

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 63 Nº2
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Mary Greene, design

David Mondedeu, "Stella in Guimarães," photograph, 2008

BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO AWARD
THE TWENTIETH ANNUAL
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$4000

TO
ELIZABETH T. GRAY, JR.
FOR HER POEM "ALBANIA"
IN THE WINTER 2011/2012 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
AND FORMER WALSH PRIZE WINNERS
MARGARET AHO, KARL ELDER,
JESSICA GOODFELLOW, MARY MOLINARY,
LUCIA PERILLO, GLORI SIMMONS,
ONNA SOLOMON, AND CHARLES WYATT.

BRIAN SNEEDEN

The Road

—*after Cavafy*

The latest on the road from nowhere is your going
and coming out the end of it, somewhere near Ithaka.

Cavafy said, do not seek riches in Ithaka, for once
you get there, Ithaka will only be Ithaka, and you
will be the man who went on the road to Ithaka,
who survived his own desire for Ithaka and found himself
at the other end of desire, still alive, somehow,
and capable of making the little fog breaths.

On the road, I wanted Ithaka and its Cyclops. I wanted,
somehow, to be defeated by the road. Instead I am the road
defeating the Cyclops and Ithaka, defeating most noble
desire itself. Alone with this wanting nothing but the road.

JENNIFER BOYDEN

The Person with the Loupe

One of us asked what we could expect
from whatever might come next, but the person
with the loupe wasn't there, so we walked the sidewalks
home, swept the stairs of our entries,
and waited. Later, someone thought to see
whether a building was still standing,
and while we nearly agreed it was,
the person with the loupe was needed to confirm—
we could not be accurate to the same degree
as the person with the loupe—how much the wind
had eroded the building, the wear
from pigeons' feet, whether the brick
could stand up to whatever time was left.
We should ask the person with the loupe.
The person with the loupe is always invited.
The person with the loupe squints
from so much looking through.
The person with the loupe prefers stillness in order
to achieve accuracy. This makes it difficult
to keep up on things. The person with the loupe
is still working on last year, says
*Each calendar day has a square the size
of all the others.* But the days, we recall,
seemed otherwise. Some shifted long while others
shadowed fast. *Nevertheless,* says the person with the loupe.
Therefore, we answer back. The person
with the loupe gets the front seat. And is looking at
something we cannot see from here. We are very far
away. We have always been very far away.

PHILIP BROOKS

Lighthouse

The keeper's a liar.
He tells me:
"Steer away!"
Next I find
he himself hasn't
steered away.
He's steered *ho*.
Or whatever he's likely to call it
being that he's
a counterfeit seaman.
It's his wife
who draws
all the ships.
Dazzling as a sunflower,
she thinks it's funny
to shut off the light
at the worst moments.
He lets her.
Thus, all the sinking and giggling.
I ask him why he lets her.
He shrugs,
then strikes a match and bids me
stare into the flame
until it burns
his thumb and finger.
Smoke wisps upward.
"See?" he demands.

JOHN A. NIEVES

Labwork

We can excuse the apprehension
over places with names
like Reactor Field, can push

back against tales of mutant
neon squirrels, but a horse—
a perfect horse—no, we fall

down here. One of the workers
tells me it was buried in '72.
Four decades in the ground

and it looks like it could trot
over and lick my hand. Perhaps
this has nothing to do with the radio-

activity used at this test facility.
Perhaps this was merely a horse
saint—some whinnying martyr.

That makes it a relic. That makes
this holy ground. But more likely
something smaller than the microbes

that eat the dead is eating the microbes
that eat the dead. One decay in the way
of another. I wonder if these suits

provide enough distance, or if we,
too, are becoming permanent. Toy
people to ride this toy steed.

The order is given to bury
it again. Maybe this is taxidermy.
Maybe we're already the museum.

MONIKA ZOBEL

The Forest Gives You a Necklace of Hands

—*after Celan*

Her hair at midnight shines
like the butcher's block. Margarete
wipes the light from her forehead.

Who beheaded the century?
Windows invite
the stars for supper.

War situates the split tongue
in the cellar. Margarete tucks half
into her apron, the other—still

breathing—flaps on the kitchen floor.
The horrors of metamorphosis—carry
something, carry meaning. Margarete

carries her boulder lips like a goddess.
And the knife, like exile, leaves
a gash in the psalm of bread.

MONIKA ZOBEL

Body Down

Tonight we are cigarette, bullet
cheeks. A house stocked with beans,

babies. Dried leaves motorcycle
in our lungs. Tongue-told I am

your dog of noise. The forest knows:
when in god, grow ash.

But we grow caterpillars in the head,
smoke a mouth full of life and hot

waiting. We are the bread
and the flour. In this metal house

we ripen, ripen. The first god
was the first human down.

MELISSA BARRETT

Glimpsing Wrangel from the Pack

*I might better keep these pages unwritten, leaving a blank properly
to represent the utter blank of this Arctic Expedition.*

—George W. DeLong, 1879

Hail mauling the deck. *Jeannette* a clutch
of broken notes pitched

against a sky, lit by ice.

By aurora red so sinister, the whole
ship wrapped in its gauze,

a city on fire.

We were prism-led before the pack.
Now our days are dull. Dull

and bludgeoning, the snow

robing every spar and rope, snow
neither one thing nor the other.

Jail gray. Gales broiling.

We tilt northwest, past Wrangel.
The top of the world

scalped—razor cut

and some mornings extravagantly clear.
We move in every direction

we never meant to.

So clear, my voice booms.
So clear, why don't you hear me.

MELISSA BARRETT

The Sears, 1973

Repose of fog, static wreathing leaden
blocks of downtown, the skyline dribbles
halfway up a husky-necked corvine tank:
black onyx, glass slats pierce the grisaille
of Chicago, midmorning.

Months beyond the topping out, beyond
Watergate and black hole theory, the city
demurs, still raises its eyes for the source
of such shadow: entire avenues knuckle
under glacial chill,

midtown walks now more terse, more
crouched. The American Dream staked
this titan—one hundred ten stories
staggering after the screech in sales, the
blurt into heaven

so clouds divide: dirk of ash spotted with
rhinestone sweat. All this from catalogs
of saddles and wallpaper swatches, from
three years of railing a hole wide as a grave-
yard (and as dug up)

into South Wacker. Till one tar stalk finally
distends: Graham's prediction of the '80s,
the '90s, etc.—the glossed hearse blacker
than gravity, spate of steel and aluminum
skin that rises with

the confidence of the elected, oil-slicked
javelin ramming right into heaven as if only
to announce the vacancy. More wind
from Chicago, we hear New Yorkers spit,
and Porkopolites roll

their eyes, pour every blue chip onto their
Reds. The workers the worst: declaring
offices cold, oppressive, and the lobby
a curdling mire. True, the wind would slice
windows at their centers,

and pedestrians were lost in the pother
of a fallen girder. Beyond a certain floor
you can see the toilet water tremor, hear
the coffee slosh. Only a few brownbaggers
dot the nine-barreled

base at lunch, but scores of tourists pad in,
cameras bumping their chests like second hearts.
It's their twenty minutes on deck (guessing at
Michigan, waving to an uncle in Lansing)
that make the renovations

worth it, the ghosted lower levels okay.
So Illinois floods with coruscating excess.
So we bow our heads under the wave
of it, thinking excess to be inaccessible,
but of course it is—

That's capitalism: records always broken,
trophies gleaming and rusting almost at once;
this record's wraith fluting along the highest
fused beam, tapping along to the antennal
ruby blink.

ROY SCRANTON

If I Could Move My Hands

If I could move my hands and snap—
 all the Marx, all the cell phone towers
 built to look like trees,
 all the Charons and rivers of dead.

The minotaur roams the island
 hunting Ariadne.

There's a place upstate
we walked in August fog,
across slopes scarred with red men,
spartan and metal, like transformers.

She sees what she wants, in clouds,
financial markets, and press releases,
she sees the eye of heaven in a one.
 And me, I rode full tilt.

If I could move my hands and bless—
 all the Heraclitus, all the slow shifts
of rose across the blue UN, all the
 Persephones and Hermes and Thothes.

Fat chance, with this phone.

But still here's something:
the rust man at 23rd St.
has all this paperwork to get through.
Towers slide into water, tessellating black;
 satellites burn the street.

Whatever it takes to kill
the mechanical bull.

PATRICK WHITFILL

For Plainview, TX: A Double Take

Take 1

Dirt sleeves skinned from the drought and June
roared road print tracks across the wine
flush scoring up the sky. Downfield, cattle fume
toward feed. Horseflies posted on barbed-wire line
zero over ditches. What doesn't jump, limps.
Leaving them wilted and itching in their gold,
the evening haze dries wheat tops to cramps
by the row. Every sweet girl's married, and the old
highschoolers roam lots where nothing clean
happens. Now one turns and says *Just because
there's no one chasing us down doesn't mean
we'll ever get away*. There's always loss
here, where you'll never pat the vest pocket
of your yellow jacket for a match and strike out.

Take 2

Moms, dirt fisted, clutch their faith. The steeple
shades grassy-kneed pastors. Our mud and banks,
our children, crumble like tipsy hymns. Still,
the cornbread, the bulls, the dead won't collapse.
Schoolkids skull the geese; farmhands, the lamb.
Burned prairies gristle in the distance, seeds
our neighbor's poverty boasts. Pellets,
owl to mouse and bone, have all gone hearse bait.
Because, downfield, the old girl and her drought-
cattle dusted the road where haze married
the lots, loss sleeves in the skinned-cork skywilt.
A match strikes out of line and dies barbed.
Just when no one's pointing you out,
you pocket up. You'll never get to love this town.

PATRICK WHITFILL
Song for the Rodeo

Horse flanks jack like pistons, coal-hard,
shock-strutting, swaybacked on both sides. Shot
in the parts that count, the daisy flare of pickups
rodeo-park themselves in the field the Methodist
church owns and rents out. The last
call's called twice a night. Straw mops the blood.

We never hesitate to shed our blood,
to sell out to the dust's cough. Men of the hard
line. Men who spin themselves in the last
lunge of a bull and don't catch, who shoot
over horns until every one of God's
good graces descends in a blaze of Ford

high beams and fog lamps, blaring like semis
the interstate shoves up the gray stretch of blood-
flow toward home. Before the jump, the spirit
moving underneath and inside that broken, hard-
ass shell treats the beast the sweetest. Shit,
go deep enough and everyone has the same last

thought tripping off the cliff before that last,
good crash of the soul: it's not the ride,
the prize or the glory, but the buzz in the chute,
when it's just us and the rush of blood-
lust that comes from wrangling a beast so hard
and pure it feels like you're dry-humping God.

We stand off while they snore like demons,
white-lipped and frothing, and pray the last
thing we see on earth won't be hoofed or hard.
We pray we'll see pillows we've cheeked and ride
a good woman in noon hay. Our blood
spills out like water from a pastor's dunk-chute.

Give us the next bronco. Give us the shot
and the question of blood. Some say they see Jesus
and rarely lie. Puddles where bull piss and blood
mingle spell out our fortunes in drools. *Outlast*,
we whisper over boilermakers. Outlast the ride
and the sun's ass over the cattle, and the hard-

PATRICK WHITFILL

pan rising like Lazarus, like shoots of sorghum stock,
like the kicks that last until the trail bleeds home.
Then we break off hard. Then we can't ride back.

PATRICK WHITFILL

Curry

—for Sheldon

We shared an after-dinner mint, and if
we only shared it—so that I took half
and you placed underneath your tongue's moist lift
the other—and we sat there, muted, stiff
and sated in the kind of pleasure that's a pleasure
because it's sticky and simple, then to
say I shared a dinner mint with you
would wrap up the whole experience together
quite nicely. What that would miss, though,
is how the plastic crinkled, how the crumbs
stuck to the callus on your thumb became
the crumbs my tongue's tip sizzled with. And, no,
we didn't kiss, or even move our palms
so they touched, but left, and quietly walked home.

D. GILSON

For the Woman I Didn't Marry, on the Day of Her Wedding

Not everything without order is unruly.
You've let your hair become a wild land
left to what will be, the Missouri wind
in June, thunderstorm season. Kimberly,
when we drove to the coast of Mississippi
in your Toyota eating red licorice, I planned
to give you my mother's ring. I resigned
myself to root in your earth like an oak tree.

Who knows what knowledge was laid bare
by those muddy waters. I sleep with men.
You knew, but waited—such patience!—
and I thank you. That yellowed night, the air
shifted course. Imminent storms settled in,
covered us in hail, froze a part of us in ice.

D. GILSON

Sewing Lesson

Above me, my mother sews a blue dress
for Brad, the only drag queen in our town.
She's bent before her work as I caress

the yards of silk charmeuse gathered round
her feet. The ceiling fan whirs, and sequins—
silver, chartreuse—fly about us, flutter down,

stick in my curly hair. Mother tousles them
free, and quick, begins to sew again.

JESSE FERGUSON

Whose Song Preceded Silence

No longer a battered panache above snow . . .

It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism

Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .

—Wallace Stevens, "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself"

At the earliest minute of morning,
the jury still out on the toehold of dawn,
I sat banqueting with high school friends,
faces playing musical chairs
in a silent hall. Faces clear as watermarks
blooming in basement-boxed photographs, as though
their familiar outlines had stepped into peripheral vision
and taken a seat. I drew closer to their table, sat drawing blanks
as the sun with its foot in the door of my window,
no longer a battered panache above snow,

stepped lightly on the crust of what I knew
could not be, as my cousin and I had stepped on
untrodden wastes of white fields, trying to leave
no trace, testing if the world would bear our weight.
Next, my cousin (my dead cousin, Cory) knocked on the door
of that peopled hall, seemingly unaware he'd died.
Stepped in and dropped his scuffed guitar case
on the featureless floor, turning his thumb-smudge
of a face to mine. But just then, daybreak's first beak snapped wide
(it would have been outside,

but felt closer) and through a draft-crack that scrawny cry,
like a bird's, found the ear not pressed to the pillow
and entering that open door nearly slammed another
on my more-than-dreamed cousin
who was just then showing us his open palms, his clean shirt.
Determined to stay, I ate on, and before we'd risen
he rose and unsnapped his case, removing
a steel slide guitar that flashed bright as glare from hoods
of oncoming traffic, bright as castings from the ego's prism.
It was not from the vast ventriloquism

of memory that his hands pumped music
to flood the far corners of the steadily emptying hall.
It was not from the selfish mix tapes of grief
that he stole the inspiration animating his homemade
bottleneck slide, a dove in flight
above snares of taut steel strings. Slowly he played
but one song: a bluegrass arrangement that made
a temple of the empty hall and wake-proof relics
of his pasty hands, leaving me something to take away
of sleep's faded papier-mâché.

CHANA BLOCH

Aperture

—*to Benjamin and Jonathan*

1

My father stirring sugar in a glass of tea
and I at his bedside, asking
little questions that fit inside
the big ones I didn't dare ask:
he might have figured out he was dying.

2

I'm dying. Not to worry: not any time soon,
I hope. But just so the two of you know.

Should I burn the journals?

3

Such a quiet man, my father.
As a child I learned to read
the blanks between the words.
More blanks than words.

What was he taking with him
into his death?
I sat there day after day translating
his unquiet eyes.

4

What a narrow aperture
between parent and child,
cramped as a mail slot.

It's a wonder anything gets through.

5

My father woke from agitated sleep.
Cossacks slashing and burning again,
banging at the door.
In the terrified silence of the hospital room
I heard him crying for his mother.

6

I saved a picture one of you made at six:
black hair bristling, the face bright green,
legs planted apart like stanchions,
and what a belly! A fiery furnace.
“That’s what you look like when you’re angry.”

You were right about that fire.
I burned a lot of things in secret.

7

But night after night, I recorded
the unabridged
version of the day,
black ink on blue-lined paper.

8

I wanted to save the two of you
from the misery that filled our house.
Even smoke-blind,
I saw your serious faces asking.
It was you who saved me.

Would it help you
to know the scope of my confusions?
The journals are full of secrets
but maybe you know them without my telling.

The key to the safe is under the sugar bowl.

LEANNA PETRONELLA

One Year Later

This is a mountain made of hands.

My hands, my father's hands, my sister's hands.

We keep placing one on top of another and we are building something
that loses its base and is simply grief
rising into time.

SIMON PERCHIK

[Windswept, this radio]

Windswept, this radio
broken open with its stations
one on top the other

though what you hear
is its dust, bleeding
the way this rag, half doll

half straw, half dirt
scrapes till a darkness
oozes from your fingertips

bent over, garbled—
she can't tell it's you
from far away, listening for her.

MARK WAGENAAR

Riddle

For the particle of dark matter whistling through you right now,
the moon hides the same emptiness as your bones. It leaves you
without a sound, the way the upside-down five-towered silhouette
of St. Charles' church disappears from the reflecting pool. Two men
row out on another pool

beneath the earth, beneath the neutrino detector, a sea mine the
size of a building: a metal cage a thousand times larger than the
one that held the heart of St. Lawrence.

Felt the breath go out of the dead, we say, when a piano variation
in blue goes through us. Felt the wind go out of the stars. What
would we call something that touches what we touch?

G. C. WALDREP

The Wilder Shores of Love

—after Cy Twombly

Sometimes a plan, sometimes
a tender star bursts
from the terrible bedding
night has left cascading all about
the rugged surface of Greek
myth. You will never be
lonely again, sighs the polis
of the spectrum, disembarking
from the little ships
the autumn leaves level
into history's maw. I can't
shop in this blue
supermarket, you complained,
hugging yourself a little
more tightly. And it was true:
one bird, then two—
robins, maybe—adrift
on the glass precipice the sea
was then making
out of all our durable goods.
It felt like a giant
radio, you said, ascending
and descending.
We were quiet, then, for a time.
I wanted to walk there,
but both of us had our hands
full: strontium, iridium,
little fossil patterns
in the anthracite, reciting Keats.

ANDREW GRACE

[How to give yourself an exorcism]

How to give yourself an exorcism:
walk into a house that isn't yours
in the middle of the night and take in
that warm accrual of scents—

bread, baby powder, fire, wet cotton—
but don't touch a thing. As you climb
the steps, avoiding boards that might squeal,
tell yourself you are just there to learn

what it is to live here, not to disturb
the sleeping bodies. As you move
your hand toward a doorknob, try
to tell if the tremor you feel as you grasp it

comes from your own loneliness
or is a devil donning your skin like regalia
as he licks along your nerves
and whispers *what's next?*

ANDREW GRACE

[No, I didn't touch them. Need]

No, I didn't touch them. Need
is murder on the veins—I feel weak
like grease is coursing through me.
I saw the woman roll over in her bed,

clumsily, not awake, and it was so private,
so unconscious, that I flinched
and slipped back to the barn. Now
I am sick in the rotted mortar of this horse stall.

But to have been up the narrow steps,
to have seen her hair, matted and moonlit. . . .
The longer I lie here, as a new storm routs
the rasping acres of dry leaves,

as sluggish thunder opens its North throat
and spotty rain erects its ghosts,
the more I feel I am getting,
like a fever, my second wind.

JEFF P. JONES
These Buildings

1

This building is frail. Does it bear saying
that it has something of me in it?

Years ago I stepped off a train without my friend.
I'd thought she was behind me but, looking back,
saw her in the side corridor on her knees, hands at her throat,
red face draining to blue. It was a foreign country
and the train's next stop was another city.
I ran alongside until the platform ended, then just stood there,
watching the distance between us grow.

There's a saying in an obscure language,
seven words whose meaning has never
been fully translated because the sense
derives from the gaps between the words,
chasms plummeting with regret that life
can only ever contain itself.

2

I wish I could live again. Not this life,
no, but life itself bears repeating.

Imagine these granite blocks standing lonely
and loyally in the night, recalling the cinch of belts,
the acts of levitation that lifted them to their places,
the hands and polishing tools that touched them
with so much care. They wait in the dark for day to come.
On the walls beside the bank of elevators perch the corporate symbols
in their brushed steel splendor, as alive and silent as owls.

3

She'll be from Pennsylvania. We'll meet in Bruges or Brussels,
American backpackers forming a fast friendship around what they
call brutal honesty. There'll be no irresistible physical attraction, just
that fervent spark of connectivity that leads to endless conversation.
Since we'll both be headed toward the same city we'll have decided to
catch the train together. She'll hoist her backpack, smile, say "Shall
we?"—and step up into the passenger car. I'll follow. We'll have yet to
exchange information. I'll know only her first name . . .

which reminds me of a sociology experiment done somewhere in California. A happily married man, as they say, well known in his small town, agreed to be seen walking hand in hand each day for a week with a woman who wasn't his wife. The social scientists wanted to test the community's tolerance for an open display of infidelity. The parameters were strict: three walks per day at fifteen minutes each. The man's wife was in full cooperation; in fact, she was the lead sociologist who'd designed the study. In order to clear everything up, a full disclosure would be run in the local newspaper at the end of the experiment. The hand-holding couple fell in love, of course. The restrictions placed on their meetings led to an irresistible fusion of anticipation and intimacy. On the third walk of their third day together the man professed his love. On the fourth day the team of sociologists were in their usual places on the walking route, cameras and recorders ready to capture the townspeople's responses. The couple failed to appear and never were seen again . . .

which, finally, makes me wonder what you think of them, these buildings. Do you ever imagine them at night? The elevator cars silent and still, suspended high in their shafts from cables no bigger than wrists, each link as breakable as a finger hooked inside a belt loop. Their I-beams wedded with bolts slid into place long ago, their stones sated lovers resting atop each other, their windows framed tears. Trains climbing toward clouds, bubbles closeting sacred spaces, fingers reaching through concrete—these buildings, fleeting as the grass of the field and as frail.

RICARDO PAU-LLOSA

Bethany Man

From afar it looks like the bus is stranded
by a field, the tourists mulling about with cameras

and binoculars, waiting for the replacement bus
to take them into town. But actually this is

the place they want to be, empty field only
to empty minds. They gather in stillness

and listen for a special birdsong, or the creak
of a cricket, and train their lenses on where

they think it came from, the wind stirring up
fuzzy seeds from weeds that spring here,

combing then uncombing sprigs
and whipping blooms, a moth cartwheeling

irreparably in the jostle, falling
to waiting beetles, lizards, and ants.

They too are on the watch for what feeds them.
They too do not believe in escape.

EAMON GRENNAN

At the End (31/12/07)

Like snow in early spring though it's only New Year's Eve the snow
this morning after shoveling became the wet dark of street and driveway
as well as snow-buds living like blossoms on our weeping beech
whose bare branches quicken in that cold hold while this ghastrlight
scarifies the void-stretched limbs of the great plane tree and jays and
sparrows keep chattering and it's apt that this last day (of a year with its
usual storm-clouds and blood-mist and gust after sweeping gust
of thunderlight) should show on the *Times*' front page a picture
of the latest face to be made a thing of the past as Pakistan and its
rattled nonplussed neighbours make the sign of fire and we sign off
as if it could burn anything away as if there could be (given even this
mild blue-and-white day) any true new beginning in the world we've made
and each day walk about as on our native ground expecting everything.

STEVE WILSON

Coumeenole Beach / Cancer Journal 6

—*Slea Head Grotto, Ireland, August 2010*

From hurt the heart unwords itself.
Goes down to dark. Sits silent.

No breaks, I'd thought, were working
there. Then roar. Then seafoam blast:

a wound was waiting. Feeds to grow.
Now alters, rends. That one long strand,

like faith, curves out uncalmed, thinned
to a breath—just so at once I'm done,

I'm lost. Yes, white the waves that scar
the shore. Yes, cold the roiling deep.

SARAH BROWNING

Langston Hughes Joins the Merchant Marine, 1923

Langston drops all his books except *Leaves of Grass*
into New York harbor, so that

the two poets lie down together in the cramped
hold of the ship, wrapped in the hammock

of language—song of themselves spooning
in the middle of the ocean. Uncle Walt whispers

to Langston out on the blue, cajoles, welcomes him—
stretching vocal cords, straining body: ship, men, hunger.

Langston touches and is touched, ship sheen of the other,
skin the question, skin the answer. No land, but music.

TED JEAN

Byrd

When his talent soared
beyond Tallis, his master,
William was seventeen.

His consort cast the viol
to oppose the human reed,
an unheard-of violation.

When he discovered sex,
his married voices
descended to heaven plain.

His motet in five parts
was new across all creation.
Stone chapels stunned.

At his Mass, his rapt Queen
stayed her lethal hand.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: A WHIRLING OUTSIDE MY WINDOW

John Rosenwald

The Best American Poetry, 2012 (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2012, 234 pp, \$35 hardbound, \$16 paper, eBook edition available), Guest Editor **Mark Doty**, Series Editor **David Lehman**.

I concluded my most recent Books in Brief review with the phrase “no more mosts,” suggesting frustration at the likelihood that any volume and by implication any editors could ascertain the best poetry that had appeared during the previous year. To my delight, this year’s *BAP* editor, Mark Doty, makes no such claim. For him, “Best’ is problematic, if unavoidable; poetry is not an Olympic competition.” He chooses instead to identify “the ones that engaged me most during a year of reading a great many poems.” I like that word: engage. Doty states clearly: “I read (and read and read) through the filters of my own taste. . . . Anthology-making is, at least on one level, a form of self-portraiture.”

And that’s about all editors can do. Doty and series editor David Lehman, despite combing hundreds of publications, cannot have considered all work published in every little magazine, every e-zine, every campus or community or personal outlet for poetry available in the United States. Similarly, when the *Beloit Poetry Journal* editorial board decides which poems we wish to publish, we’re only asserting that, among those submitted to us during a given quarter, they are the ones that met our individual and collective criteria for excellence, that engaged us most.

■

If Mark Doty, whose paean “To Joan Mitchell” graced our first *Split This Rock* chapbook in 2008, found these poems engaging, what do I find that engages me as well? First, I’m delighted he selected two works originally published in the *BPJ* to reappear in these pages. One is “Tenor,” a short, enigmatic piece by Fady Joudah that subtly complements his accomplishments as a translator of the late Mahmoud Darwish and as a medical doctor for Médecins Sans Frontières. The other, much longer, is Jenny Johnson’s “Aria,” a rich medley of song, grief, and lesbian community that we awarded our annual Chad Walsh Prize. Readers of both poems will benefit from a most useful quality of the *BAP* series: commitment to significant and substantial (one-fifth of the volume) back-of-the-book annotations to the poems themselves. We praise again these two excellent artists.

■
Who else? I love the music, the *musics* actually, that emerge from Doty's choices. Erica Dawson begins "Back Matter,"

Semantics 2.0,
Daughter, still, of absurdities,
I like "street-talker" now. Yes, please.
Breathless with ghetto woe
(". . . and his mama cried") I'd call
Me too American, too black,
Too Negro dialect. My back
Is to your front. I'm all
Set with my Nikes on.

then, without taking her hand from the wheel, drives from self-portraiture to landscape—one that is both external and internal:

Streets are talking, rakes
Catcalling, and the new
Sky's crisp as all the streams
Of frozen runoff.

There's no help
For me, just voices: barest yelp,
Incessant chatter, screams

As she observes in her note, "I try capturing moments when I'm part of the world with my back to it at the same time—in that cage of loneliness."

Different in both music and theme, yet equally successful, is Steven Heigh-ton's "Collision," in which, as he tells us in the notes, he attempts to "inhabit with sympathy the solitude of another being," in this case a deer he has struck with his car and whose internal voice he tries to capture:

Away in the eyefar
nightrise over the sapwood, and one likes
under hooves the heatfeel after sun flees, heat stays on this
smooth to the hoof hardpan, part trail
part saltlick now as snowlast moults back
into the sapwood
to yard and rot

One hears Hopkins here, the attempt to instress the inscape, the *haecceitas*, to identify and then share the core of this soon-to-die deer, without leaning too hard on all other dead-deer poems that have saturated our poetic landscape at least since William Stafford published "Traveling through the Dark." As Hopkins

insists, “Each mortal thing does one thing and the same / . . . Selves” or in ordinary language, creates its self. So there’s a certain daring in trying to write (yet another) dead-deer poem, but it’s sometimes the poet’s job to accept that challenge, recognizing that only through the individual language of the poem will the magic of individual experience manifest itself. Whether Heighton’s language manages that magic, I’ll leave to the reader to decide. For me it does.

Hopping, or “Hopkensing,” one step further I come to Brenda Shaughnessy; the beginning of her poem contains the title, “Artless”
is my heart. A stranger
berry there never was,
tartless. . . .

No poetry. Plain. No
fresh, special recipe
to bless. . . .

Spectacular in its way,
its way of not seeing,
congealing dayless

but in everydayness.

I enjoy here the verbal interplay among five image clusters that run through the poem: art, food, heart, ordinariness, vision—the first four announced swiftly in the first stanza—carried through in language that reminds me of Emily Dickinson and Lucille Clifton to a portrait of isolation in the face of love.

At least in these poems, the music the poets create might represent a rejection of the lineated prose that dominates much of contemporary poetry in the United States. At the same time their technique does not represent a return to formalism. They use internal as often as end rhyme; their rhythms remain syncopated and irregular. Their music, like Hopkins’, is often harmonic rather than melodic, as in the overlaying of four “es” sounds in Shaughnessy’s “fresh, special recipe / to bless.”



If these poets attract me with their music, snippets of other work dart into my consciousness like sunfish in a pond. In a volume

like this, where clearly some poems will engage the reader more than others, I can—to shift metaphors—window shop, catch glimpses of current fashion without needing to make a purchase.

A poet can link words freshly to shape a world, a vision. Maxine Kumin, whose work we published first in 1957, begins “Either Or” with lines that memorably load significant nouns with initially deprecatory but eventually weighty adverbs and adjectives:

Death, in the orderly procession
of random events on this gradually
expiring planet crooked in a negligible

arm of a minor galaxy adrift among
millions of others bursting apart in
the amnion of space

Or can capture my eye with a metaphor. Mary Jo Salter attends an evening orchestral performance:

Some nights there’s a concerto,
and ranks of sound amass
until it’s raining upward
(violin-bows for lightning)
from a black thundercloud.

Or a single image. Eric Pankey ends “Sober Then Drunk Again,” “The moon’s celadon glaze dulls in the morning’s cold kiln.”



Snippets and musical moments aside, the one poem in this year’s *BAP* that as a whole most engaged me was “Samara” by Lucia Perillo, another of our Walsh Prize winners. In praising her work I immediately demonstrate my own inconsistency. Having earlier lauded the music of Shaughnessy, Dawson, and Heighton for rejecting both formlessness and formalism, I admit that much of Perillo’s language reads like lineated prose:

And doesn’t vigilance call for
at least an ounce of expectation,
imagining the lion’s tooth inside your neck already
Not much music there, for my ear! But Perillo dances well
between the prosaic and the melodic. The poem begins:
At first they’re yellow butterflies
whirling outside the window—

The assonance (“butterflies,” “outside”; “first,” “whirling”) and the almost-rhyme (“yellow,” “window”) carry just enough melody for me to move me into the poem. But about the moment I’m engaged in her music she deliberately trainwrecks my interest, undercutting what seems a serious and substantial discussion by citing the dictionary, its “overzealous bit of whittlework” in defining *samsara*. She confesses she had at first confused the Buddhist concept with *samara*, the flying seeds released by maples and certain other plants, but then goes on to identify “‘the wheel of birth and misery and death,’ / nothing in between the birth and death but misery” before tossing in an off-the-cuff “if you eliminate dogs and pie and swimming / feels about right to me” and then lecturing herself about the interruption: “oh shut up, Lucia.”

Slowly she moves through this eclectic combination of lyric moment, religious principle, and self-interruption (to say nothing of Darwin and the “Autonomous Vehicle Laboratory”) to articulate her “fear that in the future all the beauties / will be replaced by replicas” since “this way there’ll be no blight // . . . when the blight was what we loved.” In her sixth and final section Perillo returns to both *samsara* and *samara*, returns in a sense to her whirling self, to a moment which transcends her concern about the misery between birth and death, when her “speck,” “some molecule” of her, can become

the afterthought of a flower
that was the afterthought of a bud,

transformed now into a seed with a wing,
like the one I wore on the tip of my nose

back when I was green.

A poem like this, bridging worlds of botany, religion, technology, autobiography—whimsical, thoughtful, attentive, moving—makes the whole book worthwhile.



Commenting on past *BAP* volumes I’ve spent considerable time riding various hobbyhorses. In writing this review I decided to dismount. I could continue to bemoan the relative paucity in *BAP* of references to countries or regions beyond our borders, the comparative absence of allusions to other writers or artists, as if

as poets and citizens we remain caged within our own boundaries. Following a three-day editorial board meeting at which our staff argued frequently and passionately, but always respectfully, about the ethics and aesthetics of political poetry, I want such discussions, especially during this election year, to serve as microcosm for discourse in the nation as a whole.

Though most of the poems in this year's *BAP* predictably remain short, lyric, concerned with personal or private emotions and experiences, I'd like to identify three that treat instead, in quite different ways, significant political issues. Two are long, surprisingly long for a book of this type and size, consuming 15 percent of the pages given to poetry in the entire volume: Spencer Reece's "The Road to Emmaus" and Paisley Rekdal's "Wax." In his poem Reece traces the apparently autobiographical relationship between himself and "Sister Ann," a Franciscan nun to whom he turns to help him understand his relationship with "Durell H.," whom he meets at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, who "sponsors" him, inspires him, teaches him to live. The politics emerge from a personal concern with society's view of alcohol as an illness and the fate of the homeless and indigent, "inconvenient obstacles / momentarily removed, much to the city's relief." The style remains plainsong, the narrative treatment matter-of-fact. Only rarely does the lineated prose aspire to musicality, and even then it almost immediately relinquishes the aspiration:

And the more she told me, the less I knew.

All about us, a stillness began to displace the light
and Durell was there, and no longer there, staining that
stillness.

After an estrangement ends there comes a great stillness,
the greater the estrangement the greater the stillness.

Across the parking lot, a gate rattled.

The title, the presence of Sister Ann, Reece's status as an Episcopalian priest, and his comments in the notes on the biblical story of Emmaus all suggest a metaphoric level to the poem, but if present the poet continually underplays it.

Not so with Paisley Rekdal's "Wax." Here the poet links multiple stories: her mother's cancer, the general incidence of cancer in Rekdal's family, the French Revolution, the history of Madame Tussaud. These stories lead on one hand to a meditation on the transitory nature of life and on the other to an assertion, in the

face of certain death and possible revolution, to the inherent equality of all humans. As we enter the wax museum we are invited to “Come and look. The king / is seated by the emperor. He is just your size.” “That is what the wax says, and then / denies it: you are a king, too.” Yet even so, even if we achieve what seems the immortality of fame, “there is a death even for the deathless.” “You will not see these same figures five years in a row.” In the notes Rekdal comments perceptively on the complex ways poems such as this one come into being, combining interest in a friend’s “book about the French Revolution and spectacles of violence,” her mother’s cancer, and her realization that her “obsession with wax was perhaps an obsession with the ways we see ourselves and our loved ones when we are least in control of our bodies.”

Finally there’s “The Autobiography of Khwaja Mustasim” by Amit Majmudar. Much of the poem lies beyond my knowledge, so I value the instruction the narrative forces me to obtain. Majmudar creates a composite, archetypal resident of the Middle East, an alter ego who appears at significant moments in Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim cultural history and political life:

I stood for twenty years a chess piece in Córdoba, the black
rook. . . .

I bound books in Bukhara, burned them in Balkh. . . .

I walked that lush Hafiz home and held his head while he
puked.

I was one of those four palm trees smart-bomb-shaken
behind the reporter’s khaki vest. . . .

Here I am at last. . . .

A mullah for a mauled age, a Muslim whose memory goes
back farther than the Balfour Declaration.

You may remember me as the grandfather who guided the gaze
of a six-year-old Omar Khayyám to the constellations.

Also maybe as the inmate of a Cairo jail who took the top
bunk and shouted down at Sayyid Qutb to please please
please shut up.

Instance follows instance, transporting me across the centuries along with the fictional Mustasim, whose position seems to me similar to the one William Faulkner ascribes to Dilsey and all others of her race in his appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*: “They endured.” As Majmudar implies, endurance until justice

is obtained is one of the most noble and most unlikely of human virtues.

■

One hobbyhorse remains. Parallel to the relative absence of international vision in *BAP 2012* is the paucity of formal variety, which is eventually a lack of auditory imagination, and more broadly of verbal experiment. Past *BAP* volumes have often had at least some experimental poetry. This year almost nothing. In “Becca,” Kerrin McCadden creates perhaps the most imaginative poem, leading us first into what seems an abstract discussion of typefaces:

She says, *It's my birthday, I'm going tomorrow,*
What's your favorite font? What should I
have him write? Serifs, I say. I like serifs.

Soon, however, we learn that the discussion is not abstract, that Becca is asking her father what style the tattoo artist should use as he engraves on her back, “*Make of my life a few wild stanzas.*” “*Make of my life / a poem,*” she later asks her mother and father as she begins the departure from her parental world, “tattoo flashing with each stroke / and there is barely enough time to read it.”

“Barely enough time to read” “the wheel of birth and misery and death”? No, Lucia Perillo reminds us, “The rule is: you can’t nullify the world / in the middle of your singing.” Though we are in winter, soon there will be “a whirling outside my window,” samara flying, carrying their seed. Thanks as usual to David Lehman and this time to Mark Doty for helping to keep the tree of poetry alive in this country. May these poems, these rejecters of what Perillo calls “Roboseed, roborose, roboheart, robosoul,” these “cherished encapsulations” of music and wonder, land on fertile soil.