangs, our man,

in his hammock of black wire. Or not quite  
hammock; rather net, what one

is caught by, however  
willingly made prey

still tangled. In the third book of his *Tristia*, Ovid,

raging against those Romans  
who mock the poems he sends as emissaries

from his exile, tells the story of Perillus, the Athenian artisan  
who thought to flatter the tyrant Phalaris

with a gift, fashioning a golden calf  
in which to place a man, whose cries,

as a fire was lit beneath, as the man, as here,  
was turned, would sound

by means of its maker's genius as  
the lowing of a bull. Thrilled, Phalaris

ordered the contraption immediately tested,  
Perillus placed, immediately, inside—

*No fairer statute  
than that which condemns the artificer of death*

*to perish by his art*, says Ovid, affirming  
even the cruelest tyranny against

the misuse of great craft. Thrice-backed,

taken at once from both ends from which a man  
can be taken, he cries, yes, neither

with rapture nor distress, as something  
as yet unlearned of language conceivably

might cry—what might be words, if we  
could hear them, translated by means

of the flesh he is forced to give way to

to strange moan. What seems at first like oil  
is not; is, rather, leather formed so closely

to the contours of his skin it might *be*  
skin, though synthetic, though clearly, when touched,

*not* skin, leather interrupted by apertures  
for genitals, anus,

lips—for what might be imagined an instrument  
to another's pleasure. Monastic

abandon: offered, blindly, to whoever

is near enough  
to want him; allowing whoever

is near enough  
to want him

to enter. Benedict, in his Rule, rails against those monks

of the fourth kind, restless,  
*servants to the seduction of their own*

*will and appetites*, whose will and appetites  
preclude a proper dedication

to a single house, a single father, trading instead  
one abbot, as he annoys them, for

another. *Semper vagi et numquam  
stabiles: Always wandering and never*

*still*, having forfeited that stability  
which is a life devoted

to devotion. Having willed

only to offer as sacrifice  
his will, having acknowledged *consent*

to be the spurious token of freedom granted  
a soul still bound, the leather-sheathed man hangs

in his hammock of black wire, certain  
that to allow devotion an object, to think

of God, of Beloved, as more  
than ciphers into which our lives are poured, is to

cheapen them. Perillus, trapped, despised himself

for having tooled the very furnace in which he lost  
this language that is our only certainty

we are not beasts, however often  
we might seem them. As he, prone, seemed them,

his body obscured in gold, his cries  
a cruel amusement that once begun

begins to wear. After they have gone, when the man

is alone in a room  
the center of which contains

a hammock of black wire  
the center of which contains

a man—wounded not  
as Perillus was wounded; wounded rather

in that way in which brokenness points  
toward what is whole—the man

makes no sound, no motion  
that might convey desire to be lifted, to be

removed from the suit in which he sweats,  
in which he, almost, cannot breathe. Conversion,

the violent turning-away-from  
which is the soul hoping to be made

still, must be accompanied  
by great turmoil—the greater the turmoil,

the greater, after, the content—  
Not greater. Not content. Rather

relinquishment, that voiding  
of the self into the self which is, finally,

*stabilitas*, which is, finally, the turning of the soul  
toward that which offers it

the greatest pain, toward that which offers it,  
in turn, the greatest

joy. Through the door by which they left the man

the men return. Or different  
men, shuttling from devotion

to devotion, who take him, again  
and again, and are still *body*, as he, still,

is body, however consummate  
his praise, however certain he is

that it is this motionful stillness  
in which God is made. Only

the slightest murmur  
as they enter. Only

the slightest murmur  
as they leave.

**MARGARET AHO**  
**Exactly at midnight**

God enters the garden  
and all the accusing angels

stop  
accusing . . .

And the ape  
of God enters as well  
with his delicate off-spring  
(agile, long-tailed, prehensile) who scale God  
to prop up his shoulders like  
pup tents, and camp there: privates, epaulettes, sprightly pet  
nephews. One of the  
smallest is hugging God's  
head: the wee leather box of his  
body on God's brow could be  
a phylactery housing  
daleths: half-  
doors, *tota*  
mercy. And these

looping his neck: chimp-  
charms, live amulets, limber  
familiar, who, screeching,  
swing round to ride top-

→

rung ( . . . God glides  
like a ladder on wheels  
through the garden . . . ) to  
pickpluckpinch (nimbly)  
with such fine-boned fingers:  
these drupes-become-balls  
(blue-green) from tall, well,  
shrubs, really—yesterday  
frothing with blossoms, today  
heavy, ripe, ready—to eat  
which they do, as fast as they  
hull (sarcocarp/endocarp/carp-  
less): these grooved beads  
enter their bodies  
and exit:

whole, un-  
digested.

And now  
the accused

creep out from the cool deep  
green of the garden  
to gather with twig brooms  
this (scat)ter  
down God's front from

→

(unstinting) passages for the-  
already-reaping-on-all-  
fours ( . . . it's happy hour  
here in the garden: no angel  
aiming its index at . . . ): finger-  
rakers of droppings (now banked, now  
burning): o dark roast . . .  
(turn/grind/seethe/  
steep . . . ) for  
the accusative (us)  
who can't sleep, who make

monkey coffee  
at midnight  
(exactly)

and drink it.

**MARGARET AHO**

**In the dream an atomizer tube**

targets

my blowhole . . .

descends, inserts

itself (here

on my left side, in

my spleen's slot). And

the bulb this tube's attached

to?: honked, Harpo-

like, by my dears (crossed

over) bent over this vent

like embalmers. So now

there's this gurgle-

withdrawal that is the bulb's

engorgement

which my begetters ex-

press . . .

and siphoned, yes, I'm

airborne. Can you

smell it?: this chrome &

citron jolt my

forebears tag

. . . *dysphoric*, *hard*

*to bear*. Are they bent

on first causes? Is this

grey-green-yellow

sludge-turned-mist

a distillate

of dad's mom's *melan-*

*cholia with a*

*Jehovah*

*complex?* of dad's dad's

penchant for prodigals/im-

prudence/mercy . . . ?

Is this splenic

meld (my

rupture) their rapture?

Are they sticking their

non-noses in their own excess

updrafted (in the dream)

into that

socket

where the moon should be?

New moon. (. . . dad's episto-  
lary closing, just before

he signed his love,

was a contraction.)

Some voice invokes this

like a blessing: it

says: *s'nuff* . . .

it says: *o*

*divine*

*darkness* . . .

**MARGARET AHO**

**In the garden with Rav Zalman who is silent**

*(How they chatter,  
hear the language of  
birds.) Three notes*

scratch the dream's  
lens: a blurry  
sumac [ . . . summaq, sumach, shumac . . . ]

*(Hear the language of  
trees); a sap-  
ling whose thin unleafed limbs*

lifting,  
attenuate like tines—three from one  
trunk: dark, durable, en-

sapped.

**[Shin]**

Sheen?

*(The letter **shin**  
has three black teeth; the breath  
is held, the ssshhhh*

*is swallowed . . . )*

In the dream, one tree-tine  
drops to hook the handle

of a boxy can, one tilts  
the can, one tries to block  
( . . . *impossibly* . . . ) the fummy

contents  
already arcing toward the shared  
trunk [ . . . O artery

behind the ear  
which stirs at nothing in the world . . . ]; hear  
the match

scratch? ( . . . *hear the language*  
*of the serving*  
*angel*): a pitching

harvest  
of black teeth/black  
exequies.

Why are you silent? What  
letter  
with its

angel/metal/plant/beast/human-  
body-  
part [ . . . impaled on trees . . . ]

what ensouled consonant, what vowel  
with its point, its  
ray

( . . . *visualized, inscribed, cut, permuted* . . . )  
shuffled, shuffled . . . juggled . . .  
[carefully

using only the larynx and tongue]  
what pyrophoric  
worlds

must be . . . [recited] must be . . .  
( . . . gathered in the throat  
and swallowed.)

**R. J. MEINDL**

**Albert's Song**

*In memoriam Albert S. Meindl*

■ **Prologue**

We are the land that gives us strength,  
Both seeing and seen, being and been,  
Subjects and objects in minuets of mediation  
Conducted by the understanding.  
We therefore and the earth,  
Shaped and shaping, lord and slave,  
In bondage to each other we become.  
Iron veins thread lakespread northern woods,  
Sanguine granite ribs the heart,  
Rivers tumble out serenest ponds and pools  
To issue forth in mighty confluence  
Like thoughts of greatest consequence,  
Rainbow, nymph and rise desire's seamless surge.  
When at the end we breathe our last and go,  
Elemental we return as seeds to bloom anew.

■  
He saw the wolf again a winter's day,  
    Beneath the butternut tree,  
    Bullets belted in its jaws.  
Across a pure white sheet of knotted drifts  
Death stared at him with yellow slitted eyes,  
    Cocked a grey helmet,  
    Marked an end to a beginning,  
Red tongue running bloody out its mouth.  
In the morning he went south.

■  
Kneeling in the stable by the manger, in the end,  
The old man pleaded for his life beneath the tines.  
*Du, mein Sohn, schlacht mich nicht,*  
*Verzeih mir die Totsünde!*  
My son, don't kill me. Forgive me my mortal sin!

■  
*Vix e conspectu Africae telluris in altum,*  
Barely out of sight of Africa's earth, upon the deep,  
*Vela dabant saevi et spumas salis aere ruebant.*  
They grimly set the sails and down the salt's foam hurled with the bow.  
They had a reason in their madness

Washing shoreward in the waves,  
In the surging wine-red sea, *oinopa ponton*,  
Having raced the foam-ern's meadow  
On sea-Sleipnir's white-flecked back,  
Come to slay the beast again, in the ancient way,  
A band of stalwart men, grim of face, some fey,  
For death would be their fate,  
Flowers strewn upon the land.  
Forget them not red vineyards  
Underneath a cancered sun,  
Dry island where the grey beast made its lair.

■

Henry said it was just like Africa.  
Bowels, bowels, goddamned bowels,  
You'd think a man was made of shit.  
In the end, he said, when it's over,  
I want a nice sweet smile to die for,  
And a big soft pair of tits.

■

Red the sun rose above the dry land  
The day the roses bloomed.  
The guns said crackcrackcrack,  
Crumpbumpbump, crumpbumpbump,  
Crackcrackcrack krupkrupkrupp,  
Dry thunder in a rainless sky  
Dappling orange and yellow roses  
On a brown and khaki land.  
Henry flowered in the grapes  
    Beyond the dead mule,  
    Beside the dusty road,  
    A garden on his chest,  
Blossoms petalled pinwheel to his face,  
Red roses for a dead warrior.

■

In the evening of a summer's day,  
    When the chores were done,  
    When the herd was milked,  
    The Belgians rubbed and fed,  
He sat upon the porch and watched

The grey mist rolling farmward  
From the swamp in which the serpents  
Swarmed profuse beneath the hardwood ridge  
Where the white walnut grew.  
O butternut O butternut,  
*Wie schön sind deine Blätter!*  
How lovely are your leaves!  
    Chiquamegon and Flambeau,  
    Tomahawk and Tomah,  
Wausau south of Merrill knew his name,  
Runding was the place where he began,  
    The old man.  
Across scythed hay the ash mist crept.

■

At Kasserine, in hardscrabble gravel,  
He and Henry overrun dug in deep  
    And waited.  
Behind a tattered *Panzer* cooked a Sherman,  
Flung a turret corkscrew up a hill.  
A tanker on a tread slowly charred,  
Sweetmeat roasting on an open fire.  
Ravenous in their guilt they drooled.

■

The same shape ran beside him in the woods,  
Walking homeward in the dark  
After school along the road,  
Sang him from the trees,  
We're together you and I, yours my doom  
Since first the thread was spun upon the loom.  
Pads whispered runic in the snow,  
*O du mein deutscher Wald!*  
O you my German Forest!  
*Bayerischer Wald! Böhmer Wald!*  
Bavarian Forest! Bohemian Forest!  
Deeped in dark Wisconsin woods!  
*Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Waldland,*  
Death is a master from the forest land.  
    *Sein Auge ist gelb.*  
    His eyes are yellow.

■  
Ruins ravel now where walls hove high,  
Atop a tor above a vale, *Fürther Senke*,  
Runding barred an old road from the East.

*Bis hierher und nicht weiter,*  
To this point and no farther,  
*Kamen die feindlichen Reiter,*  
Came the enemy riders.

The *Volk* cleared the dark oakwood  
In olden day, then lost their way,  
Laid aside in mold and dust  
Songs that taught them to be just,  
Right wrongs, cherish strangers,  
Share wisdom for wisdom  
With those of other ways and worlds,  
Sang Streicher, not Schiller,  
Rosenberg, not Rilke,  
Goebbels, not Goethe,  
Hitler, not Heine.

Began instead themselves to howl  
A savage song in crystal night.

■  
Everywhere the grey shapes now,  
Beneath the green fringed line of trees,  
Sang horror's song in sharp dark barks.  
Behind them loomed an old oakwood,  
Horns sounding deep the dark within  
Where the blue flower grew  
In the cloistered ruins of Death's chapel.  
Nothing left to do but stand  
And go to meet them.  
Yellow eyes watched him rise and run  
Across dry sandy soil,  
A man alone, fierce and determined,  
Rush with resolve, fate-marked, a hero,  
Brave and bold, to the Walkers-in-Darkness.  
A son of freedom beneath hard helmet  
Swept a way for friends to follow,  
Thrust with his blade the beast throughout,  
When red the rose bloomed on his head,  
And he fell.

■  
Listen now, he speaks, the old man said,  
Turning on the set that spanned the seas,  
Sitting in his *Schanze*, feet in blood.

Listen to the Wolf

Who sprung apart our chains,

Who swept away our ruins,

Who drove in fear our foes,

To plant our banner high upon the wall.

He said: "I have forced the hated stranger

To his knee,

Spared our sons and daughters

His decree,

Seized the space the super race must have."

He said: "I have swept away *Verzweiflung*,

Restored again *Beschäft'gung*,

Brought the Folk *Verein'gung*,

Saved once more our *Ordnung*,

*Es lebe das Grossdeutschland!*"

Howling and slaving in his rage,

Sword and tongue of our age!

■  
He awakened in the garden,

In the garden of the rose,

He awakened in the garden

Of the great white rose,

Where pale petals shone

On bent and twisted stems.

The man without a face wore white,

The burn and the boy who had no eyes,

The sucking lung that marked the time

Where time had ceased to be.

Torsos torn and tattered,

In white roses wrapped,

Warped shapes lay, while

White winds scoured bright stone,

Strewed pearled petals on the ways.

Fantastic flowers all in white

Draped fabulous iron trees,

And silver arbors thrust pale pods

Against a sable sky.

■  
On two white horses side by side,  
They bore young Henry on his last ride.  
(How long, O watchman, how long?)  
On two white horses side by side  
To the field in the forest of the stones.  
(How long, O watchman, how long?)  
On two white horses side by side,  
They bore young Henry on his last ride,  
    To the field  
    In the forest  
    Of the stones.  
And they wrapped young Henry  
    In a song's sweet fold,  
And they wrapped sweet Henry  
    In the earth's warm hold.  
(Til the stars disappear from the skies.)

■  
In the end he let the old man live—  
I forgive you father, for I have killed,  
Have slain the beast of ashes in its lair—  
    Laid aside the demon's tool,  
    Went upon the sacred grove,  
Tied alban sheet to ashen tree,  
    Bent upon its branches  
    The twisted knotted form,  
Rose and hanged for all our sakes,  
    Then set and rose again,  
In the manner of a myth,  
Bright star upon a milky way.

■ **Epilogue**

To us today in dreams they come,  
Shimmering shapes that left our lives  
*Da sie noch selbst im Werden war'n,*  
When they themselves were yet becoming,  
Vapors in the landscapes where they fell.  
Bold, resolute, and brave, they said,  
    "No farther,"  
When the people and the wolf went mad  
And ashes rained upon the world.



Now down by the beach entrenchments  
Where the seawall once was reared,  
On the paths and on the ridges  
    Where they bled,  
Geniuses of shore and hedge,  
Ghosts of pond, reed, and sedge,  
City street, mountain, river's edge,  
Farm and field, mound and marsh,  
Ditch and dike, barn, stream and town,  
Bridge and culvert, village, glen and dell,  
Of all the sacred places where they fell  
In the war against the wolf,  
In the glory of the roses white and red,  
Guide to all, to us they say:  
"Witness with courage in mankind's need,  
    Believe in joy and truth,  
Dare ardently and faithfully the deed  
    You dreamed in youth,  
Drink deep the sweetness of your dreams  
    From Love's many streams,  
But when you see the ash mist seep  
    The hollows and the glens,  
And when you see the grey wolf creep  
    The wintry wastes and fens,  
Look skyward to the stars at night,  
Be bold and tread the path they light."

■ **Totengedicht**

*Mitten unter den Blumen*  
In the midst of the flowers  
    *Lieg' ich, I lie*  
*Wieder unter Geliebten*  
Again among the beloved.  
*Mitten unter Geliebten*  
In the midst of the beloved  
    *Lieg' ich, I lie*  
*Wieder unter den Sternen*  
Again among the stars.

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

Marion K. Stocking

Over the years I've expressed concern about the self-absorption and obliviousness to large issues in many of the poems of our day. You won't hear any of that from me on *The Best American Poetry 2003*, edited by **Yusef Komunyakaa** (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2003, 256 pp., \$30 hardbound). Reading through the "healthy heap" of literary magazines, Komunyakaa has been distressed by poetry that "borders on cultivated solecism and begs theorists to decipher it," that engages in "over-experimentation" in which disorder becomes the norm and distorts language until language "erases itself." As he read for this collection he sought poems that touched him "through content and aesthetics." These are criteria I'd expect from the poet whose *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002, 446 pp.), especially in its new poems, presents a poet who seems by his nature to be always voyaging out from his ego into others, in love or in empathic imagination: "You [Richard Johnson] try to beat loneliness/ out of a drum,/ but cries only spring/ from your mouth" (from "Tenebrae").

Since most of the poems in the 2003 edition appeared in 2002, many reflect the crucial event of the preceding year—September 11. Close to a dozen grapple with our burgeoning sense of menace, suicide bombing, and war. Before I discuss some, let me say that (1) in addressing these particular poems I do not mean to slight the even larger number of exquisitely realized poems of high spirits, comic elan, engaging anecdote, incisive satire, levitating imagination, and just delectable "mindless play." There is by my standards only one truly bad poem in the book (see if you can spot it). Then (2) The editor selected these with only the "content and aesthetics" as guide. I now have also a valuable feature of this series: the poets' comments on their work, providing, in some cases, most insightful information about content and context. And (3) I am aware of Yeats's opinion that one's quarrel with others produces rhetoric and one's quarrel with oneself, poetry. The poems I discuss here test that rule; in my opinion it often fails. In their radically different voices, poetics, and emotional investments, these are all truly poems, whether the dialectic is external, internal, or one transforming the other.

I turn first to two poems, both written before September 11, that today have the weight of prophecy. Susan Dickman has spent many years "within and among Israel's multilayered, intersecting diasporas"; she wrote "Skin" in an effort to come to terms with the

horror of the 1996 Jerusalem bombings as the media through their routine coverage and language converted them to the banality of “suicide bombing.” J. D. McClatchy’s “Jihad” is even more chilling: three sonnets, each with an octave that, like Dickman’s “Skin,” records what we see on television of the religious martyrs. The poet concludes each sonnet with an italicized sestet, a pastiche from the Koran, that could be the words of the mullah or “echoing in the mind of the fanatic” on his mission of death. McClatchy’s poem, written long before 9/11, reflects the poet’s long interest in Arab culture and his attempt to understand the psychology of the priests and martyrs. The octaves make his own opinion clear. Here’s the first:

A contrail’s white scimitar unsheathes  
 Above the tufts of anti-aircraft fire.  
 Before the mullah’s drill on righteousness,  
 Practice rocks are hurled at chicken-wire

Dummies of tanks with silhouetted infidels  
 Defending the nothing both sides fight over  
 In God’s name, a last idolatry  
 Of boundaries. The sirens sound: take cover.

And here’s a sample of the sestets: “*Under the shade of swords lies paradise./ Whom you love are saved with you, their souls/ In His hand.*” McClatchy’s note appends some history: after 9/11 the *Times* heard of the poem and asked to publish it. The poet agreed, adding a note explaining that it was written earlier and a meditation on “the fraught relationship between poetry and history.” The *Times* eventually lost its nerve to publish the meditation and, finally, even the poem, worrying that despite the poet’s favoring the Palestinian cause, Palestinians might be offended. McClatchy wondered what the function of an op-ed page was, adding that “poems aren’t platforms,” but are meant “to complicate our sense of things, not stroke them. I had wanted to look at things not from the victims’ side or the dazed teenaged bomber’s but, as it were, from as remote a point of view as scripture’s.” In the tight conventional form of the sonnet, the poet has exploded into the light one of the devastating questions of our day—the role of “the book” among the “people of the book”—Jew, Muslim, and Christian.

Which brings us to the event that brought this dilemma home: “When the Towers Fell”—the title of Galway Kinnell’s long poem. This is at its initial level a firsthand account: Kinnell’s New York

apartment had a view of the towers that he was used to seeing “at any hour glitter and live/ as if the spirits inside them sat up all night/ calculating profit and loss.” Then follows a Whitmanian catalogue of the dazed walkers of the streets after the disaster, then a litany of those trapped in the towers. Into these snapshots and projections Kinnell inserts quotations from poets whose words immediately ring shockingly appropriate. (The only notes to this poem are the welcome translations of the passages not in English.) Celan’s familiar *Schwarze Milch der Frühe* (black milk of daybreak) leads into its corollary, “not a likeness but a common lineage/ in the twentieth-century history of violent death.” Kinnell modulates back and forth between linear reporting of what it was like to be there and vertical history, first Kinnell’s memory of our bloody century’s history, then an overlay of the words of Villon, Hart Crane, Celan, Wat, and Whitman that gives resonant depth to all the violence and individual suffering.

In contrast to Komunyakaa’s protest against the erasure or oblivion that some experimental poets inflict on the meaning of words, Kinnell draws on their layered meanings to consider and to enact the poet’s responsibility in the threat of actual oblivion. Here is how this splendid poem concludes:

Each tower as it falls concentrates  
into itself, as if transforming itself  
infinitely slowly into a black hole

infinitesimally small: mass  
without space, where each light  
each life, put out, lies down within us.

Working from the same assumption of the poet’s responsibility (as Shelley defines it) to explore, through imagination, the consciousness of another, Frank Bidart reacts to the catastrophe by turning back to Dante, adding the concept of justice that the punishment should fit the crime. In “Curse” he combines these principles to condemn the perpetrators of this atrocity to experience imaginatively in perpetuity the horror their victims experienced. May their “breath// enter you, and eat like acid/ the bubble of rectitude that allowed you breath.” Like Shelley, Bidart knows how to write a curse!

Bidart’s curse takes us to the specific act of destruction. Robert Pinsky, heeding a request from the *Washington Post* to write a poem

about the year following 9/11, welcomed the opportunity to write about the entire year, not only about the “terrible spectacle” that we watched, “repetitiously gazing/ Until we were sick not only of the sight/ Of our prodigious systems turned against us// But of the very systems of our watching.” Yet his poem does not escape obsession with the spectacle. And despite his loyalty to “our modern secular world as a living thing,” I read his poem as a satire, however gentle, of our society.

Perhaps the most sensuously luscious poem in this collection is C. K. Williams’s “The World,” in which the poet recreates a summer day reading among the butterflies in the lavender in a Normandy garden, where the poetry of Ponge, an article on Fragonard, and his wife and her family nearby all blend in something like bliss to precipitate the poem. Williams concludes:

Each sprig of lavender lifting jauntily as its sated butterfly  
departs,  
Catherine beneath the beech tree with her father and sisters, me  
watching,  
everything and everyone might stand for something else, *be*  
something else.  
Though in truth I can’t imagine what; reality has put itself so  
solidly before me  
there’s little need for mystery. . . . Except for us, for how we take  
the world  
to us, and make it more than we are, more even than itself.

This luxurious expansiveness is the obverse of the black hole Kinnell envisions in his concluding lines, and I take the Williams poem as a memorial to a paradisiacal mood that at this moment in history has all but vanished for thinking people. Asked by the editors in January 2003 for his comment on “The World,” he says, “I wish I didn’t have to write this,” for he evokes that lost period of felicity and poetic inspiration while “waiting for the onset of a seemingly inevitable, reckless, utterly unnecessary war, and for the disasters which will surely ensue from it.”

We know now of the cascade of poetry that tumbled out in horror at our nation’s impulse toward the Iraq war, not enough to drown that impulse, but certainly enough to awaken a renewed respect for our poets as prophets and seers. They have many other roles, as this valuable anthology illustrates, but that ancient role as public conscience is now well awake.