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BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

Fall 2005, Vol. 56 N°1

Mary Molinary

from *The Book of 8:38*

Small parts slowly	5
Faced with 8:38	6
On us too	7
8:38 is pumice	8
8:38 is straw	9
8:38 can't help	10
Thus does 8:38	11

Jose Perez Beduya

Signal and Change	12
-------------------	----

Dan Lewis

Calder	15
--------	----

Susan Kolodny

from "Black Carp"

Itself	16
--------	----

Lee Ann Roripaugh

Things I Would Do for You	18
---------------------------	----

Michael Snediker

Roman Elegy	21
-------------	----

Tar Baby	23
----------	----

Lola Haskins

Sky-Shots	24
-----------	----

Jay Franzel

The Generous Bison	26
--------------------	----

Ingrid Wendt

The History of Strife	28
-----------------------	----

Joe Pitkin

An Equation with 2 Variables	29
------------------------------	----

CONTENTS

Albert Goldbarth

Grahamesque	30
The Poem in which the Devout and the Atheists Meet in Minnesota	32
Left Behind	33
“Off in the darkness hours moved restlessly”	37

Frannie Lindsay

Receiving the Host	38
--------------------	----

BOOKS IN BRIEF, by Marion K. Stocking

Translation: Text, Texture, and Architecture	
Part II: Scandinavian, Germanic, and Slavic Poetry Today	
<i>The Best Poems of Tomas Tranströmer</i> , trans. Robert Bly	39
Inger Christensen, <i>alphabet</i> , trans. Susanna Nied	39
Inger Christensen, <i>Butterfly Valley: A Requiem</i> , trans. Susanna Nied	41
<i>Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan</i> , trans. Nikolai Popov and Heather McHugh	44
Vasco Popa, <i>Collected Poems</i> , trans. Anne Pennington, revised and annotated by Francis R. Jones	46
Wisława Szymborska, <i>Miracle Fair</i> , trans. Joanna Trzeciak	47

COVER

Lee Sharkey, “Vigil,” photograph, 2005

Mary Greene, design

Editors’ Note

Thanks to the assiduous work of summer interns Rachel Harvieux, Rachel Hinton, and Kyle McCord, the decade of the 70s has been added to our full-text on-line archive. Everything we published between 1950 and 1980 is now on-line at www.bpj.org.

→

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

MARY MOLINARY
Small parts slowly

Small parts slowly at work —vivid automata— a second-hand stammers
round a clock face a nervous child
casting shadows as it goes round &
round in mimicry of itself of a linear thing.

Digital clocks cast no shadows therefore like the shades whom Dante
encounters in Purgatory no Matter. Clocks with hands
Now that's another story. Each minute a form. Each one

leading another on. 8:38 for example & 38 seconds!
A chance minute. A Previously merging into Afterwards.
A juncture in which one must be willing. An imperceptible shift
of light on any object it strives to illumine.

Any book of hours hides in it a diary of minutes a volume (a reading) of days.
A season. Its feast.
Among its *am's* & *pm's* Winter hunkers speechless against
any given minute its birth —rushing. Fallen.

MARY MOLINARY

Faced with 8:38

Faced with 8:38 (its form & function,
its deliberate countenance), anything I could say turns
cheap & aphoristic. Blush & stumble words
armored in intent.

My time spent (spine bent) in the brevity of
this 8:38—in the linger & lull of its quick arms
—has been Auspicious. A piece of luck.
& Opportune.

Because time can instruct. Is.
Is always, in a sense, 8:38 & never
a finished thing. . . . Time is becoming less
rigid or more so.

Any form tends to become its own
function & carries within it (clutched
or cradled) a miniature of its own
destruction.

Movement & form are not the same
thing unless movement is given form
(is formed by & accepts
the gesture).

What have I done? (for example)

My eyes opened just as the bedroom
clock (digital) configured as if on ice 8:38.
Day, thus far, appears convex & not
altogether unpleasant.

MARY MOLINARY

On us too

On us too
beings & things
cast no shadow
 morning is slim
sunless & nervous
a minute belies me
 a minute betrays
a hand's tiniest
hesitation

 in this kitchen
now
toast toasting in a toaster
 & time's utter
refusal to obey
the promise of its own
 consistency, its own
myth

as if planning
already
 the daily, the small
celebrations
kept secret & to itself

while I have coffee & toast
8:38 prefers tea & eggs

MARY MOLINARY

8:38 is pumice

8:38 is pumice & ceramic
ashen-faced & staring

me down across the table
We've been like this

for so long now I must be
stone rubbed smooth

by the miniscule oceans
pouring having poured from

my eyes & having formed
(been formed by)

estuary & rivulet
contingency contingency

I must want it to say
over & over again & again

But 8:38 does not even say that
Will not utter even that word from

that crooked smile flanked by those
4 dry sockets 8:38!

I command with all
the seriousness of stone

Leave this place at once
But 8:38 gathers up

the water of me & holds
me captive in a small bowl

Measures me out all night
Makes the stone of me watch

MARY MOLINARY

8:38 is straw

8:38 is straw
light—a slant & sleight
tilt of metamorphosis.

8:38 is o-
verheard argument
amidst cinder & concrete.

8:38 is a
lover's despera-
tion. 8:38 does not

exist except in the
telling by objects
as they tremolo through space.

8:38 is what
we tell ourselves in
consolation, grief. Perhaps,

reconciliation.
No one or number
is awake enough to fight

& mean it, but in this
meantime of this year,
8:38 feels its strength,

hangs heavy from morning's
rafters, seems to *shift*,
lifts a lip & prods us on.

MARY MOLINARY

8:38 can't help

8:38 can't help but believe in
Reincarnation—a repetition
of forms—pre-existing
forms always to be dealt with.

8:38 told me that the 21st
century will be not unlike the 20th
what with its 8:38s following
its 8:37s & all the stories

those with Names have told one
another to make themselves feel better.
8:38 went on & on about epic time
& the different generations & their

stories & ended by saying *Read
their books. See their movies.* 8:38
laughed in such a way that revealed
to me in slow & certain detail

the face of a god—a history
of heavenly crimes
collecting like foam in the corners
of its sadistic grin.

MARY MOLINARY

Thus does 8:38

Thus does

8:38 hold me hostage in the winter of this kitchen arranging
on the table the distance between coffee & toast & the passing of
hours . . . & I'm not sorry for having stared into the maw hidden in a slow
blink, my hand full of minutes. 8:38 reads me all day, all day I can
tell it *nothing*. But in that space, that ferment, 8:38 seems a lingering
salt, broken against its own gravity. Crammed & caught in a difficult mouth.
Though still marked at its edges with a hardness, 8:38 slowly appears:
a small oblique, a sturdy anointing with oil & nitrogen, a straining to reach
some hour when a bird will sing. & the wall clock becomes a white
paper plate with construction paper hands attached with a brass fastener.
"Frankly," I proclaim, "all I ever wanted was *this*. To learn to read this."
8:38, lithe as ritual, kisses my chill body & mutters *At last. Alas.*
8:38 begins to hum & its humming distills to words:

*a pine tree in whose fragrant branches
a nest of birds sings in the moonlight:
birds singing in the moonlight*

"Oh. José Martí," I whisper & then ask, "What are you trying to tell me?"
But 8:38 returns to its humming & releases me into the accidental details.

JOSE PEREZ BEDUYA

Signal and Change

1

The song
on the radio corrodes

further at each turn
of the ramp

that takes the car deeper
into the spiral

of the underground
parking garage.

Three levels
down, the signal

succumbs to static,
the receiver submerged

in concrete
becomes a thing that hisses

in its sleep. Beneath
the broadcast, this absence

of silence is explained
as background

interference, noise
that becomes inescapable

when all that's heard is turned
to low, as the weave

surfaces where the brush-
stroke thins;

as the body
enters an anechoic

chamber and feels
sound built inside the skin,

that wall around the shrill
hum of nervous

system and bass
of bloodstream.

2

At certain levels,
the listening emits

its own signals: tinnitus,
tall trees of the inner

ear swaying where no wind
oscillates. And yet further

past these frequencies
the flesh admits,

there is an even more
pervasive underneath,

deep fabric
of forces still

unfurling the universe.
Our most sensitive

instruments find
the cosmic background

to be a constant
bombardment, a well

buzzing beneath
the world. The first

broadcast frayed
to static, hiss of impossible

nostalgia. This noise
below noise is your proof

that once no space, no
time ripped star

from star, sealed stellar
dark from stellar dark.

3

Listen.

When the god
ascended

with a lament
that stunned

the animals
from their wandering,

the song was
never not nerve

and root in the sepulcher
of the beloved.

DAN LEWIS

Calder

Because the dance
is gone almost
at once—this day's sun—everything—
mutable. What is, now, now and
now; because the body
wants, because the
mind needs
stasis, something
to hang on to. Two birds now,
sparrows, swoop
from one corner
of the roof, up
under the eaves.
It is the
arc the mind wants, its
geometry, how it is
scribed on air.

How many
words are needed then
to pin a shape to something
less fallible than
self? Time
the only problem, its
motion, its insistent *removal*
of everything (even the arc
invented, any bird
being only *here*, then,
here) and the mind wanting
only to make a fist, to
clutch, to hold.

SUSAN KOLODNY

Itself

Black carp of torn silk,
spilled ink in the water,
glimpsed, you swim
into memory, only you
from among the white,
the mottled orange,
the pale lemon splashed
with scarlet.

Glimpsed, you recur,
imposed on blanched faces, seen
on the gloss of the mahogany credenza,
the pale blue blush of plate.

Black carp, I hardly saw
your scales, fins, your
scalloped fan. Carp
of persistent
echoing, only
your black shadow
in the green water.

You are someone held and lost,
and never held, urgent, remote.
He, the elusive shadow fish,
she, whose death
the mind refuses.

Black of silence: the red anemone's
furled heart, the dilated pupil,
mourning ribbon, lost leather pencase,
black of silk nightgowns,
and of the inutterable VI, XII
of the clock face.

Black carp seen in the pond
among the bright others,
you render them frivolous,
as the woman in black
does the woman in pink
at the party, the man

→

in the black suit
all of the others.

Black alone soothes
the hummingbird among blood drops
on hawthorns, leaves
loose rock beside the precipice,
a door held open.

LEE ANN RORIPAUGH
Things I Would Do for You

Let me gather together a radiant cache
of jewel beetles for you—lapis lazuli blue
speckled with red and white; shimmering
green hammer-plated with yellow metal;
dapper copper pinstriping; a softly polished
celadon like glowing, apple-green jade; blue-
green lacquer lipsticked with an opalescent
hot-pink swirl; and the ones that seem cast
in the lush, buttery luster of 24-carat gold.
I will string them together with small, bright
seeds and make a necklace to warm your skin
like a dapple of sunlight burnishing
the cool, pale shadows between your breasts.

I will hand-raise mantises—feed them caterpillars,
crickets, butterflies and bumblebees, keep
them heated, mist twice daily to make moist
fog, jungled steam—so I can bring you a bouquet
which, from a distance, will look like a glamorous
arrangement of rare blooms. But come closer,
and you will see quizzically swiveling heads,
black pinpricked eyes, sway of antennae—
perhaps the Yellow Flower Mantid's fussy rustling
of rosebud-yellow wings notched in maroon;
or the Spiny Flower Mantid's pink intricate frills
and spikes, violet eyes, and giant spiraled eye-
spot on leafy wings. Maybe the Devil's Flower
will raise its delicate bisque thorns and stripes
to you; and, of course, there will be the upcurled,
lavender-striped body, pointed cone-shaped eyes,
and pink-petaled legs of the Malaysian Orchid.

I could find a Yucatan Ma-kech Beetle, with
a thick and waxy back that can be carved
with an awl. I will carefully pierce the elytra
with tiny holes and notches, then set the wing
cases with gems—peridot, topaz, amethyst
and rhodolite—so you may keep it as a pet
on a sterling-silver chain pinned to your lapel.
It will toss out razor-bright prisms in slivered,
rainbowed shards of color, a jewel-crusted
living brooch clutching the promontory of your

→

collarbone, mesmerized by the powerful swish,
pump, and fuzz of your heart keeping time
below like a jazz bass-line, thickly vibrating,
humming and strumming deep inside your chest.

I will make you a feast of wasps, flash-fried
in sesame—oil lacquering satin-banded bodies,
glazing iridescent wings—tumble them in sweet
crumbles of brown sugar and soy sauce, served
over steaming white rice. I could garnish
the plate with a ring of crisply vigilant, deep-
fried cicadas—art deco wings spread open
as if ready to take flight—spritzed with a light
spray of ponzu sauce, for something crunchy
and nutty to nibble on. I will search through
mulberry groves for plump silk-worm pupae
to stir-fry into *sangi* for you, carefully
slicing out the midgut, tossing them in the wok
with hot oil until they sizzle. Naturally salty,
so no seasonings necessary—creamy, slick
and decadent with fat, soft and chewy like large,
ripe figs. Or perhaps, if you would rather,
I would capture dragonflies, boil them with
ginger, garlic, chili pepper, onions, and coconut
milk, serve them with an herbed coconut soup
drizzled with red ant eggs, like caviar. As an
appetizer, a dozen large and rare forest-dwelling
bumblebees, steamed with kaffir, lime leaf,
shallots, and in lieu of dessert wine, afterwards,
I could offer you live ants fattened with peach
nectar. They taste like almonds and honey.

And when it's night, I'll find a Jamaican Click
Beetle, also known as "Cucujo," and hold it up
to your book like a small flashlight, so you can
read by the bioluminescent spots on its thorax,
and when you're finished, I'll toss it into the air
so we can watch it zoom around the room
like a shooting star. I will draw you a hot bath,
pour steaming ladles of clover-steeped royal jelly
over your shoulders, then call in a flock
of Striped Blue Crow butterflies to dust you

→

with their yellow tail brushes, gauzing your skin
with a light shivering of scented scales, like
perfumed talcum. And for music, I'll assemble
an orchestra to perform for you: first, a female
Oak Brush Cricket, who drums in syncopated
rhythms on leaves at night with her elaborately
ornate feet; cicadas with their tymbals,
which they ripple like thunderous metal sheets;
an assortment of male moths clattering
the castanets built into their wings; for violins,
the stridulation of crickets; and finally, a water
boatman, who makes music with his penis,
as if it were a flute. Together, they'll unspool
their seductive nocturnes to beguile and ease
you into the dark velvety creases of sleep.

I know that I am strange, and poor, and prone
to daydreams, melancholy, and compulsions,
that all I have to offer are these crumpled balls
of paper scattered across my desk, these words
obsessively embroidered together with insects
used as sequins, beads, twinkly bits of decoration.
But perhaps, in the silky gray light of dusk,
they might look something like the nuptial gifts
of Balloon Flies, with their live tiny spiders
and aphids wrapped in intricately woven, iridescent
skeins of silk, white, shimmering balloons
tightly clutched in the feet of the flies, sparkling
enticingly in the half-light like a paparazzi
of minuscule flashbulbs exploding in the dusk
during their aerial mating dances. Perhaps
you might be moved to pick one up and unwrap it,
and while you were busy with crackling paper,
smoothing out wrinkles, and reading, I might
quietly come up behind you, stroke the small
of your back, slide my arms around your waist
and hold you, my mouth in the nape of your neck.

MICHAEL SNEDIKER
Roman Elegy

There were bees
and tall grass
by the river Tiber.

The twins had returned
to the river
to found a city.

It would become
the world.
The city could have

only one name,
but there were two of them.
Two names.

The story of worlds,
the story of twins—
rueful wondering

what would happen
were the other name
chosen.

How to decide
whose name, how to decide
whose world,

and what happens
to the one
who loses.

Romulus grew lost
in the history
of the world he founded.

His story, in coming years,
grew indistinguishable
from the world's stories.

Whereas Remus
became
a storyteller,

told about the bees,
the tall grass,
a baby made of tar.

Remus grew lost
in the history
of his own stories,

the way his twin grew lost
in the history of *the world*,
the city, the river of bees.

MICHAEL SNEDIKER

Tar Baby

It is dusk. Remus, foregoing
Romulus's carousing,
finds himself lost among Latium's cypresses,

soon by brother's edict to be decimated;
soon, the agora,
from whose busy dust a city rises.

Until then, these trees are darkling amber
and availing, Remus being sorry lost and heavy
drunk, his steps slowing like he were becoming

the kind of curiosity amber preserves.
Remus, roots tripping, viaticum slushing,
thinks, slowing, *this is how it feels to be reborn*

unrecognized. And there, against a cypress trunk,
a cradle leaning, calamus-woven, inside which
is a baby. Something like a baby.

In this faltering light
it may just be baby-shaped; a shape mournful
like a baby's, without the crying,

without, upon closer inspection,
the mouth from which crying might pour.
Remus, faltering, presses his finger

into what would be the baby's face.
He divots a mouth where a mouth would be.
Remus pulls his finger back, sticky with tar,

verily, cypress sap black as the coming night,
the night soon swarming with the song of babies weeping,
sonorous and swift among the ambering trees of Latium.

LOLA HASKINS
Sky-Shots

A Magic Trick

Someone is working late in the sky's tall buildings. Bent over the dark, he has shredded the flames that are floating down now.

Constellations

I could not drive between the sky's towns if I had more spangles than a glacier.

Life-Death Sky

Schools of threadfin agitate the surface beneath which the inevitable glides.

Star

See the bottom of the page.

White

We are standing in the palazzo of a minor prince whose caretaker has thrown sheets over all the furniture.

Moon

A mother has scissored out a black circle for her child to glue.

Startle-Sky

The air bangs suddenly. That leggy flash is you, entering the ground.

Upside-Down Bowl

If you live in a tea-garden, yours will be the size of a cup. If a prairie, only sun, dripping off the edges, can show you where it ends.

for Reetika Vazirani

JAY FRANZEL

The Generous Bison

Who am I to say? I never slit rope,
stretched shield, drum or moccasin sole
from his tanned hide,
never summoned a creature in firelight dance
under mask cut from her dead hide.
Never bound snowshoe, saved fingers
from winter's teeth or poured water into buckets
drawn from that hide.

Never wound doll's clothes from his beard,
strung a necklace through her teeth,
suck-chewed the soft side of her tongue
or scoured scalp with the rough.

Need I say I sewed neither legging nor shelter with his sinew,
strung bow with her tendons, stored medicine in a pouch
that was his bladder?

Never stirred stew with a spoon or drank cedar tea from a cup
carved from her horn,
never carried sacred fire or deathly powder
in the hollow of his horn.

Never whipped a horse to gallop, swatted flies,
decorated lodge or dealt medicine with a switch of her tail.
Never soaped skin, greased hair, pressed wounds
or lit lamps with his fat.
Never sweetened a soup, brightened a pudding
or painted the face of death with her blood.

I never lengthened my hair with his,
plumped pillow, wound bracelet
or stuffed doll with hers.

Never pierced hide, put handle to paintbrush,
clubbed in battle, scraped fat, rolled dice,
sledged gear, cut sinew or breathed sacred breath
of tobacco with his bones.

I never tasted, cached or dried his flesh,
pounded or pemmicaned hers.

Never painted sun-yellow ray with her gall,
carried water or cooked gruel in the lining of his gut
or sped the tanning with her crushed liver.

Never cooked glue, hardened rattles,
carved spoons from his hoofs.
Never fished body paint or medicine
from the pond in her belly.

Never wrapped meat, bled buckets, bent basins,
collapsed cups, carried canteens cut from his paunch,
pestled baby powder, jivvied jewelry, fired fuel, tipped toys
from her dried chips.

I never rattled his balls
while the sun dancers
dragged her ponderous skull
with their own stretched skin,

yet to me,
across the humped earth,
stone yellow years
and plain death,
the generous bison
leaves these lines.

INGRID WENDT
The History of Strife

When your teenage daughter sent my teenage daughter home in tears,
and not
for the typical reasons—bad hair, fashion, boys—but for taking pride
in starting to master the German tongue my own

parents had, since childhood, abandoned (*Language of Evil, Jew-killer
Language*),
the birthright to vengeance was on your daughter's side and she
hurled it.

And I—who haven't thought of this in years, having chosen not to blame
you, the parents, blaming instead Our Cultural Climate, the Great
Human Condition—see you by chance and here it is

the stone of this memory rises as stones are not supposed to do
and I am struck, my own rage rises, this earthly hunger
to cast it back at you: fellow teachers, colleagues

whose allegiance to words, like mine, has always been steadfast
whose hope, like mine, is to change the history of strife
whose child I cannot forget hurt mine:

teachers to whom, if these hands had not a life
of their own, I would surrender
this poem.

JOE PITKIN

An Equation with 2 Variables

Tomorrow, a student will bring
A live bomb to class.
The bomb will be hidden
Inside a rabid wolverine,
Which will be muzzled.
The student will give me
The key to the muzzle;
As a gesture of trust,
I will set the key back on his desk,
Watch it carefully throughout the lecture.

Of course, I only imagine
The key, but the rest
Is going to happen. I plan tomorrow's class
While troubled students scribe their graffiti
High on the walls of our apartment building,
Packing them with elaborate script,
Like algebraic formulas, the nation's troubles
Represented as an equation with two variables.
I lie awake all night,
Wondering whether I am x or y .

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

Grahamesque

[Choreographer Martha Graham] repeated some transparently obvious fictions throughout her career, insisting that dancers have more bones in their feet than normal people. . . .

—Emily Christensen

Some have more. Or anyway *claim* more.

In his autobiography, Davy Crockett gilds the boast that he “can whip my weight in wildcats” by adding “and if any gentleman pleases, for a ten-dollar bill

I can throw in a panther.” Don’t you think a single snake uptendriled from a scalp and hissing aggressively in the air should be enough? —and yet Medusa displays a luxuriant *corona* of snakes (although a pittance compared to the giant Briareus, he of the fifty heads and one hundred arms).

It’s all a load of hooley, of course: he may have seen a golden wall of hula-shimmy lava (excuse me: *wheat*) and seen the cobalt and viridian print of a billion Buddhas’ brain waves (and for that, read: *sky*) but the whole of that shuddering glory and phantasmagoria entered Vincent Van Gogh through only the usual duo of eyes; nor did the sawed and rendered brain of Albert Einstein hold an extra hill of zippy neural gigabytes.

And still, we understand the wish for a tangible proof of supracapability. The Rock of the Prophet, rising out of its thousands of prostrate pilgrims like Gibraltar from its sea of kowtow waves.

The Cross: the wooden, historical *thingness* of it.

What would we do, if the numinous *didn’t* have bones like those, to throw down to the level

of our human needs?—like colors that the universe concedes to us from beyond the visible spectrum, so we’re willing to believe in it. Or: Mindy, in the children’s ward.

Just last year she was thirteen, at her ballet lessons like all of her friends . . . stumbling coltish clumsiness; a springy coltish grace. And now she’s waiting to be wheeled in to the deep procedure of bone marrow work. How extra large a teddy bear will it take, to say her mother’s love?

How many balloons? How many supernumerary Eiffel Towers and Noah’s Arks of balloons? Here, in the precincts of the ordinary, where most of us live, it must be that the finger Davy Crockett squeezed the trigger with

→

—impeccably ricocheting his bullet off a hanging skillet,
 a bar's brass rail, and a coffee urn, before destroying
 that shot glass on the moose's mounted head—depended
 on extra bones, a snake's-spine length of extra bones,
 but ultra-tiny and fitted together like millefiori.
 It must be. As little as 1%
 of the 3 billion "chemical letters" in our DNA is laboring
 in ways we comprehend; the rest is what geneticists call
 "junk DNA": as of now, "we don't know why it exists," a cellular
 parallel to the astronomers' "dark matter." That there's extra
 amok in the cosmic whirl—confoundingly, exaltingly—is old news,
 and we fold it into our thinking
 without even thinking about it: "oodles," says a friend
 in her retro-colloquial speak. A dozen,
 no, a baker's dozen, the whole shebang, the whole nine yards,
 from soup to nuts, the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink,
 and then the sink, and then the microlilliputian life
 in its sponge and its S-trap. As for Graham . . . I've seen videos
 of her dancers doing steps so quick, so tight, it looked
 like darning. Like a hundred pounds of body trained
 to work its channeled power as a thimble. And I know
 if we could see the foot that Martha Graham sees
 as a matter of faith—if it were glass, or even only as translucent
 as a molded shape of aspic, with its contents on display—
 we'd see it isn't an anthropometrical matter of how many more,
 but how best used: a filigree
 of focused expertise. I entered the kitchen that night
 as Mindy's mother was staring at and past
 the ragged stacks of dirty dishes, into . . . the future?
 The weave of the human heart? She saw me. "I want," she said,
 "her surgeon's hands to be like dancer's feet."
 I knew what she meant. Then she started to weep,
 and ran out. And I was left alone, admiring
 a single bead of water that hovered immovably and nimbly
 at the faucet's tip: a symbol?
 A Grahamesque symbol?
 The entire kitchen sink
en pointe.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

The Poem in which the Devout and the Atheists Meet in Minnesota

But it isn't *any* prepuce, no: this
dessicated flap of creasy tissue is Our Lord's,
inside a reliquary looking like my sister's
three-tier wedding cake—but all-over gold
and tourmalines—and miraculous cure
is attributable to standing in the field
of its presence: asthma, a goiter, a cancerous
lei of petals over the neck and chest
. . . as, elsewhere, someone rubs the penis

of a marble god perennially erect,
as if a human infertility might somehow be redressed by this
proximity to potent marble sperm;
the brassy pubis of a goddess has been similarly
hand-beseched for centuries, and worn to a color
in between seaweed and nectarine: a testament
to superstitious thinking of a kind that we
find laughable over our chilled chablis, but
one friend treasures a book especially because of its

“association value”—on the title page, in deep bold script:
From [X] to [Y]—and someone else is googoo
for an otherwise insipid fifties cookie jar she bid on
—it was Andy Warhol's, once. The lesson:
secularism isn't immune from magical authority;
and she may squeeze an artificial square to do her dishes,
but the sponge that Janet uses in her bath was once
alive in the sea, and trickles a hint of that
primacy over her body. Often deity

is seemingly behind some grand phenomenon; and
often not. It's either and it's both
in Minnesota, on this stretch of freeze and emptiness
tonight when—in a purity of sky as absolute
as thought—Aurora Borealis sweeps upon us
out of everywhere and nowhere. This is air,
and ice, uncommonly touched
by light. This is the air of our planet
brought to higher power.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

Left Behind

Among the many curiosities . . . [is] a stupefied, beached fin whale straddled by 15 inquisitive monks.

—from a review of *The Whale Book* in *Discover*, January 2005

In my earlier life I visited a brothel, and there
were women who fit that gaudy and high-hemmed life

as true as a smooth leg fits its hosiery—but
others wore the look of some of fate's sad misconsignments,

and their smiles felt like cracks in glass. The same
among the whalers (for the brotherhood often apportioned us

into the world, to do our work): the ones who seemingly
were born to clamber rigging, and the ones in whom a fire

of unbelonging would color the back walls of their eyes:
no gun could douse it. Thus it was with me,

in the monastery, for all of those years; the light
through an oriel window in the chapel's western-facing wall

would touch whatever other brothers walked across
its oblongs as if equal light rose out of them

to meet it. I felt no such thing, I radiated
no such thing, although I tried and duly loved those people

and their life. But I was . . . similar, as opposed
to the same. A rupee in with the pence. And so that day

I never returned. It wasn't intentional—not at first.
But there are flies that are proportioned to the death

of a whale, as others are assigned to the punier deaths;
a hundred thousand of them, and together

they made the universe-buzz of electrical wires
passed through the fields of stars. I heard it deep

inside my teeth. It seemed to own me. That,
and the sun (this was late August), and a stench

so rich, the air around it wavered like the air around
hot tar. I grew faint. And instead of walking away

across a beach where there was neither shade nor softness . . .
in a daze, and while the others were admiring

the corrugated flukes . . . I climbed inside the lips,
I lay down to rest on the rubbery slate of the tongue.

And then they left. They must have called for me,
and searched, and were puzzled. But finally they left

in the three small shallops; and when I awoke
it was evening; I was alone; and I understood

that I should stay here; and I have,
these eighteen years. I am the voice

of a gullet that properly should be beyond
all voice now, and I go about the office of this prolongation

seriously. But how and why, they ask—for on occasion I do
have visitors. Some fancy me the Holy Man, and would I

set my left hand like a starfish asleep for a minute
on the camembertish pudge of her infertile mons or his

distended sack. For most, however, I'm
the Caretaker (they must imagine my rounds with a sponge

and sudsy ammonia, scrubbing the great bone stanchions sleek of fungus).
In all truth—it was *the whale* that cared

for *me*. Example: early on—before the long dissolvent
rains and verminry began, and left the clean

freestanding galleries you see—the whale fed me.
Chandeliers of meat gigantically clotted the ceiling length,

and one especially succulent organ—just about the size
and height above me of a boar's head on a hunter's chateau wall—

provided oily slivers of nourishment for a full year: it
was like a grant. And I could feast, and dream, and scabble

ever farther inward: Brother Hermit Crab. And this is where
their easy allusions to Jonah fail: I didn't want out,

I'd willingly expatriated myself, and my
new mother country—steppe and tundra, scree and veldt—

awaited me with intricate sufficiency: hanging gardens,
gullies, weirdly feathered ridgebacks, and those haunted plains

where the ghosts of the billion krill still keened
their absence: each was less than a mosquito whine, and yet

this belly held a *ton* of krill: a *ton*
of otherworldly music. Do I ever miss the gladness

in a human touch? The sex scent in an alcove
of the brothel? Or the whaling sailors' rowdy camaraderie?

O yes. But regret is like shoes that I leave
outside, on the sand, so as not to mar the floor

of my home. And by the creed of the monastery,
satisfaction in one's own life can rise

to the level of sin. If so, I will need to repent a minute
for every minute I live. If only you could see me. . . !—when I enter

my encampment in the mouth, I sing a footnote
to the operatic transatlantic coo-and-boom of whalesong

he once poured forth prodigiously into the currents;
when I dance like a dandy, down and back

in the gutters of him, I trace the muscle pulleys
that rigidified the thick spar of his pleasure; when I dance

about the brain case, I'm a living graph
of whale serotonin; when I kneel

in the skull, and watch the sky-shine wheel across
those empty eye holes, I'm inside a dome

as wonder-filled as any sacred space on earth,
and fit for a cathedral.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

“Off in the darkness hours moved restlessly”

—a typo in Clifford Simak’s *A Heritage of Stars*

We believed they were horses; and so
we saddled up, we rode expectantly
through the long day and into the night.
Then we dismounted; and slept; and still
they continued to carry us
—the hours. They wouldn’t stop.
They carried us clean away.

FRANNIE LINDSAY

Receiving the Host

When you could bear the sight of food no longer,
when the time had come, I brought the venison out
of the freezer, thawed it, broke it

like clouds of bread in the pot of autumn red water;
I cooked it and rinsed it of tallow, whistled it cool,
then fed it to you with my fingers, nugget by nugget,

waiting long enough between each one
you lolled over your tongue
with grateful reluctance, then swallowed;

and I blessed the doe who woke, and shook
the mist of tiny flies away from her head, and stood
in the light's good aim as if to watch you

close your eyes and eat.

MARION K. STOCKING

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Translation: Text, Texture, and Architecture

Part II: Scandinavian, Germanic, and Slavic Poetry Today

The Nordic Imagination Today

I remember discovering my first poem by the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer. It was **Robert Bly's** translation in, I think, *The Sixties*. A low plane throws a cross-shaped shadow over a man in a field. "For a fraction of a second he is right in the center of the cross. // I have seen the cross hanging in the cool church vaults. / At times it resembles a split-second snapshot of something / moving at tremendous speed." Here is fresh poetic imagination: vivid imagery, a genius for unpredictable but telling connections, and the power to launch our imaginations into new realms. We now have Bly's selection and translation of ***The Half-Finished Heaven: The Best Poems of Tomas Tranströmer*** (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001, 122 pp, \$14, paper). Here is the same wry talent for connections ("Inside the church, pillars and vaulting / white as plaster, like the cast / around the broken arm of faith."). Each poem is anchored in the here and now, but each adventures out in space and time, transforming the literal. Listen to the end of "Guard Duty," where the duty of the guard is not only "to be where I am,"

But to be where I am . . . and to wait.

I am full of anxiety, obstinate, confused.

Things not yet happened are already here!

I feel that. They're just out there:

a murmuring mass outside the barrier.

They can only slip in one by one.

They want to slip in. Why? They do

one by one. I am the turnstile.

A radically different poet is the Dane **Inger Christensen**, who astonished me with her ***alphabet***, translated by **Susanna Nied** (New York: New Directions, 2000, 64 pp, \$10.95, paper). Reading a great deal of experimental poetry lately, I have been thinking about how poets who reject traditional form don't just "play tennis with the net down," but develop new architectures for their fresh insights. Abecedarian poems have recently engaged some of our most adventurous poets: Susan Stewart, Carolyn Forché, and, in these pages, Karl Elder. Elytis had one in *The Little Seafarer* (1985), and Inger Christensen published *alfabet* (in Danish) in 1981. Each approaches the alphabet from a different angle, and Christensen is one of the most daring. Think about this: she determines the number of lines in each alphabetical

section by Fibonacci's thirteenth-century mathematical sequence in which each number is the sum of the two that precede it (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc.). I'll tell you before you ask: she quits at *n*. When she gets up to *j* (89 lines) she splits into two poems, and the following letters have clusters of five to seven poems. With *n* (900 lines) she has completed the internal structure of her poem and stops.

So much for the architecture. What about the content? She first establishes a rhythm of repetitions—a hymn to the natural world: “apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist.” Then “bracken exists; and blackberries, blackberries; / bromine exists; and hydrogen, hydrogen,” the catalogue expanding outward. Next:

cicadas exist; chicory; chromium,
 citrus trees; cicadas exist;
 cicadas, cedars, cypresses, the cerebellum

prowl inward. Among the *ds* we find *dioxin* and *days* and *death*. And Christensen has established a hypnotizing lyric lilt: a singing celebration of the whole of the universe—light and dark, outer and inner, concrete and abstract. Proceeding, her syntax becomes more complex, with basses and cellos entering for the darker aspects of existence, so that by the time we get to *g* we are in deep:

guns exist; in the midst of the lit-up
 chemical ghetto guns exist
 with their old-fashioned, peaceable precision

guns and wailing women, full as
 greedy owls exist; the scene of the crime exists;
 the scene of the crime, drowsy, normal, abstract,
 bathed in a whitewashed, godforsaken light,
 this poisonous, white, crumbling poem

How many tonal shifts? And we're only up to *g*!

Christensen draws us through history, settling keenly on our own time. We drift through a dream sequence here, breathe through a lyric aria there. Forms become increasingly complex. A speaker who sounds like the poet, *I*, appears, throwing a stone into the sound, dreaming in a hotel room of, yes, an apricot tree. Images from earlier poems reappear with new significance. *L* begins as *life*, but after cobalt bombs appear, a new refrain rises: “there's no more to say.” Where do we go from here, only halfway

through the poem? We continue on a long, melodious, visionary adventure; each page introduces a new angle of vision in a new form. The prosodist in me can hardly wait to turn a page to savor what new figure she has created for her next leap of imagination.

I have rarely before read a translation that I could hardly believe was a translation. Susanna Nied has given us a rich poem in splendid English. I would love to hear it aloud in Danish; I would take any opportunity to read it aloud myself in English, to let the mathematical and the linguistic, the philosophical and the natural, the symphonic and the declarative, play through my lungs and throat and mouth—from the “naos, the innermost space of the cell,” to the speculation whether “what’s raven or starling or lark / lost for all time will find itself there / in eternity / eternity.” Either Danish is in its music uncannily close to English, or Susanna Nied has done a miraculous job of finding English equivalents for the musical texture of the verse. For the architecture, translatable syntactical structure helps, as well as the verbal repetitions that (like *apricot*) take on chordal resonance as they recur. Listen to this, plucked out of the middle of an *I*-poem:

think; like a leaf on a tree
thinks; like shadow and light,

like shining bark thinks,
like the grubs beneath
the barkskin think, like lichen
on a stone and a bit of dry rot
think, like the squawroot thinks,
like the misty forest clearing
thinks, like the marshes think
where the rising of the rainbow
is reflected, think like a bit of
mud, a bit of raindrop
thinks, think like a mirror

Now Christensen has a new volume, ***Butterfly Valley: A Requiem***, also translated by **Susanna Nied** (New York: New Directions, 2004, 128 pp, \$13.95, paper). Here we have four long poems, moving from the most formal to what looks like prose. The title poem, the requiem, is a modified crown of sonnets. The reader never knows who, exactly, is dead, but the symbolic

significance of the butterfly, with its cycles of renewal, is clear. The linked sonnets use strict Italian form, with content and syntax conforming exactly to the stanzaic grid. The metrical norm is, in this translation at least, iambic pentameter. But to my ear, the translator, possibly through fidelity to the word-by-word original, pushes the meter close to organic free verse, as in this tercet:

Here in its cocoon the admiral
once a spring-green, glutton caterpillar,
transforms itself to what we call a mind.

Here I admire what the poet does so well—the arresting observation of detail and the double transformation, literal and metaphorical. The meter, whether it scans or not, dramatizes the content, and makes me wonder what this sounds like in Danish.

The other three poems are formally different. “Watersteps” is eight “chapters” of five sections each, each section with five “paragraphs.” The ostensive subject is the fountains, piazzas, and steps of Rome. The details keep recurring in a web of images; as I continue reading I experience a transformation of these sensuous details to verbal marble. The third poem, the “Poem on Death,” is in stepped quatrains, organized in seven increasingly long sections. Consider one little stanza, so limpid in its diction, so unpredictable in its dance, so complexly resonant, in and out of context:

take death by the hand
give it an apple
walk up to its grave
bite the apple first yourself

This is a profoundly self-reflexive work, a poem about the difficulty of writing a poem about death. (If “profoundly self-reflexive” sounds like an oxymoron, believe me, it’s not.)

The final poem, “Meeting,” the longest, looks at first glance like prose in seven chapters. Reading it through the dramatic flashes that the translator captures eloquently, I feel as though I’m in the middle of a very condensed novel. But I’m inclined to avoid the term “prose poem” here, since read aloud this would reveal itself as richly cadenced poetry. Coleridge would have had no problem appreciating as true poems these tightly-organized, musically-formal works with the justified margins. “Meeting” has

brilliantly accurate empathic *image*ination: “I think of a green little fir still with growing tip foremost this tingling down through the trunk.” Say those words with your lips parted and savor the vowel progression Nied has composed.



Deeper into Europe

I’d like now to address three Eastern-European poets of my generation, born within three years of each other but radically different in their lives and in their work.

If Inger Christensen is little known in the United States, the same is certainly not true of **Paul Celan** (1920-1970), whose obscurity and dark complexity have rather attracted than repelled our contemporary poets and critics. As J. M. Coetzee writes in *The New York Review of Books* (5 July 2001): “Even during Celan’s lifetime there had developed a busy scholarly trade . . . based on him. That trade has today grown to an industry.” This is my first wrestling match with this formidable poet, and I am glad of the opportunity to share what I have learned.

Let’s start with an article by Lucia Cordell Getsi, “Poet as Reader, Reader as Poet: The Intertext of Translation,” in *The MacGuffin* (Spring/Summer 2003). Here are the first two stanzas of an untitled poem, unpublished in Celan’s lifetime:

Kleide die Worthöhlen aus
mit Pantherhäuten,

erweitere sie, fellhin und fellher,
sinnhin und sinnher.

Getsi works up a “translation lexicon” and urges you, dear reader, to try your hand.

auskleiden (to line [as in sewing with material], dress, undress, dress out) German joins the preposition and the verb in the infinitive to make new meanings; in the present tense, the preposition and verb split, as here.

Wort (word) *Höhlen* (hells, holes, caves, caverns)

Pantherhäuten (panther skins); *antre* is French for panther, also

erweitern (widen)

sie (them)

fell hin fell her (*fell* is the same in English, can mean pelt of

an animal, or the membrane lining the muscles, has same resonance of to fall; *hin* is toward the subject, *her* away from, roughly, to and fro or here and there
sinn (sense, faculty of perception)

Now that you have tried your translation, Getsi admits that after thirty-three years she is still not “reading,” only translating, Celan, since he cannot be simply “read.” She provides three of her own translations, the first to capture “the semantic vectors of body and religion . . . at the expense of the foregrounding of linguistic deconstruction”: “Line the word pits / with panther skins // widen them out. Fell back and fell forth, / sense back and sense forth.” Her second attempt emphasizes “aspects of wealth and royalty”: “Dress the word caves out / in panther furs // stretch them, fur to and fur fro, sense to and sense fro.” Her third tries for more complexity: “Line the word holes / with panther skins // expand them, fell forward and fell back, / sensing forward and sensing back.” “I have never gotten out of his wordhellholes,” Getsi concludes.

I have before me ***Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan***, translated by the husband-and-wife team of **Nikolai Popov** and **Heather McHugh** (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan/University Press of New England, 2000, 167 pp, \$24.95, hardbound). The translators have favored poems not previously translated in English, so that you will not find here his best-known works, such as the “Death Fugue.” Admitting that no one can “reproduce in a language other than German Celan’s tragic relation to the language which was his instrument and life,” they decide not to give the German, loathe to seduce the reader into line-by-line comparison that “fatally distracts attention from what matters first: the experience of a poem’s coursing, cumulative power.”

If you were to read nothing but the translators’ preface you would be well rewarded, since Popov and McHugh share Celan’s passion for transformative language; they respond in their preface and notes with a style that reflects his mercurial linguistic imagination; they understand the palimpsest of meaning in each German word and are at home in his landscape of cosmic consciousness. They have the verbal muscle to create English analogues to his stutterings, the splittings and reunings, puns, inventive compounds (*eye-slit crypt*), neologisms, paronymies, and dramatic truncations. What’s more (and a great deal more),

like Lucia Getsi and like Anne Carson in her *Sappho* they provide detailed notes (really essays) on the problems and discoveries in the poems. Thus I get to share the adventure of translation. One example, explaining the book's title: "*Kehlkopfverschlusslaut*, the German term for 'glottal stop' (lit. occlusion of the head of the throat) is such a throatful that it can choke even a native."

How do Popov and McHugh handle the poem Getsi essayed? "Upholster the word-hollows / with panther pelt, // enlarge them, furback and furforth, / senseback and senseforth." Here is how their version of the rest of this poem ends:

give them vestibules, ventricles, valves,
furnish them with wilds, parietal,

and listen for the second,
every time their second, second

sound.

Upholster and *hollows* seem to me inspired for their sensuous sound. And this poem provides a fine example of Popov and McHugh's genius at creating a lyric—an English lyric—through alliteration and assonance, through the cumulative mini-rhythms Celan sets in motion, and the internal coherence through the echo of *furnish* back to the furs—providing the poem's "coursing, cumulative power." This is one poem Popov and McHugh choose not to annotate, but I want to say how, working through it with all this assistance, I have come to accept it as my window into Celan's work. I had to labor to learn to listen for that "second, second / sound," but now am profoundly impressed with his poetry, with the architecture of each poem, and with the text of this translation, the texture of both German and English. I can begin to appreciate why Celan has been called *the poet of the twentieth century*.

Now try another McHugh/Popov version, straight:

Ring narrowing Day under
the heavenleaf's web of veins.
Across large cells of empty time, through
rainfall, climbs
a black-blue thing: the
thought-beetle.

Words in blood-bloom
throng before his feelers.

After an explanation of the three-part coinage of *Engholztag* in line one (the table of contents hyphenates *Ring-narrowing*), the translators provide a gracefully written appreciation of this poem in itself and in the context of his other work. I enjoyed the note, but, actually, I already had the impression that I was “reading” the poem simply as a poem by way of this translation.

The Yugoslav poet **Vasco Popa** (1922-1991) was born only two years after Celan, but his *Collected Poems*, translated by **Anne Pennington**, as revised, expanded, and annotated by **Francis R. Jones** (London: Anvil Press, 1997, 464 pp, £25, hardbound) takes us into a different world, a world in which, as Ted Hughes writes in his introduction, terrible things “happen within a containing passion—Job-like—for the elemental final beauty of the created world.” Popa conducts the reader directly into the imaginative life of a people—the ancient people of the Serbs. For those of us whose impression of the Serbs comes from the news spots during the horror in Kosovo, reading this life-work in poetry (with its valuable notes) helps us to understand both the passion of a people for whom a fourteenth-century defeat in battle can retain an impact comparable to that of the Holocaust in my generation and the profound role poetry has played in this passion.

First of all, these are short lyrics—less than a page. We get only one stanza in Serbo-Croat, but it gives us an idea of how exquisitely-composed these poems are. Just listen (stressed syllables in italics):

Providan golub u glavi
U golubu glinen kovèeg
U kovèegu mrtvo more
U moru bla•en mesec

Much of this incantatory structure comes through in translation—of stanzas, whole lyrics, and the divisions of Popa’s books into tightly-interrelated cycles, sometimes liturgical groups, even sometimes symmetrically constructed to “open like wings.” After some poems influenced by the French surrealists are some imaginative vignettes of country life. The decapitated hen

jumps away
From her bloody head
Which thrusts her into night

She jumps away
To fly up to her roost

Year by year the poems expand in scope—always with playfulness; always a folkloric flavor, always the shock of imagination; typically with a dark or bitter edge. The sun, a Near-Eastern solar deity, sometimes suggests Christ. The totemic wolf who prowls through many of the poems was associated with the Serbs' patron saint, the folk figure St. Sava, and comes to represent the Serbian people. Here is "Wolves' Tenderness":

We're lying in the grass
On Wolf-Meadow above Vršac

They say
The wolves were killed here
Every last one

Only their name
Was left alive

An animal tenderness reaches us
From under the alert grass

And stirs our lips
And limbs and blood

We love each other without a word
My young she-wolf and I

The third poet in this group is still alive: **Wisława Szymborska**, well-known as Nobel laureate and through her publication in many literary magazines (including this one). The edition I have is *Miracle Fair*, translated by **Joanna Trzeciak** (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001, 192 pp, \$24.95, cloth). Trzeciak worked with the poet on these translations and on the imaginative organization of this collection—not a chronological "collected," but in chapters by theme, each chapter introduced with a visual collage by the poet herself and a line from one of the poems in that chapter. The translator has worked to maintain the form of each

poem, including the rhyme scheme; she provides more than ample notes, some of which explain untranslatable Polish.

Though Szymborska's poems vary widely to the eye, they often have an iterative rhetorical structure—sometimes a catalogue, sometimes incremental repetition. Start with a love poem, "A Man's Household," which opens:

He's one of those men who want to do everything by themselves.
 You need to love him along with drawers, cabinets, and shelves,
 with what's on top of cupboards, or inside or sticking out.
 Everything is going to come in handy without a doubt.

Then follow sixteen lines cataloguing everything from "squeezed-out tubes, dried-out glue" to "a dead beetle in a soap dish" and concluding:

May I throw out a thing or two?—I put this to him dearly,
 but in response the man I love just looked at me severely.

Here we meet her winning playfulness, her affection, and her sense of wonder.

She is, all the same, as Czeslaw Milosz acknowledges in his foreword, a seriously grim poet. "Psalm" comments lightly enough on "How leaky are the borders of man-made states!" when clouds and sands and birds and squid move freely over and under them:

How can we speak of any semblance of order
 when we can't rearrange the stars
 to know which one shines for whom?
 Not to mention the reprehensible spreading of fog!

The poem concludes with a wry glance at Terence:

Only what's human can be truly alien.

The rest is mixed forest, undermining moles, and wind. Her poems on Nazi freight trains, on the history of torture through the ages, and on the end of what was to have been a glorious century are eloquent, memorable (worth memorizing), and, yes, grim.

All these poets have this sensuous sense of the depth of time—biological, historical, mythic. All at one point or another enter into the life of the old world of nature, as in Celan's "Across large cells of empty time, through / rainfall, climbs / a black-blue thing: the / thought-beetle." The evolution of the human race weighs on these poems, if only to lead us ironically to Szymborska's "only what's human can be truly alien."