

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 60 N°2  
WINTER 2009/2010

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**COVER**

**Mary Greene**, design

**Cole Caswell**, "Brush," photograph, 2006.

→

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

**Poet's Forum**

We invite you to join the online conversation with *BPJ* poets on our Poet's Forum at [www.bpj.org](http://www.bpj.org). The participating poets for this issue are Mary Molinary (December), Don Schofield (January), and Kerry James Evans (February).

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# BPJ

THE EDITORS OF  
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL  
ARE PROUD TO AWARD  
THE SEVENTEENTH ANNUAL  
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE  
OF \$3,500

TO  
ONNA SOLOMON  
FOR HER POEM "AUTISM SUITE"  
IN THE FALL 2009 ISSUE.

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

Snowman

isn't  
this  
poem's  
title, no,  
just as this isn't  
the brim  
of his hat, just  
as these aren't lumps  
of coal but more like  
cubes of sugar, just  
as this is not a pipe.  
Neither is this a scarf, nor  
is this a red wheel barrow, no.  
What this is is (à la Stevens) ink  
on the back of an envelope—  
or was, to be more exact,  
before it was typed to be  
e-mailed off at the speed of light  
to become the absence of light before  
it was rolled and tossed without the heft  
of a snowball, which is not the truth, just as  
this is snowballing toward a title below—  
both visible and invisible like *like* without  
the “k,” like the buzz word for a buzzard  
sitting on a blind man in a blizzard.

**KARL ELDER**  
**Vanishing Point**

A February Saturday afternoon, Heineken gone  
to your head, you take the back way home,  
come to a stop, flick on the blinker you forgot  
that now clicks like memory's own metronome.

Swinging onto Garten Road, you catch a quarter mile ahead  
a car cocked on the edge, half in the ditch, flashers,  
a signal any rum-dumb son of a sailor heeds  
as if heart were radar enough for head, with no hedges,

no fences along the blond/black waves of cornrows,  
no trace of snow to obscure the scarred, the sacred spot  
she props a new blue wreath, a slight woman or girl,  
you cannot tell, as she wears a yellow hood and is thus

anonymous as the pseudo-mourners (the morbid, the curious)  
these four months since the boy lost his grip on the wheel.  
That he might have been dreaming, it being near midnight,  
that the paper told who, what, where, yet no why

is the mystery in this miserable memorial and why  
they are drawn here maybe instead of elsewhere, this  
landscape where last he was alive, complete with portal,  
that the pilgrim within us may spy a hidden shore and—  
which?—kneel before the canvas or, at sight of it, wretch.

**KARL ELDER**

**Conversion**

*What has sound got to do with music?*

—Charles Ives

Like a song he heard wrong all his life  
thought he knew what it took to be moved,  
wolves, loons plying from the spirit life,  
no glimpse of it soon to be improved  
upon, yet there arose from the mouth  
of his being by way of being  
where he dreamed—call it North via south—  
if not prayer, no craven brazen thing  
less holy than in its refusal  
to beseech, seek, even, the divine—  
some syncopation, an interval  
like a lake mirroring stars, tree line,  
but outside of time, the mind at home  
with the mute music of the poem.

*for Beth Ann Fennelly*



**MARY MOLINARY**  
by  
poems composed for the left hand

1.

to keep dementia away  
most of the doctors say  
use the opposite hand—  
force new learning on the mind

my left hand laughs  
says it's all silly,  
doesn't buy the split-  
brain theory

but being good sport, plays  
along—works hard against being  
awkward

it's my right that slays  
me—sulking and skulking  
at the margins—curled  
up like a forgotten turnip

2.

my left hand does not know  
love—not like my right one does:  
nimble caress of alphabets,  
keys letters, lover's uppermost

thigh—my left hand is impatient  
to learn what my right knows:

lovemaking is easy if you mean it:  
use both hands, all fingers,  
use lips teeth tongue,  
all of your vowels  
and all of your toes!

**3. golden sunflower of my left hand**

my left hand may have  
a dirty mind—you'll never catch it  
    blushing, and  
no doubt, if it knew sign  
    language, my left hand would have  
    a dirty mouth

my right scrubs it clean

my right hand is not  
only better at astronomy  
& masturbation, it excels  
    in all arenas: math, poetry,  
    philosophy, music

my left can barely beat  
a drum or hold this pencil  
    but  
my left hand used to lug  
itself around like an early  
dinosaur—feathered but not yet  
    capable of flight or glide

**4. speech impediment**

not exactly a stutter  
or dissolve  
of liquids—l's r's losing  
their places against the backs  
of unfamiliar teeth—

[*girl rabbit rare*

*rabbit gir-rabbit ra ar*

*ahrah rah ree ray roy roo*

*rood row ahrah ooroo arrow*

*barrow carry air care air i see*

*a girl who roars like a rabbit an aurora*

*au-roar-a the red robin roars at the hoary aurora]*

o! my left hand at times  
wants so much  
to be  
flawless  
worthy—

could it weep  
it would

**5. slow girl**

she can't move quick enough for meter or wit.  
with my left hand, it's all slow syllabics at best.  
were she a character in a play or novel,  
she'd sit and slowly rock, touching each petal  
of every flower brought to her by all the kids  
who would run away uncomfortably and  
laughing. she wouldn't much care, she likes flowers

**6. Let us now praise the left hand**

Here then it is: "here is this tender and helpless" left hand—humble, aged beyond its years, bitten, gnawed at, wretchedly unmanicured: having borne the brunt and weight of manual labor, the pathos of small burns, fresh cuts and scars—whose unnaturally fattened knuckles seem like porous stones or clumsy cement covered in the thinnest veneer of human flesh: calloused crackling dry wearied by thirty years of "rate" plus tips: the hand's portrait I draw for you now not for pity's sake—god no!—but for the sake of us all: the left hand is a trembling body—ours: and is it not eloquent when it trembles like the filament of poverties and times and depressions past: a single lightbulb burns in the plank shack of this left hand: bent tines on a silver-tint fork:

**7. *My Life* by the Left Hand**

Let's be honest as pen nibs & pencil leads will allow. I am far less "stranger" to her childhood than her right hand is. & far left. What I represent is a flash of common birds fleeing an autumn-bare cottonwood tree, the pause between branch in repose & pencil teetering on the edge of fledging. I remember every pane of glass in those huge public school windows—windows I wanted to open to fly into rose & tumult sky filled with molecules I could smell & ambidextrous music I could play to if they'd let me. Truth is, the privilege of the holy right hand practicing its perfectible script & staying so beautifully between the *Big Chief* lines—

What lies!

Truest thing she ever wrote: a poem in the 8th grade called "Hate." That was *all* me telling it like it is/was. The right hand had already learned to embellish, to please. Truer still: I did "hate you all" for stunting my growth & for making her accept absurdities as somehow natural. Were it not for me, for the large memory I keep clear as those panes of glass, I tell you: we would have lost her *completely*, wholly, to that well-wrought fiction.

### 8. Indictment/Confession

True. Yes. She was in the leviathan, the belly of the beast—the industrial kitchen of the Sheraton “El Conquistador,” Tucson outskirts. Her hair, short. Her apron, green. Never good with knives, it wasn’t unusual to see her cutting bread more slowly & deliberately than she did everything else. I was reminding her (yes, holding the baguette incorrectly, thumb flailing out there like a fish) about history: about her employers, ITT/Sheraton: *Chile, Allende*, I said, *Pino-fucking-chet!*

At that moment, one of the chefs (pastry) yelled across the kitchen to one of the sous chefs (sauces): “Did you open your insurance letter? Dude! My left hand is only worth \$5000 but my right’ll get me 10 grand. That’s fucked up!”

Some will say she came at me for the insurance money, but that’s not true. No. She wanted to shut me up. It was her conscience—ironically the same conscience that got my ass out of the way fast-fast. She and the right/knife hand came down at me meaning business!

She got nothing for the sliver-tip of my index finger. Not even workman’s comp. And besides, honestly, I *was* egging her on.



## 9. Sinister

The left hand is asleep. This needs to be quick and quiet. I'm not convinced we want or need to let this cat out of the bag. Haven't we all gotten along just fine so far? I wouldn't say the left hand is necessarily evil, but really! And it isn't as though it was tied down like the old days; the left was kept from nothing. All it does is blame. Blame and castigate. You and I both tried to civilize the thing on numerous occasions. It didn't like scales and hated to practice anything... Look at it! Passed out from God knows what dark imbibing. I'm afraid and I think you are too. For us. I think it seeks revenge and all we wanted was to instill a work ethic. A grace to its rough manner. The thing was born with an unhealthy rage. It's sinister. The less it knows, the better.

**10. Lesser poem by a lesser hand  
(moral: Do Not Romanticize This Character or Scene)**

an abundance of butter-  
flies & fish, my left  
hand is Panama, the  
Philippines—a *purr*-  
fect destination when you  
need adventure, a simple  
meal, a retreat from, or  
tan-brownish skin  
my left hand speaks  
English when you need—  
will coo a cool breeze  
into your quixotic ear  
or across the dawn of  
your volcanic nipples  
when you read the ravines  
& lines of this palm be  
only a little afraid/excited:  
my left hand may croon  
in savage languages scoop  
you up butterfly you serve  
you with salty fish & rice

**11. Self-Portrait with Left Hand & Blue Vase**

part of me says no blue vase at all but a monkey & a bird & the monkey holds tenderly the bird . . . well the bird is perched in the simian's flat opened left palm & lemon yellow everywhere the monkey is chimp perhaps or tarsier its face the self as subject & the bird is blue as the Mediterranean blue as the absent ceramic vase—the beak wide open—one can nearly hear the tune the communion between monkey & bird & the title is THE MARVELLOUS POSSESSION it's a double entendre . . . well wait, this could be a sinister painting: the subject (monkey) hides its right hand behind its back—that hand full of seed & the title is SINGING FOR MY SUPPER . . . oh, no! I don't like that at all! the bird *is*—blue as absent ceramic vase—& in the palm & singing *just because* & lemon yellow everywhere everywhere

<sup>i</sup>  
**12. How my left hand ended up in this shallow grave**

with all these complete or nearly complete human figures who grew tired of being treated like just so many left hands is no mystery: here's a thought: *analogy & irony excrement & teeth all i see & all i see* here's sunset: a sidereal sidelong glance on clove-pink hills coloring them umber shadows seeping one into another making one large shadow called night stars drop like a sharp knife might like a sharp knife did from here surrounded by bodies and stars i see night for what it is a sieve *through which* here's a memory: stringed instruments sobbing Shostakovich & there she is conducting the 20th century in front of the speakers a fury she merely sniffs at senses because the right alone can't handle this because she needs me to conduct the 8th (though the right baton/knife hand commands all the attention) here's the finale: at the end we are all of us trembling with a strange joy at the end this is grief deepest sadness a shallow grave left for revision

**my left hand**  
**13. How I ended up in that shallow grave**

a simple late  
winter early  
spring snow—  
at least 2 hands deep

we watched all night watched  
the *real* disappear beneath  
the drift of things, a temporary  
rapprochement mediated by  
the peach-bloom glow of low  
clouds, light, luminous crystals of  
water mirroring back

a landscape with snow is all  
about shapes and their accents

we used to play breathlessly in the rare  
snow and my left hand always pointed  
out the peculiar expression of mother  
as she looked out at us through the window  
a strange sort of joy that harbored  
something we could not understand  
so we'd plop down to make angels for her

my left hand is out there now, waiting  
in that shallow grave to make angels . . . no,  
it's practicing its letters . . . no,  
it's writing messages in the snow

**14. simultaneities**

**(Left then Right then together)**

L

*going into a trance*

*like any dead*

*artifact*

leaven the bread

lift the lover

lift the evening

sift sift this

that these

those stark

sift medieval

rose then hold to

nose now go

back back

to artifact

thingy thingy

singy singy

R

*did not help*

*never a clever*

feller

never a clever

left—a lever

left—a sieve

snappy snap

it can't it cant

a lark a lark

left—a hammer

left—a flower

left out in cold

now gone

back back

to seed a sad

ashen singing thing

more by the left:  
③

to keep dementia away  
most of the doctors say  
use the opposite hand—

force new learning on the mind.

my left hand laughs  
says it's all silly

doesn't buy the split-  
brain theory.

but being good sport, plays  
along— works hard against being  
awkward;

it's my right that stays  
me— sulking and skulking  
at the margins— curled  
up like a forgotten turnip.

**KERRY JAMES EVANS**  
**Leaning in from the Sea**

—a line from “Oysters,” by Seamus Heaney

*Too much black in that boy, she tells his father, shears in hand.  
Too much ears. Too much nose.  
Not black: Pussy.*

But the bitch is too white.  
She’s a one-room trailer  
at the bottom of a gravel pit.

She was hot shit, high school cheerleader—  
she was prom queen material.  
Too white. Too trash.

*Too slow to keep up with them boys.*

■

We ran the ball up the gut.  
We only won when it rained.  
Senior year, we went 3-8.  
I fucked a girl.

■

Fucked the green out of her eyes  
and now she walks around brown and blue.

The boys at the trailer plant in Brilliant call her Texas.  
I don’t know why. She never married?

She plays tambourine  
in a country band Brandon Franks formed.

■

They tied me up for a traditional buzz cut  
fit for a football player. Fit for a soldier.

*We’ll make that cowlick go away, boy.  
We’ll train your hair to lie right.*





Last time in the city, a pigeon  
splattered its innards right next to me.

Who'd do that? Who'd clip  
a pigeon's wings

and throw it at a person?  
All that blood. All those feathers.



Sounds Roman. Sounds like soldiers again. Sounds like trumpets.



Religion has always been a coin in the mouth.



In D.C., Mother said, *Don't you stand up for yourself.*  
*Don't you go getting in trouble. I don't care what for.*  
*You'll be dead, boy. You'll be dead before I'm thirty.*



When I lived in the city, which I did, I learned phrases  
mean less when you're holding a gun.



Which I am.



When I lived in Mississippi, where there are no cities,  
only snake pits and psychics,  
I learned young mothers bear children  
out of necessity. Out of loneliness.  
That cotton always needs more hands.

■

*No need for the combine, boy. No need for the gin.*

■

*You won't make it around here.  
You got wide between your eyes.  
You got something wrong with your gait.*

■

Always leaning in from the sea.

■

When I'm called back to the front.  
When the living forget their families.  
When bone dust and blood inherit the land.

■

Who will open his own stomach like a Roman?

■

I am holding a gun.

**PHILIP PARDI**  
**My Father's Christening**

**1**

After the story, its telling, and only then is it a story.

**2**

Here, danger is all in the tweaked reach  
for balance,

schlepping the ladder through snow, questions  
where before I had two feet,

even the red dirt, even the muddy brook,  
white-faced.

Halfway from porch to dead maple I slip, ladder  
akimbo—

so quickly snow finds ankle and wrist, so quickly I'm up  
to shake it off.

**3**

Alexander wasn't content to merely sack Tyre.

Why was he piqued?

Because they had been arrogant?

Because their seamanship spooked him?

Historians disagree.

For seven months, soldiers worked to construct a bridge  
that might carry the Macedonian soldiers from the mainland  
to the walls of the offshore city.

The bridge, or mole, or dam, or causeway,  
is there to this day in what is now Lebanon.

From inside Tyre, the Phoenicians rained down arrows,  
launched burning rafts.

Historians agree that Alexander was usually humane toward his prisoners.

On this occasion, however, he decided the point was the story.

Eight thousand Phoenicians fell.

Along the coast of the island, Alexander had his men erect  
two thousand crosses. These were for the young men.

Over thirty thousand women and children were sold into slavery.

Essentially, that was the end of the Phoenicians.

4

I once went to see a fight between  
two men, one was a friend, so strong,  
smiling all the while with us, his buddies  
who'd come for the show. They met, these two,

behind the pharmacy, and those who came  
to watch sat on the stoop. Nothing  
turns as quickly as the tide against you.  
The other guy, smaller than me,

was all fury. One flurry, just one, and  
my friend looked up at us with buttery  
unresolve. We who weren't fighters, what  
could we do but watch, and when he ran,

run with him?

5

They came, they came with baskets, they came to watch  
(a man is speaking), ladies and children all  
came dressed in their Sunday best, intent on a picnic.  
They'd watch the war begin and end right here:

Manassas, or Bull Run, the troops and families  
marching out together, wetting their shoes  
with dew, blankets and picnics unfurled on the hillside.  
And congressmen in buggies were there too;

there was to be a victory party that night  
in Fairfax, there was whiskey, there was champagne.  
But then, can you imagine thousands running,  
troops and mothers, uncles and children, the food

trampled, a fear among them, not then knowing  
Beauregard wouldn't sack the city. How certain  
they were, how little they knew, walking into  
the fields the way that we might go to a ballgame—

6

Here the man pauses, looks up from his cannoli. Glancing around, he realizes everyone has drifted away, his story unheard, unheeded. He stands alone at the buffet. At the far end of the rented hall, he might see my grandmother, young then, cradling her firstborn, my father, age two months, all the more tightly in light of the radio playing. December 1941, and we can imagine a leanness to the leaves that have waited this long to fall, and the quiet outside, and the quiet inside, but for the radio. They'd been in the car, driving over from the church of St. Francis, when the radio broke in with news that fixes forever a place. From a rooftop, a reporter said the planes were flying so low he could see the pilots smiling. My grandfather wasn't sure whether to pull over or speed up or start honking his horn. A vast secret to have to bear into the day, to others who maybe haven't heard, or maybe they have, and when they try to tell you, you must quiet them, unable to hear it told in words not yours. The food goes uneaten as a terrible smallness crowds into the hall. The world is elsewhere, but coming.

7

Snow-shinned.

Even on this dying maple, a few leaves survive.

The plan was never not to fall, they say, only to see it through, to see  
the burden  
unburdened,

but you with the wet socks (I was just turning away) why must you  
grasp so wildly  
at what you believe? When will you let yourself be

not witness (who must, after all, flee with the tale) but,  
like us, wet and chilled?

Going back for the saw, at the spot where before I fell, I step carefully,  
fall again.

8

Late night reading  
of Aeneas  
arriving, seven

years gone and salt-stained: some-  
how he survived  
and now he must explain

how. Stumbling into Carthage, he finds  
all of Troy before him, ablaze,  
and Priam speared and ladders rising

about the walls, *a tortoise shell*  
*of overlapping shields*  
assailing the gate, and

he himself he sees, mid-wrath—  
a mural. Stumbling,  
that is, into his own story.

**9**

Mid-fall, early October, my father's sixteenth birthday, he's on the roof.  
New Jersey humming about and beneath him,

the lights far fewer than in the town I will know: it's dark enough  
to see

and he sees it now: the slow spin, the dull throb, this man-made  
moon

flashing  
overhead—

no fear here, no headlines pounding out their capital letters, he can't  
imagine the Russians

wanting much to do with Edison, N.J., any more  
than he can believe in a God

who'd kill his son, or that Nippy Jones had been hit yesterday  
leading off the 10th. Seeing

isn't but half of it, he's sure, shoe polish or no, flashing lights  
above or no. No,

Sputnik showers down no revelations  
on him, no dreams

of becoming an astronaut or venturing far  
from home,

no wish but the wish for utter normalcy: dinner, and after  
dinner,

a drink, and how far away even that must seem. Nearby,  
a radio plays

Jerry Lee, and my father listens with his back  
flat

on the flat roof, his eyes alive  
to what he knows

is a spent fuel tank tumbling ahead  
of the satellite, though

try as he might, he can't train  
his eyes

on a spot just behind it. Knowing  
it's there

doesn't help, can't help him  
find it.

**DON SCHOFIELD**

**Harmony, USA**

**1**

Fog rolls in off Moro Bay, a heavy,  
churning motion—and we are in it.

Road signs can't be seen. The sun a dim fuse.  
Each curve surprises, then is gone, just our headlights

on fog, its swirling generosity  
as now it swings open to windswept cliffs,

gulls and cormorants beyond. No horizon.  
No retaining that distinction. Gun-gray

swells, curling up from unseen depths, rise huge  
against the cliffs, leave scrawls of brine arcing

up shore. The salt-scaled trunk of a fig tree  
glints where light now touches. From the bluff,

pelicans drop bodily into surf, emerge  
with fish wriggling in their pouches—a moment

not expected, never meant, as fog rolls closed,  
our lights thrown back into our own faces.

**2**

Patty and I let ourselves be printed,  
frisked and scanned. We filled out forms, and still weren't sure  
they'd let us see my nephew, till a light  
blinked, a buzzer sounded, a heavy bolt  
dropped; then a huge metal door hissed open

to a long, narrow room with low ceiling,  
rows of plastic chairs bolted to the floor,  
prisoners sitting under glaring lights  
with wives, girlfriends and families,  
their children playing in a big sandbox  
beneath a primitive mural with cliffs,  
gulls rising and dipping into low fog,  
enormous orange sun above the horizon.



Then Robert was led in. His close-cropped hair,  
gray, receding, surprised me, but not the dark,  
intense eyes and dimpled chin of the boy  
I used to babysit. Faded workshirt  
and jeans. Worn-out tennis shoes. When we sat,  
he kept looking beyond us, left and right,  
then into our eyes to see behind him.

**3**

*The guy behind me's a snitch. The other's  
a friend, but we don't talk out here. Goonies  
hear everything, write you up just for kicks.  
You wanna know what it's like doin' time?  
We march single file, arm's length apart.  
Always some goony's face up close or watching  
through a window. Same routine every day.  
A number determines what mail you get,  
what books you read, who you sit by at meals.  
7, noon and 5. Tin trays with runny  
mush or mashed potatoes, cold peas, and spam  
all in its right place. Nights, one bare bulb for  
twelve of us. We can pound the walls, yell, or jack off  
in silence. Some nights a needle gets through  
and we're in heaven. Nothing you'd notice.*

*Some guys get catalogs or girly mags  
to keep them dreaming. Me, I keep busy  
cleaning—I do what I have to—windows,  
urinals, goonies' boots, even their pickups  
in the parking lot. Some days I can feel  
someone else inside my body. I'm sweeping  
or standing in steam from the dishwasher  
and he'll shout, Eat shit, Goonies! He waltzes  
where he wants, masturbates in well-lit rooms,  
strolls into that mural you're looking at,  
flies with gulls way beyond the horizon.  
So, tell me, what's it like out there these days?*

4

This morning at the motel Patty showered.  
I watched Phil Donahue with some trustee  
from Texas describing how he was attacked  
by a pack of bloodhounds as the warden  
and other officials looked on. Folding  
jeans then shirts, I thought in turn of chasing  
and being chased: first a ridgeback bounding  
up a slope, catching the scent on a clump  
of stinkweed, along a dusty creek bed.  
Then the prisoner, stumbling rock to rock  
across scree, the baying close. They caught me  
in a ravine. I rose, fell, turned and rose  
again, hounds hanging from my crotch and chest. . . .

The warden asked Donahue, "Who you gonna  
believe, a law enforcement officer  
or this con?" I switched the TV off just as  
the trustee lifted his shirt to show us  
his scars, saw them shrink to a fading dot  
as Patty, naked, stepped out through steam.

5

*Should've seen the wedding we had once.  
You'd've loved the bride, spiked hair, plump, a real  
beauty, "Here Comes the Bride" on the intercom*

*as she slowly marched through the open door  
in a long flowing gown, the groom a friend,  
a Mongol doin' time here for arson.*

*Should've seen us cons in clean blues, happy  
as cons could be, goonies shooting photos  
as if we all was family. All the Mongols*

*from L.A. were here, wearing shiny suits,  
standing with the judge under a flowered  
arch. We all clapped when she put on his ring,*

*stuffed our faces with cake, waited in line  
to congratulate the bride. Damn goonies  
wrote me up for touching her veil—hell,*

*I just wanted to see her face. She ran  
under a hail of rice, waved as she left,  
waved and waved, long after the door hissed closed.*

**6**

Past Ragged Point—zebras. I count twelve grazing  
just off the road, stripes pale against the fog.

Other cars have stopped, couples and families  
leaning over the fence, snapping photos,

stretching to touch the one closest. We wedge  
in with the others, wondering who would bring

zebras from their vast rangelands  
to this windswept, fogbound corner of coast,

when the horses from childhood come to mind:  
Flicka, Silver, Trigger, Bucephalus,

all the Shetlands on cereal boxes,  
wild stallions I raced through backyard grass.

These days there's only one horse left, an angry  
Lipizzan pounding hard against his stall

when a body I want, can't have, walks past.  
I'm calm on the surface, but that Lipizzan

keeps on kicking, long after the moment  
has passed. Now he's a lion in tall grass

sniffing the air as I lean close to read  
the lines of their coats for some hint they know

he'll pounce, tear open their soft underbellies,  
chew their entrails in the warm savanna

dusk. Ears flicker. Muscles ripple. We're all  
leaning, breath mixing, grazing on zebras.

7

*When you leave they'll make us strip, shine flashlights  
up our asses, stick a gloved finger in  
to grope for pills and knives. You should see us  
leaning into the wall, our butts a row of . . .*

*of what, Uncle, you're the poet—puckered  
lips? Little kisses? A line of moonflowers,  
each with its own aroma? How 'bout stars,  
a whole constellation waiting for goonies*

*to finish? They check our hair, shove a flashlight  
(the same one) into our mouths, lift our balls.  
They know our tricks and we know what they don't—  
cons can swallow anything, crap it out*

*the next day. Still it's night I love the best,  
the other guys asleep. I touch my body  
like no other can, go first to forehead,  
lips, dimpled chin, along my neck, then stroke*

*chest to hip, like a woman would, but no  
woman fits these fantasies. I touch thighs,  
shins, calloused soles. This ain't about jack'n  
off (that's for later, quick, in shower steam);*

*it's me claiming my body back, the man,  
whatever he's become. I never touch  
my asshole, though. Goonies own it, like words,  
everything we do in daylight. They keep us*

*bent like that for an hour, write us up  
if someone farts or groans or hasn't stooped  
enough. Uncle, would you bend, spread your cheeks,  
let some guard stick a cold finger way in,*

*jiggle it a bit to see if you get  
hard, pull it out real quick? And what'd you call  
that row of butts glowing in flashlight beams—  
blooming anai? Yeah, but in whose garden?*

**8**

We made love, then left the motel, driving  
back toward the lives we'd left, those fictions we  
depend on. I kept thinking: was that warden

on his horse flat or round? I know the currents  
rushing through his body—the flow of death  
over the flow of life—are in us all,

but that's abstract. He loves his horse without  
irony or complication, loves a  
clear, simple order. He must be flat or else

he'd wonder at his own inhibited  
pity. Not that I would call the dogs off,  
set a fellow sufferer free, the image

too rich for that—a bloodied archetype,  
Actaeon, no doubt, in love with the dreaded  
goddess, his own hounds clawing out his eyes

to lay them at her naked feet. The woods  
were beautiful that day, so full of life  
amid the dying leaves and rotting ferns

his horse was chewing to fuel its blood. He must  
be flat or else he'd go from doubt to want,  
outrage to certainty, and feel at times,

in a deep embrace, another's current. Yet  
he must be round or else the flood within  
or the flood without would wash him away.

Thinking that way, the motor pinging low,  
I began to sympathize with the warden,  
had him lift the trustee from the ravine,

set him running again. His horse? I would've  
pushed her over, but that mare kept tugging  
at the ferns, getting rounder and rounder.

9

I'm breaking the rules, I know, by talking  
to you. So you can find me through the fog  
I write *zebra*. He raises his head as if  
to speak: what wisdom, you might ask, leaning  
over the page, lips moving, could come  
from a body that's a parody of  
convict, horse, and text, a sign for all three  
shifting according to strict laws? I've seen  
Egyptians with eyes like his, ebony  
set in darker rings, detached from the moment,  
like that elevator operator in Cairo  
who held the door open and beckoned me  
in with a quick, unexpected, *Thank you*.

Since I've stepped into that infinity  
of desire between us, let me confess  
I love you, oh, I want you. I would enter  
your spinning mind, impose on your attention  
the figure you've always wanted: the object  
itself, without *it*, without *self*. I'd be  
*You* in an instant, if you'd let me  
and even if you wouldn't. Always shifting,  
never touching, in the prison-house  
of language we're all innocent. . . .

But, hey, you  
stopped reading. Bored? Confused? Or did your body  
feel a message, so you went to relieve  
yourself of that significance? Pity.  
When you left, the zebra talked up a storm,  
let us ride him, took pictures of us  
with our own cameras, heard you coming so  
went back to silence. Focusing again,  
ignore the golden stream arcing toward  
his feet, steam mixing with fog. It's his lips  
I want you to see. They're moving. They're saying,

*Thank you.*

**10**

*Words? Hell. They're all so meaningless. There was  
that three-holer in a Motel 6 in  
Yuba City. She touched me when she talked,*

*liked my chin. So I switched off the lights, did  
what comes natural. Next I knew she was  
tied to the bed, naked, not breathing. Body*

*did it. Went to work with hips and tongue. Felt  
soothed after. I helped her with her torn blouse,  
found her panties under the bed. . . . I'm innocent.*

*We all are. Us drugstore robbers, fire-  
starters, public poisoners, and loud-mouthed  
pimps. The truth be known, you'd be here with us.*

*Both of you. No rays detect your guilt,  
nor count the ways you done dirt. Now I've gone  
and scared you. Damn. Do you like the mural?*

*Did it myself. I know, the sun's too big,  
waves all off, no perspective to speak of;  
still, a place I'd love to be. No words there,*

*no cons, their ten thousand stories. I never  
finished mine: Whoever locked the door did it  
from inside, easy to step out into*

*the August night. Junebugs banging a globe.  
Old Colusa Road. Then sirens. Flashing  
lights, my face slammed to the dirt by cops*

*cuffing me. So, Uncle, tell me, am I  
some animal, caged to reflect on guilt?  
Fuckin' words, that's all. Mine against all theirs.*

**11**

The highway lines rush past. What we desire  
we leave behind. I see the fading light  
and gauge my feelings for this woman sleeping  
beside me, stroke her hair and point the car  
away from maximum security.

The motor's hum is not my heart, nor speed,  
nor temperature. I smell the ocean air  
rushing into this inland valley: man  
and woman and such a gap between us  
we'll never fill it, though our passion tries.

We both laughed at the sign—*Absolutely  
no prisoners allowed inside the children's  
sandbox*. I watched a con's young daughter tamp  
elaborate walls around a castle, saw  
her frightened eyes when she looked toward me.

If I were up for life, would Patty hide  
a blade inside the sand, or carve a message  
beyond that small square window where  
conscience still comes to view the ones it loves,  
*Help me, before this man tears me apart?*



And if I touch her cheek, will she awake  
and smell the air and see the drifting fog,  
and understand the highway's lines are here  
to tell us when to pass and where to merge?

**12**

In last night's dream the cons were women dressed  
as zebras, kissing me and tearing me  
apart. I was the groom, the sacrifice,  
my head impaled and planted in the sand,  
singing out my *O* with a country twang.

Jerusalem the Bride. I saw her on  
TV dressed in a gown of snow, the news:  
six old men crushed when a coffee house roof  
caved in, their hookahs still in their mouths—  
a tragedy you have to sing about.

So, *O*, I cry, as if that vowel were all  
I need to get us through the fog, the road's  
dips and curves foretold by signs we can't see  
as we inch along at fifteen thousand  
explosions per second, and below us  
the Pacific's unrelenting roar—*O*,

I'm a liar without a lyre, blinded  
by my own headlights, looking deep into  
your eyes, Dear Reader, for a pocket  
of clarity, a reason to keep going,  
at least a sign—just one—for the next town:

*The Best American Poetry, 2009* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2009, 239 pp, \$35 hardbound, \$16 paper). Guest Editor **David Wagoner**, Series Editor **David Lehman**.

In reviewing a collection such as this, I try to heed three personal mandates. I wish first to draw attention to poems or even parts of poems that move me emotionally and intellectually, that make me feel, as Emily Dickinson suggested, “barefoot all over,” so touched by the poem that I experience life and language freshly for having read it.

The opening lines of Bruce Bond’s “Ringtone” do just that:

As they loaded the dead onto the gurneys  
to wheel them from the university halls,  
who could have predicted the startled chirping  
in those pockets, the invisible bells  
and tiny metal music of the phones,  
in each the cheer of a voiceless song.

To envision this moment with its “voiceless song” seems to me a remarkable act of the imagination. Bond recreates the atmosphere of the grim killings at Virginia Tech, invents or describes a particular instant during that day, laces it with bitter irony concerning our reliance on electronic communication, even introduces a bit of gallows humor, without ever undermining the serious nature of the scene he depicts.

The note Bond strikes rings throughout the most recent volume in the Best Poems series, leading me to look, as my second mandate, for the editors’ aesthetic. What do David Lehman and David Wagoner identify as characteristic of poetry in the United States at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century? And third, more generally, while recognizing the specific vision of these editors, I wish to explore what their selection shows about our nation. Will they provide a reflection, however fragmented, of our national character at this moment of its history?

One great service David Lehman has provided as series editor involves precisely the opportunity to regard the state of our poetry and our culture during the past twenty-three years. The continuity of his role, combined with the changing of the guard of annual editors, has guaranteed both consistency and variation

as the volumes swung between the antipodes of, say, Harold Bloom and Lyn Hejinian.

In the opening paragraph of this year's foreword Lehman discusses Shelley's portrait of the poet as "a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude." I would continue, if poets are "unacknowledged legislators of the world," as Shelley also claimed, then let us investigate what laws we enacted in the previous year. On the whole, I would argue, our recent legislation assumes an elegiac tone, a dark and voiceless song without much cheer.

Perhaps it's personal. Loss feeds the imagination. Marion Stocking's death this past spring led Lee Sharkey and me to craft our most recent issue as an elegy for our friend, mentor, and predecessor on the journal. But I don't think that's the whole story. Already last year we had noticed a tone of deep resignation, perhaps even tragic acceptance, among what we regarded as the strongest poems we had recently received. We came to identify the tone as a fatalism connected with the Bush era, a sense of deep frustration and near despair. The writing in this volume of *Best Poems*, produced during roughly the same period, shares that vision. If Bruce Bond sets the key, Jim Harrison strikes the chord in "Sunday Discordancies": "I'm making notes / for a novel called *The End of Man, and Not Incidentally, / Women and Children*, a fable for our low-living time."

In this volume, however, problems strangely surface most often in another guise, "voiceless," not connected exclusively with the human beings we might expect to speak. Lance Larsen identifies the dominant theme in "Why do you keep putting animals in your poems?" Jude Nutter explores it in "The Insect Collector's Demise":

imagine what happens  
to a child in that moment

when the matte-black pin, thin as a horse hair,  
breaches a cricket's lacquered façade and passes  
smoothly, and without resistance, through

the body beneath.

. . .

What hubris  
to think the insects loved their lives

less than I loved mine. Each one  
a verb snatched from the world's mouth.

The poem ends with a clear image implying the parasitic character of humanity and a statement concerning the consequence of such behavior:

the egg

of the ichneumon, that persuasive burglar, lies  
next to the egg of the wood wasp.  
What the world gives, the world

then takes away.

Time and again in this volume a poet approaches human failings through ecological loss. Mary Oliver rues the death of a fox. Sarah Lindsay urges us to "Tell the Bees" of "the gap between their ignorance and our grief." P. Hurshell finds "a dead bluebird on our deck." Maud Kelly tells us of cows with "holes in the sides." In "The Silence of the Mine Canaries" W. S. Merwin asks, "who knows how long now since they have been seen."

Three poems investigate this elegiac mood through a biblical text. Barbara Goldberg takes her title "The Fullness Thereof" from Psalm 24. In three verse paragraphs she moves from the creation ("In the beginning a riot of color, burnt umber, magenta, / madder red") across the Euphrates to Virginia where "we numbered the trout and catfish," "blazed trails in the forest and left distinguishing marks" as "we cleared the path to today." The poem moves on to a recognition that "it's hard to think of home without the hawthorn and the scat of deer and mole," a grieving celebration that we "feel at one yet fully other in this diverse dominion."

K. A. Hays chooses Joshua 23:14 as her text. In her marvelous "Early Creatures" (*BPJ*, Spring 2009), she calls herself a "doubtful apostle"; here she compares us to turtles "gliding down to the profound // mud to wag in for a fine six months / of anti-meditation," planning to survive "as the earth above wasted and

ture” by “being nearly dead,” letting the lungs “through that din, be still.”

In “The Book of Steve” Catherine Carter suggests another alternative. In a poem that recalls for me Nicholas Biel’s “Adam” (*BPJ*, Winter 1959/60), a hip dude Steve and his best boy Adam name the animals until Yahweh apparently listens to Rush Limbaugh and exiles Steve to “somewhere among the leaves of Western Eden,” providing Steve with a “helpmeet . . . who was not fruitful, / who did not multiply, who had no dominion over the earth.”

These poems, and many others in the volume, echo in their deep concern for those existing on the earth—animal, vegetable, and even mineral—the elegiac question Antonio Machado asks himself, in Robert Bly’s translation: “What have you done with the garden that was entrusted to you?”

Despite this leitmotif, the tone of the volume does not remain exclusively elegiac; occasionally it reflects the astonishing optimism that surged through many parts of the country last November 4. If the first step toward reconsidering our relationship to the “fullness of the earth” involves recognizing and bemoaning how we have abused it, more steps lie ahead. Phillis Levin hints of a sassy crow “pecking for what is new.” Tina Kelley asserts a need “to crow, to fly, to gild and gnaw. . . . // Play and improvise. To last.” Margaret Gibson, in “Black Snake,” works in a similar mode, depicting a snake and her response to it, recalling D. H. Lawrence’s need to “expiate . . . a pettiness.” She then moves to an image of the ouroboros that creates a “coil of song . . . from the deepest trance of its body,” freeing her to identify and sing “the song I’d inscribe on stone, on ground, on grass.”

■

In choosing poems that express this deep concern for life on earth, David Wagoner may have inadvertently, and unduly, restricted the range of his selection. In her annual reviews of this series Marion Stocking often observed the breadth within individual volumes, whether Lyn Hejinian’s commitment to the experimental tradition or Charles Wright’s to work that is “easily accessible.” Here I discover relatively little variation of theme or tone or technique, though of course exceptions rule. I find little

explicit treatment of history and few historical settings, little experimental work, few poems that manipulate page space, a paucity of extreme wordplay, few linguistic or syntactic nonsequiturs. Notable exceptions include Mark Bibbins's "Concerning the Land to the South of Our Neighbors to the North" and Kevin Prufer's "On Mercy," with its gorgeous clusters of vowels and consonants: "But the sun went on with its golden rays / like a zealous child // and the camera-eyed bees jittered mercifully / in the distant branches."

Compared to past volumes, formal variety seems minimal. Although much language sparkles in sound and rhythm, the format remains almost always either verse paragraphs of indeterminate length or stanzas without meter, and almost never with rhyme. Whereas last year Marion Stocking could praise the range of forms, here I find one regular sonnet, one sort-of sonnet, one sort-of ghazal, one sestina, no villanelles, pantoums, or even haiku. Only J. D. McClatchy in "Lingering Doubts" uses short rhymed forms. If the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets or Lyn Hejinian or younger writers who explore forcing open the language don't enter this volume, neither do representative voices from the New Formalism: no Gjertrud Schnackenberg, no Timothy Steele.

The most unusual poem Wagoner includes is the longest: Craig Morgan Teicher's "Ultimately Justice Directs Them." In twenty-four sections, two of which contain no words, the poet explores the invasion of America by Americans who wish to "break / everything down / to basics" because "America // has become too frumpy / for its pants" and (stealing Richard Nixon's campaign slogan) "Now more than ever. . . . // The soldiers are here. . . . // it is / already done"—these last three snippets presenting all of sections 12 and 15, welded quickly to most of section 24.

Other absences strike me as well. Relatively few poems notice other artists, rely substantially on mythology, mention other countries or regions of the world, include scientific references, or even demonstrate a sense of humor. After I had typed those phrases I decided I'd better check myself. So I went back through all the texts of all the poems, quickly to be sure, and will now report: Some historical poets do creep on stage for cameo appearances—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Wyatt, Milton, Shelley,

Keats, and Hopkins get one mention each. I found two specific references to twentieth-century poets (Attila József and Derek Walcott); one to a composer (Mendelssohn, if you're curious); one to any visual artist (Agnes Martin); three to Freud; none to a scientist; three to any South American place, person, or problem. None to Africa. Altogether only seven poems deal more than fleetingly with an international setting or subject. Among American poets the isolationist impulse continues to thrive.

Perhaps the intensity of their frustration and fatalism has led our poets to this impulse, to voicing such restricted measures. Two poems in this volume suggest both the limitations of this view and some means for transcending it. In "The Great American Poem," Billy Collins contributes one. Ordinarily I'm not a fan of his ironic dismissal of contemporary detritus in the United States. The title of this poem doesn't promise more than the usual. As it begins we're on familiar Collins turf:

If this were a novel,  
it would begin with a character,  
a man alone on a southbound train  
or a young girl on a swing by a farmhouse.

The first turn in the poem, predicted by the title, moves to what might become a glib metapoetic observation:

But this is a poem, not a novel,  
and the only characters here are you and I,  
alone in an imaginary room  
which will disappear after a few more lines. . . .

But then Collins issues what I would call a welcome reconsideration of much of his work, and goes on to articulate a position I would let stand as emblematic of the elegiac poems in the volume:

We have something better than all this turbulence  
lurching toward some ruinous conclusion.  
I mean the sound that we will hear  
as soon as I stop writing and put down this pen.

I once heard someone compare it  
to the sound of crickets in a field of wheat  
or, more faintly, just the wind  
over that field stirring things that we will never see.

Betsy Sholl's "Gravity and Grace" seems at first glance to have little to do with the thread I've been following. It contains no elegiac commentary on the natural history of the United States, focusing instead on a European woman author. Yet beneath the reminiscence of Simone Weil, which holds power and importance in its own right, lie similar concerns. As she compares the "gravity" of Weil's writing and life with "those three boys on the next bench / blowing up balloons. . . . // all high-fives / and laughter," Sholl questions and laments our individual and collective status "if everything we do ends up empty." By the conclusion, however, paying tribute to Weil's intelligence, discipline, courage, and self-sacrifice, the poet implicitly urges movement beyond elegy, beyond consolation, to a vision of activism that may enable us, unlike Weil, to survive in a new relationship to the world around us:

*Love is  
not consolation, you wrote, it is light,  
meaning that fierce headlamp of attention  
which leaves the self in shadow and trains*

*its high beam on that void where prisoners  
huddle under gravity's dark weight,  
and grace, if it comes, comes in secret,  
to those struck dumb, trembling in the glare.*

By voicing these concerns but moving beyond our borders, Sholl provides a valuable extension of American poetry's sometimes parochial vision. At times, as in this collection, we may focus for a period mostly on domestic matters, but we can't remain at home for long, for Goliaths lurk outside who may be moved by the legislation our poets enact. Betsy Sholl's poem, as well as many others here, offers ample testimony of a significant and pervasive atmosphere, and ample reason to track it through the developing poetry of the twenty-first century. Along with the two Davids, Wagoner and Lehman, we need to slingshot stones against the giants that threaten us.