

FIELD FIELD



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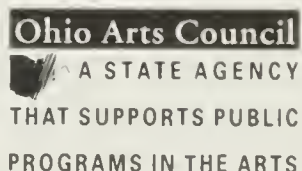
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BRIGHT WORLD

— And it came to pass, that meaning faltered; came detached unexpectedly from the place I'd made for it, years ago, fixing it there, thinking it safe to turn away, therefore, to forget — hadn't that made sense? And now everything did, but differently: the wanting literally for nothing for no good reason; the inability to feel remorse at having cast (now over some; now others), aegis-like, though it rescued no one, the body I'd all but grown used to waking inside of and recognizing, instantly, correctly, as mine, my body, given forth, withheld, shameless, merciless — for crying shame. Like miniature versions of a lesser gospel deemed, over time, apocryphal, or redundant — both, maybe — until at last let go, the magnolia flowers went on spilling themselves, each breaking open around, and then apart from, its stem along a branch of stems and, not of course in response, but as if so, the starlings lifting, unlifting, the black flash of them in the light reminding me of what I'd been told about the glamour of evil, in the light they were like that, in the shadow they became the other part, about resisting evil, as if resistance itself all this time had been but shadow, could be found that easily . . . *What will you do? Is this how you're going to live now?* sang the voice in my head: singing, then silent — not as in desertion, but as when the victim suddenly knows his torturer's face from before, somewhere, and in the knowing is for a moment distracted, has stopped struggling — And the heart gives in.

TRANSLATION

Stillness of a body that seizure has just finished visiting, has
passed through. The trees, I mean. Oranges. Figs, and lemons. I
forget
the dream that I'd had beneath them, only that I'd had one.
I woke from it. Nothing anywhere lacked definition.
Like vision in pieces, scattered, and now reconnoitering. You
asleep
beside me. This life as a mown field contained by wilderness,
the wilderness ringed in turn loosely by possibility
in the form of countless unchecked stands of pliant grasses
in a wind forever ready to stop blowing, though it doesn't, ever,
it doesn't
seem to — I watched you sleeping. All was stillness. I watched
your eyes keep not unshutting. The rest would happen
once you'd opened them. Bluish moths, strawberries, blue flow-
ers. The rest you know.

TURNING WEST

Through a distance like that between writing *from* a life
and writing *for* one, the words skeined like smoke upward,
as in prayer at first — then outward, a banner across which
a crown of lit candles had been stitched by some
otherwise forgettable,

lost hand . . .

Blue silk, the stitches;

black the banner:

Like one of those signs that give,
irrefutably, and none expecting it, the heft of truth to
what had been but rumor. Fields — more fields; horses
whose champions-put-to-pasture idleness fooled no one.
We do what we have to. We continued our journey.
Above me, the banner opens and furls, and opens.

A SUMMER

The latest once-more-with-feeling-please
manifestation of letting go, cadence of wings
folding, unfolding, nights at the pier, nights

beneath it, boat-rower, finder of lost things,
bodies at sea, the body as itself a sea,
crossed wherever crossable, *makes me feel*

*so much better about myself makes me
feel good, as by arrangement, as of arms
and legs, as for an altar-piece in the sand,*

ritual resting as much in the details, *careful,
easy*, as in what we make of them, the eye, if
faltering, not failing quite, X for speak no more,

for love also, also his mark, *you'll forget me
only when I say you can*, a rosewater X at
each wrist in the style of rope-work, restraint,

release from it, slavery is dead, everyone
saying so, singing it, believing it, let them —
a lovely rumor. Then summer was over.

ELEGY

Think of nothing so much
as light thinking of where
it will hide when all
the bulbs have gone out,
and follow Vita Sackville-West's advice
to plant flowers you can recognize
in the dark because *elegance*,
said Madame Errazuriz, *means*
elimination, a room edited
to make room for more
room so that every object stands
in relief. *I have been memorizing*
the room, Queen Christina replied; *in the future,*
in my memory, I shall live
a great deal in this room. Inviolable,
really, like the violence,
the violins in the andante of Schubert's
fourteenth string quartet, the *v* sound,
Poe claimed, is the most
beautiful of all because it is
the sound heard in violets
and viols, although I have come
to prefer the sound of *x* because it marks
the spot in *exile* and *exit*, exquisite
and exact. Before she was
Harriet Brown, Greta Garbo
was Greta Gustafsson. Once
you were here. Now you are
the most elegant of all, the future
as we imagine it
to be: a beautiful room, vacant
except for the blonde light
flooding its face, like Garbo
staring ahead at the end
of *Queen Christina*, already
thinking of nothing, no longer
needing her director's advice.

ON YELLOWED VELVET

Sur du velours jauni, performance direction
from Satie's *Danse Maigre*

At ease on the lawn, the sacrificial
deer stand adjacent to the statue
of St. Francis. They are slower than
adagio, than the Basilica
of Assisi with its ceremonial
rights, but sacred and holy like the face
of the ocean, neither below
nor above. And there's nothing
artificial about them; they stand and stand
for what touches both *don't*
and *know*. What's uncanny,
unheimlich, in German is not
heimlich, secret, and certainly not *heim*,
home, which means home can't be
where the heart is but the Hôtel
Tassel in Brussels, whose staircases
turn and let down their lips
to meet you, whips unfurling
like vines. Freud said we'll know
the uncanny when surprised
by some *heimlich*, some fear or
desire we've repressed
come home, pressing
the shore like the ocean's thin
lips as they sink
into sand. What's left
when the white-tailed deer have
disappeared in the woods will be
cloven, heart-shaped
tracks. While you sit writing
at your *bonheur du jour*, the woods fill
with accent trees or, if
you prefer, eccentricities.

AFTER GAETAN PICON

*All seeing is joy
when it is simply seeing.
It is from the mind
that the trouble comes.*

When it is simply seeing
the eye is lucid, whole;
the trouble comes
when the mind divides.

The eye is lucid, whole,
illiterate, agnostic;
where the mind divides,
the worm of blindness enters.

Illiterate, agnostic,
the stunned eye falters;
enter the worm, blindness,
the serpent, text.

The stunned eye falters.
It is from the mind,
this serpentine text.
Only seeing is joy.

ULYSSES, TOO, WAS SOMETIMES DOWN AT HEART

The way it happens, we go way up,
then way down. Hormones soak us. A watery
solicitation insinuates, whispers, promises:
our tissues quiver for an hour or half a day.
Then the tide turns, and we touch bottom.
We didn't do, or forgot. There was a resolution
above us. High, out of reach. We have learned to
hear the sound of a rain cloud forming. A mast
nearly snaps. We make that promise again —
to be steadier, to spend the highs slowly. We picture
an even channel flowing between two rocks. Once,
we stood above them and could see forever. Later,
we escaped with our lives. Names for these rocks
were already known in the age of the classics.
We know because we founder. Become inert.
They were gods, once: Mania and Depression.
In a religious time. A time of voyages.

Fred Marchant

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

It meant you could face your accusers.

It meant there was no place to hide.

It meant you would not sleep, or carve your name on your arm.

Or give anyone the finger.

It meant you did not have to wave your hand as if you were
drowning.

It meant you really did not have to have the answer.

Since there were only a few of you, across from you,
it meant you studied their faces as you would the clouds outside.

It meant you might not totally forget them.

It meant you were roughly, sometimes, just about equal.

In the center before you there was nothing unless one of you gave
it.

It meant that when you were gone, everyone felt it.

It meant that when you left, you felt you hadn't.

That you still had a place at the table.

That it might appear later in your life as one of the particles
that float in on a bar of sunlight, reaching this room you have
settled in.

The particle rests on the table and moves with the planet.

And does not lie.

LOOKING-HOUSE STANZA

Inland, before the roads were made, there was nothing but fields and a gray tower made of sea-shell paste and limestone. It tilted in the pasture, looked a little mad. Closer was a river that was both dark and sparkling, as it had cut its way deep into the ground, changing as if it were a living thing moving through a living thing. The ground as the ground likes to tell us had mostly to do with memory, and the idea of memory, which to those of us who forget, are not the same thing. The things we remember, or choose not to, and those we forget, blend into the hills where the sheep graze, and sip from the waters that run just under lavender. You could stand there yourself, staring out to where melancholia blew like a storm in off the North Atlantic. You could do as we did, wade through the rivulets, and you would think you were just lonely for home, but then the sun would shift, and there you'd be, at the edge of a field where an abandoned, rusting car has a dog secured to its steering wheel, a leather lead running toward freedom and heaven and all that existence promises. The Looking-House already would have slipped a few more inches toward the sea.

V. Penelope Pelizzon

from THE MONONGAHELA BOOK OF HOURS

xi.

As if we needed more reminders that life plunges its arrow straight through us, the infant girl, a few days old and still charged with her mother's hormones, begins to bleed, a diminutive period as her snail-sized uterus sheds before falling dormant for a decade. All the eggs she will ever have are already double-clutched within her.

An industry of pastel babywear tries to camouflage our beginning like this, implicated, sticky and sexual. We want to sweeten it, and sweet it is, though not buttercup sweet, not sky-blue sweet, but sweet as a dark river's cantillation.

Christopher Patton

TAMMUZ. ISHTAR.

from dark, from inward, from acid recess,
an emergence

from dark, from inward, from acid recess,
an emergence incomplete & continual

emergence. Purgation

Cor ne edito. Pythagoras

November. Colour subsides. Earth subsists. Cabbage soup,
potato, fire.

The day is strong. Nothing can deface it.

(*Ishtar speaks*)

my lord, fingering
the flute of lapis, bearing the carnelian ring, *my lord thou art*

— not I no not I no such as that

broad beans and lentils
a winter rye a few gathered, the rest ploughed under for a
green manure

ox-drawn a plough turns the earth as the earth turns under
imperturbable constellations

— You're afraid.

— Yes.

— I'm not going to hurt you.

— No.

ondoyant et divers. Montaigne, of his mind

they turn in me through me in and out of me

Densities. Emptiness. Hard white heat and then vast.

A ravishing of light and air as the soil clouds up to crop

lord, my lord
thou art here now there everywhere

Grasses and cinders. Bricks in a field. Insentient. Celestial.
Wasps convening on a crumbling June terrace above the rose
garden

do me do me no harm no do me no harm

here *now* *there*

remaining me a boundless ease a few dim stars a hill brightening
one day death

Later in a dream Pound shows me his new sketchbook over
brunch at St. Elizabeths:



- * = *Lithophragma parviflorum* small-flowered woodland star
- * = *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum* gold flower white flower
- * = *Calypso bulbosa* fairyslipper genus "concealment"
- * = *Andromeda polifolia* bog-rosemary chained to the rock,
many leaves
- * = *Viola sempervirens* trailing yellow violet evergreen
violet
- * = *Phlox diffusa* spreading phlox diffusing flame

This is what I see he says when I see the stars now you try it

THERE'S THE SPRING

There's the spring
of Botticelli
with its well-known attributes —
a difficult time
for virgins.

Rotting hyacinth bulbs
stink up the corners of houses.

There's the hand
under the skirt and, later,
motherhood.

On the street corner
a fat person's selling
March cup-flowers.
It's windy.
You can smell the droppings
of winter.

There's the reunion
with wavy air when
it gets really warm
for the first time,
with headaches
and tired shoulder blades.

EMPTINESS

Your eye fixed
on a gray or red chair.

Eucalyptus, smelling of cats.

Two eyes see much
too much in corners.

Slant-light: typographer
of a surviving wall.

Silent film with
stuffed bird
stalked by a stuffed
marten.

No end after death.

The draped mirror
tries to contradict me
in vain.

DIFFERENCE

What you learn, that lasts —
the differences between
red and red,
skin and skin
after a shave.
Slowly your beard grows
through your face. Time
runs wild. Here's to health,
people say and raise a glass.
The really fine difference
among us then, when you come
down to it, is whether
you go to work or
to your guns.

translated by Stuart Frieibert

GLOBAL WARMING

Oona's nails are pink as abalone.
But she won't shake hands. Everyone's holding

cell phones, happy as clams,
in clenched grins. I'm calling

my twin ear, she says, they say,
to hear myself. My onion,

my own Vidalia, Slim Him says,
my yellow butternut, my sweet

potato, he laughs, specializing in vegetable
speech. Oona's smile curls

like crazy. It's always fifty-three degrees
below, Slim speaks, geothermally. They

are sinking in snow, knee-deep. The hemlocks
wear hulky snow jackets. Groovy

says Oona, out of date, she's in duo-
folds. It's impossible, anymore,

to say what's natural. May as well
wear feathers and skin. She's been

plucked, pruned, and brushed herself.
Oona's got a mood on.

If anyone can be anyone, we must all
be one tree, she says. Her outfit

quivers. The white fox, clenching
its own tail in its own jaw.

REFORMATION

It is fall in the woods. I go in.

A downed aspen is covered in ears: to what is it listening?

Crack of crisp leaves as I bend to them. The thrill of late cicadas.

A distant grackle testing the season with its pulse of song.

And something else, more feeling than sound. This light

Branch-sifted, granular. As if seen through a grille.

The sun's brass screw tightens. Cold places its shawl on my
shoulders.

Slowly dropping leaves reveal vaulting boughs & vast limestone
clouds.

Orb spiders have pinned web-theses to the trunks of ash & beech.

Upon our simple lives, they claim, you've built your philosophy.

HOUDINI SUTRA

The small box is filled
With me and air; the large box
Is filled with water.

Let air have its fill
Of me. When I free myself,
Water never tells.

Inside there's a roar,
But I'm playing it by ear,
Cool as a river.

Big hand for the man
Who can think outside the box
Little by little.

Escape hinges on
My wherewithal. Go fathom.
After me, the flood.

The small box is locked
Inside the large box. Water
Seeks its own devil.

He who is artful
Washes his hands of the odds,
Wishful no longer.

File me under
Up in the air. Pour me out
Like a waterfall.

Small world, all full
Of dear old air. Everywhere
I flow, there I am.

Submerge me. Write my
Name in water. Give a wave
When there's no me there.

PREGNANT AND FAR GONE

— Jorie Graham, "The Sense of an Ending"

Make me a hollow in the mountains —
gone where so many others have,
and each alone.

Make me a den
to fit this body, tight-skinned, strange,
filled up with a stranger.

Make me a land where everybody knows
this pain with mindless rhythm,
thresher threshing,

and after,
the long tired rhythmless day
and day and night and day.

Make me a hollow in the mountains,
where now and then the child will laugh
like a cold spring, shine as nobody

ever has. And love like the clean
ax that leveled this meadow
split me open.

NOT ME, I'M NOT

Not me, I'm not
that languid pregnant
one they say's adrowse
and full, a sunflower
drunk on August,
and laden as a fat
cat laved with sun,
lapped in cream.
My still-small belly's
always either a lead-lump
or a choppy sea. My legs
that ran the hills
now quiver and refuse.
Insomnia stalks. I have
to work, I have a quick
relentless two-year-old.
I'm some sort of hinge
where others swing.
I'm a kind of survival.
Waiting, watching the round
encroaching shadow.
Birds fallen still,
cows in a silent panic.
In the noonday dark.

DREAM BABIES

Their skin is like an orchid
floating in a bowl — petals
growing daily translucent,
inevitable water easing through
the surface cells. They are
water lilies, invisibly
stemmed to earth.

The babies are crying. I bleed
milk, but not fast enough, never
enough. How many babies?
Even one is a whole
drowning universe.

Away, however briefly,
I come back somehow late, late,
and the very walls are a garden:
voluminous lilies, roses
and thick dahlias, voracious
peonies open screaming.

THE RAILWAY STATION

Drawn out, drawn out from the depth of my dream,
another night train. This is reality.
The ancients sighed at river tides ebbing and flowing,
while I stand like an advertising poster in the station.
The child, hearing a bee fussing anxiously inside the window,
pins a live butterfly on the wall
just to decorate my reality here.
Having plucked the flimsy mattress spring
and made me dream of a minor earthquake,
this pounding heart of mine, this pounding heart of mine —
could it be the palpitation of the train coming?
Did I ever want to be a station for dreams?

April 1937

DRESSING TABLE

(Imitation of an ancient theme)

The world enriches my dressing table
like a market surrounding me with fruits.
Even though they can be picked up without effort,
my appetite is weak on first rising.

Gossamer, you should tie yourself to the left of the eave.
Willow catkins, don't drop into my basin of water.
Mirror, mirror, you are really annoying.
Let me first draw two slender eyebrows on you.

Yet from the joy of each pair of mandarin duck tiles
I have known the roof; I also appreciate
every leaf that forms the big jade-green *wutong* —
look, the little bird on the twig parading its songs!

Give the new robe a graceful twirl.
"To adorn is to lose oneself."
Who wrote these words for me? No more recalling —
how disgusting! "I complete myself to complete you."

May 1937

translated by Mary M. Y. Fung and David Lunde

LETTUCE

from 101
was green boutonnieres
all the way to the mountain.

There must be fields
of croutons then, of salad tongs
in another state.

She and I left the highway
and the car,
her hair still going
seventy miles an hour.

I was floating a bit
with travel inside me,
with planes inside
and the varicose veins
of maps and the mints
hotel pillows dream.

Gravel talked to our shoes, we walked
on grinding teeth, on the earth
mulling things over.

We just wanted our legs again,
to let our feet
taste gravity beside a field
where lettuce is born.

Someone had taught the desert
to rain with sprinklers
as tall as me when I stand
on my shoulders, mist

from the parabolas of water
was rainbowed by sun
and kissed our skin,
which bloomed.

There was one
standoffish head
that broke the rhythm
of row after row,

I called him Louis
Sixteen and wished
him well in his escape
from the revolution

on the horizon,
the brown hands
of boys decapitating
the field.

TO ROANOKE WITH JOHNNY CASH

Mist became rain became fog was mist
reborn every few miles on a road
made of s and z, of switchback

and falling into mountains of night
would have been easy and who
would have known until flames

and nobody, even then. I played his life
over and over, not so much song
as moan of a needle and the bite,

the hole it eats through the arm
and drove faster to the murmur
of this dead and crow-dressed man,

voice of prison and heroin and the bible
as turned by murdering hands.
And the road was the color of him

and the night was blind but the mist
turned blaze in headlights as I haunted
myself with one of the last songs

he sang, about what else, about pain
and death and regret and the fall
that was the soul of the man.

TO HELP THE MONKEY CROSS THE RIVER,

which he must
cross, by swimming, for fruit and nuts,
to help him
I sit, with my rifle, on a platform
high in a tree, same side of the river
as the hungry monkey. How does this assist
him? When he swims for it
I look first up river: predators move faster with
the current than against it.
If a crocodile is aimed from up river to eat the monkey
and an anaconda from down river burns
with the same ambition, I do
the math, algebra, angles, rate-of-monkey,
croc and snake-speed, and if, *if*
it looks like the anaconda or the croc
will reach the monkey
before he attains the river's far bank,
I raise my rifle and fire
one, two, three, even four times, into the river
just behind the monkey
to hurry him up a little.
Shoot the snake, the crocodile?
They're just doing their jobs,
but the monkey, the monkey
has little hands, like a child's
and the smart ones, in a cage, can be taught to smile.

FLIES SO THICK ABOVE THE CORPSES IN THE RUBBLE
THE SOLDIERS MUST USE FLAMETHROWERS TO
PASS THROUGH

And the little roasted flies
fall into the ruins too
and more flies come — shoo fly, shoo —
until there's nothing for them to come to
any more, nothing but sky, blankety-blank blank *blank* sky.

MYOPE

The boy can't see but what's right in front of him.
Ask him about that clock
across the room, he can't see it, or he don't
care. He makes a picture of a mountain — he's looking
at the mountain! — and it comes out fuzzy
and he puts in cliffs and fizzers
that ain't there. Sit an apple down
on the table and he can draw it in pencil, in color, once so right
I almost took a bite.
And he's got a nose on him like a hound.
His Daddy says he can sniff a rat in the freezer.
A set of ears, too: he says he hears
his baby brother crying
and I can get to him
just as he opens his mouth to wail
and in my arms it's right to sleep again.
That comes in handy, sometimes. Sometimes
a baby's got to cry.
The boy's a bit odd.
He likes books a lot.
On a hot summer evening,
I swear, he's reading on the porch
and the pages turning make a breeze.

UNCLE DUNG BEETLE

Hail!, Uncle Dung Beetle, he who
wherever dung meets dirt, which is everywhere, is our sweet Savior,
without whom
each of us on the planet would be up to our necks
in two-day-old — crusty on the outside,
soft in the middle — cow-pies,
without whom
the gloomy stench
of earth everywhere would be gloomier,
without whom
the worms would carry their burden alone,
without whom the earth
receives less nitrogen
and more bacteria eats its way through the intestines,
without whom no breathtaking
specializations: the dung beetle who lives
in a sloth's rump fur and leaps off to ride
his host's droppings to the ground, a jarred
but instant claimant,
without whom
we would be swallowing shovelfuls of flies each day,
without whom
only in heaven
(and then only after all the dead are evicted)
would it be possible to live.

THE CHAIR-CANER

What it had cost so that the old peasant gave in
who had refused to yield his ancestors' land,
cost to have the swamp sanded over, and the bridge built
and the reception for state dignitaries, he takes no notice of it,
the Sunday painter devoted to flowers,
to cats' eyes, to young girls' blossoming
on an imaginary dune, just as such things are not noticed
by the gods of this palace who smoke and talk of art
with the gestures of Greek statues. He only
knows that for painting, a sparrow in the sky
suffices, or a sun-ray on the straw of his chair
if in the depth of silence for an instant the grip unclenches
of that shadow which makes the eyes flinch.

O CARAVELS

I

A child, I knew how sweet departure was
from having never left the skiff
of hills, split open any horizon
but the rain's when it closed off the morning

and that I'd have to find at any cost
the right light so that I could fix the seas
in their places on the map and not
overflow the lines. I was ten and

had more voyages in my pockets
than the great explorers, and if
I agreed to trade Sierra

Leone for Yakoutia, it's really
because the snowy frame of lace
around the stamp was sturdier.

II

For Paul de Roux

Old and lost like a horse
outside the slaughter-house yard
already dead to any possible return
to the tenderly green grass

of the past, perhaps I'd also lick
saltpeter from the walls. Let Heaven arrange
for it to be like the brother in Turin
who licked Nietzsche's face

where everything — grandeur, terror, knowledge —
had foundered, leaving nothing
in the midst of tears and among the mockers
but a man like a road

when it cleaves the sea.

translated by Marilyn Hacker

SPANISH NEEDLES, BEGGAR'S-LICE, COCKLEBURRS

The bushes' ambush,
you're wearing a future thicket.

Hey warm-blood,
kum ba yah.

They walk to vespers
on our legs.

Talk about patience.
They say, Here I am. Send me,

and then they wait
for a lift from a dog

or a hitch on a deer,
stilts!

Surprise me, they say.
Nineveh sounds fine.

It might take the entire
epistle lesson to pick off

the thistles' little missiles.
They velcro

and go, seed sequins.
You talk about faith;

your brushing by
is a wind

and they hear a call,
their name.

They answer,
they come.

SAVED

From the concrete floor to the window sills the detritus of work is piled. Split mattock handles, dull ax heads, dinged tins empty of their putty and caulk.

Below hanging tools whose bite is still sharp, whose grips are still sound, he keeps the reamed and wrung off, the jimmied, jammed, sprung, crimped, kinked

and unstrung. Something might be needed again or serve a purpose we haven't thought of yet. In this jumbled ward of the toothless and lame,

there is a place for everything to be misplaced, a random notch or nook for the you-never-know that by being lost might one day be found.

Keeper of rebar and gapped snouts of jumper cables, give me a little of that old oil and mineral spirit stain. Keep me keeping, in vain, that one day use will come.

RED MOON

August sky cloudless, smokeless,
a high deep blue that softens
and fades toward the horizon
where the sleepless mountains float
like overloaded barges in a mist.

A pale yellow mayfly lands
on the back of my hand — translucent wings
upheld, set like a sail tacking
in the breeze, turns its whole small
body to return my gaze. Orb eyes
consider me before it lifts off,
vanishes into air. Light touch, brief affair.

The river runs black with ash
and mud, two days of rain
through last summer's burned slopes,
choking the gravel bars, cutting off light
in the water so shade that made
the depths complex, lies on the surface.
Dark days for the fish.

Dark days. Fires burned so hot streams
boiled. A stallion reared and battered
against fence rails. Yellow-shirted men
and women worked for weeks in ash
and cinders. Smoke choked the valley.
One day in town we stepped out of a store
at four in the afternoon, smoke so thick
and dark lights in the parking lot had come on.

Fires gone, the mountains bleed.

Now the first white cloud pushes up,
a tentative thought, from the western ridge,
rises into the wide blue.

Make a contrary motion, Miles said.
Put a streak of red up against the blue.
Light a backfire in memory, but keep moving.
Full moon, red moon. She's come and gone.

She left hours ago. And the man
waking alone in a dark room
remembers her motion, his own,
slow, then wild, then subsiding
into a lingering scent of almonds and ash.

BALTHUS

When the angel arrived, bare-breasted, androgynous,
its lower half sheathed in tulle
bluer than the plums in ceramic bowls propped on stools,
the vetch in the studio
revived; colors assumed blunt authority; even
yellow became heavy. Bells
toll from tinny speakers: Mozart striking precise notes
with an almost disarming
simplicity, their grace and gravity suggesting
the long marriage of pleasure
and sorrow. *Così fan tutte*. I named the angel
Katia, thus assigning
gender. Now each brushstroke resonates with tumescence.
Black mirror, red table, moth,
white skirt. *Nude in Front of a Mantel. Girl on Her Knees*.
Sprawled on a chair, Katia
pretends to read a volume of sonnets by Rilke.
I pencil in my journal:
*To assume God's face, to ponder what He incarnates:
landscape, young girls' flesh, newly
ripe spring fruits, trees full of sap, the sweetness of sleeping
children. I know that this work —
a painter's required labor — always means redemption.*
When I look up, the angel
has fallen asleep, but the plums, those black plums bursting
flecked skins, have been devoured.

DID THIS EVER HAPPEN TO YOU

A marble-colored cloud
engulfed the sun and stalled,

a skinny squirrel limped toward me
as I crossed the empty park

and froze, the last
or next to last

fall leaf fell but before it touched
the earth, with shocking clarity

I heard my mother's voice
pronounce my name. And in an instant I passed

beyond sorrow and terror, and was carried up
into the imageless

bright darkness
I came from

and am. Nobody's
stronger than forgiveness.

SITTING UP LATE WITH MY FATHER, 1977

White fire of winter stars —
what he's thinking at fifty
I finally know.

He thinks, so the blizzards will come
and I will be healed;
we'll talk

when you grow up
and I am dead.

White distant emerald fire of winter stars.

PUBLICATION DATE

One of the few pleasures of writing
is the thought of one's book in the hands of a kind-hearted
intelligent person somewhere. I can't remember what the others
are right now.

I just noticed that it is my own private

National I Hate Myself and Want to Die Day
(which means the next day I will love my life
and want to live forever). The forecast calls
for a cold night in Boston all morning

and all afternoon. They say
tomorrow will be just like today,
only different. I'm in the cemetery now
at the edge of town, how did I get *here*?

A sparrow limps past on its little bone crutch saying
I am Federico Garcia Lorca
risen from the dead —
literature will lose, sunlight will win, don't worry.

SCRIBBLED TESTAMENT

I stand before you
here, some hairy
primate's fall from grace —
one of the patients of God,
one of the orphans of light.

Having read the great books
of this world, only
to completely forget them again;
having learned how to speak
this language only

(darken it up a bit will you)
to translate my heart for you
from the original
silence;
in the end, I was

simply borrowing it
from its inventors
the dead and the brilliant
unborn,
forgive me.

CHASSEZ, MY DEAR

from this white room
or, infected
by migraines and echoes,

you will end
up marrying Monsieur. He
calls to you in his mud

green voice, I know,
like the seeds of your breasts,
you politely

crunch yourself
into one tooth-
less, sorry point. Somewhere,

sweetheart, you
are the slow steeping
of apricots, a jar brimming

with summer wings. Come,
stretch your mouth around
this: with some happy

weather and black-
market faith,
you could be the girl

with impeccable
posture, in the red hat
who jetés out the French doors,

never glancing back.
Or — O, darling, don't love like this —
you could scuttle behind the veil, skull-

heavy and hissing, startled
by the softest light.

IDEAS

Blue birds above are green when on the ground
heard they are seen and seen they're also heard
their wings extend the borders of their land
but from their feathers winged fires spread

Clouds come alive in various changing forms
agile chameleons seen by the sharpened eye
ideas and then their opposites in turn
Protean in the limitless blue sky

they're sailing through the purest excellence
of sublime laws stamped into the horizon
the stars may make the moon's games and their own
visibly present in the course of a season

translated by Daniela Hurezanu and Stephen Kessler

PRAYER

You'll find me in a suitcase, you'll find me in a car.
Lord, unbend my legs. Lord, lift me so I see.
The red moon in winter is the memory of candles,
the sky like church windows the sun nods through.
Lord, you'll find me in a dead car, I'll be gone in the trunk,
birds around my head and a mouthful of glass.
Birds that spin the head, Lord, and blood on my chin.
Am I ugly like this, hands roped at the back? My eyes
closed tight? Touch my face with your palm,
with your rough old hands that worked too hard —
A car in the field where the weeds grow high,
the trunk closed tight so no air gets in. Unknot me,
lift me to a glassy sky. Your lovely mallet arms —
I can't describe the arms that you must have.

SCAR TISSUE

What must be said can't be said,
It looks like; nobody has a clue,
not even, it seems, the landscape.

One hears it in dreams, they say,
Or out of the mouths of oracles, or out of the whirlwind.

I thought I heard it, a whisper, once,
In the foothills of the Dolomites,
night and a starless sky,
But who can remember, a black night, a starless sky,
Blurred voice and a blurred conceit.

It takes a crack in the membrane,
a tiny crack, a stain
To let it come through; a breath, a breath like a stopped sigh
From the land of foreign tongues.
It is what it has to say, sad stain of our fathers.

Whatever is insignificant has its own strength,
Whatever is hidden, clear vision.
Thus the ant in its hide-and-seek,
thus the dung beetle,
And all the past weight of the world it packs on its back.

The insect world has no tongue to let loose, and no tongue to
curb,
Though all day and all night it cries out.
Who says we shouldn't listen to them?
Who says we shouldn't behave ourselves as they do,
no noise but for one purpose?

Chipmunk down from the tamarack,
and back on patrol,
In and out of the alleyways and sunspots of his saurian world.

The thread that dangles us
between a dark and a darker dark,
Is luminous, sure, but smooth-sided.
Don't touch it here, and don't touch it there.
Don't touch it, in fact, anywhere —
Let it dangle, and hold us hard, let it flash and swing.

The urge toward form is the urge toward God,
perfection of either
Unhinged, unutterable.
Hot wind in the high country, an east wind, prairie wind.
Unutterable in cathedral or synagogue.
Unhinged, like low wind in high places.
Wind urge and word urge,
last form and final thing, the O.

Great mouth. Toothless, untouched.
Into whose night sky we all descend.
Star-like we list there
Restructured, forms within forms.
Meanwhile, the morning's sonagram
reveals us just as we are,
Birds on their bright courses, the dogs at work in the field,
Flies at the windowpanes, and horses knee-deep in their deep
sin.

ROMANTICISM REDISCOVERED

Stanley Plumly, **Argument and Song: Sources and Silences in Poetry** (Handsel Books, an imprint of Other Press, 2003)

When poets take the time and trouble to write prose, and write it well, we ought to value it highly. Here is Stanley Plumly, at his best:

One early October morning I was being driven by a friend from Billings, Montana, to Sheridan, Wyoming. My first visit. We had the time, so she asked if I would like to stop off at the Little Bighorn, which was on the way. I said sure, why not, with no idea. The weather had turned sour, with an intermittent ice-cold drizzle and a black sky. The rain, in fact, had been falling all night, and had given the land more weight, as if it needed it. The tourist season was long over, but the drive into the main area of the Custer Battlefield National Monument was still open. It was on a rise, though not too high. Through the cloud and ceiling of the sky there was little, it seemed, to see, as the open landscape diminished into lush endless moorland and undulant sameness and a gray wall of weather. It was a landscape to get lost in, even on a good day. You could see that much.

This is prose with most of the qualities that go into the making of a good poem: a precision of detail (*on a rise, though not too high*); a sense of order contending with disorder in a kind of stand-off (*undulant sameness and a gray wall of weather*); and most of all an ability to elevate small things to a new level of importance and expressiveness (the new weight that the rain has given the already heavy land). The landscape captured here is one we all know, or should. It's our America, "a landscape to get lost in, even on a good day." Now Plumly shifts his mood and tone with aplomb and elegance:

Yet standing there awhile, I was moved, more moved than I have ever been by a landscape, except the grounds at Gettysburg, which are also mapped and discovered and toured until one day you pass by accident and see, perhaps, askant. Men had died here, bravely, and had been buried, in pieces, where they lay. Even in the obscurity of the weather you could feel the presence of the power of the dead in battle. You could feel it in the roll and secrecy and totality of the land, which was a series of blind-sides and which was nothing else but this one history. It was human and it was alive. And though the dead could not humble the land, they were now an intimate part of it. Its richness.

Plumly is talking about being moved at a battlefield, but ultimately, of course, he is considering the value of poetry. He understands from his own practice that poets are much given to attempts to connect, or re-connect, the human and the non-human, the self and the landscape. He knows they help their readers connect through the communication and invocation of emotion ("I was moved . . . you could feel the presence . . . You could feel it"). No wonder then that he fastens on the realization that one way we connect ourselves to the land is by dying. As Louis Simpson once said of Americans, "grave by grave we civilize the ground." Sometimes, he might have added, we die in large numbers, in terrible battles like Gettysburg.

Something of Lincoln's eloquence from that battlefield seems to invade Plumly's prose as he takes in "the roll and secrecy and totality of the land." There's a bit of Faulkner too, perhaps, especially in the follow-up phrase, "which was a series of blind-sides and which was nothing else but this one history," and the three sentences, short and long and short again, that close the paragraph. The blind-sides I take to be the configuration of hills and valleys that enabled the ambush that destroyed Custer's regiment. Their indifference or innocence changes when the massacre occurs. They are still what they are, but they are also this new, and human, meaning.

One key to Plumly's success in this passage is probably signaled by the slightly peculiar choice of the word "moorland." Among other things, along perhaps with the unusual word "askant," it reflects Plumly's deep attachment to the English Romantic poets. It is from their renewed and renewing sense of the meaning of the human/nonhuman interaction that Plumly draws his own American version. Keats and Wordsworth are at his elbow, in effect, as he gazes at the Little Bighorn battlefield. Their saturated sense of the meaning and value of the English countryside, with its long history of human use and habitation, lots of living and lots of dying, is one he can adapt and borrow and build on for his emptier and somewhat more terrifying American West.

The last three sentences of the paragraph, then, constitute a renewal of romantic sensibility, in its most positive aspects, in a new place and time. The "It" of the third-to-last sentence is the land, but somehow also the history. To say "it was human" is to fuse the nonhuman and the human. To say "it was alive" is to contradict the fact of death. This is what the Romantics wanted poetry to be able to do, and Plumly's next paragraph unpacks the implications of his anecdote:

So we say life and death, as if that were the edge of ultimate concern to the imagination, when the real edge is between life and more life, memory and wish. The powerful imagination does not work, as every good poem reminds us, unless it comes to an edge, makes its pass, and, one way or another, returns. It surely, in a lifetime, gets harder and harder to get back. And a lifetime can be barely thirty years, as it was for Plath and Emily Brontë and almost for Keats. They were nourished by the very thing that would bring them down. That was their intensity.

The essay's title is "The Abrupt Edge," a term drawn from ornithology, acknowledging the importance to birds of areas where one type of cover and vegetation gives way to another, "where

the advantages of both are most convenient." It has been a meditation on writers like Keats and Plath and Brontë, set in the landscapes where they wrote, the "edges" where their imaginations crossed over and came back and then finally crossed over for good. In its ranging around to discover poets and their use of borders it has also touched on Whitman and Roethke, as if to show that the distinctive Romantic ecology, poets as birds at borders and edges, can occur over and over again, in multiple times and places. This gesture makes Coleridge and Keats our contemporaries, of course, and sidelines historical accounts in favor of a view of poetry that is, if not timeless, at least more like an account of recurrent natural cycles than of linear, tragic, and strictly human time.

We don't have to argue, of course, that all poetry must mediate between the human and the non-human, between historical time and cyclical patterns in nature. Poems can stay within the realm of the human, handling politics, psychology, sociology, history, and the like. But since my own preference is for poets and poems that tackle that large issue of what it means to be human by investigating the borders with the non-human, I am quite taken with Plumly's account, and with his particular way of going about his defense of poetry. And if his attachment to Keats and Keats's nightingale sometimes seems a little excessive, I can accept it by reminding myself of the ultimate breadth of the argument it proposes.

In the essay that follows "The Abrupt Edge," for example, "Words on Birdsong," Plumly risks being called both naïve and sentimental. He has been to a reading in which a younger poet confesses to changing the "facts" behind a poem in order to accommodate its rhetoric; what was originally an account of a friend's disorder or illness is made into an account of his death, so that the poem can become an elegy, the change being more appropriate to the tone and diction the poet has come up with. So the poet writes an elegy for a friend who has not, in fact, really died.

The "sophistication" of making the rhetoric dominant, of saying that poetry is mostly a playful manipulation of language, is fashionable and postmodern. To resist it by invoking the

Romantic poets is probably to make one's arguments easy to dismiss in our current artistic climate. Yet Plumly's propositions gather a considerable power as they accumulate:

Without the truth-telling knowledge of its source, poetry's language is a siren song, a call from the cave of winds. But such knowledge is not isolated or limited to the individual talent. There is also the tradition. Anyone who writes a poem marries, for better or worse, the experience behind the poem as well as the experience it engenders, while at the same time acting as a connector of the art to the poetry of the past, to specific, relevant poems, and becoming, in turn, a transmitter of poetry into the future . . . to, again, specific, relevant poems.

Homer and Eliot come to his aid here, but he is also making Eliot's ideas about tradition and the individual talent more Jungian, more collective and communal, as the next sentence makes clear:

The archetypes of our common and communal experience find their forms in our poems; the integrity of their expression depends on the individual truth of the archetype, on how responsible the poet is to individual, archetypal experience.

This seems to me to set out the poet's responsibilities to self and community with notable clarity and eloquence. Of course we can go about undermining terms like "individual truth" and "integrity." Everyone knows how to play the relativity game these days. But Plumly's resonance rolls on, for me convincingly:

Just as our poetic forms are reinvested generation after generation, so is our community of experience. If we can lie about the death of a friend for the happy convenience of our small moment with the art, clams will play accordions, and fancy replace the imagination. Lying about

death, about this fundamental shared experience, we call into question, by implication, the values of all the elegies that have preceded us—we call into question the very name of the experience. Lying about death makes death itself a lie. And turns it into the anonymity of an abstraction, a linguistic conversation.

From this firm and illuminated vantage point, Plumly goes on to discuss the archetype of birdsong and to offer a nuanced review of the context and circumstances that led Keats to the writing of the nightingale ode: his brother's death, the encounter with Coleridge on Hampstead Heath, the history, both mythical and natural, of nightingales, and Keats's own oncoming illness and death. He writes of these things with a familiarity and ease formed by long study and deep admiration. And he produces, of course, a powerful counter-example to what was probably a rather cheesy little elegy by the nameless postmodernist poet. Invoking tradition is one thing, and it can feel irritating, even petty. But making it live and breathe, recapturing it in archetypal form and meaning, is no small distinction. Again, from the later part of the essay:

Whatever the mysteries or multiples of the sources of a lyric poem—and all lyric poems, regardless of their achievement, begin with the same ambition—however distant the inspiration, however finally transformed the original experience is, the fact remains that fact itself—physical, existential fact—exerts an equivalent pull of gravity while at the same time authenticating the future. Like every other art, the making of a lyric poem exists on a time-line—the poem's future is made out of its past, its success out of its sources.

This means, among other things, that subjective lyricism is not simply self-absorbed or self-aggrandizing. "The imagination, an event into futurity, depends on its empiricism, on its evidentiary gravity, on events of personal history, not in order to play with

the toys of personal knowledge but in order to release our powerful and catalytic experiences into archetypes." Hence the value of the nightingale ode, and hence also the value of Plumly's careful account of its composition.

The two essays I've been discussing belong to 1986 and 1992, and one is happy to have them together, leading off this book. If the rest of the collection does not quite match them, it certainly has other kinds of rewards to offer. There is an essay on Whistler's Nocturnes, two short pieces on Keats's "To Autumn," and an interesting piece called "Autobiography and Archetype." Readers may find the essay called "Dirty Silence," originally a lecture, rather hard going. Its opening paragraph is contorted and dense (one wonders how its auditors managed to follow it). But persistence will be rewarded. It complicates the polarized issue of free versus formal verse with great intelligence, and its discussion of Robert Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas" almost matches Plumly's fine account of Sylvia Plath's "Blackberrying" in another balanced and thoughtful essay titled "What Ceremony of Words."

Any collection of this kind will produce different favorites and may come to seem a little patched together. Towards the end of my time with this book I found my interest waning sharply, and realized it was because I was reading short reviews from the 1970s. No matter how insightful—and Plumly is never less than an unusually acute reader of contemporary poetry—these pieces date, and what Plumly thought of, say, Tess Gallagher or Dave Smith almost thirty years ago will probably interest fewer readers than he would wish. While wondering about the inclusion of such material, I can close by stressing the overall excellence of this collection, especially the first two essays, notable for their lucid and powerful writing, their ability to assemble diverse materials, and their staying power in a world where poetry fashions come and go, but certain truths endure.

David Young

AN INVASION OF FLOWERS, A SHAMBLES OF DOGS

L. R. Berger, *The Unexpected Aviary* (Deerbrook Editions, 2003)

Eric Pankey, *Oracle Figures* (Ausable Press, 2003)

James Galvin, *X* (Copper Canyon, 2003)

Heather McHugh, *Eyeshot* (Wesleyan, 2003)

Michael Teig, *Big Back Yard* (BOA Editions, 2003)

Poems that give me something true—that tell me what I already know but in such a way that I don't recognize it until it's upon me: those are the poems that make me most glad I read them. It's not that I'm happy that I read them, exactly: I experience a complex pleasure central to poetry that includes sadness as well as joy, heaviness as well as humor, hope and its opposite, and even rage—all of these and more in their greater and lesser forms.

In my yard today, deer browse the bushes as the temperature drops to 10° F. And today, browsing through a stack of books published in the last year, I find myself believing I have more in common with the deer, something beyond my usual dark thoughts about our two species being overabundant, outstripping the earth's ability to sustain us. We are both looking for our kind of nourishment.

Mine is often bittersweet. Sometimes the effect is achieved by means of a turn from one tone to a very different one, as in this poem of L. R. Berger's, from *The Unexpected Aviary*:

The mattress is laid outdoors
as if this were natural.

I am speaking to a friend
on a phone, my legs still tangled
in the knot of a cool cotton sheet.

I describe to her in detail
the sumptuousness of the hibiscus
flowering above the mattress,
a tree heavy with red leafy blossoms

like drowsy birds perched
all together in a breeze.

Some swoop soundlessly down.

My first lover sleeps beside me,
the one so deliberately kind.

Then the invasion begins,
hundreds of soldiers in khaki uniforms
dropping like blossoms,
parachuting from the sky—

as many soldiers as blossoms
landing feet first, heads
snapping left, snapping right.

They trudge in heavy boots
off after each other, trampling
the fallen hibiscus,

marching toward the front lines
which are always nearby.

The poem revisits Eden, creating an idyllic place of oneness with nature where even a mattress might be perceived as some kind of botanical form. While the presence of a phone ensures we don't lose sight of the dreamscape's modern setting, the introduction of the "first lover" keeps the Eden theme clear. The innocence is intensified by the fact that the lover is sleeping and that he is "the one so deliberately kind."

And then the fall, predicted by the title, which is "Dreaming of the Front Lines." In this case the fall is literal, enacted by hundreds of soldiers drifting from the sky like khaki blossoms, the knowledge of evil blooming in their parachutes. Hindsight gives new meaning to the red color of the blossoms and their falling, and also to the phrase in line two, "as if this were natural."

In the following poem, from Eric Pankey's *Oracle Figures*, the turn, while it comes quite late, similarly changes the effect of the poem completely.

SHADES BEFORE AN OFFERING

They stand before me as the stirred air
Outside a swarm, a ghost of salt
In suspension, shadow wrapped in shadow.

My habit of flame gives them shape:
A mass that tosses and settles, tosses
Like drafts in a wind, loose pages,

Scribbles amid the fog and ether,
Scribbles and scratches upon vellum.
No words can tempt them to step forward.

No barley or wine, blood or honey.
No opiate incense. No dram of sleep.
No words can tempt them to step forward

Again. They recognize my hands.
Folded in prayer, for what they are:
A rude shambles, the locus of slaughter.

Pankey's voice is elegant, his language as lovely as the images it carries. The way "stirred" is accurate for both the air outside a swarm and salt in suspension is both delicate and vigorous. The suspension of the poem's forward movement in stanza four, and the return to that movement where it left off, with the repetition of the line "No words can tempt them to step forward" but with the addition of the crucial word "again": these are masterful. The shades had almost come to seem harmless, wrapped in the dreamy diction of *vellum*, of *opiate*, of *dram*.

But they know something disturbing, something that the poem tries to resist but gives way to in the last line. Again, the lan-

guage is carefully used as the tone shifts dramatically under the weight of this knowledge. Rude it is to know that being alive means participating, no matter how one tries to avoid it, in slaughter, a fate foreshadowed by “shambles,” which is not only chaos but bloodshed, a slaughterhouse—the killing floor or field, the place of the human and, in the poem below, the animal *not with us*. So it is that those who have escaped this life do not wish to return.

The deer linger, lowering their heads to nibble on ivy and then raising them suddenly, ears swiveling, poised to flee. They have many enemies, including me—although my contribution to their demise is not that I plan to have venison for dinner but that I drive a car, fly in planes and buy produce that is shipped by plane or truck, run lights at night and heating or cooling systems depending on the weather—in short, that I suck down more than my share of the earth’s bounty. The fact that I am contributing to my own demise and possibly that of the planet is an irony the deer cannot appreciate. They simply fill their mouths, their stomachs, with greens.

NATURE, BESIDE HERSELF

Nothing is at one with nature,
Not wind or wind-tried trees,
Not arriving grass,
Not famished coyotes or lovesick whales.
How do I know?
Interviews.
Without the part
Where I point out the obvious—
The not with us—there’s no such thing as nature,
Is there?
It’s just another everywhere where
We loiter
Outside in order
To side-glance in.

This is from James Galvin’s excellent sixth collection, *X*. The

irony of what's said in this pared-down poem (a tone that culminates in the wry, single-word line "Interviews"), is reflected in the deliberately flat diction. Deliberate awkwardnesses such as "everywhere where" and "side-glance" steer the poem away from the easy sentimentality of unity that the term "nature poetry" brings to mind. We and the other creatures inhabit this "everywhere," each looking sideways at the others from a particular perspective. (The mention of whales reminds me that the placement of their eyes is such that they can see only to the sides, a fact that explains why they occasionally ram boats head-on—a literal level of meaning that Galvin may or may not have intended.) The poem is a small box bursting with paradox: nothing is a part of nature, not even Nature, who is "beside herself," another loiterer on the plain of "everywhere."

Here is another poem of Galvin's:

SO LONG

I look down at my hand and there's a wrinkling ocean in it.
A halcyon nest rocks on careless waves.
Small in the bottom of the nest, fledgling, my father curls.
He doesn't look so good.
What I say, what he says, what does it matter?
I've got this ocean in my hand, and there's no cure for that.

This poem too has Galvin's characteristic anti-sentimentalism. The flatness of language here is accentuated by the fact that all the lines are end-stopped, creating a sense of finality befitting the last line. "Wrinkling" is nearly wordplay, and eases the reader's access to the mental palimpsest of the hand/ocean image.

Each of these poems has a moment of humor that wins me over; above, it was "Interviews"; in this case it is the fourth line, "He doesn't look so good." The surrealism of the image gives way at this point to a kind of fateful practicality: what really matters, after all, in the face of the human circumstance? (The word "cure," incidentally, brings to my mind a line from William Matthews' "Manners": "Yes, there's a cure for youth, but it's

fatal." While Matthews' poem is quite different in texture, the poems intersect on the word "cure" used with equally ironic tones.)

Heather McHugh's language is like Galvin's in terms of being idiosyncratic, but her voice feels less spoken and more written to me (I'm not criticizing here—both positions are strengths). McHugh's poems are more acrobatic, enlisting word-play and neologisms, as in the title below and the way it works against the first line. In this poem her idiosyncratic, staccato American idiom still harbors an irony that is at root similar to Galvin's. Here is an example, from *Eyeshot*:

IQUITY

It too has a den.

(In all the best democracies

we watch TV.) And any child of time
(whose father is a big *bête noir*)

desires to have his looks averted
from unpleasant likelihoods.

But still Red Ridings by the hundreds could not
cuddle one bad night away, while in the den

the Buddha seems a giggle-meister. Dr. Factoid
sells some fish oil: fewer suicides in

Matsushima. Action, faction: subtlety be sacked.
The den is Poll Land: let's just get along!

Unhappy endings outlawed by a
scientific vote! No need for misery: in cine-pop

a little extra nookie on the side; in cine-mom your
hubbie hurries home. (Hi, hon.) Your honor, honest,

is not implicated. Soothers
must, by definition, say

no terrifying truths. And mercy knows
what men have done!—(that's why the one

and only split. They quit. The universal
donor is a goner).

So many right choices make this poem's take on our cultural addiction to life as a dumbed-down movie work. Wrapped in the the fireworks of language, the dark message comes across with fluid cheeriness designed to disguise its bite. In fact the poem goes out of its way to let us off the hook: "Your honor, honest, // is not implicated." It's all right to let ourselves be soothed by the commercial brain-massage of popular entertainment. What "mercy knows" need not be spoken of explicitly here.

Which, of course, makes it emphatically present.

The second of two poems entitled "Report to the Bishop" in Michael Teig's first book, *Big Back Yard*, uses an offhand tone to capture the way the extraordinary can become ordinary (as in, for example, the way newscasters everywhere now use the phrase "ethnic cleansing" as if it were not a horrific concept). Here, Teig's speaker creates a similar effect by attributing the events of the poem to "custom":

REPORT TO THE BISHOP II

My boat was first.
We needed water badly.
We saw others there
but none like us.

Firewood is scarce but mosquitoes plentiful.
They have the following custom:
before speaking they cry
for half an hour.

One night a spark fell
on the straw covering me.
We left after having eaten the dogs.

We took everything they had
for that was the custom.
We continued to pretend we were angry.

The speaker here is a variation of the “unreliable narrator” of fiction. Here are two cultures in opposition, two conflicting customs, reported with obvious naiveté. The story sounds familiar, doesn’t it? It is the archetypical story of such conflicts, dressed for the occasion in convincing specifics but including the basic formula for xenophobia: “We saw others...but none like us.” The complex pleasure here rests on the speaker’s lack of insight, his simple take on the situation (evident, too, in the simplicity of his diction and syntax). Given how many times this story has played itself out in the world, we might all adopt the custom of crying before speaking.

It’s probably apparent that the poems that have caught my eye on this cold, snowy day have something in common—a distinctive style and an ability to manage some very disturbing news about a world in which war falls upon innocence, the dogs are eaten, and yet in which there is “no need for misery” in “Poll-Land.” Poetry has its moments of transcendence, of inviting us to revel in our senses and to remember that we are in love with the beauty of this world. But sometimes it resonates on several emotional levels at once, inhabiting that peculiar human territory we recognize, with some misgivings, as home.

Pamela Alexander

TRANSLATION AS NEWS

Aharon Shabtai, *J'Accuse*, trans. Peter Cole (New Directions, 2003)

Saadi Youssef, *Without a Country, Without a Face*, trans. Khaled Mattawa (Graywolf, 2003)

Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, trans. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché, with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein (California, 2003)

Vénus Khoury-Ghata, *She Says*, trans. Marilyn Hacker (Graywolf, 2003)

Ca Dao Viet Nam, trans. John Balaban (Copper Canyon, 2003)

Huu Thinh, *The Time Tree*, trans. George Evans and Nguyen Qui Duc (Curbstone, 2003)

When I first encountered Vietnamese poems in the early 1990s, I tried to imagine what it would have been like if one of them had appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* during the American War in Viet Nam, in the place usually reserved for a photograph. Whether it would have extended the meaning of William Carlos Williams' statement that people are dying every day for want of what is found in poetry, I don't know; but it would have made a profound difference to me. "Informed" war protester though I was, I knew almost nothing of Vietnamese culture, much less Vietnamese poetry, which was all but unavailable in English. How many American readers of poetry understood the depth of irony in Denise Levertov's 1967 poem "What Were They Like?" in which a futuristic post-war interviewer asks "Had they an epic poem?" and is answered: "It is not remembered. Remember, / most were peasants; their life / was in rice and bamboo."

In 2003, the year in which the Middle East appears to have replaced Southeast Asia as not only the primary site of conflict in the world, but also the target of an American aggression that those of us who lived through the war in Viet Nam find hard to fathom, some poems appeared that can help us enter the region of conflict through something other than the usual news. If poet-

ing that two of the poems are sonnets and one written in rhyming couplets, recognizable through the off-rhyming of translator Peter Cole). Indeed, many of the poems that make up this very short book were published in the literary pages of *Ha'aretz*, which Cole calls "Israel's daily paper of record," and generated a great deal of controversy there. This reminds us of the limits of our own culture; but it should also be noted that *Ha'aretz* refused to publish the poem "J'accuse."

That the translations carry this provocative title, though the primary volume from which they are taken was called *Artzenu* (*Our Land*), is consistent with the presentation of the book, which also includes informational notes with website citations. The confrontational evocation of Zola's famous attack in the Dreyfus case, especially resonant and provocative when used by an Israeli poet, is a reminder that there are times and places that may raise literary polemics to the level of moral imperative.

The times in question here are the years between 1996 and 2002, which include the beginning of the second intifada, the "War" that Shabtai evokes in a poem of that title:

I, too, have declared war:
You'll need to divert part of the force
deployed to wipe out the Arabs . . .
and set it against me.
You've got tanks and planes,
and soldiers by the battalion;
you've got the rams' horns in your hands
with which to rouse the masses;
you've got men to interrogate and torture;
you've got calls for detention.
I have only this heart
with which I give shelter
to an Arab child.
Aim your weapons at it:
even if you blow it apart
it will always,
always mock you.

The directness is not new for Shabtai, whose earlier plain-style work culminated in the raucous sexuality of poems written between 1987 and 1995. In these more recent poems, the erotic or obscene is turned to new purpose: the word "Peace" has become a whore, and in the book's most harshly satirical poem the 2001 Israeli electoral candidates are Peepee and Caca. "The moral, it seems, doesn't come with a smile" begins a poem with the same title, with perhaps a glance back at Shabtai's earlier work in the "seems."

But if the new poems of political confrontation remain as disturbingly direct as the earlier erotic ones, current political events and their historical background have given a richness of allusion to Shabtai's poems. Some of this is, like the title, provocative: a number of poems reference the Holocaust, including "The New Jew," which evokes its subject in German as "*der neue Jude*" who "rises at night, / puts his uniform on, / kisses his wife and child, / and, in two or three hours, destroys / a quarter in one of Gaza's ghettos." But there are also allusions to the classics (Shabtai is a classicist and translator of Greek drama), and to the Hebrew Bible. The latter are often Blakean readings which, like the World War II references, turn Jewish history on its head; thus "Passover 2002," which created much controversy in the newspaper, ends with "the slaves . . . rising up," a "brave soul . . . burying its oppressor":

Here is your cruel,
stupid pharaoh,
dispatching his troops
with the chariots of war,
and here is the Sea of Freedom
which swallows them.

Identification with the Palestinians is central to "J'Accuse," but Shabtai's ultimate concern is "This Country." Though "The pure words I suckled from my mother's breasts: Man, Child, Justice, Mercy . . . / are dispossessed before our eyes, imprisoned in ghettos, murdered at checkpoints," there's "still good reason to stay

on and live here— / to hide the surviving words in the kitchen, in the basement, or the bathroom." Ultimately visionary, the book imagines "The Victory of Beit Jalla," a currently occupied West Bank town in which Palestinian children will one day "emerge from their monastery lock-up": "they'll drop their stones," and "one will gather his eye, / another the stump of his hand." "We too will be refugees," Shabtai says:

We'll sit shyly
at the edge of a blanket
spread out beneath an olive tree,
and, together,
eat hummus and cucumber.

Shabtai's ultimate gesture of reconciliation is to become a refugee, or, as he says in the final conflating words of "My Heart," a "Palestinian Jew."

The refugee is, directly or indirectly, central to the poems of the other three Middle Eastern poets under discussion here, all of whom, long-term or intermittently, voluntarily or by force, have written primarily in exile from their native countries; the native language, for all, is Arabic. In a time and place when every Arab is suspect (try entering this country with an Arabic name), the experience of immersing oneself in the individual world of each of these poets can be something of an antidote to the morning paper. We are helped, in each case, by translations that are so masterful they make us forget we are reading translations. But the cultural shift is still not always easy: the experience is itself a little like translation, with each unfamiliar world emerging gradually, reading by reading, until we begin to feel not at home, but at least like more than curious tourists; we begin to know, at least, how little we know.

Saadi Youssef, in a generous selection that spans the work of over four decades, gives us the most expansive sense of the diverse Middle East. Born near Basra in 1934, he has been forcibly exiled from his native Iraq three times, and from other places as well; the book is organized according to places he has lived.

which include Kuwait, Algeria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Paris. Although he has been politically active in most of them, the directness central to Shabtai's work is for the most part muted here. The most notable but not the only exception is "America, America," published in 1997 but even more resonant now. "I am not American," he says; "Is that enough for the Phantom pilot to turn me back to the Stone Age?" And then:

Leave me, pilot, leave my house roofed with palm fronds
and this wooden bridge. . . .

Why did you come to me from your Nevada desert, soldier
armed to the teeth?

Why did you come all the way to distant Basra, where fish
used to swim by our doorsteps?

In most of these poems Youssef himself is writing at some distance from Basra, of a "Country where I no longer live, / my outcast country," from which he gained only "a traveler's sails, / a banner ripped by daggers / and fugitive stars" ("Solos on the Oud"). Absence is part of the experience: the title of this volume is taken from "The Ends of the African North," where the poet sees an exiled girl "without an alphabet, without a face"; later he writes, in "The Spring":

Amman in San`a, or Ajman in Beirut,
or Baghdad a ringed orchard,
names of cities emptied and their impressions entangled.
Their alphabets have forgotten their shapes and their
shapers.

But if absence and erasure of language are recurrent themes, the richness of "impressions entangled" is more central to Youssef's aesthetic. In "Poetry," one of a number of poems which evoke his alter ego L'Akhdar, he asks: "Who broke these mirrors / and tossed them / shard / by shard / among the branches?" Rather than answer, he continues:

Colors are all muddled up
and the image is entangled
with the thing
and the eyes burn.
L'Akhdar must gather these mirrors
on his palm
and match the pieces together
any way he likes
and preserve
the memory of the branch.

Some of the short poems achieve this through a single focused impression: observation is central to the poet's technique, as translator Khaled Mattawa (himself a native speaker of Arabic) points out. But even the single image is often resonant with emotional and sometimes political significance; thus the early "Oleander Tree" in Algiers, which children won't touch because, in a negative version of the phrase in "Poetry," the tree is "lost between the thing and its image." Although the tree carries the political weight of standing "stubborn between / carriage horses and black shoes, / raising [its] red flags in the square" at the end of the poem, the larger context of Youssef's work suggests that the poem may also attempt to "preserve the memory" of a tree which, like the rivers and other trees of Iraq, becomes a point of reference in the poet's memory. Or there is this later "Scene":

The suburban trees
are guarded with transparent fog.
They weave in secret
the clothes June will wear.
Quiet like the neighborhood seamstress,
they are startled like us when we forget,
vanishing in a similar space.

Now they are making a dress for us,
A dress whose owner has died.

Beyond these short poems, and impossible to give much sense of without quoting in their entirety, are longer poems where impressions are indeed "entangled," not only with each other, but also with allusion, direct statement, memory, reflection, and history: past and present intersect, and the poet's voice and identity often blur—but image and line also recur, creating a small world which we enter from various angles, a collage to be experienced as we "match the pieces together" rather than a narrative thread to be followed. In the earlier long poems, the shifts are easier to follow: thus "Enemies," a 1977 poem written in Baghdad before the poet's final exile, which begins with a childhood memory of moving "through cardamom flower beds, / through papyrus, through orchards of falling dates" and ends with the poet in prison, but creates its movement through the shifting significance of images instead of a clear narrative line.

More tonally complex is "Trees of Ithaca," written in Paris in 1989. Evoking, sometimes with startling directness, the Palestinian experience and the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 (which Youssef witnessed), the poem relies on startling shifts of imagery, speaker, and address. Beginning with a perspective-altering image ("Suddenly . . . the world that lived within was a palace made of glass"), the poem often addresses Adam, "child of the moment"; but it ends in dialogue with al-Khidr, a figure from the Quran, who earlier in the poem is the subject of one of Youssef's most visionary moments:

He is building boats out of the ribs of speech,
unfolding sails out of the scent of lemons,
and bringing nearer cities that were ravaged by plagues
and raiders and brothers and history

This is perhaps is the ultimate work of these poems themselves, with their many cities, much history, and, even "without an alphabet," various speakers and modes of speech.

Sometimes speaking of the Palestinians as "they" in this poem, Youssef more frequently identifies with them: "And we will keep our names" is a recurrent line, followed, each time, by

a list of Palestinians, among them Mahmoud Darwish. Darwish is similarly named by Shabtai in the Whitmanesque poem in which "My Heart" is, among other things, "with the pencil on your table, Mahmoud Darwish." Evoked by both the Israeli and the Iraqi poet, the Palestinian poet Darwish is undoubtedly and also deservedly the best known of the poets under review here.

Unfortunately, It Was Paradise is astonishingly of a piece. Both expansive and focused, it draws on four of the poet's books and reprints one entire book-length poem; but almost all of the work was originally published between 1986 and 2000. Some of the poems have been published before, in versions "edited" here by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché in such a way that the voice of the book seems thoroughly consistent, the language carried effortlessly by what one almost forgets are not its original rhythms. Darwish's consistently long line may contribute to this fluidity: short free verse lines such as Shabtai and Youssef often use can be resistant to translation, whereas the longer line, especially when it's as syntactically contained as Darwish's tend to be, gives the translator room to find a corresponding music. But it isn't simply the form or its translation that gives this book both its unity and strength.

Born in 1942, Darwish fled Palestine with his family in 1948, and became an "internal refugee" when he returned; in 1970, after several imprisonments, he left the country for good. His poems of the 60s and 70s reflect this personal and political history rather directly: as the translators say in the introduction, "In a realism stripped of poetic flourish, the 'poetry of resistance' was born" in Darwish's early work.

The experience of exile is still central to these later poems, but it almost always transcends, even as it references, the historical situation. In poems from the 1986 book, home becomes metaphorical ("*My village is the bundle on my back*"; "Where can I free myself of the homeland in my body?"), and exile becomes a negative metaphor for silence, for nothing, for no place: "We travel like everyone else, but we return to nothing. As if travel were / a path of clouds." Later absence itself becomes a tangible presence: "My absence is roaming among the shadows, and tug-

ging at me" ("The Raven's Ink"). Darwish is like Youssef in recognizing the place of words in such a landscape:

This path—our path—is a tapestry of words.
With it we mend the hem of the *aba* stretched between our
solitude
and the vagrant land sleeping in our saffron dusk.
(*"The Hoopoe"*)

But while Youssef's poems often begin and thrive in concrete observation, the primary "place" of Darwish's increasingly visionary poems is less easy to define.

Here, from the 1995 volume, are the first three stanzas of "The Owl's Night," a poem that references the time Darwish spent as a "present-absent alien" in Palestine:

There is, here, a present not embraced by the past.
When we reached the last of the trees, we knew we were
unable to pay attention.
And when we returned to the ships, we saw absence piling
up its chosen objects and pitching its eternal tent around us.

There is, here, a present not embraced by the past.
A silken thread is drawn out of mulberry trees
forming letters on the page of night.
Only the butterflies cast light upon our boldness
in plunging into the pit of strange words.
Was that condemned man my father?
Perhaps I can handle my life here.
Perhaps I can now give birth to myself
and choose different letters for my name.

There is, here, a present, sitting in any empty kitchen
gazing at the tracks of those crossing the river on reeds.
A present polishing the flutes with its wind.
Perhaps speech could become transparent, so we could

see open windows in it, and perhaps time could hurry along
without us,
carrying our tomorrow in its luggage.

And here, following two stanzas that describe first a "timeless," then a "placeless" present, is the final stanza:

There is, here, a transient present.
Here, strangers hang their rifles on the olive's branches,
to prepare their dinner in haste out of tin cans
and rush hurriedly to their trucks.

The realistic detail of this stanza is strikingly powerful, a solid (but "transient") fact that collides with the haunting metaphors of the rest of the poem. Even the most concrete of these are barely tangible: the silken thread forming letters, the tracks of those crossing the river on reeds, the idea that speech itself "could become transparent, so we could / see open windows in it": these are indeed the "chosen objects" of absence.

Such objects, rarely of precise concrete observation but almost always of more subjective and ultimately metaphysical vision, are one source of the book's power. Often repeated, these objects or images give the book its unity and make of it a world where nothing is quite as it seems, where, as for the exile, the familiar world has become both absent and strange. The frequent appearance of horses, roads, wheat, fig trees, flutes, butterflies, and doves (for instance) allows for the imagistic development and transformation that are one measure of this book's progression. Often the metaphorical quality of the images is foregrounded: there is a "road in the road," and "the land has another land"; "from our names we come to our names." The wind is "chasing the wind / so that it might find a home in the wind," and "there is a land at the border of a land within me, / filled with you, or with your absence." Increasingly, even metaphor transforms itself: in the book-length sequence *The Mural* the speaker declares that "My language will be a metaphor for metaphor."

The Mural is one of two long sequences in the book, both of

them translated here for the first time. Originally published in 1993, "The Hoopoe" is a twenty-page poem in which the speaker is in dialogue with the bird of its title who "dictates / his letters to the olive tree of exile." The speaker throughout the poem is a collective "we," speaking from metaphorical exile ("Longing is the place of exile. Our love is a place of exile"). Though the poem is visionary throughout ("The universe is smaller than a butterfly's wing"), one movement is from the recurrent "people are birds unable to fly" to the imperative "fly, just to fly" of the ending.

The recent book-length *Mural* seems to begin where "The Hoopoe" left off: "I laid myself to rest and flew." The poem is lightly grounded in illness (a nurse appears and comments on the speaker's delirium), but its mode is visionary: "I know this vision, / I know that I am breaking through to the unknown." As in many visions, opposites converge, as in "the blurring similarity between exit and entrance": "*Do not corner me into dualities,*" the speaker tells Satan. The first of several "others" with whom the speaker converses is an echo, the second a "you" who is himself: "I am he who talks to himself." The second "I" has been given to him by his own "ode" ("green is the land of my ode, green and fertile"), a female figure; also female is his "special goddess," the Canaanite Anat, one of the many religious and historical figures in this expansive poem. Most of them have their origins in the Middle East, reminding Western readers of the wealth of history, myth, and religion that the region contains: this poem alone evokes Babylonian, Canaanite, Sumerian, Egyptian, Hebrew, and Christian (as well as Arabic and Islamic) traditions. *Gilgamesh* segues into Ecclesiastes, and the poet appropriates the words of Christ as well as Solomon.

The ultimate encounter of the poem is with Death, who appears in the metaphorical context of exile: "Death, wait while I pack my bag: a toothbrush, soap, a razor, cologne and clothes." This encounter is the climax toward which this intensely visionary narrative has been moving, and it is sustained through several pages of poetry that are transformative even in translation: "Every time a bird grazes a cloud I write it down. / The dream has untied my wings," or "O make haste, my horse, and stamp

my time into my place. / The place is the path, but there is no path except you, who shoes the wind." Slowly and gracefully, the poem comes down from its visionary climax:

Just as Christ walked on the lake, I walked in my vision.
Yet I came down from the Cross, fearing heights, and keep-
ing silent about the Apocalypse.
I changed only my heartbeat to hear my heart more clearly.
Heroes have their eagles, mine is a ring-necked dove,
a star lost over a roof, an alley ending at the port.

A list of what is "mine" follows ("This sea is mine. This fresh air is mine"), but the poem ends with a thrice-repeated "I am not mine." What Darwish may have become, in transforming exile into language and absence into what is beyond language, is a poet who belongs to all of us.

The last of the Middle Eastern poets to be considered here has moved farther from her native country: born in Lebanon in 1937, Vénus Khoury-Ghata left for France thirty years ago and writes only in French. The second volume of her work to appear in Marilyn Hacker's adept English translations (Oberlin College Press published *Here There Was Once a Country* in 2001), *She Says* includes an essay in which the poet explains that French initially served "as a mask behind which I could move" while "my countrymen and -women walked through gunfire with uncovered faces." While "Arabic lives within" her, she is, much like Youssef and Darwish, ultimately "the citizen of a paper country whose geography I could undo or remake according to my needs. . . . Homeland one carries on one's back like a nomad's tent."

That is the country of "Words," the first and shorter of the two sequences which comprise this book. Its fourteen unnumbered sections relate a history of language that is at once mythical and surreal, beginning with a kind of alternate creation myth ("In those days . . . words declaimed the wind") and moving into history as words, "projectiles against the cemetery wall / . . . broke up into alphabets / ate a different earth on each continent." Khoury-Ghatta's surreal images, often contained in a single long

line or two, are delightfully defamiliarizing in themselves: "Words, she says, used to be wolves / they lined up on the mountain peaks to tell the moon about the difficulty of climbing the slope"; "Words, she says, are like the rain everyone knows how to make them / you only have to wring a cloud out upside down and Noah will write with both hands." But the frequent shifts among "characters"—alternately letters or words, the people who use them, and the natural creatures and phenomena to which both are frequently linked—remind us that we exist between language and nature and partake of both.

The natural world created in this short sequence is consonant with that of the 33-sectioned long poem that gives the book its title. The "she" of the title is important: in the essay cited above, Khoury-Ghata notes that in Lebanon "I wouldn't have written books; I would have had children and cooked." The "she" of this poem does neither; like Youssef's alter ego L'Akhdar or Darwish's other "I," she is a kind of mythical repository for the poet's voice and vision, an inhabitant and chronicler of a world that is, like Darwish's, at once familiar and strange. As in Darwish, the familiar becomes so by repetition: *She Says* is richly inhabited by many kinds of trees, by birds and wolves, by wind and rain and fog and a distant mountain—a natural world with which "she" converses freely and often: "The wind in the fig tree quiets down when she speaks / and speaks up when she's silent." But nature is never far from her house, which becomes familiar by the repeated appearance of its doors, walls, and mirrors, its copper cots and its canary; there "she knits facing the peaceful spider / her skein of yarn and the insect's saliva unwind[ing] at the same speed." There is a "town around her," and villages which she approaches as she carries her daily "load of fog." A stranger who is only known by "her green shadow," she lives in a house and countryside which seem to reflect more of the poet's Lebanese past than her French present.

If the life of this alter ego is seemingly more domestic than Darwish's, it is also frequented by shadows and angels and ghosts. If not a plot, there is a kind of emotional trajectory to the poem that both grounds its speaker and allows her to move more

deeply into the past. Early in the poem "she closes her door on the trees come to share her mourning"; a few sections later she "opens her door to the winds who liberate the dead pinned to her mirror to bury them higher up in a hole in the air." Angels appear soon, "a pot of jam under each wing / and on their shoulders the bread of grief," and then a "dead man" who may or may not be the "he" who makes other appearances throughout the poem: "He shakes her so she'll drop the words she stole / makes her break her engagement to the maple tree / attaches her to the same leash as a goat and a four-leaf clover." More important are the multiple dead, who live comfortably both inside and outside the house:

Their voices alone pass through all obstacles
without sorting blackboards from brambles
deaf to the multiplication of partitions
to the division of the soil by the odor of the wheat

Their linear howling adheres to slippery surfaces
mirrors windows glasses

Their clinking of cracked crystal is their disapproval of an
earth lacking compassion and sun

"Immured in her walls" are "cold-bodied men" who "retain their reproachful looks"; but the dead are increasingly welcomed: "She unrolls her humiliated dead over her doorstep / then seats them at her table in the order in which they were forgotten." It is hard not to think of Khoury-Ghata's "countrymen and -women" who "walked through gunfire" when we read of these dead, and impossible when we read of a soldier who has written from a distance: "Children guard doorless houses / Their fleeing parents took the holy picture with them / leaving the black marks of their prayers on the wall."

As the poem progresses, the speaker increasingly references history with time-marking phrases: "At that time the earth was so high up / women hung out clouds and laundry on the same line," or "The earth she explains was unreadable at that time / because of the winds which erased it as fast as it wrote / from

right to left according to the geographers of Aleph." For a time she becomes not merely "she" but "the old woman"; briefly, "the old man" who "left his shadow on the tracks" appears as well. Here is a selection from the second half of the poem that simultaneously reminds us of exile and other disturbing aspects of even current history, at the same time that it offers us, in its last lines, a small counter-vision:

From rails buried beneath the rubble
she sees a train burst forth which isn't on the wind's station-
schedule
for which no one is waiting

The men who get off it fill the gaps between the houses
their voices enlarge the cracks in the walls

...

The dogs they set on her come back with their muzzles
smeared with light

It's not the fireflies who'll bring back daylight says the old
woman

who sees the train the hunters the dogs the moon pass by
and opens her umbrella to shelter herself from the torrents of
darkness

Through evocation or provocation, through surreal creation or vision or observation, these books may collectively give us not only a temporary shelter from the darkness of the current news, but also a multi-faceted humanizing lens through which to view it. We may have to wait to hear voices from inside a Palestinian state, or even, for the most part, from Iraq: the vast majority of the poets in the aforementioned *Iraqi Poetry Today* write, like these last three poets, from exile. But those voices will come, as they are now coming from Viet Nam.

The poetic news from Viet Nam is not all new. Though we didn't know it thirty years ago, Vietnamese poems indeed appear in newspapers, and yes, there is a Vietnamese epic—3,254 lines

that many Vietnamese know by heart. There is also an older folk poetry, the *ca dao* which poet John Balaban first gathered, translated, and published in 1980 and which Copper Canyon reprinted this year. The poems are often quite haunting, including this one, spoken by a woman:

A wind sighs through the flame tree.
So far from home, I can't even eat,
my hunger dulled by secret grief.
I take up my bowl. I put it back down.

Usually governed by quite strict rules regarding syllables, rhymes, and tones, the poems were composed as early perhaps as 1177 A.D. and, as we learn in this new edition, as recently as the Vietnamese-American War. It is good to have them in print again, to remind us that other poetic traditions are considerably older than our American one.

One of the poets who wrote during the war, and continues to write today, is Huu Thinh. *The Time Tree*, co-translated by poet George Evans and Vietnamese-American Nguyen Qui Duc, is a compendium of two books written during the 1980s and 1990s, *Winter Letter* and *The Sea*. The latter is, like Darwish's *Mural*, an emotionally expansive book-length poem. Set in the Truong Sa archipelago, where a territorial dispute between Viet Nam and China occurred as recently as 1988, it begins with a dialogue between the sea and a soldier. The six sections of the poem all conclude with "The Waves' Words," and the movement between water, sand, and soldiers is always fluid. The third section's "Soldier's Story" gives us, like many of the Middle Eastern poems under review here, an opportunity to inhabit briefly a distant landscape, to meet the grasshoppers, crickets, grapefruit, snails, and fireflies with which the speaker once lived in close harmony. Aspects of that landscape also appear in the shorter poems of the first volume, which includes "Asking":

I ask the earth: How does earth live with earth?
—We honor each other.

I ask water: How does water live with water?
—We fill each other up.

I ask the grass: How does grass live with grass?
—We weave into one another
creating horizons.

I ask man: How does man live with man?

Rather than answer, the poet repeats the question twice, in separate one-line stanzas, leaving the words to resonate as we read the rest of the book and go about our lives. If the answers we come upon are unlikely to be as comforting as the voices of earth, water, and grass, the example of these books, which look beneath the alphabets and words of our separate languages, woven imperfectly but beautifully in translation, can give us one small answer to balance against the distant but still-present sounds of gunfire and bombs.

Martha Collins

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My friend Joan took a picture once,
three nuns, all strangers in solid flowing white,
peering into the Grand Canyon, that

astonishing void. I see them
from the back, a hand just so, pointing.
A head tilted. There. And my eye, poor eye,

moves from one to the other to the other,
restless. And pleasure? The canyon's vast
and empty, and endlessly still. And so small,

my looking at their looking.

(from "The History of The")



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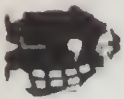
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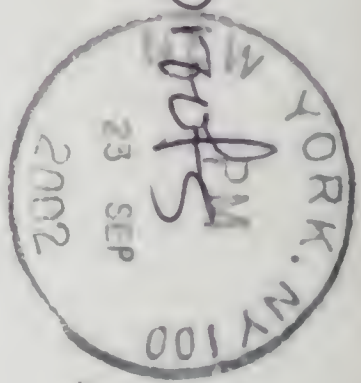
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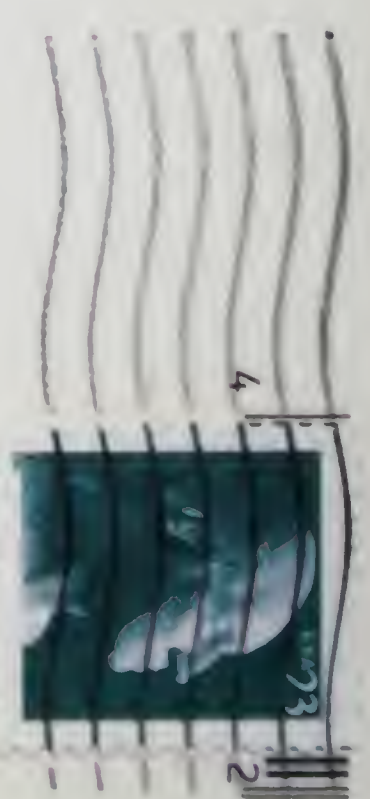
Hi Field - the proofs
look great.



Thank you

(This is me -
signing off)
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