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COVER

Lee Sharkey, "Net of Webworms," photograph, 2005

Mary Greene, design

→

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

CYAN JAMES

Seed Pods 'longside Flowers

A bucking ship's hold
cramped with brown beans
fermenting in rattle sacks:

the brown, the rich extant in the
New World before freedom,
sailing now to Spain, *au miel*

nibbed & conched, enrobed
melting in the hot of a soldier hand:
peace-meal gift, offered square.

A small-stricken girl, eyes brown as
the thing she reaches for, unaware
it's too sweet, too startle strong—

she retches out onto the ground, cocoa
& turnip greens, the last laughing words
of uniforms come to stuff her belly.

On the new-dealing continent, a woman
lifts up to daubed lips the broke-off piece:
tinge of wasabi, trace chipotle: aphrodite-luxe fat.

MARY K. LINDBERG
Goya's Portrait of Ferrer

What would it be like,
he thinks, green eyes
rising from the velvety
red book in his hand,
if my wife were really
in love with me?

His dark Byronic hair rushes
forward, as if blown by wind
sailing words off the page.
Three fingers grip the verses,
capturing the idea.

His absent gaze
ticks the moment when
the physical world fades;
he sees only his own thoughts
stirred by word, phrase,
rhyming couplet.

She would; no she wouldn't.
But then, if she did,
we could do what she won't.
That might be quite pleasant,
even sublime. I think she will.

STEPHANIE N. JOHNSON

Wine Water

I shared a bed. Some man came and said
he hadn't slept all his life. I gave him some of my night
hours without

even thinking. Wish someone would have warned me.
Now I dream a man's blue-
shaven visions. I can't tell if I'm a woman

or a man in the dreams, but it doesn't matter.
What happens when they mix:
soil, Sister. That's all we've

become. Man plus Woman equals
Ditch Dirt. And this is supposed to be beautiful,
the strongest tonic.

ROSS R. WHITNEY

Serenade

I still remember.

Hawthorn, caraway, milkweed.

He came the summer of no rain: *stoneroot,*
bitterroot. He stood in that field and called

oregano, marjoram, poke root, myrrh.

Sister sat by her window.

No boy would look at her: *bloodroot,*
wormwood. And our parents
grieved: *spikenard, rue.*

She lived in her room. She read books
in bed. They were her fantasy: *coltsfoot.*
They were her man: *eyebright,*
buckthorn bark. They were her *rose hips.*

He came the summer of no rain,
and stayed one season. She watched:
red clover. She listened: *queen*
of the meadows. He called

alfalfa, allspice, aloe, angelica.
Balm buds, balmony, beech.

She washed her hair—that's how
we knew. Some *bittersweet*
change of heart. Something
from the field.

Our evenings were warm. We slept
with windows open. He came in or she
caraway to the field. First kiss: *blessed*
thistle. First *lady's slipper.* First *corn silk,*
gentian root. Imagine *milkweed.*
Imagine *passion flower.* From the field
he had called, night by night,

rose hips, sea wrack, skullcap. She put
her book down. He called *shepherd's*
purse, horsetail, summer savory.

She answered *catnip, kava kava,*
calamus. She answered *calendula, lobelia,*
wild cherry. She was *queen*
of the meadows.

My nephew, her son: *blue violet, white*
oak bark. She rocked him *valerian, wild*
alum root. She sang him *poke root,*
milkweed, chamomile. She sang him
the whole wild field.

He came the summer of no rain,
and stayed one season. The sky turned
blackberry leaf. Before he left, *spearmint,*
white clover. The day he left,

saffron, sassafras, feverfew, rue.

RANE ARROYO

For a Bitter Veteran Student Who Is 24 Years Old

. . . and my other students

Shipped out, you learned quickly that
the First World wasn't the only world,
that numbers always become statistics.

Now, you are back among *civilians* with
their vaudevillian worries. Judgment
isn't meant for someone who has just

jerked off in a desert far from his gods
who actually came from a similar desert.
You tell me your fantasy was: a gripped car,

skinnydipping, a gun up the moon's ass.
Write as if your life depends on it; it does.
Write about how you learned to curse

in order not to be cursed, how cursive
bomb drops were your chandeliers, how
you were touched only when mourning

for someone next to you. Right it, fight
the fuck you in your ballsy little boy
looking for his mother in screaming

nights. You will yet play strip poker and
be astonished when no one asks about
the scars. You will not die on my watch.

RANE ARROYO

Blue Visits

The drowned won't stop circling
my island. Their eyes are not
perfect pearls; their hearts are not

secret volcanoes. There is no path
for them to join us on brief beaches
where we light illogical fires to keep

the living drunk and singing aloud.
Retroflexed driftwood disturbs with
its plainness, purity. Sometimes

shells offer words, but the noise
of this nilpotent world overwhelms
the fragile gates of the inner ear.

BERT STERN

from How Reb Katzman Got to Heaven

for Fred Paddock

1. The Rebbe Stops Talking

Katzman's hair was tangled with sticks,
he'd forgotten how to talk.
Where he ate bread on the stoop of his hut
birds pecked for crumbs.
He gnawed raw boletus where he picked them
by the fallen oak.
In his sleep he flew like a nightbird,
but language was a skin rash
that never went away.

*Words redden the skin of things,
he sang to the wren at the door.
We soothe them with the silence we gather.
My prayer cries out from my bones.
But words buzz like flies in swarms.
Ay, Adonai,
remove these fiery angels that guard Eden's gate.*

2. Trayfe Katzman

Young and full of spirit,
what could Katzman have done?
Stay home nights
to watch his mother sweeping,
the girls at her apron strings,
father davening, snoring,
mumbling tales from the Talmud?

No. Katzman would go to the tavern,
drink and sing with the Poles.
Once on a dare
he ate pork, and liked it.
He'd fight and get bloody,
go off with a girl.
Shikse? Mox nix.
Drunk he came home
and drunk he slept.
When the sun rose he sawed boards
for his father to hammer into chairs and tables.

Old now, a mensch who said his prayers,
Katzman prayed forgiveness.
And God said:
Who keeps score? Just keep singing.
Ah!
The law was the law
but there was something better behind it.

3. Katzman at the River

Oy Rebbe, oy Rebbe, the salmon said,
stippled, half water,
more light than flesh,
oy Rebbe, come in.

Katzman looked down.
Reflections of plum blossoms
floated on current, and in air
plum branches tossed in noon light.

Slowly he took off his clothes,
washed them in the river
and hung them on branches of plum.
As he slid down the bank on his tuchus
great drops splashed into the sun.
Katzman swam and sang praises.

D. E. STEWARD

Octovro

Her *shalwar-kameez* of lime blue silk, her blue-black hair in a single braid

Of the Punjab and Pakistan

And azurite blue is greener and duller than Dresden blue, greener and paler than smalt

Azurite blue is air blue, Armenian stone, bice blue, blue ashes, blue bice, blue verditer, cendre, ceramic, Chessylite blue

Azure or azure blue is the heraldic blue, the blue color of the clear sky

Then there are Savitri Devi's New Age fascist Hindu-Aryan myths in her *A Son of God*

The first juncos of the winter, two females appear

Hokusai's fifteen-volume *Manga*, the vertical of his *Awabi Pearl Diver* who lifts an abalone high, the surface of the sea displacing her chest line at the viewer's eye level exactly at the surface skein

Bijin-ga

Ukiyo-e, or the Floating World, not a water world, *Ukiyo* was first a Buddhist phrase, "the sad world," that by a pun became a world of uncertainties, a floating world

Fascination with the endlessly changing and unpredictable

D. E. STEWARD

Not an inaccurate abstract of one of the strong lines in the
Japanese character

As Utamaro Kitagawa, ~1753–1806, worked in the Yoshiwara,
locale of Edo's brothels

Edo prints are so popular because of the *shunga*, the erotic
books

Now it's compensated dating across Japan, *enjo kosai*

School girls using their ubiquitous cell phones to connect with
office men and geezers who'll give them Gucci

So *sugoi*, so cool

Drifts and runs, runs and drifts

The virga drift over the Utah canyonlands

Making to tack toward the junction with the Colorado

Switzerland lies against the arc of the Alps connecting the Rhine
and Rhone, it rears above flatland Europe

In nearly Chessylite blue

Altocumulus fills the high summer afternoon horizons of
northern Minnesota and North Dakota

The white hot heat of the summer Sacramento Valley

The open lands

In the volcanic-dust red sundown glory of Western Cape fynbos
just off the strand behind Dawids Kraal, close enough for the
sound of surf

In the Southern Hemisphere that year most sunsets spread to
vast red prosceniums from a Sumatra volcano's dust carried
around the planet

On a single overhead wire against that red one evening, a male
pintailed wydah in breeding plumage rested before seeking its
roost for the night, its black-sheen tail longer than its body,
black, white, red finch's bill

Those spectacular birds in the Western Cape nest in the trees
and brush everywhere over the entrances to meerkat warrens and
aardvark burrows, the trails used by spring hares, black-backed
jackals, Cape foxes, guinea fowl, and brush-tailed porcupines

Cape sugarbirds, orangebreasted sunbirds, Cape francolins, black
eagles, Cape gannets, jackass penguins, Hartlaub's gulls, Cape
shovellers, blacknecked grebes, Cape robins

Proteas, restios, and ericas

Vivid lemon bokmakieries, malachite kingfishers, brilliant green
Knysna louries

The birds of the Western Cape even more vivid than the spinning
rhinos, mother and calf, fighting to keep the little one from being

→

taken by a lion pride on the attack, dust rising in the dawn, in the Masai Mara, the morning before shifting safari south into Tanzania

More emphatic than the three intimidating hamerkops squabbling over the mat of stranded, brown, wonder-eyed xenopi in the empty swimming pool in Ezulwini, Swaziland

For a Chinese matchmaker's dinner, even after twenty years in the West, befitting the stickily sweet conversation, her mother served Port with the food

"If I'd wanted to marry a scarf merchant, I could have done that without all that folderol ten years ago"

Old blue is pale and it is redder and duller than powder blue or bluebird

Off the Simplon, 2005 meters, bask in the strong sun with two women students on bicycles up from Brig below in the bottom of the Valais

Bitter jokes about *Herrschaft* and the Swiss exploitive manipulation of foreign workers

Savvy Swiss women who know it all and that they have to live with it. With sun on the Simplon snow banks too glorious for more jabbering, they get back on their bikes and start the long coast back down

Swiss women suffer the same blunt Swiss opportunism that laundered German gold, most often called the boat is full, that still tries to enforce *volkhafft Verborgenheit* and the credo of *Kinder, Küche, und Konsum*

D. E. STEWARD

Every time a feminist there advocates anything more serious than to get men to wash the dishes now and then, the whole thing falls back into squabble and compromise

While in Scandinavia . . . and in France, Germany, and Italy for that matter

The confusing, paradoxical realities through which we swim

“Unlike modern readers, who follow the flow of a narrative from beginning to end, early modern Englishmen read in fits and starts . . . making sense of the world. . .”

October 1st. Three or four hermit thrushes moving through, one feeding on the top of a fresh pile of fallen leaves

October 2nd. The four quiet hermit thrushes at the utmost limit of their winter range, a bit forlorn as migration holdouts

An excited flock of juncos arrives on their way in for the winter

Blue ultramarine ash in negation of soggy dead-leaf brown

“You’ve slapped together travel notes, moralistic ramblings, feelings, notes, jottings, untheoretical discussions, unfablelike fables, copied out some folk songs, added some legend-like nonsense of your own, and are calling it fiction!”

Commonplacing

Sampling credits to Robert Darnton and to Gao Xinjian in *Soul Mountain*.

GALWAY KINNELL
Hide-and-Seek, 1933

Once when we were playing
hide-and-seek and it was time
to go home, the rest gave up
on the game before it was done
and forgot I was still hiding.
I remained hidden as a matter
of honor until the moon rose.

D. O. MOORE

Hypotensive, Or, The Day I Became a Bird and Back

Largely things slowed. Lengthened.
Lightened. As if I weren't there.
I no longer needed all that

blood and turned away from such
solidity as bones (hollowing out)
and skin (thinning). A cold veil

of water bathed me as legs shrank to
sticks, wrists shriveling. Arms now flat
expanded. What I had was sound:

waves of wind pulsing through, up
sweeping me, louder than the tensed
voices pitched and clicking, calling me

back. Breath, too, was left, rising high,
quick, ballooning my chest. Exalting.
Someone pressed me down then, pricked

in needles for sacks of fluid pumped into me.
I thickened. A cold gurney named thighs,
fingers back to me. I can't say I wanted them.

D. O. MOORE

Unearned, Still Offered

Sometimes I forget you
watching there—you, blue
breath, teeth of angels.

You stand in grace,
and I am cleaning walls
with a camel hair. The cracks

are that thin. Nothing
can interrupt me. Body full
of fissures, eyes full of soot,

I cannot turn to you.
You wait without impatience.

MURIEL NELSON
Sun and Migraine

The blinds were up. I would have had them down
if they could keep light's blades outside. My view

was skewed, it's true, or skewered—the right half to
a microscopic sea of ghosting cell shapes,

the left, to a distant sun it didn't want.
Emily Dickinson's funeral tramped through my brain

and split it with Auden's night that needs our love.
I turned the other cheek. One eye, pillowed

at a slant to the window, opened—an experiment—
the other, too, and then both halves together came

to be a black-shrouded firmament over waves
of quaking orange leaves and their shades. Brilliant

alders which had been looking sickly were losing
their grip when a seagull rose from them. Sparks

trailed, then feathers gathered and spread, speeding
from light into dark, and wings whitened, then blackened in flame.

STEVE WILSON
The Hunger Bird

At windows, the darker trees, where
the blue-barred wing I understand
sparks and shows against voices,
some cold eye now suddens
within ragged light—lifted, shifting

on the branches gray, green;
white shards scattered upon the walk.
Beneath the slow space of sound imagine

rain—its lulled fall we've wanted long.
Memory, is that your hand upon the latch?
Thought, have you taken to hollows?

Here is my need—a crackled call
or syllable that withers the breath: of winter,
blown down pines. She has drifted
toward a certain sleep—deep oak.
Old Soul, for a moment then, know, touch.

JOSIP PUPAČIĆ

Tri moja brata

Kad sam bio tri moja brata i ja,
kad sam bio
čtvorica nas.
Imao sam glas kao vjetar,
ruke kao hridine,
srce
kao viganj.
Jezera su me slikala.
Dizali su me
jablani.
Rijeka me umivala za sebe.
Peračice su lovile
moju sliku.

Kad sam bio
tri moja brata
i ja,
kad sam bio
čtvorica nas.
Livade su me voljele.
Nosile su moj glas
i s njim su sjekle potoke.
Radovao sam se sebi.
Imao sam braću.
(Imao sam uspravan hod.)
To su bila tri moja brata:
moj brat, moj brat, i moj brat.

→

JOSIP PUPAČIĆ
My Three Brothers

When I was my three brothers and I,
when I was
all four of us.
I had the voice of the wind,
cliffs for hands,
heart
like a forge.
Lakes took pictures of me.
Poplar trees
uplifted me.
River washed my face for her own.
Washerwomen fished
for my image.

When I was
my three brothers
and I,
when I was
all four of us.
Meadows cared for me.
Carried my voice
cutting with it through streams.
I rejoiced in myself.
I had brothers.
(I had an upright walk.)
I had my three brothers:
my brother, my brother, and my brother.

translated from the Croatian by Natalija Grgoric and Ognjen Raden

JOSIP PUPAČIĆ
Nesagrađena kuća

Vrata nemaju izlaza, i nema vrata na koja bi izišli, brate moj!
Nema vrata, ni prozora, ni krova, tvoja kamena kuća,
u koju je ušla (nimalo slična tebi) neviđena noć.
A zašto ni kuće nema, brate moj, zašto nema kuće tvoje?

Došao sam u selo u kome gori tvoje ime
(nimalo slično tvome grobu, nimalo slično tvome odlasku)
jer ti si gradio kuću od plavca kamena, od kamena tvrdog kao san.
Došao sam u selo u kome gori tvoje ime.

I sišao sam u podrum po kojem otac riše tvoj povratak.
I stvara tvoj svijet. I stvara tvoj svijet!
Jer, brate moj, ti si sin (bio si sin) i brat, i otac.
Jer ti si bio sin i brat. I kuća je tvoja narasla jedne večeri.

I mrak su svrdlali prozori njezini. Igrali su čempresi.
Svirala je noć. I krupnjali su tvoji sinovi.
Jedne večeri opet si bio lijep; jer, narasla je kuća tvoja.
Ja sam pjevao.

Godine urlaju po starom zidu, mili moj.
I ruše tvoj dlan. I ruše tvoj san.
Kuća je samo temelj, nacrt tvoje smrti. Brate moj!
Otišla je kuća. Otišla je kuća. Otišla je kuća tvoja.

JOSIP PUPAČIĆ
The Unbuilt House

A door without an exit, and no door to exit through, my brother.
No door, no window, nor roof has your house of stone,
entered by (not the least like you) the unseen night.
But why is there no house either, my brother, why is your house not
there?

I arrived at the village in which your name burns
(not the least like your grave, not the least like your departure),
for you were building a house of blue stone, of stone as hard as a dream.
I arrived at the village in which your name burns.

And I climbed down to the cellar where father draws your return.
And creates your world. And creates your world!
For, my brother, you are a son (were a son) and a brother and a father.
For you were a son and a brother. And your house grew up one evening.

Its windows bored through the darkness. Cypresses danced.
Night was playing. And your sons got bigger.
One evening once again you were handsome; your house had grown.
I was singing.

Years howl across the old wall, my dear.
And bring down your palm. And bring down your dream.
House is just a bedrock, a blueprint of your death. My brother!
Gone is the house. Gone is the house. Gone is your house.

translated from the Croatian by Natalija Grgorinac and Ognjen Raden

VALERIE BANDURA

Speak the Slavic

They weren't exiles or gypsies, though that's who
these boys, with their cropped hair and wool uniforms,
drafted and trained, were sent up to the Vitosha Mountains
to catch—border crossers from Yugoslavia,

small groups of men with new beards and scraped shoes,
though most were boys like them who came from nowhere
headed any place else—refugees, of which, during the Zvinkov years,
there were few. What there were, Petio told me years later

in his backyard in Tucson, after he left on a student visa, then
dropped out second semester to smoke weed, watch porn,
and deliver Blackjack pizza east to Valencia and west to Tanque Verde,
what there were up there in the mountains, he said, taking a swig

of his Rekia, a Bulgarian moonshine, were moraines, wooded foothills,
and a damp, bone-white stillness they couldn't tell came from
down in their guts or from the air that came over them at night
like a shadow over a field. In Bulgaria

they called it *tiyacte*, meaning *to move into a silence*, a silence so bad
they'd fire off their Kalashnikovs, round after round of
the first-person pronoun, *I, I, I*, to make sure they weren't dead, I mean
deaf—

it didn't make a difference. After a year or two playing soldier

they hadn't become heroes or men, but ghosts, shades of themselves
wandering the landscape, getting old. Which too is a silence.
What they did hear they heard on the radio, a cheap,
black Stalitza with a pull-and-fold handle,

and for a few weeks that autumn in 1989, they could
make out through the static something about a coup, a beheading,
a slaughter, reports that were interrupted more and more frequently
by Bulgarian folk music with its ukulele and fiddle.

That was it. No one from town was dispatched to retrieve them,
so the boys stayed up there on what they thought was
active duty, playing soldier, getting old. By the time
they came down into the capital, Petio says, after wandering

past foothills of rotting hay rolls into Sophia's afternoon streets
with their casual daylight just as the heavy doors of the markets
were being padlocked, the canvas covers swung down
over the fruit stands, into a city they didn't recognize, a city

whose history was overturned in the cars lining the streets,
with their useless rifles hung from their sides,
they came down as language, born from a silence into daylight—
the forbidden, hidden, until it one day, *pfft*, comes to life.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

Imperfect Knowledge

1

The biography where William Carlos Williams's wife is thinking X.
—Judith Kitchen, deploring oversupposition in certain literary biographies

There are two poems listed in Whitman's original advertisement for Drum-Taps that have never been found: "A Soldier Returns, He Will Soon Be Home" and "As I Envision Surfaces Piercing."
—summarized from a talk by Ted Genoways

The structure of the billowing Portuguese man o' war: I don't know.
And: why isn't it ever enough to be "ceased," why
add the "de-"? I don't know. Whitman:
given his later fascination with serious (what we would see
as "proto-modern") dance, what might we learn
if only we had a visual record of the movements
in performances he'd watched, and could compare these
to whatever slide and stomp and swirl was his,
between the type-set table and press, in his time
as a printer?: no one knows. (Some experts
could "hazard a guess.") If even *that* eludes us . . .
how to "read" the huge balletic leap of a beast
on the wall of a Paleolithic cave, its clayey umber self
part-trailed like a comet in its wake
[you see? "balletic" . . . "like a comet" . . . "self" . . . and so
we'll never know]; that cave and this one,
where my brain conducts its little introspections,
may not have one flapping bat of thought in common.
The war in Iraq right now: don't tell me that you understand
the deals which enabled and support it,
and that generate a moneysphere around the Earth
of invisible e-wealth Munch or Chagall might have painted
in flight like banshees: you don't. You don't understand it.
Somebody knows the origins of "hurdy-gurdy,"
"skanky," "zounds," the use of "fudge"
to mean a wee prevarication, "23 skidoo"—not me,
no more than I could say why gold is malleable
while some days bullets can bounce off my students' indifference.
And: the type employed by Gutenberg? . . .
was an alloy of tin and lead and once-I-could-tell-you.

→

(Though really I do know the etymological background of “zounds”
 —I fudged.) My aunt Regina died of brain cancer
 when she was in her thirties (I was twelve) and there
 was a year when words would disappear from her mind
 to make room for a brutally scouring wind;
 she was a frightening gale force of those erasures by the time
 she finally “ceased.” The soul—or whatever
 you call it, animus, or consciousness—the “soul”
 as it rises out of its tenuous mystery mix of people-atoms
 and emptiness . . . at what degree
 of structural biocomplexity does it originate?
 We’ll never know, not in *this* century.
 An aggregate of atoms we’d call Roquefort cheese
 is more dense than a tear—a pebble certainly is—
 but where’s their leap of wonder and their despair?
 For that matter, where in the periodic pile of elements
 is ours? Where does it go to, when
 our webbing of psychoelectrical linkage disappears?
 For that matter, where did the hitchhiker go
 —she wore a red bikini and a black eye
 and she said her name was Honey but you know that that’s
 a lie a wee prevarication—after Tony dropped her off
 “at that alley, there, by the ‘Inn-&-Out’”: a shadow
 into a shadow: gone. For that matter, what *did* Flossie
 —Mrs. William Carlos Williams—think about [and here,
 insert your choice of detail: illness, sex, the single arm of the moon
 through the kitchen window when he was off on his rounds
 and she was alone in Rutherford] in 1912, the year
 they married (and, incidentally, *Poetry* was founded
 in Chicago by Miss Harriet Monroe)? The most empathic biographer
 doesn’t know (and yet might claim the right
 to a sort of especially enlightened “insider’s assumption”: hence
 the rabbi/imam/priest on the character of the “soul” [see above]).
My wife. . . ? By now you’d think I’d set myself against
 herself in bed like kindling
 for the low flame of a mutual dream . . . but no,
 there are no goggles (of either technology or intimacy) to see through
 that
 impenetrable night terrain, a spouse’s skull;
 and wherever in her the natives are freely offering
 garlands of orchids and hydrangeas to a statue of me / or

→

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

toppling it down and dancing around it widdershins
in manic exultation / or simply bartering for the day's
fresh-grown necessities in the marketplace, oblivious
to that iconic figure-of-figures, atheists of it . . .
is Area 51 to my prying. Truly—the country of X.
I passed a touching sample of its roadside signage yesterday,
a long-untended billboard from the '20s or '30s:
[illegible weather-smearred letters] & Son.
Citizens of that country.

2

. . . Recognizing a person's face requires an intact fusiform cortex, primarily in the right hemisphere. Damage to this area of the brain definitely robs the mind of its powers of facial recognition, a condition we call prosopagnosia. People with this condition . . . cannot distinguish between the faces of even their closest friends and family members.

—Sam Harris

I was nineteen and he was twenty-six when he proposed. You know that: it's part of the record. This was on the rebound—he had loved my sister Charlotte at first. It's true, and in the biographies. Still, we made it work. We married in 1912 (it's in this poem: you've read it); we made it work at 9 Ridge Road in Rutherford, we made it work till the day he died in 1963 at the end of eleven years of his debilitation. You know all this, it's anywhere. Bunny, he called me in letters, and Snookie—but usually, as you know, it was Flossie or Floss, until that's who I am now, to you, to myself, and for all of those nights I sat in the kitchen while he was out on his pediatrician rounds and taking notes for poems on right-at-hand prescription pads and even toilet paper. I know about the women. As late as 1943 he wrote to Kenneth Burke—and you can look it up—“. . . still crazy about the women.” Patients. Poetesses. Hours. And yet he loved me, it wasn't a sham, a person is a convoluted thing. I had my privacies, as stoked inside my head as burning coals—and so I gave him his, that you can find in alphabetical order in an index that you study in classes as dead as a monger's fish. For me it leaped—it was alive. The rest, the coals, are none of your business. I didn't like Humbo—Hemingway. He was a small competitive man. I did like Harry Kemp, a nice man. Marsden Hartley?—he would climb all over you. Our son Paul played at Carnegie Hall: violin: a prodigy. You've read these things, that now and then I've let out from my head; the rest remains, as it should, in an insular space. You'll never know. He wrote of “the spectacle of our lives / with joined hands.” “We lived long together / a life filled, / if you will, with flowers.” This is all in the books. They were my plums that he ate, so sweet, so cold, and with apology. “Death,” he said, “is not the end of it.” And: “Listen while I talk on / against time.” Sometimes I fell asleep while he talked.

3

I was on a long flight across the Pacific, staring idly out the window at moonlit ocean, when it occurred to me with a certain uncomfortable forcefulness that I didn't know the first thing about the only planet I was ever going to live on. . . . I didn't know what a proton was, or a protein, didn't know a quark from a quasar, didn't know how an atom was put together.

—Bill Bryson

The desire to know is so ingrained in Western society that we take it for granted. For other cultures, on the other hand—such as Australian aborigines or American Indians—knowledge is neither a right nor an obligation. . . . No one has the need—or a fortiori the right—to know everything.

—Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams

A dollar is always a single thing; but sometimes it's ten dimes. And so, the Portuguese man o' war: a colony. That sounds right—in the way a poem *can* “sound right.” (Though that doesn't make it true. What Dr. Williams knew about suffering was a wheelbarrow—when he wrote; and when he doctored, he'd better have known that ten cc's of [this] [or that] would slow a racing pain.) Name seven opiates. Seven poems of Williams's. Quickly: “widdershins,” “cicerone” (rhymes with baloney, not bone), “ergs,” “palliasse” (as opposed to “pelisse” or “pellicle”), “siphonophore.” I wasn't sure of “rhizome” today, and I *really* can't tell you in what dendritic curlicue of the brain our sensation of guilt is born—or fear, for that matter, or love. Why Stan and Della are such jerks is evidently (if my poll at last night's party has any validity) beyond surmise. Why “20 small, rectangular pits from an excavated medieval site” in Cornwall, England, are found to be “lined with swan feathers” . . . there are theories galore, but no clear winner. “Della”? “Stan”?—invented names; you'll never know. And even to their “closest friends,” their reasonings are often as opaque as the night in a Paleolithic cave—we can knock at that door until our knuckles are raw, and not be let inside to where, in the flickering wicklght, all of the beasts on the wall

→

(and all of the human-animal hybrid creatures) move as if tattoos on the skin of flexing muscles. (“Penis representations,” maybe even actual “penis sheaths” for ritual petitioners, is how we first interpreted the rolls of clay we found at Le Tuc-d’Audoubert, although we now believe that they were “just” clay-modelers’ samples “used to test plasticity.”) The lolled dicks of the boys (“the youths,” I think he’d say) as they laze on the banks after roughhousing; that, and the burls their nipples become in the sharp October air . . . this scene is understood *exactly how* in Whitman’s consciousness? We’ll never know: both poetry and prose are more forthcoming on the war (“The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through”), on the “gyrating wheel” of eagles’ sex-in-flight, on *anything* . . . except the nitty-gritty of his own erotic needs; the special guided tour of the memories in his head (“Here, do you know this? this is cicerone himself” [“My Picture Gallery”]) is silent on that subject. It’s a given (really, how many poems of my generation evoke it?) that we don’t even know what the universe is mostly made of—what the astromasters call “dark matter.” Well, *I* have a theory: “everything-we-don’t-know” is that unknown 94% of the cosmos. (92? 97? Something like that.) I’ve *heard* it, too: if a whistle’s an emptiness forced through a zero, I’ve heard dark matter keening through the small holes of unknowing, seen it bend close to my aunt Regina and play on her brain for its personal kazoo. At the start, it was only an occasional word: “I’ll take the stove to the doctor tomorrow”—“stove” for “bus.” At the end . . . but I was twelve, and they protected me from the last of that gutted-out thing in her skull: I only could experience its horrors second-hand, in the deep—the gulping kind of—weeping that her-sister-my-mother served as a small ventriloquist’s dummy for; and in the way our failed hopes went down the row of one purported cancer-curer after another. (We will never cure it: not, anyway, in this century.) And *you* can hear that wind, as well—its shrill of teasing absences—and you don’t require so difficult an instrument as a gas-ring formed on Saturn or the circle of buzzards above a death; no, simply set your ear to a lost

→

hair scrunchy on the sidewalk, and out of it
spirals the suckhole howling of those angels
who see to our ignorance—the angels of withholding
and the angels with the blindfolds in their hands, a host enough
of the otherworldly to make even televangelists doubt
their pulpit-thump certainties. A wind like that
begins in the caves of our first shit-frightened puzzlements
(*the lightning powers—who are they? the bear, the kneel-in-the-dark,*
the sex, the death, the hunger powers—who are they?),
and listen: we can hear it skreeking still, these shaky millennia later,
through the chinks in the face of Ramses the Second
in Shelley’s “Ozymandias.” (Shelley? “Shelley” *who?* According to
today’s pop quiz, my students don’t know.) And listen: those blanks
intentionally used to structure some of the lines
by . . . whatshername? Duh. Graham. Something Graham.
Well, no single human being can know *everything*:
we’re each a partite contribution.
Otherwise the universe would only require one of us at a time.
Now: when did the Suez Canal first open,
what (presuming electrical charge is involved)
is the total wattage of our average dream, and who
are you in your spouse’s subconscious? All together,
we might know—like a colony,
like a Portuguese man o’ war
(*i.e.*, a siphonophore).

4

A Semblance of His Lost Work Appears, with the Radio News in the Background and Then an Oldie from Bette Midler

A soldier returns, he will soon be home,
Out of the haze of cannon and the smoke of a city sunder'd,
He returns, he will soon be embrac'd,
He, who possesses but one arm now—a mother's arms encircle him,
He is incomplete, but he was not left cold upon the war-ground,
He is not of that 600,000 *and 43 killed today by insurgents*
including a group of 17 children as carrion,
They are sacrific'd as surely as if on altars,
Those who could not crawl away *had gathered when U.S. troops*
were distributing candy nor is he the soldier,
A youth, or to be frank now, only a boy, a Drummer,
I spong'd the sick-damp from his brow, he was perhaps fifteen,
And merest atoms of manliness coating his cheek as yet,
And in his wound in his side the bone was apparent,
And in the bone a mass of the gore of life was apparent,
In the candle's light this blinked as if a boy was hiding inside the boy,
And I watch'd through the night as that glimmer fail'd,
And lo! at the morn it was gone. *We lost our baby in the Korean War,*
I still don't know what for;
Don't matter any more is none of these, is only himself,
I see him approaching his old home, over a hill,
I dream him daily, he is with me
(Always, even unto hauntingness),
As I think of a people rended,
As I envision surfaces piercing.

5

There are always limits on what we can know about ourselves, about others of our kind, and certainly about those of another species.

—Kay Redfield Jamison

I could study this crude / Drawing for hours and still / Not figure out how it's done.

—Gregory Orr

And then Larry drops her off. And then John.

Dashawn. Ed. Hoosan. Timothy. “Have you got any money for cigarettes?” She’s Silk.

Kreem. Amber. On one corner, Bree. And Honey: we know *that* if we know anything. Then: gone. Reclaimed as theirs by the enigmas of the night, with only a half-used packet of rolling papers left behind on the passenger seat, or a lighter, or a hair scrunchy—the Ocean of X is always busy depositing these small uncontexted huh?-parts on the sands.

A used and wadded-up [huh?]. A *10% Off* coupon, good at [Huh?] & Son. A headline, BLAHBLAHBLAH IRAQ, as it floats in its daily [huh?], unconnected to blood, untethered to oil, no equating it to this five-year-old in a motionless heap at the market, under a circle of flies that whines in a language older even than human death.

“My name is Ozy[*illegible weather-smearred letters*]. “Oh yeah?

My name is Albert Go[the statue topples, and my wife wakes up with quick scared breathing], (*scared sounds*), Why what was it, (*leave me alone*) / (*come hold me*), *I don't know*. Oh we,

oh we, oh we don't know. <(to be read as a vapid singsong). And sometimes when we *do* know . . . we still don't know, as when I looked

up

from the page and laughed at my nanosnap of idiocy: *penology*

is *not* the study of writing instruments. Sinuous wind through a hollow tree, a particle accelerator, a pinhole.

Even so, at times the touch of a blessing attends to such enforced obscurity; there *are* things we *don't want* to know,

and shouldn't know, and *really* shouldn't tiptoe through the bedroom dark

without disturbing him (or her) and sneakily open the bottom drawer to discover. The brain itself is built to be

a weeder-outer; this is *why* it possesses the necessary ability

→

to generalize, to free us from accepting every new encyclopedic crumb. And anyway, we do know more with every generation; if the human genome can, with viability, be likened (as it often is, in journals for the interested lay reader) to the keys of a piano . . . now we're done with fumbling "Chopsticks" and the full command of "Rhapsody in Blue" is at our fingertips. We do know more—and more is always declaring its immanence, out of the inky void. For example: the asteroid Albert, first recorded in 1911 and then, due to miscalculation, lost—a true two-mile-diameter hole in our understanding—was found after 89 years, when astronomer Gareth Williams was noodling around with a run of recent observations, stopped dead-middle of things, and said (and here's a quote to echo across the annals of science), "That looks like Albert." "Zounds!" is from "God's wounds" (a euphemism, masked as a contraction); let me add the coinage "zosions" here, "Regina's erosions"—every day a little less cohesion, every day another rupture in her neural dictionary. And the type employed by Gutenberg? . . . a metallic alloy of tin and lead and antimony (rhymes with "cicerone," "a guide who conducts sightseers"). Our last sight here is of a man who is indeed in the process of setting type. Years later he'll even compose (and so I use the verb in both senses) a poem of praise he'll title "A Font of Type," the various faces ("nonpareil, brevier, bourgeois, long primer") presented as every human possibility ("wrath, argument, or praise, or comic leer, or prayer devout") in a patient simmering: "slumbering," as he puts it, "within the pallid slivers"—gibberish, awaiting its great synthesis in words. It's 1848. We find his roisterer's slouch hat tossed into a corner, and his sleeves rolled up, his apron with its smudges like medallions. And now he readies the scarred composing stick. And now he swivels between the two case boxes (upper-, lower-). What he's called "the pleasing mystery of the different letters." It's afternoon, and light the shade of a pekoe tea is entering the shop, an azure and aqueous light, a light the gray of butchers' bones—an American light, abubble and composite.

→

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

He'll work his trade at these: the *Long Island Star*,
the *Long Island Patriot*, *The Freeman*, *The New World*,
The Statesman, the *Evening Tattler*, the *Brooklyn Evening Star*,
the *Brooklyn Evening Eagle*, *The Aurora*: a song,
those names—a rhapsody in black,
resistant printer's ink. He's heard America singing,
and he'll sing as well—he'll sing of the body electric.
Pirouetting now, about the shop: a heavy, laboring pirouette
as balletic as the living champagne flute
we call a jellyfish. Even as he sets
a final sentence for the day, he cocks an ear against the air
. . . a music . . . glorious, though imperfect . . .
sets, and cocks, and whirls,
incipiently moving—we might say grooving
to the song of [him]self.

MARION K. STOCKING

BOOKS IN BRIEF: The Poet in the Poem

A reviewer of a recent biography of Anna Akhmatova quotes the biographer as protesting that when she can't decide which of her lovers Akhmatova is writing about, "It is as if she has infused the poem with her own disappointment, and given it fictional intensity." To which the reviewer snaps: "Well, *yes*—that's what poets do." As with Akhmatova's work, the books that have risen to the top of my nearly 300 review copies over the past year place the poet in a variety of personal and political relationships to the poem; each achieves a fictional intensity—or fictive music if you will—that has located me more fully in the world.

■

First, two poets concerned with American racism in the century just past. **Tyehimba Jess** in *leadbelly*, selected by Brigit Pegeen Kelly for the National Poetry Series (Amherst, MA: Verse Press, 2005, 120 pp, \$14 paper), has recreated the life of the blues singer Huddie Ledbetter (1888–1949) with 111 poems in many voices, including that of the Colt Protection Special his daddy gives him in 1902:

his daddy brings him to me
fresh and fifteen, a boy beggin'
to know me like a virgin
wind risin' to fuck a hurricane.

The poet's power to enter each character with an appropriate voice and poetic form is stunning. Many of the characters, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and, especially, Leadbelly's patron, the folklorist John Lomax, are familiar. Jess dramatizes the tensions between the unconsciously patronizing Lomax and his prize performer, often in split lines—reading two minds simultaneously. It is easy to be absorbed in the unfolding story, listening to the voices, and to overlook the controlling intelligence of the poet. What do we learn about Tyehimba Jess from this first book? That he is a scholar, working with primary as well as secondary sources, including the Lomax papers at Texas, and providing a timeline to guide those readers not familiar with Leadbelly and his career; that he is a dramatic artist, writing from inside his characters, with a rich vocabulary and great formal skill; that he writes with profound empathy for his black characters, women and men, so that the reader shares his passion. Here is a splendid work, handsomely designed by Verse Press.

Coming at America's racial experience from another perspective, **Martha Collins** in *Blue Front* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2006, 94 pp, \$14 paper) has imagined what her father witnessed when, as a five-year-old boy in 1909 Cairo, Illinois, he watched a mob lynch a black man and then in a wave of hysteria go on to murder a white man. Collins, like Jess, infuses the authority of extensive research into a rich variety of prose and poetic forms to recreate the social climate of a dark era and the mindlessness of its injustice. Though she writes from an external perspective, as her father watched from where he sold fruit in front of the Blue Front Restaurant, her arrangement of the evidence in a fragmented but cumulatively coherent collage produces in the reader a profound revulsion from the anarchy of violence. These poets transport us vicariously into a significant period in our own history.



Now, for our century, two poets who write from the authority of personal experience. **Lilah Hegnauer** in *Dark Under Kiganda Stars* (Keene, NY: Ausable Press, 2005, 96 pp, \$14 paper) recreates her summer in Uganda teaching English in a secondary school and helping out in a medical clinic. A young Catholic woman (she wrote this book, amazingly, when still an undergraduate), she had little to prepare her for a society whose practice of Catholicism is permeated by even older cultural traditions. The poems enact the immersion of an openhearted, imaginative observer, largely unconscious of the cultural script of racism, in a realm she does not yet know or understand. First we encounter her students, her difficulty in telling even the genders apart. Then our attention is drawn to one particular student, Fildah, as the writer attempts to enter the culture more fully by writing in Fildah's voice. Her growing joy in sensuous spontaneity takes form in a variety of rhythmic syntactic repetitions. Here in "Scythe Singer" she observes a young seminarian as he is scything the convent yard:

Swing and drop, arc and swing,
the drop of each side catches me most—
or the pause and drop—or the pause,
step, and drop.

Another pleasure is the dozen "Proverbs" poems, juxtaposing her immediate experience with traditional African sayings. Each stage in her initiation into this rich culture generates a new

poetic form. The poet is always translating her candor, her freshness and responsiveness, into art.

Next comes another poet who can carry a reader into the heart of his experience through translating that life, awake or dreaming, alert or stunned, into the reader's memory. I'd been telling a poet how silent my friends and relations, beginning with the GI Bill students in 1946, have been about their war experience. His response was a gift of **Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet*** (Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2005, 72 pp, \$14.95 paper), evidence that veterans returning from Iraq are breaking that silence. This is an account by a strong poet of what it was like to be an infantry team leader in Iraq with the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division. Contrasting acutely in tone with Lilah Hegnauer's work, it nevertheless has the same keen accuracy and candor of observation, the same balancing of outer and inner life, the same concern (and, more important, empathy) to imagine the consciousness of the people he observes. "2000 lbs.," to name just one example, enters into the last minutes of six victims—both American and Iraqi—of a major detonation.

Here, complete, is "Sadiq" (friend), with its resonant epigraph from Sa'di: "*It is a condition of wisdom in the archer to be patient because when the arrow leaves the bow, it returns no more.*" This is one poem without a specific occasion, but turn to the Notes to realize the historical and moral power of these nine lines:

It should make you shake and sweat,
 nightmare you, strand you in a desert
 of irrevocable desolation, the consequences
 seared into the vein, no matter what adrenaline
 feeds the muscle its courage, no matter
 what god shines down on you, no matter
 what crackling pain and anger
 you carry in your fists, my friend,
 it should break your heart to kill.

■
 Now I'd like to describe at somewhat greater length two elegantly composed books by poets who write, like Hegnauer and Turner, in the first person but inhabit imagined, sometimes mythological, personae—or, perhaps more accurately, are inhabited by them. **Louise Glück's *Averno*** (New York: Farrar, Straus and

Giroux, 2006, 80 pp, \$22 hardbound) opens with a wonderfully pure lyric, “The Night Migrations”:

This is the moment when you see again
the red berries of the mountain ash
and in the dark sky
the birds’ night migrations.

It grieves me to think
the dead won’t see them—
these things we depend on,
they disappear.

What will the soul do for solace then?
I tell myself maybe it won’t need
these pleasures anymore;
maybe just not being is simply enough,
hard as that is to imagine.

This limpid language becomes slithery in the body of the book. Glück tries out variations on the Persephone story. Is the *I* Louise Glück? the persona of Persephone that lightens and shadows *Averno*? the poet in this imaginative compositional mode? In “October,” is it Persephone who says, “So much has changed. And still, you are fortunate: / the ideal burns in you like a fever. / Or not like a fever, like a second heart”? Is the persona addressing herself? addressing Hades, or even Demeter? I ride the music as the poem unfolds, but I am never sure I’m altogether in focus. In “Persephone the Wanderer” I think perhaps the *you* is just me, the reader, and I am content to carry multiple meanings without any irritable reaching after a reading:

You are allowed to like
no one, you know. The characters
are not people.

They are aspects of a dilemma or conflict.

When in a poem like “Landscape” I feel at home in a visionary world, I remember the reviewer of the Akhmatova biography fussing that the poet has infused a poem with her own experience and given it “fictional intensity.” Yes. This is indeed what poets do.

Another complexly conceived and richly written book is **Peter Streckfus’s** *The Cuckoo* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

trapped us in the musical net. Moreover, I was amazed at how engaged I became in the mysterious narratives—so unlike any I had ever encountered. There are journey poems, in which the composition of the poem would appear to constitute the journey. There are recurrent images, especially of birds and dogs. “The Bird” begins, “A bird loved me.” The speaker catches the bird, and “Like a child, I must handle what I love. In my hands it became / mesmerized. I’m not sure if from fear or wonder.” They “talked long hours about the avian // and the humane.” Eventually the speaker wills himself into a small bird

Then a larger one. A night bird, a day
bird. Until I was just right, just its size.

And this is how you’ve found me.

*One bird, one,
and a cord
of twisted hair*

When I encounter that cord of twisted hair elsewhere in this book, I realize that *The Cuckoo* can be read, if not as linear narrative, still, like Glück’s *Averno*, as one intricately reticulated poem.

Many of Streckfus’s leitmotifs come together in the final mesmerizing multi-movement suite “The Organum: A *Cartoon Memoir*.” Appreciative of his playfulness, I noted that in each section all lines begin with the same letter; when I spelled out the initial letters of all the sections, they revealed a super-acrostic: THE ORGANUM, confirming my enjoyment of the book as an organic, musical whole. My trusty *American Heritage Dictionary* advises me that *organum* is a variant of *organon*, from the Greek for “tool, organ of the body, instrument,” meaning today “a set of principles for use in scientific or philosophical investigation.” This is serious play. To top off the game, I find in the notes that this and one other poem are composed entirely from words in Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail* and a translation of the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *The Journey to the West*. I’ll leave to others the perverse delight of tracing the shadow of Oulipo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*) over Streckfus’s oeuvre. If this amazing book has a firm bottom, I have not yet got down to it. But I have certainly gained profound

respect for the poet, visible here in his generative imagination, his verbal versatility, his rhythmic and phonemal architectonics, his breadth of canvas, and—always just under the surface—his humor and his empathy. *Empathy?* Who else has written from the point of view of a dung pile and made me think reincarnation in such a form might not be bad?

■

I have brought you from the poet invisible behind the subject of the poems, to poets writing of their personal experience, then to mercurial poets using the first person in shifting personae to create a complex music of the human spirit. **Theodore Enslin's** extraordinary *Nine* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 2004, 312 pp, \$34.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper) comes as close as poetry can to pure music. Although I have no formal musical training, I have watched a poet who does become so spellbound as to nearly fall out of his chair at an Enslin reading. And I do have some experience in poetry as a score for performance, even when the instrument must be lungs and throat and mouth and mind. Here is some of what I hear. The first of the twenty-seven lyrics that compose "Sea Change" begins, "Words from the song the high low song / there is no high song there is no low song / it is high low wind from the western sea." These simple notes recur throughout the lyric stanzas. The lineation and caesuras tell me how to sound it. The title sets the Shakespeare lyric running beneath the text, and perhaps like me you hear also humming along under the words the melody of a familiar old song. The second stanza begins, "In writing the words the words of the song / we leave the experience leaving it we leave / the experience of the song the high low / song in experience the eastern and western seas." "In writing the words" is almost as close as we come to an awareness of the composer—significant, since the process of composition is one of the subtexts of this volume. When the word *spell* occurs it acquires the weight of all its meanings, just as each sequence intensifies as it develops. Testing the infinite range between concrete and abstract, each line enacts a slow unfolding of consciousness.

Perhaps you can tell how valuable a musical vocabulary would be in speaking of these poems. Consider the matter of pitch, beginning with *high low*, and how recurrent words and phrases

resonate with each other in the repetitions. Feel the weight of the rests. In a later stanza of this poem Enslin writes, “high low let that be the singing / active sounds a singing silence weighed / silence in the song to sing there silent.”

Reading this beautiful book as a whole (and I have been seduced into reading it word by word aloud) gives me the sense/senses of being submerged in the natural world—sea, rock, wind, fire, and flesh and blood. In an ideal world there would be an island in the sea where for nine days one could hear the poet read it, one poem a day. Like Thoreau in his last years, Enslin pays spell-bound attention to the actual world—the whole cosmos in process, in motion. One of the poems in “Conservator” opens,

Stand watching as the buds begin to thicken
they dim the light and yet the day will gather
light from buds reds changing green the thick
of budding as it swells and darkens
stance for watching it will gather change

Each line of verse is a metonym of this dynamic universe. Each line implies a way to live one’s life.

So where is the poet in the poem? I want to quote Yeats: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” The vertical pronoun stands up only in love poems. A sequence on marriage colors the whole volume as epithalamium. The first and the last poems, “Autumnal Rimes” and “Ring,” both richly considering mortality as leave-taking, make an ouroboros of the whole, the cosmic snake taking its tail in its mouth. In a world seemingly set on suicide, these poems affirm everything a feverish society needs for its redemption. I want to leave you with the first and last lines of poem 10 in “Skeins”:

A letter to the future an open letter sealed
 . . .
an open letter sealed to read its future Open it!