

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 57 N°4 SUMMER 2007

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**Subscriptions**

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

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

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$3; elsewhere outside the USA, \$7.

**Submissions**

are welcome at any time, but must include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

**Retail Distributors**

B. DeBoer, 113 East Centre St., Nutley, NJ 07110

Media Solutions, 9632 Madison Blvd., Madison, AL 35758

Ubiquity Distributors, 607 Degraw St., Brooklyn, NY 11217

*Beloit Poetry Journal* is indexed in *American Humanities Index*, *Index of American Periodical Verse*, MLA database, and *LitFinder*, and is available as full text on EBSCO Information Services' Academic Search Premier database.

Address submissions, correspondence, and orders to  
*Beloit Poetry Journal*, P.O. Box 151, Farmington, ME 04938

Send review copies to

Marion K. Stocking, 24 Berry Cove Rd., Lamoine, ME 04605

Copyright 2007 by The Beloit Poetry Journal Foundation, Inc.

ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, Maine

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**Yan Yuzhen**, “Rabbit Eating Cabbage” (front) and  
“Four Magpies Bring Happiness” (back), paintings,  
Huxian County, China  
**Mary Greene**, design



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

**HADARA BAR-NADAV**

**Love and Smoke**

You overwhelm me with your dress  
always lifting always falling.  
Velvet parting, velvet portiere,  
many callers (lifting falling).

Many admirers admiring  
your velvet hallways and the silk  
faux-Victorian settee  
ribboned in scarlet and smoke.

How to compete with a tent so big?

Your dress hung from a tree,  
your dress waving from a tower,  
and then your dress breathtaking on TV,  
the reporter bleeding from her mouth.

All the people line up to see you,  
beautiful in firelight, with shreds  
of cotton in their fists  
and their fists in their mouths.

The smoke is thick inside this tent.  
And you, volcanic, spread.  
Velvet ash, velvet wish.  
Soon we are crawling. We are dead.

**KEVIN MILLER**

**The Silence After March**

The night gives him up—  
a prisoner crosses a border  
to dumb stares and open arms.

Pear blossoms scatter like searchlights  
in a spring so cold, one goldfinch is god.  
The reception line fills

with women waving willow branches.  
The thin wands trail tender leaves  
and ripple an arc of light.

He wears dark glasses, his hands unbound.  
One woman imagines blue eyes,  
another thinks blindness freed him.

No flags fly in this sanctuary. A boy hums  
a song with words in someone else's language.  
The swaying women's shoulders touch.

This wall of cotton winds a path to a garden.  
No one speaks of release or conditions.  
A freckled girl stands near a table.

She holds a bouquet of fortunes bunched  
like a white hydrangea she cannot control.

**SUZANNE ZWEIZIG**

**The Negev**

Nothing's negated here, where every turd  
of every long-gone goat, camel, fox  
petrifies  
to some solid fact you kick with your boot.

Mollusks turn to stone; even the carcass  
does not quit: bones surf the ground, skin dries  
to a rattle,  
steel-edged in the centuries-long sun.

This land is all metal and time: a copper vein  
flayed open winds through the rock:  
ore on ore,  
war on war, soldering in the heat.

Who does not long for rain? An oblivion  
of wet earth, annihilation by mud, some  
slobbering  
maw to swallow the detritus—all.

But the rain falls scant, each drop  
a pock; each trickle scrawls  
its thready path  
across the earth's parched throat.

Even the lark's song is written in the cliff.  
Pebbles roll, scree trickles to a final  
wavering note:  
it all has, it all does matter after all.

**BETSY SHOLL**  
**In What Furnace**

*And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?*  
—William Blake

The long neck, the windblown waterfall of tail—  
what vision flickers in my daughter's eyes  
as she stands on a fence rail, seeing fire  
in the mare's mane backlit by late sun?  
Fire, too, then, in her bright hair, burning.

*In what furnace, wrote mad William Blake,  
asking what flame makes tiger and lamb,  
what eye sees the lost boy dressed in soot,  
sees the boy sucking at hard breath inside  
destitute old men—mad burning William Blake*

who looked and saw the world inside out,  
at its core flame, as if that's what God made—  
and flame, still, glowing in the dark chestnut  
of this horse's eye, in the mystery  
of her tongue, tooth, lip, each flick of ear

and running stream of whinnies, in her coat  
growing winter-long and shaggy: What hand,  
what faceless breath flares these nostrils,  
tosses the head, blows the straw of this tail  
over the coals rippling inside her flanks?

Out of what furnace was she torn and bred  
into racer, warrior, hauler, vehicle,  
into creature little girls love and men  
stake their lives on? What flame in my daughter  
makes her jiggle her apple and call?

From what womb this child, leaning toward blaze  
and huge breath? And me at the kiln door,  
holding her back, recalling my own first horse—  
gone now, as so much is gone, as coal sheen  
goes to ash flake, to clinkers of black lace—



**BETSY SHOLL**

gone, but still glowing in my dreams  
with burnished flanks and jittery side steps,  
that excellent memory intent on  
frightening me again, just where he first  
backed me against the stall, over and over

raising his head, eyeing me wildly, stomping  
his foot so close to mine, he could have crushed it  
if he wanted, but chose instead to impress  
on me the hot twist of sinew, the hammer  
of his strength, the lit forge of his eye.

**BETSY SHOLL**

**Gone**

Far back in the hills behind the pastures past the stand  
of oaks where cows graze undergrowth down to bare ground  
through denser woods up several hills  
through brambled ravines not a cloud in the sky  
not a nest in the ground suddenly a grouse startles straight up  
scraping my cheek a stun

so my own heart half copters out almost  
without a self then legs briared mind sensing wolves or worse  
I walk on fearing the woods won't like me

Come to an overgrown field sunlight glinting on what  
radiators old sinks doors worn down to unhinged oblivion rust  
eating through rust not one undented pot with lid  
not one cup with a handle not a toaster with wire attached  
not a cloud in the sky not a sky in the sky but pieces  
of bridge blue broken gazebo riverbank willows tiny and chipped

hard-caked with dirt pried up with a stick  
Aphid earthworm shy beetle scuttling off good daughters of earth  
is this how you clean house filling the land

with what it would rather forget Is there a somewhere  
for everything and if not the dark of the moon then this  
hidden ravine stumbled on by fear inner tube oven heating coil  
clock face staring up crazed Good daughters you spiders and slugs  
how I feared you appearing in ones and twos on my doorstep  
I only knew your land by sight driving past

not by downed limb rabbit hole thicket and swarm not by ditch  
where what once worked becomes inert swaddled in dirt  
earth's dark pierced by bed spring fork with bent tines jay shriek

Earnest daughters endlessly rummaging sorting shards  
of ruby glass cracked lampshade pitted soup ladle all that was human  
gone feral the dizzy acceleration  
looking into that deep well teetering there  
the terror and thrill of it Spider beetle worm rot mold  
you endless invincible doers and undoers on my doorstep

**BETSY SHOLL**

in the woods   emptying one space   filling another  
spinning weaving cutting   so all things new become old  
oh daughters   all things made   unmade

**EMILY ROSKO**

**Weather Inventions (1)**

and then something  
    raised up          a wind inside

wherever space is  
    bell, hand, tulip, crown

magnetized between two  
    chambers          a conveyance

an internal climate of the body  
    when a tree trunk becomes a feeling

turbulent, the charged ground  
    of grass accordion-bent

("accidents, events")  
    so this makes spindle

and arrow, net-veined as  
    the dragonfly          ("a resemblance to  
an animal in a starlet of snow")

**EMILY ROSKO**

**Weather Inventions (2)**

Urgency was behind the wind's study.

A calculation, rate of diffusion.

From on low, incendiary, Tokyo, swept.

Intermingling systems, a polar-front current.

Hydrogen balloons crossing the Pacific eastward.

One to Michigan intact, one to Oregon not.

We sent back two suns.

**ADRIANNE KALFOPOULOU**

**Mute as Lawns Nobody Dares Walk Across**

When my mother calls telling me of still freezing nights across  
the Atlantic,  
I smell moldering pears, the claret tinge of their bruised skins,  
as mother talks of  
her darkness, the not-good-news that travels from where she  
lives in thinner light,  
her voice in low cadences as she speaks of Kiveli who made pies  
all her life, and

I smell moldering pears, the claret tinge of their bruised skins, as  
mother talks of  
*that awful man who rubbed Kiveli's face into the pavement and  
broke her elbow.*  
Her voice in low cadences as she speaks of Kiveli who made pies  
all her life and  
lay bleeding on an Athens street when a young woman found her  
and asked if

that awful man who rubbed Kiveli's face into the pavement and  
broke her elbow  
was someone she would recognize. *What man? What man?* Kiveli  
was crying and  
lay bleeding on an Athens street when a young woman found her  
and asked if  
with her face to the pavement she remembered the event.  
Remembered if the man

was someone she would recognize. *What man? What man?* Kiveli  
was crying and  
asked over the phone if I wanted a bottle of oil from her olives,  
*For your salads?*  
With her face to the pavement she remembered the event.  
Remembered if the man  
had hurt her any more she would not have been able to walk,  
but won't say more, and

asked over the phone if I wanted a bottle of oil from her olives,  
*For your salads?*  
I tell my mother I'm going to see Kiveli, and mother tells me if  
her arthritic knee  
hurts her any more she won't be able to walk, but won't say  
more, and  
I ask about her surgery, whether her knee is healing, and say  
she'll be okay.

I tell my mother I'm going to see Kiveli, and mother tells me if  
her arthritic knee  
gets any worse she will be left to the sad fact of a wheelchair life, so  
I ask about her surgery, whether her knee is healing, and say  
she'll be okay.  
*Do you have memories that won't heal?* the Vietnam vet asks,  
confessing had things

got any worse he would have been left to the sad fact of a  
wheelchair life, so  
*What man? What man?* the therapist wants to know, *muffled*  
*voices, Vietnam.*  
*Do you have memories that won't heal?* the Vietnam vet asks,  
confessing had things. . . .  
There was a coup d'état. I learned to count in Thai then we  
moved to Bangkok.

*What man? What man?* the therapist wants to know, *muffled*  
*voices, Vietnam.*  
I had an uncle who thought it fun to slip my panties down in a  
circle of adults.  
There was a coup d'état. I learned to count in Thai then we  
moved to Bangkok.  
My uncle would say we played a game, the circle of adults nodded  
and laughed.

I had an uncle who thought it fun to slip my panties down in a  
circle of adults.  
He died in a hospice speaking in Greek his American wife couldn't  
understand.  
My uncle would say we played a game, the circle of adults nodded  
and laughed.  
Kiveli is healing fine, back to making pies. We talk and I tell her  
of my uncle.

He died in a hospice speaking in Greek his American wife  
couldn't understand.  
My mother says how sad to die speaking words your wife can't  
understand.  
Kiveli is healing fine, back to making pies. We talk and I tell her  
of my uncle.  
I'll revisit Vietnam, even Bangkok. *It all comes back*, the therapist  
insists.

My mother says how sad to die speaking words your wife can't  
understand.  
*And poor Kiveli, accosted by that man. . . . What man? What man? . . .*  
I'll revisit Vietnam, even Bangkok. *It all comes back*, the therapist  
insists.  
So I tell my mother about my uncle and she is uncomfortable,  
interrupts with

*And poor Kiveli, accosted by that man. . . . What man? What man? . . .*  
her darkness the not-good-news that travels from where she lives  
in thinner light,  
her days mute as lawns nobody dares walk across, and I'm  
folding sweaters and scarves  
when my mother calls, telling me of still freezing nights across  
the Atlantic.



**XAN L. ROBERTI**

**Three Conversations**

Holding his hand up to the sky he says: *Line it up. If the semisphere of the moon next to your palm makes a "b," it is brightening. If it sits on the opposite side of your palm, and makes a "d," then the moon is dimming.* He knows the secrets of the sky. I think he must know mine.

b. As we make the bed, he tells me an old man asked him if he knew about *featherbedding*. *It's an old word*, he tells me, *that's why the old man knew it and we don't. It means fluff-up*, he said, plumping the foam in my pillows, *like, we could featherbed your résumé.* And I wonder how much I am featherbedding in order to love.

d. Yes, he says, *let's lunch on Monday*, and I call him to confirm. He doesn't answer, and the lunch hour comes and goes. I think of husbands who come home late, lackluster professors, and systems of commitment. I am ill-prepared for the orderly life. So I let his absence slide into form alongside his presence. This will only hurt a little.

**MARY KATHRYN JABLONSKI**

**Praesepe (The Beehive)**

It was a liquid world: viscous, mutable,  
at times even joyous, a world of florals,  
open/closed. I distilled your every word  
to nectar. In repetition of James Gould's  
experiment at Princeton: you moved  
the sugar and I found it, you moved  
the sugar and I found it, you moved  
the sugar and I found it, you got out  
of the car with the jar, and I was  
already there. But now the hive is dead.  
Desperately, I beat this union down  
like Virgil's bullock, still no bees emerge.  
Instead, like truths, they escape my mouth  
in wild dreams as I ascend darkening hillsides,  
combing open graves for the lost queen.

**JESSICA GOODFELLOW**  
**Chance of Precipitation**

Rain's tonal ticker tape  
tarmac tarantella  
rooftop timpani  
water glitterati  
articulate in triplicate.

River, all glissando  
glossolalia  
liquid limerick  
wet tessellated  
littoral lateral lullaby.

Ocean's hush-hush hoodoo  
whispering womb  
chez chartreuse chanteuse  
fugue soothed in blue  
a wish awash in white noise.

The insomniac longs to transliterate  
rain into a human alphabet—  
French, maybe. A lullaby, a chanson,  
a hymn. A baptism of sleep  
as unstable as water.

**JESSICA GOODFELLOW**

**Snowstorm**

All night the insomniac has watched it  
falling evenly on the uneven earth—  
a redundancy of snow unmapping the ground.  
It straightjackets the quiescent trees.  
The world, stashed in a magician's vast sleeve,  
awaits the call of encore from its starry audience.

In a hazy pantomime of roofs and mailboxes,  
snowing knit-purls to not snowing  
like wakefulness to sleep: a slow raveling  
or a sudden unhinging, the insomniac doesn't know.  
He has failed to observe, again, how to truss  
the self to the concussing of air, how to receive

the sacrament of sleep which, like snow,  
falls in a mantle of colorless symmetric  
absolution. The snow-saddled fence and his wife  
under the coverlet are sine waves equally  
swaddled in the nameless sameness  
once banished to the runes of molecules.

Finally the self can stop talking to itself.

**JESSICA GOODFELLOW**

**Rain**

The insomniac flings pebbles at the clouds.  
He says they won't stop following him.  
(If you keep secrets, you will drown.)

He howls obscenities into the wind.  
He claims it goes right on talking about him.  
(If you fail to keep secrets, you will burn.)

No one can convince him otherwise.  
No one is awake.  
(The patron saint of running water

Finally the rain runs itself dry.  
Over the closed eyes of the insomniac.  
is also the patron saint of silence.)

**JESSICA GOODFELLOW**

**Flood**

Mud-begotten, rock-ribbed, why continue to live on a floodplain?  
Have you not wept to see your neighbor's hexed piano  
floating in full grandeur down Main Street?  
Did not your father also weep in nineteen hundred and fifty-four?

Have you not wept to see your neighbor's vexing piano,  
mean reminder of (n+1) nights it kept you wakened?  
Did not your father also weep in nineteen hundred and fifty-four  
though it was, then, a trombone—and a younger brother?

Mean remainder of (n+1) nights it kept you wakened,  
the thundering churn and thrust of the Broken Arrow River  
though it was, then, a trombone and a younger brother  
who were washed away and never seen again.

The wandering Sturm und Drang of the Spoken Sorrow River  
is roaring louder than the startled cries of those  
who were wished away and never seen again.  
But familiar loss is desired above inconstant chance.

Warning louder are the darkled cries of those  
who've made this mistake before. You reckon,  
"A familiar loss is required in lieu of constant change,"  
and so we all dwell in dangerous places.

Who's made this mistake before? You reckon  
no one else. Anxiety sounds like an upright piano  
and so we all dwell in dangerous places  
like father's trombone-emptied basement, like the heart.

No one else's anxiety sounds like an uptight piano.  
Mud begets rock-ribs. Continue to live on a floodplain—yes.  
We *like* father's trombone-empty basement. We *like* the heart  
floating in full grandeur down Main Street.

**JESSICA GOODFELLOW**

**Drought**

Worse than (a road)  
going nowhere  
is (a bridge)  
spanning nothing  
but shrub skeletons  
grass ashes  
and broken  
beer bottles.  
Gumbo clay,  
desiccated,  
tessellated,  
dried mud mosaic  
under the  
insomniac's boots.  
The badlands  
are bad for it,  
mad for it,  
anything defined  
more by its *lack*  
than not:  
thirst,  
debt,  
futility.  
Wind.  
An excess of  
Nothing.  
So the insomniac  
thought he'd  
settle down here.  
No better place not  
to lay your head  
at night, he said.  
But the townspeople  
(when there was a town)  
the dirt farmers  
(when there were farms)  
the ranchers  
the cowboys

the emigrants  
the surveyors  
the homesteaders  
the claim locators  
the tenant farmers  
the railroad agents  
the small landholders  
were having none  
of that.  
Even the ghost  
towns were having  
none of that.  
Enough of not  
having enough,  
they said.  
Don't bring  
your brand  
of it here.  
They'd spent  
the day putting  
down the last  
of the animals,  
kids hiding  
in the root cellar.  
They'd summed  
up their accounts  
and marveled  
how many ways  
the land could  
betray them.  
Or the wind.  
Or the sky.  
They were  
looking for  
a rainmaker,  
a cloud lassoer,  
a Midwestern Moses,  
to part the dust

and bring them  
water.  
We look  
to the night sky  
for moon rings,  
they told him,  
not for dawn;  
to the horizon  
for clouds, not  
clarity.  
Waiting is all  
the same, the  
insomniac objected,  
not a matter  
of object  
but of state.  
Well then there's  
the difference  
between waiting  
and wanting,  
said the tall one,  
tossing another  
beer bottle over  
the railing. Git  
on now, cross  
that bridge.  
See if you can  
come back.  
Before I go,  
said the insomniac,  
tell me,  
how can you  
sleep?  
Tell me,  
came the answer,  
how can  
you go?

**BARBARA CLAIRE FREEMAN**  
*from The Apocryphon of St. Ursula*

**X 1, 1-68, 18**

You asked that I send the secret  
book to a post office box near the airport.  
I am not certain you will be  
able to open this attachment or if  
our platforms are compatible, but I  
could not gainsay you. I have translated  
this into the obscure language we  
learned at the camp that has neither vowels  
nor consonants so you will be  
the lone interlocutor. Remember, beloved:  
the book was given to me  
under circumstances known only  
to you. It is like an ear  
of grain printed in many colors. The earth  
is yours to scan. Train only those  
who were never given names.



**I 16, 31-34, 34**

Shut up in a house of fire

bound with toxic [...] lying [...] chanting [...]

**N33-**

Then in [...] faith [...]. And you said “[...] able

to be saved?” You received [...] intel reports. What is

**4AA**

called “The [...] unbegotten,” because you [...] down

10:06 a.m.

**93**

The [...] created man. [...men] listed

[...] as destroyed

**III 120, 1-147, 23**

Terror did not come into the world naked,  
but in carry-on bags and tropes. Nothing covered  
will remain; life is water, not stone. Low means  
green, blue guarded, elevated yellow, orange high,  
severe white. Dry, papery leaves cannot  
absorb the risk of colors; a stone tablet is more  
reliable than a harddrive. It is possible the compiler  
disjointed what were once whole paragraphs, burying  
pieces in various bodies. Stones have traces,  
not origins. Beware of solvents, counterfeit spirits,  
the fragrance of honey. The book is hidden in the  
book, where you will find me.

V 17, 19-24, 9

He whose names are invisible symbols  
is unbegotten, unbegun. Whoever has a name is the  
creation of another, like those who shoot their arrows  
after dark. Everyone born at the facility (pages  
11 and 777 are missing, replaced with corresponding  
sections from the 175 codex [no. 365]) will perish  
at the facility. Simple numbers weaken the resolve  
of our allies, moonlight morphs and spreads  
into the pattern catastrophe management attempts  
to avert. The magnetic charges weaken, corrupt,  
and finally erase all data, but hidden  
is the perfect day.

II 51, 29-86, 19

Their luxury is deception. Their trees  
are godless. Their souls, facsimiles. Their fruit,  
poison. Their calls for amnesty, lies.

Their sleeper cells metastasize

in darkness, their place  
of rest. Installing trace detection portals  
is part of the pattern. Burying alphabets  
in the sky is part of the pattern. Waiting

until better shadows are available is  
part of the pattern. There are no accidents,  
no portents. Crushing percocet and apples  
is part of the pattern. Let birds

fall where they may.

VIII 132, 10-140, 27

Face to face tongue broken sleepless

bound with silence [...] hanging [...] trembling [...]

N33-

hunts me down [...]. And you said “[...] find

the black sea?” Solar flare [...] among ghosts. You

4AA

far from me when [I am] [...] near you [...] unkind

11:59 p.m.

93

Paler [...] than dry grass when September

[...] under ground

**Epilogue: “The Desert Has Twelve Things”**

Close the book to re-enter the book. Beware  
of wells; they are not always deep. Inter  
the bones between the word. Seek  
a single letter, clear as frost in the long  
grass. Within the whiteness of a page,  
the black of days. Enter the well whose sign  
the center was: a scripture that obtains  
only if God is a stranger from Himself.

The leaves of the book  
float face down.

**Notes**

The inspiration and source text for the poem, part of a longer sequence whose ruling persona is St. Ursula, is *The Nag Hammadi Library*, a collection of Gnostic writings edited by James M. Robinson.

“VIII 132, 10-140, 27” borrows from William Carlos Williams’ translation of Sappho’s fragment 31.

“The Desert Has Twelve Things” comes from a poem by Mechtild of Magdeburg, a thirteenth-century Beguine mystic.

**JAMES GROSS**

**Stanzas**

Leonardo  
you set it soaring  
sketching canvas-hinged shoulders  
like dragon-fly man

lentamente, lentamente, slowly  
soffice—soft feathered arch  
building lift

“movimente della parte inferiore del corpo”  
only an idea  
on parchment

your backwards scrivetti,  
set it soaring  
Leonardo

five loose stanzas  
on an articulated wing

**LOLA HASKINS**

**(When you live under the mountain. . . .)**

When you live under the mountain  
you do not see the mountain.  
What mountain, you ask,  
stirring your tea,  
as your visitor falls silent  
before the clouds.



**LOLA HASKINS**

**Recruits: Fort Riley, Kansas**

Every night they lose at poker to older  
men, who know what to do with their faces.

**LOLA HASKINS**

**In the Adirondack Chair**

Looking the other way as  
something flutters beside me in the wind,  
I realize  
I can't tell pages from wings.

**LOLA HASKINS**

**Perfection**

The chameleon on the window vanished  
without seeming to move. So are we  
looking through the chameleon now  
as we gaze across the pasture?

**SUSAN TICHY**

**Stork**

'May I live long enough to face my ruin'  
I copied the words

Except, it looked like *rain*

Thirty-eight dead on the river boats  
Three hundred elk on a snowy curve

Everything in abundance

Your nights on the river a radio  
If I wake in the night a radio

A hill beyond the glass a glass of water

On the altar, medals for bravery unjust word  
Raven feathers, bone of a sea turtle

Litter of fox pups playing on a paved road

It was two a.m. they were chasing moths  
I don't remember why we were on that road

We were on that road

Awakened by  
Artillery or

Its silence

■

Artillery or its silences  
A taste of garlic metal taste of rain

On the Golan I lived in a shack on a hill or say  
I slept on a cot in a locked compound

Eight miles from the tracer fire

SUSAN TICHY

On the river you slept between gun mounts  
In the pools of shit and fear

On the river you called  
For blank for blank for peace and it never came

There were helicopters battering the air there  
Were jets taking off and landing

Outside just now a Great-Horned Owl  
Is measuring the silences between them

It's a drought year sound is malleable  
It's a drought year wind

Has the patience of its kind  
It smells of fire and the book says now

There is no higher desert  
On sleepless nights I climb it

On sleepless nights life simplifies  
To a round of terrible questions

Will I lie on my left side  
Or will I lie on my right?

The helicopter lifting you but not you your body  
Your body lifting toward me in a telescoping panic

At dawn we rode out cowboy style  
To find the Golan's wild indifferent cows

They had swept for mines, but mines say  
*You must ride in line like an ant*

I can count the cows, or a line of ants  
That crawl up the coroner's arms

His headlights in the driveway  
Your walking stick beside my bed

SUSAN TICHY

Your face illuminated by tracer fire  
Jets pass overhead at the moment they say

No jets pass overhead  
This is my primary education

This is how I must learn to describe peace  
A white stork down by the fish ponds

And a blond man in a bathing suit  
With an Uzi propped on his hipbone

■

After an hour it wasn't that  
Fox in the road it wasn't that

A bat flutters open stars  
Small jet follows its own sound fear

Of its riding lights cut straight through the side of the hill

You stood in the yard with a black pony  
I waited for you with an armored book

We shelved our books on the face of the mountain  
Our books were stones and we built two cairns

One at the summit one at the lake  
On the path between them the road to Baghdad

Crosses the Cai Rang Bridge  
Crosses your body which body

Training jets pass over our house  
So low the windows buzz

That armor-piercing said word said

SUSAN TICHY

If a child's arm flew toward you through a window  
If you came back crazy came back taller

Came back wearing a white scar  
I wrote down the middle of your face

If you bent to tell me bent to lift  
A drowned sailor out of the bath

At moment of waking don't look down  
Knife-ridge ice-ledge don't look down

Rain-wet sailor nothing now  
Vicarious it ends here

Sand-colored armor sand-slick rock

Fox barks fear in the night  
A wren wakes up and chatters

**MARION K. STOCKING**

**BOOKS IN BRIEF: Where Are We Now?**

In 1950, when the *BPJ* was new, critics divided the poetry turf between the wild men and the academics—the “raw and the cooked.” Our 1957 chapbook contrasted the formally conservative British “Movement” poets like Amis and Larkin with our West Coast “Underground” like Orlovitz and Bukowski. Today the “schools” are somewhat different. David Lehman, writing of the New York School, contrasts their avant-garde “linguistic engines” with the “repositories of felt experience” of other poets. I’d like here to explore that distinction.

To represent those poets who create “repositories of felt experience” I’ll start with **Galway Kinnell**, whose new volume, ***Strong Is Your Hold*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006, 69 pp, \$25 hardbound) comes with a CD of the poet reading the entire book, with welcome introductory comments as if for a live audience. I especially enjoy hearing the little revisions from the published text that appear to emerge spontaneously in performance.

Many of these new poems at first suggest Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility.” “Pulling a Nail” enacts literally extricating a nail, well implanted by the speaker’s taciturn father, which precipitates his recollections of that difficult relationship. The physical action goes internal at the end to an emotional but powerfully ambivalent conclusion where the nail emerges bent, “forming a little wobbling / bridge between then / and now, between me and him, / or him and me, over which / almost nothing of what mattered / to either of us ever passed.” Emotion here is conjured through recapitulating the physical and psychological process of pulling that nail. The things poetry can do!

Strong in this book is Kinnell’s kinship with other poets, especially Whitman—the source of the title: “*Tenderly—be not impatient, / (Strong is your hold O mortal flesh, / Strong is your hold O love).*” Also strong is his absorbed attention to the natural world. I am much taken with “Everyone Was in Love,” in which the small children come in to their parents naked and draped with amazingly acquiescent garter snakes. The image delicately suggests an erotic Eden where a tree of wisdom replaces the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, where Noah’s ark accepts the condition that snakes eat frogs. The children, like their poet father, take no sides in the predator/prey relationship; they are



at home in the natural world. A few of the domestic poems in this volume seem to me uneven, but all the nature poems are solidly fine. For me the strongest of these is “The Quick and the Dead,” in which Kinnell attends to the process of carrion beetles burying the body of a dead vole. The poem progresses from its shuddering question of whether there is “a resolution worse than death, after death” to a cheerfully sober acceptance of the natural processes of mortality.

“The Quick and the Dead” shows that, unlike Wordsworth, Kinnell does not necessarily put time between his spontaneous emotion and the tranquility of composition. Indeed, tranquility might be an inappropriate response. I was astonished when, amid the immediate panic reaction to what is now simply “9/11,” his “When the Towers Fell” appeared in *The New Yorker*. How seamlessly Kinnell blends Villon, Celan, Aleksander Wat, Whitman, and Hart Crane into one voice, outraged at injustice and inhumanity while deflecting any perverse “pride” in feeling that this nation had been uniquely afflicted. (For this volume the quotations are translated in the notes and on the CD.) The poem opens with the authority of the poet who lives where the towers were part of the daily scene, who “grew so used to them / often we didn’t see them, and now, / not seeing them, we see them.” He then proceeds to a counterpointing of scenes in which he imagines being at work in the World Trade Center that morning with vignettes of what he himself saw, coming immediately back to town as he did to meet with students. The voices of other poets connect this disaster to the human history of outrage. Lines from Celan’s “Death Fugue” introduce Kinnell’s image of the towers that “come before us now not as a likeness, / but as a corollary, a small instance in the immense / lineage of the twentieth century’s history of violent death.”

It is my sense that only a poet who has spent a lifetime crafting words to express what he observes and experiences—be it pure familial joy, the minutiae of the natural world, or (back to Wordsworth) “man’s inhumanity” to his own species—only such a sustained discipline of attention and imagination could produce a poem so rich and accurate so soon after the event. Emotion recollected in tranquility may inspire other poets to cope with the trauma of the destruction of the towers, but I’d be surprised if they can match the power of Kinnell’s immediate

response. Those who wonder, beyond the television images, “What was it really like?” and, beyond the political rhetoric, “What did it really mean?” can look here for an answer.

■  
**Harryette Mullen**’s first book, *Tree Tall Woman*, got pigeonholed as “identity poetry” in the voice of a literate black woman. Though Mullen widens her audience in successive books, she fortunately carries the wealth of her black and female identities throughout ***Recyclopedia*** (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2006, 190 pp, \$15 paper), which reprints her second volume, *Trimnings*, and the two that follow, *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* and *Muse & Drudge*. In a useful “Poetic Statement” in Rankine and Spahr’s *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*, Mullen provides me with my transition from Kinnell’s “repositories of felt experience” to the “linguistic engines” of much of today’s experimental poetry. She says, “I think of writing as a process that is synthetic rather than organic, artificial rather than natural, human rather than divine.” She continues, “My inclination is to pursue what is minor, marginal, idiosyncratic, trivial, debased, or aberrant in the language that I speak and write.” In her preface to *Recyclopedia*, “Recycle This Book,” she describes *Trimnings* and *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* as “serial prose poems that use playful, punning, fragmented language to explore sexuality, femininity, and domesticity.” They correspond to the “Objects” and “Food” sections of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. Read her title as *Supermarket* and/or *Sperm Kit* and you’re off, ready for the games.

I’ll talk my way through the first poem in *Trimnings* and then you’re on your own.

Becoming, for a song. A belt becomes such a small waist.  
 Snakes around her, wrapping. Add waist to any figure,  
 subtract, divide. Accessories multiply a look. Just the thing,  
 a handy belt suggests embrace. Sucks her in. She buckles.  
 Smiles, tighter. Quick to spot a bulge below the belt.

I know I’m missing things in here (Mullen does not expect any reader to get every play), and I may well be making connections the poet hadn’t anticipated, but that’s part of the exhilaration of the game. Remember Coleridge’s praise of Wordsworth: when he used a word it meant everything it could mean. *Becoming*. OK, we’re in the process. Ah, but an article of clothing may be

*becoming* to the wearer. And something in the story is *coming*. Oops! *Coming* in which sense? On to *for a song*. Both a song for what's coming and the belt that was bought cheap? And the belt *becomes*, isn't just becoming *to*, the small waist. *Handy* gets anticipatorily physical. Then *snakes*. Yes indeed, our old friend from Genesis. And isn't he rapping? A black snake, seductive? *Add* hints at a pun in *waist*, compounded by *subtract*, *divide*—all specific to the effect of a tight belt. Along comes *multiply*, with multiple connotations, one of which rears its head in the last line. But first *accessories*, both those added fashion details and—dare we read it?—partners in crime. What do they multiply? Well, a fashion “look” and also a gaze? *Just the thing* suggests the voice and intentions of the wearer as well as the Steinian thingyness of the object. OK? And the possible connotations of *suck*? Now we're getting down to it. The poem seems to start as objective narrative but is actually dramatic. Especially in *tighter*, its effect is physical and psychological, climaxing in the last three words, which renew the cliché. This intimate theater pushes Stein's tender buttons, evoking, for example, “Aider, why aider why whow, whow stop touch, aider whow, aider stop the muncher, muncher munchers.” In *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* Mullen's satire of commercialized produce scours the supermarket with mass-produced clichés: “Refreshing spearmint gums up the words. Instant permkit combs through the wreckage. Bigger better spermkit grins down family of four. Scratch and sniff your lucky number. You may already be a wiener.”

An epigraph to *Muse & Drudge* from Callimachus defines the familiar feminist dilemma: “Fatten your animal for sacrifice, poet, but keep your muse slender”—the traditional irony of woman as inspiration and exploitable (sex)worker. The language in this volume is richer than in the prose poems, effervescing with fractured syntax, neologisms, and multiple puns. Mullen's declared aim is like Wordsworth's “renewal of words,” though this is hardly Wordsworth's palaver. Consider “he dictate so dicty, she sedate so seditty,” followed by a stanza that sings the blues. She puns ever more lavishly: “his penis flightier than his word.” She jams words together so that they overlap wonderfully: *apocalypso*, then a triple overlap, “*hysteriotypist*.”

Mullen divides each poem into four quatrains, suggesting a song. In her preface she writes that she “imagined a chorus of women

singing verses that are sad and hilarious at the same time.” I’d sure like to hear it. The voices are usually disjunctive. I wickedly imagine that if I were to put each quatrain on a three-by-five card and keep reshuffling them into groups of four I’d have an endless supply of zingy associations. Even on the formal page it is up to me to create new connections. Here’s one stanza:

mutter patter simper blubber  
 murmur prattle smatter blather  
 mumble chatter whisper bubble  
 mumbo-jumbo palaver gibber blunder

Start off “mother father sister brother,” and see how far you get, beyond the crazy delicious music of it. A family all talking at once as in an Altman film? Or just a poet drunk on language. Note the vertical rhymes, alliterations, and assonances; read it crosswise or up and down: a magic square, with the three-syllable *palaver* extending and focusing the last line. A delight machine.

Beyond the heightened diction and prosody, Mullen extends the elements of her earlier texts—sexuality, femininity, and domesticity—while satirizing the seductive commercialism that controls them. Love her for her ludic genius—loopy, ludicrous, liberating—and for her increasingly rich and playful juggling of black diction, syntax, music, and tradition. It is a gift to have these three books, these eloquent “linguistic engines,” together.

■  
 The next step out is to **Ben Lerner’s** first volume, ***The Lichtenberg Figures*** (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2004, 53 pp, \$14 paper). Eighteenth-century polymath Georg Christoph Lichtenberg discovered the pattern of outwardly exploding dendritic forms where lightning strikes, figures that suggest the commanding electrical energy that informs these poems. (Copper Canyon provides a stunning cover illustration for this elegantly designed volume.) The first of Lerner’s fifty-two untitled fourteen-line “sonnets” establishes the connection/disconnection: “Real snow / on the stage. Fake blood on the snow. Could this go // on forever in a good way? A brain left lace from age or lightning.” We have here a twenty-four-year-old poet whose ludic genius is unintimidated by the ludicrous. He romps in the English language, sometimes shooting down cliché after cliché through syllepsis such as we haven’t seen since Alexander

Pope:

I did it for the children. I did it for the money.

I did it for the depression of spirit and the cessation of hope.

I did it because I could, because it was there.

I'd do it again. Oops, I did it again.

. . . .

Let's just do Chinese. Just do as I say. Just do me.

That does it. Easy does it. That'll do.

The play is not all on the surface. Among phrases one could hear any day at the next table in the coffee bar comes "the depression of spirit and the cessation of hope," throwing a dark shadow in under all the stylistic glitter. Remember that "brain left lace from age or lightning." Not funny. And as you read, watch out for couplets like "If it is any consolation, we admire the early work of John Ashbery. / If it is any consolation, you won't feel a thing." Strong currents beneath these surfaces.

Lerner's second book, *Angle of Yaw* (Copper Canyon, 2006, 127 pp, \$15 paper) is a stunner. I could use all my pages here to explore the ramifications in form, intertextuality, and intellectual pioneering of any one of these five sequences. I have spent a good week, a very good week, rereading and mining this remarkable volume, but I (the critic Lerner keeps wryly referring to?) don't expect to exhaust its riches. Part I, "Begetting Stadia," offers seven short poems, the first, with its fourteen lines, a wave back at the sonnets in his first book:

Demands indefinitely specified,  
demands incompatible with collective living

beget stadia  
with indefinite seating  
delicately tiered.

Resembling its shape  
and therefore suggesting its function:

a wave.

Or repeating its shape  
and therefore undoing its function:

a wave,

which I will here attempt to situate  
in the broader cognitive process  
of turning the page.

The opening lines, with their cagy suggestion of indeterminacy, alert the reader to the tension between individual and collective action and in their abstraction introduce the primary action of the book as a whole, which is cerebral. No red wheelbarrow, buzzing fly, rolled trousers, or burying beetles here. “Think about it.”

In an online interview (called to my attention by a review in *Verse* by Ashley David) Lerner has said that “the ability to enact the experience one describes is, I think, a hallmark of a great writer.” (Sotto voce: It is also the hallmark of the Romantic ode.) Although overt action erupts in the last line, the reader must accept the challenge that all these poems are really staged in the theater of the intellect. The academic diction (parodied, no?) of *cognitive process* wittily begets not only those indefinite stadia but *realizes* the action in the prosody of six lines that enact, then reenact, the image of the wave. (Ninety-six pages later the reader is back in the stadium, caught up in the wave.) In these tightly lyric free-verse constructions, Lerner invites us to enjoy throughout the volume the constantly shifting relationship of shape to function. When you get your own copy, look at the sound patterning of the poem beginning “We call it sports entertainment,” admire the dramatic lineation, the yawing diction (“in the collective economy / of variable stars”), listen at the end to the narrative voice modulating from comic self-conscious to formal historical (“Am I not then entitled to”) and concluding with an iambic pentameter couplet of which Frost might be proud. These poems may well be “linguistic engines,” but those engines are fueled by lyric energy and conducted by one whiz of an engineer.

Sections II and IV are “Angle of Yaw.” Sailors know that *to yaw* is to swerve suddenly, as in a squall. Aviators and astronauts understand it as a turning about a vertical axis. One of these poems deals directly with the aeronautical, but, as the book’s title would imply, there are syntactic and intellectual swerves throughout the work. Everything in motion, but unpredictably. I’m going to yaw for the moment to Section III, “Didactic Elegy,” five substantial poems in irregular stanzas. Here’s how it opens:

“Intention draws a bold, black line across an otherwise white field. / Speculation establishes gradations of darkness / where there are none, allowing the critic to posit narrative time. / I posit the critic to distance myself from intention, a despicable affect. / Yet intention is necessary if the field is to be understood as an economy.” Follow that? I assume intention is despicable because, scientifically, it implies teleology. Then I realize that the word *emotion* never appears in this work, only the clinical *affect*. This is (aha!) poetry in a 180-degree yaw from “romantic” passion into the passion of art. The fifth stanza ends, “Can this process be made the subject of a poem?” Drop down to the next stanza and find: “No, / but it can be made the object of a poem.” Slithery words, *subject* and *object*. Turn the page and confront this:

Events extraneous to the work, however, can unfix the  
 meaning of its figures,  
 thereby recharging it negatively. For example,  
 if airplanes crash into towers and those towers collapse,  
 there is an ensuing reassignment of value.

With this new figure (not a subject or object) I am busily reassigning my attention. I begin to feel at home in the rhythmic structure of the poem and to read hungrily for the next yaw. And the next. I finish the poem profoundly engaged and ready for my next three or four readings. At this stage I am taking the elegy to be for the towers, the critic to be the one who is responding to the image of the towers’ falling (i.e., as on film, as a work of art). The poet’s didactic lecture is delivered in a series of interlocking questions and aphorisms (“Should we memorialize the towers or the towers’ collapse? / Can any memorial improve on the elegance of absence? / Or perhaps, in memoriam, we should destroy something else.”) The lecture, then (back to the artist’s black-on-white line), seems to be on the integrity of art. But don’t take this critic’s word for it, since every rereading waves me into new configurations.

Section V carries the provocative title “Twenty-One Gun Salute for Ronald Reagan”—twenty-one seven-line stanzas, each followed by an indented couplet. Some are dictionary definitions for which the player must identify the word defined (“Minute hooks fasten to a corresponding strip with a surface of uncut pile”). Some sport with Lerner interviews (“I want the form to

enact the numbing it describes”). Some are just bitterly, if comically, absurd (“I would shoot myself only in self-defense”). Some sound as though Reagan or G. W. Bush might have said them, on or off the record (“This is your tax dollars hard at work,” “I neither regret nor recall my presidency”). Some are openly historical (“Proceeds from the arms sales were then funneled to the Contras”), some slyly political (“A diamond cheval-de-frise tops the White House”). I’ll end with the final line of the volume: “Is this thing on?” Damn right it’s on.

■

For full disclosure I must add that after I’d selected these books to exemplify two poles of contemporary poetry I was astonished and delighted to discover that not only had the *BPJ* been the first to publish Galway Kinnell, in 1952 when he was twenty-five, but we were also the first to publish Ben Lerner, in 1997, when he was still a teenager. The distance in age between Kinnell and Lerner is greater than that between Shelley and Thomas Hardy, the difference in their poetry even greater. Since from the beginning it has been a primary aim of this magazine to discover the growing tip of poetry, it gives me intense pleasure that we have been able to say to these radically different poets what Emerson said to Whitman: “I greet you at the beginning of a great career.”