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Zhang Xinglong, “Kiwis,” woodcut, Huxian, China

Mary Greene, design

POET'S FORUM (blog.bpj.org)

The participating poets for this issue are Alpay Ulku (May), Maggie Schwed (June), Heather Dobbins (July), and Mario Chard (August).



An arrow at the bottom of a page indicates that the stanza does not break.

MICHAEL JONES

A Gypsy Sings of the '89 Massacre

“The leaves were green,” his song begins,
“when the students gathered in Timisoara.”
In fact, they came in bare December.

As rough and strong as rope, his voice
gathers them with the dead of other
songs that begin the same way, rising
from singing's soil of leaves and slaughter.

ÉIREANN LORSUNG

The lightest word they used was animal

*—with quotations from an interview with Natalya Kolyada,
Belarus Free Theatre*

One after another the scarlet informants: birds out of season,
a certain and stuttering progress. Was it a bird I said it was the voice
in the door.

The eye of your fellow citizen, who lives with you in the same country.
The end of the century says, *What will happen to you will make 1938
seem like a dream*

*Leave your children with their grandparents
Leave your houses unlocked*

The century makes a high wind blow straight through everything.
Bright red birds are moving up and down the stems outside.

*Do not come within two meters of a window
Do not look for your child*

In this country a century is a place no one can inhabit.
Dead zone around the secret core.

*You are falling asleep in panic
You are waking up in panic*

The marvelous thing is how their tiny feet can grip, even while swaying.
Someone is whispering about you nearby.

The century walks by, holding something in its hands.
You have to see. You cannot go out and touch.

PETER JOSEPH GLOVICZKI
Five American Sentences

We went on a journey to the water and collected river stones.

When the man on the corner asked what I collect I said I buy gold.

All around the world I see the ice melting one glacier at a time.

I grew up around a lot of fake people if you know what I mean.

My mornings always begin with two cups of coffee and a pancake.

KIP ZEGERS**from The Poet of Schools****The Poet of Schools**

The Poet of Schools looked about him.
There was no one to ask.
Daily, he went about his work,
taking water he'd drawn
from the pump, carrying it
to a well, pouring it down.
He pumped water from
the earth, he poured it back.
It had tasted sweet at first,
it tasted sweet now.
The clearer all this became,
the more steadily he pumped,
the more willing he was to pour.

The 8th Grade Class

is like a plate spinning on a pole's tip.
Or a freshet after rain, on a hillside—
what wasn't is now the rush downhill.
It's a flock of grackles in April
at 3rd Avenue & 96th Street,
big mouths for their size mouthing off.
Or harbor seals, whiskered faces
staring at shapes ashore,
that duck under, then come up again
in the surf off Coast Guard Beach.
As if to peek.
The sea is empty when they're gone.

The Poet of Schools Talks in Prose

The morning after the day on which the school's beloved French teacher died in the building, a girl from his Creative Writing class stopped by.

It was first thing. He said, "Hi! What's up?"

She said, "I just wanted to see if you were here," and looked at him. And fled. He had that sense, that she had run away. And then he had the sense of what it meant to be another's teacher, which was what he was.

Hand Over Paw

A suit approaches the Poet of Schools:
"You must measure here, now, that
which you think you are about. I have
for you in which insert results."
The poet of schools holds up one paw.
"Numbers?" "Yes there are categories
and this the test of measure is
Best Practice." The hair on Coyote's back
stands up. His howl has cadence,
its lines break. Controlling disclosure and
disguised as an English teacher,
he will be underestimated, every time.

RAY NAYLER
Old School

Empty of car rows, every evening this
Lot where the kids come, coiling their concave,
Oiled as the ball bearings blazing beneath.
Outside the arcade where Altered Beast plays
They're grinding the firecurb. Rise from your grave!
The Olde English, bag-bound, burns in their throats with
Cadged cigarettes purged from dads' dresser drawers.
The kids talk the trickhorde from tic-tac to tailstall,
From Ollie to frontside, from 50 to Five-0,
Christ airs and craillgrabs, creepers and cavemen.
The company sponsors, the skatepros and skateshops,
And stickers, and kickturns, and Christian Hosoi.
Switchflip to shove it, suede in the grip tape,
Shinscars and scabbed shanks, boardshorts and shortbolts,
Then bored of the wordspin, somebody stands.
His duct tape and shoe goo grab at the grip tape,
The black asphalt pulls at his urethane wheels.
First: parking block boneless (the boys on the bench grin)
Then an Ollie grab old-school (joked for a joke).
They half-time a handclap, he halfcabs to heelflip.
A quick double kickflip, cruised to a craillgrab
And everyone stands now, stunned into silence
By his kneepoem of long limb, of liftoff, of loftspin.
He shrugs and just shoves off, slack-shunting the blacktop.
Cool is a cold nod, a casual Coke-swig
And back to the trick talk, the tips for good tailstalls,
The tales of how Tony Hawk toeflipped down ten stairs
Or nailed a 900. It's only the last trick,
Eclipsed the next evening by any of them.

ZAKIA HENDERSON-BROWN

Can we, can we get along?

Rodney King, rehab star, dies his dunce's death
and my husband's voice is a dotted line, language
crunched up by grief. Meaning, tonight, recovery means
nothing, drinks sucked in like air, words lithe and loose,
some woman's mark on his neck. And briefly,
I send curses to the whole city of Los Angeles
and all of its bodies that broke the body
of that anonymous drunk, turning his name
into the symbol that would come to haunt
the dry lips of the only firefly left in the dark field
of my chest. And because I know once his voice climbs
to the top floor of his throat and the barkeep
rolls up her sleeves and his eyes are so heavy
with blood and regret they don't respond to light
that he will spend his night with wings
drowned by whiskey. Body lit, then not, then
blacked out somewhere along the summer landscape,
I know this will be the final time—locksmith en route.
I've come to know there is not always a way to keep
a blank space where words should be, a blank face
amid turmoil; that there is not, in fact,
any way to avoid what must come, to say
to the thing buzzing there: *No,*
not this time.

J. SCOTT BROWNLEE
Requiem for Used Ignition Cap

Give God no dead
with their brains
busted out, no black
shotguns beside them

empty. Not the boy's suicide
explained as accident,
not his grief manifold
in his family's tongues

taken out of their mouths
by the power of
all that pain unloading.
The body quits.

The spirit does. No one knows
what to say except, faintly,
There, there. Let what joins us
not be lamentation only.

Every tether we tie to that
shotgun blast renders us
split open. We see
the evidence of it

& cannot be blameless:
casing intricate, green
on the boy's bedroom floor
& as memorable now

as the souvenir kept
from some scenic island,
smooth shell thick with buck-
shot meant to penetrate

flesh of an animal
or a dangerous man.
Not a child, Lord, no,
we say, prophesying.

Give us today
 no miracle of rain
to fill our emptiness
 except him, Lord,

that shattered boy,
 back in our fold
still praying earnestly for rain
 as we do, with his head

buried deep in his hands—
 or raised to the sky
as the water strikes him: slick
 mouth open, drinking.

ALPAY ULKU
Compensation

What did the twin towers stand for?

This is a week after 9/11, at the Middle Eastern grocery store. The proprietor tenses. *I don't know.*

The cop is standing at the counter. He drops a bag of cashews on the scale, his hand on the bag, weighing it down. He asks again. *You don't know what the twin towers stood for?*

I don't know.

It is silent for a good long while. The proprietor looks away. *No charge for the cashews.*

That must have been the answer, the cop is pleased. That bag of cashews is something to behold.

ALPAY ULKU
Garage Sale

1

Remember the keyboard? asks my wife. She's holding one in her hand.
Now there's a packrat. I'm not so bad.

I offer my opinion that the packrat is the one who buys it.

I was only looking. She's mad at me now.

Who wants to get some chocolate ice cream? I call out. *Chocolate!*
Chocolate ice cream! Hey, "the only emperor is the emperor of ice cream."

She ignores me and pokes at a cell phone.

2

What's that you're watching, son?

Of Mice and Men, he says. *American Lit.*

I watch some with him. . . . *They've changed the meaning there.* It bothers me more than it should. This business of not printing books anymore, of letting them interview their parents in place of a history core. *Hey! That's not how it goes!*

He looks alarmed.

It's okay, says my wife. *It's just a movie.*

3

Applause.

I turn it down, and we listen to the rain instead.

The President strides on. He has chosen George C. Scott as his avatar today, our flag behind him with its 39 stars. He's playing Patton.

I think we're going to war, she whispers.

Not yet, I say. I minimize the screen so it no longer covers the entire wall.
He'd use his own image for something like that.

ALPAY ULKU

The Orange Sonata

Hey, fancy-schmanzy, my uncle says. The ears of corn are wrapped in foil, the famous black and gold, known throughout the world, that proclaims them non-GM. *You've come up in the world. Get you a steak next.* I tell him we'll get steaks for two, true organic, and oranges fresh from the tree. We b.s. like this while he sets the water boiling and lays our GM meat on the grill. *All-Fruit's not the same*, he tells me. *It just tastes sweet.* It's stupid, but I really do like hearing all about those days, the farm our family owned. The stuff they did as kids I'd never let my kids do now, hell, they'd take them from me.

In the condos across the street, a police drone flits from floor to floor, a blue orb sampling conversations, taking video. A green orb turns and drops: it's spotted someone wasting. We watch the evening show. *Must be some good flying weather.* My uncle turns the meat. A drone the size of a kid's balloon bumps against our balcony. It's translucent, soft, you can see its hollow core. This one's a sniffer, trolling for illicit drugs, certain pheromones—anger, fear—for referral to a blue orb; scanning for trace elements from explosives, for referral to a black orb, I suppose. But those were good times, man, those were the days.

AARON CRIPPEN

[So the girl, San Jie]

So the girl, San Jie, says we're having dog for dinner. I'm like OK. When in Rome. It smells good on the stove anyway. Scott's toking up and I join him. The kid, Fan Fan, is in the corner. Julia with her big eyes is going back & forth. San Jie brings out about 9 dishes followed by the dog on this orange platter. The head is on and all. It's like an adolescent dog. Fan Fan comes, Julia sways her hips, we all sit down and start. It's my first dog. I rip off the ear with chopsticks . . . well, try. I suck at chopsticks. San Jie pulls out the white eye for herself. And the kid, Fan Fan, starts bawling. "You killed Jimmy! You killed Jimmy!" His hand holding chopsticks in midair wilts like a flower. His face starts pouring from all its holes. San Jie says, "You didn't take care of him." She eats the white eyeball. Julia pulls the dog's spongy tongue from its baked mouth and holds it to Fan Fan's lips. "Here, eat Jimmy's tongue and he'll be with you forever." And the crying kid eats it.

MAGGIE SCHWED

Pollen Season

Whatever got me (a huzzah from spring) finally left my throat to jump into my left eye, now red and suppurating like a gorgon's. I would lift a glass in your direction but I'd have to wash the glass. Admit impediment. The kids are home, with all their mysteries and possibilities and old resistances. Love and sex in the air—tears in the wings. With the thought that not everything has to get away from us, we should manage family life again. My old mother wants a man's arm to help her from the car. Oh, come on, I say, you don't weigh more than a bag of feed. Indignantly, she puts her hand in mine. The doorknobs in her house give arthritis, if you don't already have it; the shower, by turns, freezes and scalds the unwary. Do you share with me this sense, that as ground warms the world fills again with soldiers? And how strange it is our own are hidden? Their voices on the radio sound with exhaustion. I read obsessively about the farmers. Seed savers, believing in another season. One carries water in a battered pot, ducking as she runs because the seeds, the seeds must go in, quickly, even into cratered ground, or famine will be the next year's crop. Photograph: beekeepers meet under a small tent in the heat of the day. The beekeeper, who trusts his bees with bare arms, has a guard and the guard a Kalashnikov. Think of it: guns, they say, like corpses, store well in vats of honey. And the bees, without borders, pollinate.

As the grass rises, we begin our slaughter. Old hens head to the stock pot. The hands learn again where organs lie. Twin rosy cushions of lung, yellow fat's heavy curtain, the green cup of bile. Body as system: the whole multicolored rope of the guts frees and pulls forth, crop to vent. (What am I doing, you ask. Learning. Having learned, I practice my skill.) Again the hand goes in. Now I harvest embryos: brilliant orange stand-alone yolks, in series. Ever smaller. And now I scrape the beaded surface of the ovary itself. Sometimes the finished egg, its shell veiled in membrane, waits at the terminus of the oviduct. So which do we love, dear friend, death or life? The excited pullet in the barnyard is running with a three-foot entrail streamer in her beak, the happy cannibal. I say, let's hear it for the orchestra of sparrows nesting under every eave.

HEATHER DOBBINS

In the Low Houses

He asks, *Is it even?* In his hands, the frame, sure
as he held me that morning. That bed was a box

where we could hear each other breathe, mouths reddening
despite winter. We carry a grave to the low houses, sealed

and poured into. A feeling stays put there, lies alone to itself.
Our bodies sometimes align. Said and skin, open and close.

Mostly we age, botch and buckle, make difficulty
where there doesn't have to be any.

He stands on a chair, ready, and I follow his
heels on the edge like I did into sheets.

I imagine he falls: I'd brace the back of his head
against the hardwood floor and hurt myself. I could heal,

sewn in silver and bone, but would my body be able to cross us?
I used to believe in shelter, the dead

and what's too late sharing the same tone.
He uses a blue ribbon to align the nails.

I pace the floor with worn voices for what is still undone.
I say, *Move your right hand south.*

This room is a box we can leave, but I can't see through his body:
Where we don't touch. Where we do. Salt and flank.

The threshold to *together* is between our legs, a split
for heat, where we know what we cannot in the low houses.

Can I go to him again? It is both *I miss you*
and *I miss you altogether*. The pull to keep, to keep.

I look at the cemetery through the window.
He asks, *Are you minding the headstones?*

I read the white wall behind him: *No then Yes.*
After the climb, how do we stay here in pause

above the low houses, the ones we walk over and do not acknowledge,
stone above marl? Nowhere else to go but down, the fallen in clay.

He asks, *Will you hand me the hammer?*
I keep the nails in my mouth, hold my breath as he hits,

hoping for no plaster pocket, a crack in the ice.
In his hands, the frame, a matted sky, four lines

in shadow and glass, each spine a ladder from the quiet.
The wire indents the beds of his fingers, where

I am used to resting, a strain for two bodies
in one house. Control and pitch. Old voices

still tangle in my hair: in my left ear, I hear timing,
and in my right, *No one can fix this but me.*

This box is a room for the living.
I make sure to touch their hair in the coffins, what was always dead.

Sometimes how hard we try doesn't matter.
The pine has to fall. It will be made into a house for men to carry.

The needles are weak, know only how to burn.
Once I asked why they placed a penny on a grave,

not touching the other pennies. They said a woman is not allowed
to be a pallbearer. In his hands, the frame, an inside

dimension for touch and tame, comprehending as line does form.
A force. Meeting my eye over his shorn shoulder, he asks,

What about now? Do not look away like you are used to.
For once led, an unfurling iris, I do not flinch.

HEATHER DOBBINS

Now I say, *Come closer, I have lost count of the lines in your lips.*
My chest to his: an amplifier and a low chord.

I want what everyone does, so taken
with touch and fingers that taste. Contain, try and try.

Fail. Wait. A lopsided gait. He says, *Nevermind, love.*
No one will notice but us. Crooked, I get it a little wrong.

JENNIFER LIGHTY

That Which There Are No Words For

—in memoriam, Sandy Hook, December 14, 2012

All afternoon on the oyster farm
a great egret watched me work
hoisting bags of oysters
out of the shallow water
onto the dock to sort.

It was dark of the moon, tide lower
than I'd ever seen it, exposing rocks,
a pile of culch I'd dumped at the edge of the marsh,
mud speckled with dead slipper shells,
crabs that could be hibernating.

Oysters, sealed tight, holding
their mouthful of saltwater in deep cups
polished smooth inside by flesh,
passed through my gloved fingers,
sorting for market.

I wasn't thinking about thresholds,
how often we cross without knowing,
doors opening and closing
without a creak or click as the latch catches
and we wonder what side we are on now.

My body had taken over: bend, hoist,
dump, sort, back into the old bag
to grow another winter underwater,
or into a wider mesh
strung on a line close to shore for market.

I broke apart the fused ones,
pulled the beards off mussels
and tossed them overboard,
rescued small crabs who clung or froze,
imagining then I couldn't see them.

Minnows thrashed in my palms,
a surge of pure light and muscle.
When I released them back to the muddy water
through my cold fingers
joy flashed like quicksilver.

I wasn't thinking about thresholds,
I was on my hands and knees
pushing oyster bags through six inches of water,
sucked down when I tried to stand,
forced to crawl, cursing and laughing.

The egret, who had not moved in hours,
took a few elegant steps, rippling the calm.

Sitting up, kneeling in my waders,
waist-deep in mud,
I closed my eyes,
not because I knew what was coming,
but to see in the dark as well.

The white feathers of the egret so fine and smooth.
The marsh, golden in mid-December.

It was the day before our darkness made itself known,
that which we'd say about after,
There are no words for.
Crow call in the east answered by one at my back,
Prepare to be emptied.

The death of innocence is one way to learn
how to love. In the dark, I pray for another,
pure as white feathers, a breath
passing with ease through my body,
turned to the low sun moving across the marsh.

MARIO CHARD

Round

State departments of transportation use military artillery to control the avalanche threat above mountain highways. Occasionally artillery ordnance does not explode upon impact, a potential risk to hikers after the snow melts.

—United States Forest Service

1

All night the sound of water
in a ditch. No dreams to speak of.

Not the cannon shells
across the canyon or their routine

sound. Snow
pulled from the mountain like a sleeve

torn from a shoulder.
We inoculate our son. In the needle,

the same virus we hope his body
will defeat.

2

In my father's dream
it is the ditch that wakes him,

*All night the sound of water
in a ditch. No dreams to speak of*

voices coming from the lawn.
Outside, men stand with their arms uncrossed,

*not the cannon shells
across the canyon or their routine*

men who ask him for his boots.
When he slips them from his feet

*sound. Snow
pulled from the mountain*

he sees water spilling from the tops,
water running from the porch

*torn from a shoulder.
We inoculate our son. In the needle*

and gutter, water where the ditch had been,
the mountains all made low.

*the same virus we hope his body
will defeat*

3

I woke, waited
barefoot by my window

*In my father's dream
it is the ditch*

until the cannon shook my roof again,
sent the smallest avalanche

*coming from the lawn.
Outside*

it had not meant to
barreling from my shingles.

*his boots.
When he slips them from his feet*

In the dream
I saw men standing where the ditch had been,

*water spilling from the tops,
running*

then only half
their bodies stranded in the snow.

*where the ditch had been,
the mountains all made low*

4

When they said it was a boy
hiked farther than the others on the mountain,

*Woke, waited
barefoot by my window*

stumbled on the live round
in the grass and pine needles where the shell

*shook my roof again
the smallest avalanche*

struck in winter,
I dreamed I also picked the metal from the brush

*had not meant to
barreling.*

to see it better,
knew its risk by weight alone,

*In the dream
I saw men standing*

ran the shell back quickly
to my father.

*then only half
their bodies stranded in the snow*

5

*When they said it was a boy
hiked farther than the others on the mountain,*

*stumbled on the live round
in the grass and pine needles where the shell*

*struck in winter,
I dreamed I also picked the metal from the brush*

*to see it better,
knew its risk by weight alone,*

*ran the shell back quickly
to my father*

MARIO CHARD

Caballero

Rigoberto Salas-López, 30, was charged with transporting illegal immigrants resulting in death. Eight of the 14 people in the Chevy Suburban died after it rolled several times on U.S. 191 a few hours before dawn Monday. Salas-López, originally from Guatemala, told investigators he swerved to miss a horse. He was arrested after fleeing into the desert in the Four Corners area of Utah, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado.

—Associated Press, April 17, 2007

The passengers say no, he wasn't swerving to miss a horse, he was fondling a female passenger in the front seat of the vehicle.

—Sgt. Rick Eldredge, *The Salt Lake Tribune*

1

Say it was a horse.

That the horse watched
the three-ton van

roll until it stopped
where their bodies
stopped. That the horse

unlike a horse waited
until he stood. Say it was
the horse he followed

in the desert. Say it was
the desert, the sagebrush
that kept the horse. Say

it was the trail he left
the patrolmen followed.
That they never found

the horse. That he covered
the horse tracks in
the desert with his own.

2

The sergeant doesn't find the wreckage first. When he asks the survivors how many cars passed in the desert three hours before morning they tell him they remember only one, that someone moved the bodies from the road and drove away. In their language they say this road is a river nothing gathers. The sergeant asks to see their driver and one points to the desert. The rest point to the woman he reached for, a hole the body left passing through the windshield.

3

Son,
in Spanish you do not agree,
you must *be in agreement*,
estar de acuerdo.

Two people may agree or disagree,
like we do,
but they must also *be in one*
or the other.

If you mistake

cuerto for
cuerta

you will have said *rope*
or *cord*,
though both words divide and bind
some older form of

agreement.

As a boy I saw
a model of the spinal cord,
how the nerves run down, divide us
behind.

They named it *cauda equina*—
horse tail—buried
cord.

4

In his dream the sergeant takes a shovel to the river to hold the river back. He is told he will find nothing, to keep nothing he finds. The sergeant stands in the river until his feet freeze, until they lose their hold, until it is the shovel itself he holds to keep from slipping under. The river is choked with debris. It is a bird nest, finally, that passes, convincing him. Inside he sees small branches woven, then string, then needles, clothing, then hair. He untangles the nest to braid a rope.

5

Say the three names
he gave the
sergeant were true. Say

the names of the
eight bodies pulled from
the wreckage became

the numbers they first
labeled them by. Say
the eighth is no longer

nameless. Say they still
tie ropes to the caskets
of immigrants they find

in the desert. That a rope
saves time should
someone come looking.

Say they bury the ropes
for the dead to climb
back. Say their names.

6

Son, do not mistake

cabello with
caballo

hair with
horse,

that *caballero*,
though gentleman,
meant

horseman.

You've heard the Spanish
conquered Mexico
on their horses.

You've heard the conquered
could not tell
the man from horse
and ask me,

How do we know
the conquered knew?

They listened. The horses
never spoke.

CHRISTINE PACYK

Postcards from Paris and Valdosta

If we excavate we return to this hidden thing—
police chief, townspeople constructing

parade floats bound by fire cord.
In this one Henry Smith is hanging,

his eye sockets singed by oil-slicked blaze.
Plate glass, silver salts. The pop of flashbulb

after picnic jubilee—straw-hatted men
pose with a trophy of cooling ashes.

The sneer with incisors captured in sepia tones.
Teeth and bones in children's pockets.

And tied upside a poplar tree, Mary Turner,
twisted, skin-slouched, knife-slit,

with a vacated cavity between her hipbones.
This past—toxic voiceless paper—

hush and hushed.

KATIE HARTSOCK

The Buried in Sleep and Wine Hotel

Wake-up calls come as ghosts
whose death wounds, fresh along their flanks,
are little monsters, open enough to show
they are full of nothing inside.
These phantoms mean to announce
the city under attack, the insidious tricks
it fell for, how it even feasted its own demise
and rang with song and bedpost-banged walls
and now sleeps more deeply than its dead.
There is no pain like knowing the polis
is doomed. And so the shades
pontificate to terrify, convinced that terror
can't fail to get the dreamers on the move.
The great end of any dream is
the self-assurance none of it was real,
and the closing of eyes once again
to the hum of hallway ice machines,
distant and discrete from the burning walls.

KATIE HARTSOCK

The Grant Me the Stamina to Pray Extended Stay Motel

To quiet the mind into nothingness
is not the task. To keep the mind quiet
on a single thing, or perhaps a string
of single things, to think not of the thought
but just to think, intimate with the unknown—
what maintenance of the heart
that takes, what unaccustomedly narrow
points must stay pinned. As if a meteor sails
through the awful silence of outer space, but then
the daily offering must be drawn from the purse
always, always the elbows or knees
get sore. The eyestrings
must be held taut with that which has no eyes,
which grants the wherewithal to ask
before it tenders any yield.

KATIE HARTSOCK

The Western Edge of a Time Zone Hotel

Not far from here a meadow marks the line
of the longest sun and brightest time human
arrangement of such things allows—
a map to the meadow informs every bedside drawer.
Its eagles dart close as prairie moths,
grasshoppers fly ahead of footsteps
with the hum and herald of rotary phones,
and trees wave in the light like crowds at concerts
who wanted the lawn tickets they got
for the amphitheater's show, would not wish
for anything else. A beautiful place
to die, the underworld rising up
through golden grains and purple-tipped spears
and weeds that sprout their own billowy cosmos
for heads and bloodred sumac buds sculpted
by wind—to see the grim one coming through all that,
to claim not a wife but the love or despair
of one life. To be there
to be told however it went down it's done,
in the meadow with its manifold vantages of hours
over there, where they've already happened,
and that way, where they are still, or about to be.

STEVE MYERS

On “Africa Time”

Time seemed a rift we'd wandered into,
the moon drifting over ghostly mine dumps, the sun
surfacing slow-motion on a young woman emerging, dream-
or *dagga*-languid, from her home, her body sheathed in cream-colored
shift and sweater, lifting her arms, pressing palms together, stretching to her left—
as a dancer might release tension, standing in the wings before an entrance—
while behind, along the beige-brushed wall, her shadow, like the cast hand
of a sundial, passed, and whether it was jet lag, or a trick of optics,
appeared to move more quickly than she, as if ticking off
a calculus: charts; proofs; actuarial tables; the virus
was everywhere; already it was late June,
the shortest day of winter.

CHASE BERGGRUN

To Heidegger at Todtnauberg, 1967

dampness,
much.

So deeply did
I want to believe. And yet I know

when you go back to
your guestbook,

beside my name you will see only
my yellow star. How

I loved you. And no word is coming.
We walk above

the bodies of the dead, and I hear
the coarseness, and no word is coming.

Now *eyebright*, and
now *arnica*,

sun's segmented mimic,
and after our walk

I leave space for allowance,
for disappointment. *Un-delayed.*

The fire-funeral
of language burns slow, our days

like apple cores hang low on
weakened trees, a wish

to leave you with the knowledge
that you too

wear the black coat
and the death's-head, you too

there in your hut,
hand-in-hand with the poet.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: What Ghosts Know

Melissa Crowe

Traci Brimhall, *Our Lady of the Ruins* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012, 96 pp, \$15.95 paper)

Cole Swensen, *Gravesend* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 96 pp, \$21.95 paper)

One of my favorite Emily Dickinson poems asserts:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few.

I love this brief meditation on the power of the imagination to overcome the scarcity of the actual. As a poet myself, I make it a rallying cry, a reminder that it's my job to make prairies in the reader's mind, to build on the page bees as buzzy as the real thing. I suppose, in the end, Dickinson's little *ars poetica* is a comfort to me, both as writer and as citizen of a troubled world. Maybe in my tendency to repeat this poem to myself on hard days I'm clinging to its whisper of hope that what the world fails to supply, words might continue to offer, that image (and its counterpart, memory) might be as sustaining as clover.

But the truth is I doubt this assertion. And I don't usually go to poetry for comfort (or not exactly, or not just).

Even the comfort I manage to take from Dickinson's poem is diminished by my knowledge that these days bees *are* few. And temperatures are rising. I need not recite here the catalog of catastrophes that have already begun: heat waves and fires, flooding, drought, and all the human suffering that results from the increased competition over dwindling resources. There are those of course who doubt the veracity of climate science, or deny it out of greed, but I'm more interested in those who believe yet turn away from its warnings, perhaps because I must to some extent count myself among them. The enormity of the problem is just too big to grasp, too awful to look at straight on for very long without reaching for some escape, some comfort. We may find this comfort in a calm pragmatism—the apocalypse, after all, keeps not arriving. We may find it in the still staggering beauty of the earth itself—every spring, bird song, leaf bud, fox cub, flower—or in the promise of salvation from a higher authority, secular or sacred. Or in the ease of our luxurious

nihilism (iPhone, Xbox, Lexus), the notion that we will live our seventy years and pass on to oblivion, that nothing we do now will matter then.

Whatever our balm of choice, it's a poison that distracts us from this moment. Right now we are quite capable of real changes that would stave off the worst effects of global warming. But making those changes requires a willingness to remain in the difficult present. By *we* I mean you, yes, but also me. I go to poetry, then, as a training ground for steadying my gaze, for inhabiting this place, this moment. In Traci Brimhall's darkly beautiful *Our Lady of the Ruins* and Cole Swensen's haunted and haunting *Gravesend* I find just what I need—poems that won't let me escape, that hold me here and teach me to read this moment as a trace left by history, a mark we make on the future, poems that school me both to my own impermanence and to the permanence of all my actions.

Our Lady of the Ruins evokes a vivid and ongoing aftermath. We are never quite sure what the survivors have survived, but we read of “women dancing in basements during the raids” and “girls who traded their bodies to soldiers for bread.” “Wind sings through bullet holes in the windows,” while the book's recurring collective “we” “hold[s] still to learn eternity.” Gunfire along with natural disasters (floods, sandstorms, and cyclones) punctuates swaths of time otherwise filled with watching, searching, waiting, and predicting—endless iterations of interpretation, attempts to read the old world and the new one in which the survivors can't help living. Nuns, priests, and penitents populate a landscape haunted by a frightening and partially shrouded past:

Signs on the trees say it is forbidden
to take your life in the woods,
but people sway from branches,

swords rust between their ribs.

As I read, it feels increasingly urgent that I and these variously damned villagers interpret such signs accurately, yet our efforts are hampered, the signs both vivid and opaque, like hieroglyphs or fragments of Sappho. History is here and gone at once, what it means a matter of speculation or rumor. In “The Colossus,” the speaker describes the villagers' attempts to trace it:

In the beginning, none of us could tell rock
from bone. Some claim the desert was once a sea,
and the statue we found facedown in the sand

was a god who hardened as the waters dried.
Others say raiders stole it from an imperial city
but buried it when they discovered its curse.

Though the survivors are dogged in their pursuit of revelation,
stone yields its secrets slowly: "Our mallets grow worn, our
dowels / dull. The earth falls away, and still it hides // its face
from us."

When frustrated by their failed efforts to read the past,
Brimhall's steadfast pilgrims turn to divination, beseeching a
series of oracles to tell them what the future holds. In "How
to Read a Compass," one such seer intones a set of cryptic
instructions: "Take the blackbirds from your hair and lay them
in the grass. If their eggs hatch in your hands, go north." In
these utterances we glimpse some of the disoriented desperation
at play. Soon, though, the strangeness starts to reveal its sense:
"Take the gold from your neighbor's river and throw it at the
stained-glass hymn. The words that don't break are a message."
This gold (remnant of an unequal economic system?) and this
hymn (trace of the "ecclesiastical terror" to which Brimhall's
speakers repeatedly refer?) may have led to disaster and should
not be regarded as useful tools for moving forward. The survivors
might need to bury the gods that they discover are cursed.

The speaker concludes the poem by instructing her listeners to
"Find the village besieged by war where the monk set himself
on fire in protest. Find the immaculate muscle which did not
burn, and take it." The speaker, then, instructs the listeners
(one of whom is now clearly the reader, who inhabits a "real"
world history) to locate what has not been destroyed and salvage
it—but only if it is untainted (a spirit of relentless protest? a
speaking of truth to power?). What remains when the survivors
have discarded old cultural comforts may then be worth
salvaging. Again we see that to discern which vestiges to carry
over into the new world requires an act of sustained attention.
If those who speak in Brimhall's lyrics can't make sense of the
partly buried "before," can't manage to predict what is to come,
they still don't abandon the enterprise of interpretation so

crucial to survival. They dig and improvise; they evaluate and invent and discard ritual; they beseech and curse and resurrect and exorcise their deities, finding their way through a process of elimination that requires them to read every trace.

In the world mapped by *Our Lady of the Ruins*, no confident trajectory exists from wrongheadedness to wisdom; on the contrary, we may see in the same poem signs of both stunting and clarifying vision. “Unharméd / but not safe,” Brimhall’s bewildered refugees long for and fear salvation, but never deny complicity. They confess relentlessly—nothing and no one in these poems possesses or even claims innocence. One speaker laments, “We want to forget the wayfarer we hung / when he asked for food”; another tells us, “I am responsible to what I have witnessed. I have eaten the eyes of the enemy.”

Much of the language in this collection evokes a hazy Christianity, remnant of the cultural past that the speakers (even the priests) assess continuously. Daily, they build new gods and burn the old ones, burying their ashes in the sea. Often religious and political guilt are conflated, as in “Prayer to the Deaf Madonna,” where the speaker tells us, “Yes, I profited from war. My children lived. / They ate apricots and honey.” Though this speaker turns, briefly, to beseeching the unresponsive Madonna to help her forget her trespasses, she’s all the while busy contending with what the war wrought: “I have to disguise fugitives, to wrap the dead // in flags, to bring the wounded water / and a priest, and I have my country, / I have my country to fear.”

If the fearsome country stands vividly before this speaker, her god (an artifact made in the image of the father) grows increasingly distant, breathless, and unreal. The sailor-slaves who speak “Dance, *Glory*” insist, “There is no paradise // waiting for us, so why ask for miracles?” pointing to the captain who branded them and “sang / to the lightning as he swept ashes from his burning ship.” Brimhall’s band of seekers is apocalyptically free in the aftermath of God’s disappearance; they “drift the treasonous sea,” floating “on the backs of dead sailors . . . / naming constellations of amputated saints.” Whether they will sink or swim neither they nor we can discern.

But I find I am heartened, if not comforted, by the fact that so many of Brimhall's speakers (to whom I find myself attached) recognize their limitations and enact through their utterances a kind of cultural exorcism. In "To My Unborn Daughter," a pregnant woman warns her girl-to-be, "Do not // believe their dusty proverbs. . . . / They'll tell you we are banished, but this isn't exile. // It's a refuge from a nation of titans." These characters are speaking a tentative truth that opens the possibility that they will act differently. They tell us a good fear is useful. By killing their gods, untying their women, by "stitch[ing] . . . their] eyelids open" to "look . . . at the sun," they make it possible to continue. In this searing moment, this sustained and honest and painful seeing, I locate the best chance for survival—theirs, ours. I find I am one of Brimhall's bewildered, complicit, dogged, desiring pilgrims, and that the world she depicts is this one, mine.



What Brimhall creates through a compelling cast of ragtag characters, by dramatizing a moment from which we can't look away, Cole Swensen achieves through a combination of formal invention and a sustained reading scholarly in its depth and breadth. With *Gravesend*, Swensen gives us a dreamy, haunted hybrid, a theory of ghosts presented in a mixture of lucid, sturdy prose and fragmented, perpetually beginning, prematurely clipped lyrics. As such, she enacts formally a state of productive liminality similar to the mythic uncertainty Brimhall establishes. Both books are full of specters and shades; both ask us to remain for extended periods in the difficult, astonishing space between knowing and not, where "every face is the ghost of an instant."

In a way that makes clear that the present is always aftermath and precursor, *Gravesend* catalogs a host of revenants, occurrences of return and rupture, and layerings of time and place. Not surprisingly, she locates ghosts in houses, re-occupants who "erode . . . the line between being and place," but she also finds them in histories and paintings. She investigates by means of etymology, common usage, rumor, and speculation the hauntedness of texts and of language itself. The title of the collection participates in this etymological investigation: one section of the book consists of Swensen's interviews of actual

residents of Gravesend about the meaning of the name of the English town. They tell her it “makes me think of engravings and grayscales” or that the word morphed from Graff de Sham, literally “the home of the Sheriff.” Some say the reach of orchards—the apples Gravensteins—ended there on the outskirts of London, or that other towns sent their plague victims to Gravesend for burial.

Swensen shifts between reporting the inhabitants’ derivations in grammar-bound prose and her own elliptical meditations:

As if the grave could end, said a ship, this fog
is not among the listed would have shifted in and out of
 light in a way most
unbecoming, it unbecame and floated just inches over the
 water was not found
in the morning.

In these lines we spot one characteristic means by which Swensen’s work trains the gaze, holding the reader in the present moment. By repeatedly thwarting expectations for logical structure, the this–then–that narrative of the conventional prose sentence, Swensen demands our honed attention to the sharp but elusive fragment and thwarts the accustomed leap to resolution. We are *here*, again and again. Our words, though, are haunted by sound/music and association, by linguistic provenance, and by personal and cultural history. As Lacan insisted, language speaks us, the surest means through which the past pushes its way into the present. Each of us needs to recognize we have inherited a ghost language freighted with meanings that we may dimly or not at all perceive, that appear in our utterances as traces, blind spots others may see/read from the corner of the eye. It’s “the shock of recognition on the face of the dying // that, in a Rembrandt sketch, or I saw it once / in a painting by Ingres, though he had not / put it there.”

In the landscape of *Gravesend* none of us ghosts or will-be ghosts (a distinction Swensen makes academic with her fragments, elisions, and layers) escapes “the wheel” of time. In one of the more fragmented poems in the collection, “Who Only Living,” she describes knowing as “a grey scale,” ghosts, words, and living beings “always ambiguous,” unpaintable, unsayable, known only by their effects “on leaves on trees on things

in the world.” Indeed the fragments in these poems are themselves ghostly; we experience them as disembodied half breaths on the backs of our necks; we begin to perceive them, that is, and as soon as we attend—gone.

The speakers in the fragmented utterances beseech history, asking the dead to reveal what the past might mean, but like Brimhall’s dead prophets, Swensen’s “remain / indeterminate and cold” though “the dead were thought to know everything.” The living figures in “History” expect this wisdom from the dead because they see ghosts as “suspended in the middle of the story,” yet both here and in Brimhall’s poems the living seem the most suspended—trapped where “God is slow and the face you see at the window / is your own,” trapped, as Brimhall has it, between “the garden” and “the singing bones.” The middle of the story is the best, the only, and the hardest place to be, particularly if one can make no sense of either death or prophesy, a problem Swensen seems no more eager to resolve than Brimhall. Here we sit, then, “stretching [our] arms out so far they would hurt,” holding “a candle in the burning hand as the cradle [goes] up in snow.”

But if, in this dauntless, delicate book, we are tempted to assert that we know we are temporary, that “There is no cure // for anything,” and that the grave has no end, Swensen unseats even our certainty that the grave is an end without diminishing the weight of mortality. In “Kent” she claims, “Once there was a death / that seemed to deserve it, but that was an illusion. Once there was a / death, but that was illusory, too. And all over Kent, someone is still / heading up the stairs, lighting the way with a match.”

In Swensen’s poems we are already ghosts, haunting our own present moment like light from dead stars. She describes an encounter in “Varieties of Ghost” with that “errant” who

faces you and is not so empty, now it turns back and faces you
that remembered you that forgot to say something was
forgotten because the day

arrayed itself in overlapping screens a superimposition of
scenes in which

→

someone a century later crossing a street turns around too
quickly and there you are

a rip in the air through which the endless endlessness that
replaces us calmly stares

Time here becomes not only endless but simultaneous, tangled in such a way that we can't tell anymore who is haunting whom, our own solidity thrown into terrifying question as we're projected as the past of a future we won't live to see but which may somehow see us. Swensen makes us all, then, both fleeting and omnipresent, both indelible and already dead: "And silently trailing through me will you ever be / a sound in an empty house an inexplicable mark that, washed off, grows dark."

This may be, for me, the most important message in *Gravesend*, in which ghosts are much less an emblem of transcendence than a blending of mortality and eternity. We will live only so long in these bodies, yes, but we will, each of us, haunt history, and the earth, forever. As Swensen observes in "Old Wives' Tales," "*Whatever you do is forever done.*" My footprint—whether existential or carbon—marks, matters.

■

And so we might return to Emily Dickinson, who tells us, "Nature is a haunted house—but Art—is a house that tries to be haunted." Nature haunts *Our Lady of the Ruins*, whose landscape evokes a pre-industrial lushness more than a post-apocalyptic wasteland. A single image drawn from among many—"minnows // swimming in a drowned girl's lungs"—contains all the news we need for us to recognize that the earth and its creatures are both tenacious and fragile, that animals (crows, deer, wolves, people) live and kill and eat and mate and die and give rise to more life. Nature—human nature included—is beautiful and murderous; it takes no interest in our individual desires or fears, nurturing and destroying indifferently. Only we would-be ghosts are capable of reading the signs and acting on them. *Our Lady of the Ruins* and *Gravesend*, through their precise and slippery visions, their relentless intelligence, and their gorgeous, burning music, make me want always to apprehend what the haunted moment holds and to take care what kind of traces I leave behind, what kind of ghost I am.