# FIELD

# FIELD

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| *EDITORS* | *Stuart Friebert*<br>*David Young* |
| *ASSOCIATE EDITORS* | *Alberta Turner*<br>*David Walker* |
| *BUSINESS MANAGER* | *Dolorus Nevels* |
| *COVER* | *Stephen J. Farkas Jr.* |

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## WALKING HOME

Good Friday then,
March, the month to remember nothing though some of us try —
crocus, and the tiny iris, perfect memories they have
coming up the same way, out of god-knows-where,
the bleak lush bottom of things.
                                        It's the high sweet gloom
of church, this air,
late afternoon on the street, all the flowers going inward,
not anything like sleep. Lamps on in the houses,
one after another until the moon
is just the next lit window
hung high overhead.
                            Good flowers, I say to their darkness, good
walking up the steps.

## AT THE Y

In the pool with huge fish on the wall,
light there, and that chlorine blue,
the old women grabbed
the sides and walked all winter
up and down the water, one
with a tube up her nose and taped there,
one with a neck brace,
shrunk delicate as a child, and others —
I can't remember how many.
                                        I'd watch their thin backs
breathe as they walked away.
I'd squint
from the skylights. Even a sigh
had an echo there, that sweet water
an eye with no
brain behind it to speak of.
                                        They'd smile at me,
so exhausted in the locker room.
They'd smile as they
came toward me through the water
where I stood
and fiddled with my goggles, always
fogged up. Above us
the lifeguard was a high eclipse, in earphones,
his eyes rolled sideways, this body
barely holding in
another body that swayed and whirred
and wouldn't come back.
                                        But I'd dive down
to a deeper nothing, pale
as pale jelly, the kind with no flavor
just the smallest scent. I got so
I'd forget the whole business
in the same tired gesture my arms would make,
the long weight I carried

thinning out to the sound of blood
in my head, that pastoral.
                                        It wasn't music,
it wasn't anything at all, only
the going and the coming and the going,
the hard breath between.
I could leave it quick. After so long, I'd
pitch backward against the side
and hang there. We wake from the dullest dreams
that startled way, and lie
down again in the dark.
                                        I'd lift my blind goggles —
the boy guard folding towels now, quiet,
bored with his misery. But those women
taking it so patiently, up and down the shallow end
where danger was
exact and unending.

## UPSIDE DOWN IN THE RAFTERS

Squeezing through some crack in the house,
it came into my sleep and I woke to the sound
of furred wings flying through darkness, no
light in here at all, the way they like it, drawn
to absence and the steady breath of
one woman in her bed alone dreaming, a woman
in a hospital bed waiting for the prognosis,
waiting for her name to come up
on the screen and all those people on the bridge
watching three moons rise in the sky knowing
they were about to die, but still afraid to kiss each
other on the lips. It was that kind of
year, and me wondering which gap in the trees
a person could disappear through.
I had no idea how I was going to get it
from the house, or how
I was supposed to live with it
upside down in the rafters.
Last night, on the pond, my daughter and I
sat in the canoe watching bats feed
around us, the thrum of insects
palpable, everything eating and being eaten
in the same stroke. The sun was gone and the birds
were back up in their trees with their beaks
shut, but the black sky was full of wings, bats
flicking in and out above our boat, bats snapping
bugs in mid-air then sweeping back up and around
as if to eat the dark between us.

## CAIRNS

These hills are full of rocks.
In the fields sometimes it looks
like they've been planted, stuck in the ground
on purpose like potatoes.
When I was a child, my brothers and I
rode the stone boat behind our father's tractor.
It was a long, flat, wooden barge
and we sat on it while someone
plucked boulders from the fields,
threw them onto the boat.
I remember the tractor noise
in front of us, rocks
accruing around our feet,
the smell of newly plowed soil.
How the field gleamed like a lake.
I remember the boat full
of boulders, but I don't remember
who was doing the work, or what we did
with the rocks after hauling them
from the field. Whatever it was
my father might have been building.
It was a strange crop, the boat
that would not float, and the children
piled up at one end.

## I HAVE SET MY HEART ON THE SPARROW

*It is as if one set out to love one of the sparrows flying past and behold, it has vanished . . .*
— Marcus Aurelius

One world is always beginning.
The cows meet like the burdens of sleep
in a field, each one
bearing a white part a black part
of the map. I snow

right there, they hardly notice
interference — memory —
They mean to freeze with
their eyes set longingly
on the farmhouse,

eyes like mud trying
to say *love*. Eyes like cows
loving a house, or deciding
smoke from the chimney.

Smoke begins in the belly.
Mother and Father, you are there.
There, this time without me.
I can't begin —

All night I listened to one bird
from my bed, after it had rained.
I said, Imagine there is nothing
to the world but you and the bird —
this one throaty waterfaller, this
small surge, this diamond-chipper. Bird.
It sings. You listen.
It can't conceive of you. You listen.
One bubble in the darkness —

That's where I fell
asleep, where a language
I know only as a language went on
alone. The spilled connection . . .

It's the life again where God
says I can only use three details:
I arrange and I arrange.
I want to be able to say farewell.
I was told once what birds mean

their calling is only
"I'm a lark," "I'm a wren,"
"I'm a starling, starling, starling."
"This is my territory."

I dream my first memory. House,
I tell the cows
*I will love that bird forever.*

## EVERYTHING WHERE I LEFT IT

I go to another bed in my dream.<br>
At the foot of it the dog<br>
doubts me with his one blue eye,<br>
knows me with his one brown.<br>
One minute on the radio clock<br>
glows into another. Beside me,<br>
fisherman, you murmur when<br>
your wife will be home. I'll<br>
be gone —

like happiness. And then,<br>
in twenty years, come<br>
back to bed. Do you remember me?<br>
We met once on the streets of Haifa,<br>
you carrying a bag of sunflower seeds,<br>
spitting their hulls onto the pavement.<br>
We walked till dawn —

a hyperviolet sweeping the bay.<br>
I go to another sea now, crests<br>
of the ragweed outside your house.<br>
The windows soft as hems. But nothing

binds memory to memory, nothing<br>
explains where I wake<br>
and have you buried him, you<br>
must have, but when —<br>
the lean gray dog

who clicked lightly to the door<br>
and back when I stirred. Over his skull<br>
the cool fur tightened, the way<br>
a wound heals up . . . This

is what startles me.
In all this loveless time, I had
never dreamed
he could not still be with us.

## TWO SPECIAL SENSES

1. *Proprioception*

At night, when we fly,
this is the sense insurgent, the instrument
panel tilted and lit, the offshore voice
insisting we're gliding steadily over the house,
that a slow, steady turn of the head
will take us out, over large animals, necks bent,
drinking from a river, nearby; that a nod
will take us down to the salmon frantically
shouldering upstream, splitting the swirled surfaces
with leaps. With waking,

with day, each joint, each articulation
broadcasts a continuous accounting
of its attitude, configuration, position
in space. Summed, by instant, they configure
you, they inform your self-portrait, they orient
and apprise you of your current standing
in the world. Is your elbow bent now? I ask Gina,

head-injured, as she slouches in the bars;
Head straight? Yes, she says, and Yes, so
we bring a mirror, which she curses.
Six months later, after discharge, we've
arranged lunch, and she sweeps into the restaurant
spike-heeled, hair grown out, scars invisible,
so completely put back together I fail,
for a full embarrassing beat, to recognize her.

When she takes my hand, she gives me, slowly,
her gorgeous, leveling, lopsided smile;
she says Your mouth is open.

2. *Stereognosis*

You do it by hand, this,
by gradual appreciation of surfaces,
outline, heft; by holding a thing,
by caress, you commit it
to memory and can call it back,
tactile, whole, always.

When this fine sense is lost,
though touch is undiminished,
eyes will name commonplaces, but
without conviction. The man,
blindfolded, given an ice cube, says
it's cold, it's square, it
has edges, but

he cannot tell you what it is.
Like love, then. In my dream
of digging potatoes, I uncover you
and glance around, irritated.
I was not expecting to see you here,
I almost say. Then,

more myself, turn and dig again,
refusing to speak altogether.

## CLOSED HEAD INJURY

Big wigs of flowers in every room we wheel by. She
had big red flowers in her blouse that night, and cold rain
running up his arm as he throttled down for gravel.
He ran out because she had been asking him to

get her something. What it was was here a minute ago,
if I would just park him here in peace and let him
think, instead of dicking him around like some little pony.
What it was was her blouse was open and she wanted him

to get her something important. He'd go and be right
back, but now they tie this stinking poodle in a sling
around his neck every morning, this hand I want him to bear
weight on, this hand he won't look at or acknowledge, this

hand they grafted on, he guesses, while he teetered his week
with burrholes ventilating his head, to this dream of reaching
into flowers, a slur of red flowers he was watching rain
wash, a long time, very slowly, off pavement.

## DOES ENOUGH HAPPEN?

Gnats tick down
pricking
the tensed, emerald lens
of this tarn. For the hour,
trout strike, flashing,
and weave away.

All this water's
parted, day by day,
from sky, now tilting
so suddenly and unreasonably
clear. The few
winnowed clouds maneuver,
gilt by the sun
in decline. Why

is it so hard
to hold the mind
still? At one end,
the outlet tips glassy
over a length of log,
begins its effortless,

ratcheting fall
from one conclusion
to the next.

## PIEN RIVER FREEZING OVER

For a hundred miles
along this river
the ice is closing

harness jades
and jasper pendants
clink at the ragged edge

under the ice
water moves
the same way life does

racing away to the east
all day all night
nobody noticing.

## UNABLE TO CROSS AT YUNZHI

The river's fast
in this rock gorge

we stare, my horse and I
at the wrecked bridge

there's an old temple here
that creaks in the cool wind

chilly sound of a bell
rain clouds filling the sunset

on the wet sand
tiger tracks

on the smooth water
dragon spit

I'll stay here tonight
and then go back by the river road

the water's too deep
and there's no boat.

# MORNING ON THE RIVER

Cold water glimpsed through mist
sandbanks dim in the moonlight

and we anchored at Chien-wei
across from a group of wine shops

the dancing girls didn't know
we'd lost a bitter skirmish

singing a song about flowers
they lined the opposite bank.

## COMING HOME

My little boy pulls at my coat
as if he's asking me

'Why did you take so long
to get back home?

Who did you fight with
all those months and years

to win that prize
of snow-white hair?'

## SPRING IN THE SOUTH

Green for a thousand miles
and crimson orioles singing

river villages, walled hill towns
wineshop banners flapping

in the old days here they built
four hundred eighty temples

balconies and terraces
half-lost in misty rain.

## LATE SUMMER EVENING

Candles burn silver
autumn's coming
feel the cool screen

brushing away fireflies
with a delicate
silk fan

sitting on the steps
to catch this air
chilly as water

and watch the Weaver and Cowherd
keeping their annual tryst
in the Milky Way.

## SAYING GOODBYE

Too much love
somehow became
no love at all

over this farewell bottle
we can't manage
even a friendly smile

only the candle
seems to be able
to feel for us —

all night
it weeps
little wax tears.

*translated by David Young*

## DRIVING

1

The summer our marriage failed
we picked sage to sweeten our hot dark car.

We sat in the yard with heavy glasses of iced tea,
talking about which seeds to sow

when the soil was cool. Praising our large, smooth
spinach leaves, free this year of Fusarium wilt,

downy mildew, blue mold. And then we spoke of flowers,
and there was a joke, you said, about old florists

who were forced to make other arrangements.
Delphiniums flared along the back fence.

All summer it hurt to look at you.

2

I heard a woman on the bus say, "He and I were going
in different directions." As if it had something to do

with a latitude or a pole. Trying to write down
how love empties itself from a house, how a view

changes, how the sign for infinity turns into a noose
for a couple. Trying to say that weather weighed

down all the streets we traveled on, that if gravel sinks,
it keeps sinking. How can I blame you who kneeled day

after day in wet soil, pulling slugs from the seedlings?
You who built a ten-foot arch for the beans, who hated

a bird feeder left unfilled. You who gave
carrots to a gang of girls on bicycles.

3

On our last trip we drove through rain
to a town lit with vacancies.

We'd come to watch whales. At the dock we met
five other couples — all of us fluorescent,

waterproof, ready for the pitch and frequency
of the motor that would lure these great mammals

near. The boat chugged forward — trailing a long,
creamy wake. The captain spoke from a loudspeaker:

In winter gray whales love Laguna Guerrero; it's warm
and calm, no killer whales gulp down their calves.

Today we'll see them on their way to Alaska. If we
get close enough, observe their eyes — they're bigger

than baseballs, but can only look down. Whales can
communicate at a distance of 300 miles — but it's

my guess they're all saying, *Can you hear me?*
His laughter crackled. When he told us Pink Floyd is slang

for a whale's two-foot penis, I stopped listening.
The boat rocked, and for two hours our eyes

were lost in the waves — but no whales surfaced, blowing
or breaching or expelling water through baleen plates.

Again and again you patiently wiped the spray
from your glasses. We smiled to each other, good

troopers used to disappointment. On the way back
you pointed at cormorants riding the waves —

you knew them by name: the Brants, the Pelagic,
the double-breasted. I only said, I'm sure

whales were swimming under us by the dozens.

4

Trying to write that I loved the work of an argument,
the exhaustion of forgiving, the next morning,

washing our handprints off the wineglasses. How I loved
sitting with our friends under the plum trees,

in the white wire chairs, at the glass table. How you
stood by the grill, delicately broiling the fish. How

the dill grew tall by the window. Trying to explain
how camellias spoil and bloom at the same time,

how their perfume makes lovers ache. Trying
to describe the ways sex darkens

and dies, how two bodies can lie
together, entwined, out of habit.

Finding themselves later, tired, by a fire,
on an old couch that no longer reassures.

The night we eloped we drove to the rainforest
and found ourselves in fog so thick

our lights were useless. There's no choice,
you said, we must have faith in our blindness.

How I believed you. Trying to imagine
the road beneath us, we inched forward,

honking, gently, again and again.

## KEATS IN OHIO

*How long is this posthumous life of mine to last?*
*—Keats, to his doctor*

A clearing somewhere
in the lost forests of Ohio,
the last leaves
a brilliant library of loss.
A river of mist.
A sawmill's smoke and feathers

hung in the still gold air,
each ghost tree planed straight and true.
In the river
the muskrat burrows deeper.
On the bank
a shirt so clean it glows,

bride-white,
against the fires of fall —
how nuptial
the world trimmed in white
on its way to death,
blade and leaf enlaced in frost.

This is the coldness
needed to make the sweetness sweet,
the sugar maples know,
the leaves inflamed, the air too red
to breathe, as if,
parting the branches, into the clearing

a man would step who,
from a hired carriage reeling toward Rome,
had seen two footmen
in the Campagna assist a cardinal.

One loaded the gun for him,
one like a good dog beat the bushes

to flush the songbirds
favored in the Eternal City.
In a rented room
death would keep watch over his sleep
as it worsened,
over the friend who sketched him sleeping

to keep himself awake,
over the hired English nurse.
Death held the bridle
of the hired horse, held out of reach
the bottle of laudanum
Severn had been sent to buy,

the ship awaiting
a breath of wind back at Gravesend.
Still the slow rush
of water toward water, the boat
of a fountain
drowning in sorrow the piazza below.

Still the rushed slow fall
of leaves. They bury the Spanish Steps,
small belongings
to be swept up and burned,
the air crisp with regret —
what was left for him to despair?

# SEPIA

There, *buon' appetito*, was the cuttlefish
we ordered without meaning to,
served in its own ink, *seppie* in a sea of sepia
as if it were still in danger of dying for art,

the ink sac to be removed quickly and unbroken,
dried to avoid putrefaction, dissolved,
precipitated, filtered, dried, mixed with gum arabic
so that I could render the monochrome:

the waiter in black waiting
to minister to the converted
if we would give up trying to save ourselves,
poling the blackened rafts of cuttle

across the ever blacker, ever wider bowl.
If we would give up trying
to translate the menu's translations
into something we recognized from home.

*Lasagna* made into "noodle pudding" —
if we couldn't argue with that,
what could we argue over? Were cuttlefish
monogamous, or just in captivity?

The waiter leaned over us
like one of those long Byzantine saints
curved in mosaic inside the dome of the basilica,
who hovered over the faithful and the tourist alike,

bored by their own lean grace. It was late,
the lagoon no longer a homey carpet of fire.
Venice woke to the slap and sting of salt,
a dream surrounded by water.

The night fisherman was just a smear of light
across the ink he trolled.
Did he trail a female cuttlefish from his boat
to catch other nocturnal males?

*A study of water passing obstacles*
*and falling into a pool, with notes —*
did he know the sketch by Leonardo,
the water we saw hung on the wall

of a damp palazzo? Water drawn in sepia,
brooking no argument from the book-like snag
but turning aside, turning on itself,
turning into the fury that made good the delay

stroke by loving stroke.

## THE NOTHING ABOVE THE WATER

Separate a mother and baby —
after a time
the whimpering stops.
After that, in each of them,
there's something faraway, a stare.

A woman hears that her brother's dead.
Looks out the window: now
a cardinal's adze-shaped head
means death for her, only her.

Some evenings are two: one going up,
lightening. One falling, purpling.

Where you live,
a broken-down forest,
dark grain of water
through shambles; a laugh
that half-cries —
like the spluttering of a candle
dashed with water; a leaf
strung up on a raveled spider thread.
A lake shore, the dim below-trees,
the faint half-musical
swallowing of water.

In daylight you see the water,
in darkness you see the nothing,
a long crossing.

## THE MAN IN A SHELL

*for Anton Chekhov*

One day I went walking and
boom — there was Varenka,
the young lady
I'd planned to marry,
madly pedaling a bicycle
as if she were ten years old!

When I tried to warn her brother
about such behavior
he shoved me downstairs,

tumbling out of control, dignity flying away
forever, and there was Varenka:
"Ha-ha-ha."

How be a schoolmaster anymore?
How will pupils pay attention
to a man who has tumbled downstairs?
Sonorous Greek lost in roars.

Tuck in my blankets.
Things must be kept within bounds.
Draw the bed curtains.
A man should get married.
Ha-ha-ha.

## CINEMA VÉRITÉ: THE DEATH OF ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

The camera pans a gorgeous snow-filled landscape: rolling hills, large black trees, a frozen river. The snow falls and falls. The camera stops to find Tennyson, in an armchair, in the middle of a snowy field.

Tennyson:

It's snowing. The snow is like . . . the snow is like crushed aspirin,
like bits of paper . . . no, it's like gauze bandages, clean teeth, shoelaces, headlights . . . no,
I'm getting too old for this, it's like a huge T-shirt that's been chewed on by a dog,
it's like semen, confetti, chalk, sea shells, woodsmoke, ash, soap, trillium, solitude, daydreaming . . . Oh hell,
you can see for yourself! That's what I hate about film!

He dies.

## CINEMA VÉRITÉ: WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY FOLLOWS HIS BLISS

The Fairfield County Fair in Lancaster, Ohio. Shots of Thackeray on the Ferris Wheel, the bumper cars, at the livestock auction, drinking beer at the demolition derby. Cut to Thackeray at the concession stand.

Thackeray: I can't make up my mind between Elephant Ears and a chili dog.

Concessionaire: Oh, go ahead, Mr. Thackeray, get both. You deserve it.

Thackeray: You're right. What the hell, Elephant Ears and chili dogs for everyone! They're on me!

Assembled passersby [in chorus]: Oh boy! Thank you, William Makepeace Thackeray, possessor of one of the strangest middle names in history!

The fair comes to a halt as Thackeray is lifted and carried through the streets of Lancaster . . .

# CINEMA VÉRITÉ: JACQUES DERRIDA AND GOD'S *TSIMTSUM*

An intensely exciting montage of Macchu Picchu, erupting volcanos, North Pole glaciers, cells multiplying, Brazilian rainforests, $E=MC^2$, 200 MeV, undersea vistas, the Milky Way, etc., eventually leading us to the Mount of Olives, where God and Derrida loaf, the latter holding a Camcorder.

God: I withdrawal from Myself into Myself to provide a space and an occasion for all creation.
Derrida [flustered, shaking the Camcorder]: Wait a minute . . . Which button do I press? . . .

Videotape streams and spills out of the Camcorder . . .

## THE JEWELS OF WINDSOR

*Sotheby exhibit and sale, Geneva*

Back from a frenzy of glory in war,
modern in bold check and floppy tie,
he favors his left profile.
Prince of Promise, hails the populace
but George V still thinks his fidgit son
poor David — small and pretty crybaby
with Victoria's hollowed eyes.
My father doesn't like me,
the prince glooms over brandy.
And mother Mary's German chill
curves back to childhood,
endless white slide of ice.

Drowning now in Wallis, hidden
and found, he heaps his love's
lean bosom with jewels,
sends schoolboy *billets-doux*:
"A boy is holding so very very
tight. More and more and more."
Papa dead, we know poor David's story.
Here are the years precise
in jewels. Gorgeous plethora —
diamonds, rubies, David's penance
(he had not made things right)
the Alexandra emeralds, pearls
(he had not made things right)
sapphires to bring out her eyes,
menagerie of Cartier beasts,
the panther crouches on 90 carats,
the blazing leopard stalks her wrist.
My Wallis from her David.
Hold tight. More and more and more.

## THE WEEPERS

*In 1528 the shipwrecked Cabeza de Vaca and a dwindling number of armada survivors lived for a time with Indians who roamed the narrow islands of the Texas coast. His account describes their curious ritual of weeping, how as another culture might salute or bow or make the sign of the cross, these people wept.*

This is the island named Misfortune
where Karankawas are weeping
and the sea is wildly in agreement:
sorrow, sorrow.
                                    From the terrace
how white everything white is in the dark,
simplified and heightened:
parallel lines of waves fixed
as if by brush in titanium white
and the beach a long white stroke
to darkness.
                              It would be the same
even then, this edge of the New World.
This sea over and over, this trek of moon.
The wind in this direction,
this smell of salt, of weather.
                                                  And the weepers
starting up. A half hour of wails
for greeting. How are you? Not too good.
Simplified and heightened.
The castaways were impressed
with such lively sense of their own calamity.
*To this island we gave the name Malhado.*

Night makes dark mirrors of the terrace windows.
Inside I appear out there, come
so far, castaway from some
                                             old world.
The weepers are assembled, their lamentation

rising in this direction, profound, insistent,
all the years ahead
*come to an end alike forlorn and fatal.*

# MISS BLUE

*Hattie's Place, a brothel operating 1896-1946 in San Angelo, Texas, was sealed shut by Texas Rangers. It is now open as a museum.*

Thirteen steps, a landing, thirteen more
rise to old lust — second story rooms
in a rage of Texas June heat.
This is authentic. Haven't you always
been curious? A thumbtacked *Ring Bell For Service*
is the last madam's surviving scribble.

Velvet and gilt in the front parlors try
at grand decadence, but this was never
New Orleans, never Chicago. This was always
too many slow hard miles from anywhere.
The players here were cowboys and soldiers
out all day with the lizards in 109°, insane
metallic chirr of cicadas a refrain in their heads.

Here are the cribs, these hold the evidence,
the mysteries. Ten little sanctums with screendoors.
Five opposite five. The long, dark and thrilling
hall between them. The screendoors harldy censor,
hinging open, clapping close, incongruous
backporch sound in this corridor resounding,
surely, with melodrama acted on the iron beds.

There was always one called Miss Blue in #5
distinguished by indigo motif, tinted light bulb,
and something more — a peephole. A spy's eye
on the other side ogles in your mind
until you are sentient of yourself, bathed blue
and ghostly in the tilted dressing table mirror
and you see it is possible to fall in love

with your own allure. If bad luck, steelblue spike,
had driven you to this feverish godforsaken room,
back then, you'd keep your insolent eyes
on your own silverblue reflection
shining there where it's winter,
where the cold white ground is blue.

## MISSING PANELS FROM AN ALTARPIECE

The man behind the glass at the all-night filling station
counting out bills.

The hills of old snow on the roadside, growing older.

Occasional headlights
from nowhere, flaring up, then:

*

Slag heaps, salt piles, a long row of telephone poles
over miles of crystalline farmland:
sparkling, an agnus dei turned into weather,
with no one on the radio to mind much.

*

My mother once said
you do what you do
and let other people put a label on it.
Just then my grandfather stepped into the room
holding up a needlepoint rendition
of Leonardo's "Last Supper."
He had used blue thread for the saint's faces,
and Jesus Christ was orange.

The image is a toll-booth, and I
am searching through my pocket for some change.

*Graham Hettlinger*

## WAITING FOR THE ELECTRIC TRAIN TO LENINGRAD

Now we all pay homage to ice,
shuffle and skid on this platform
like pilgrims just learning to walk
through the slick stations of faith, longing
for pig iron and wood, anything missed
by the enameling rain.
Old women lock arms. A soldier stamps,
then chops with his boot-heel.
Pigeons scuttle and stab at black
unreachable seeds.

Soon it will come, we say to ourselves.
Soon we'll look out at familiar trees,
the dug-up main at Kupchino,
those dark blue stalls near the station.
Soon we'll ride to the city, its steam
and slag, its grinding trams
and gravel on a bridge,
its ancient, audible stones . . .

So we cup our hands to our mouths.
So our breath fans out through our fingers.

## NOT JUST SHADOW

It's December. From a squat
apple tree on North Leverett Road,
two deer hang
split open beneath the eclipse.

A red smudge dries by the stars.

When seen, the moon is a *Mister*
closed at the edges.
But its curve keeps pulling at our bodies,
mindful as sister or friend.

This fat shadowing is *another.*
Assassin of moments, hours.

Slipping like a lover's crawl across skin,
it smothers.
The thin blue snow grows black.

Dogs bark, asking in.
Stones stick to their icy paws.

Look how this brief visibility of time
caresses, chokes, then lifts away above the pines.
A mouse skitters out to feed.

Fiercely, a first self readies for duration,
with its now-blooded, brimming return.

## THE ARROW

The wounded man might have lost his way
In the woods,
If he hadn't had the arrow to pursue.

The arrow
Came more than half way through
His chest
And pointed the way.

The arrow
Had struck him in the back
Had raised his chest up
And its bloody tip
Pointed the way.

Such luck — such great good luck
To have a pointing arrow
In the woods —

The wounded man knew from now on he couldn't get lost
And where he was going wasn't far away.

# SIN

Lord,
When I'm at the dinner table
And someone makes a headlong move,
Aiming to snatch
The bone from my plate,
Or to push it farther down,
I want to bite.
I'd leap to wring his fangs with my hands,
I'd snarl.

Only you can tell me,
Lord,
What these urges are.
Was I a dog in another life?
And what was my name?
What did they call me?

I haven't caught myself
Barking yet,
Though I did see myself a few times
At the fence —
And I don't even wag my tail,
And I don't nuzzle up to humans.
And I don't nuzzle up to humans.

## INNOCENCE

The same idea would come to him,
Three, four, ten times.
And each time he'd think it new.
He'd even write it down.

Fortunately, his memory didn't help him much anymore
(Oh, Lord,
What a memory he had at six!)
And the idea always moved
under different words,
So many many words.
What a huge mask!

It can be said he had
The same idea all his life.

And therein lay, in fact,
His abiding greatness.

*translated by Adriana Varga and Stuart Friebert*

## TO SEE YOU AGAIN

Amanita virosa,
white and capped,
or another house

and stalk,
the brocade of
lepiota procera,

fur work,
or unfurled silk,
gown crepe,

mussels.
Coarse stone.
Chill wash.   Fog.

I hadn't visited
your house.
It was a dream.

I hadn't been
to your house
in months.

In a dream,
I would neglect
a coral, a fin,

and a handhold.
An eyestalk,
snowmelt,

bruise patch,
clam shell.
Snow-bodied, dew-

touched, finched.
Is it your soul
rising again,

this one spotted,
shy, with
resurrection pinnules . . . ?

## THE CROSSING OF ORCHIDS

The walls hold the town
against the sea and its wastes,

the houses' faint tint
of green soap.

Filiated stairs lead down
to the cloudy

pores of water,
the invisible ink

of a little empire.

What is there to do
but to spread myself

everywhere,
to hold rain

in a moment of flesh.
If I could resemble

a soul whisked up
through a fontanel.

A body halfway

out of a body.
Whereas one orchid

is like a stylaster
fan atop

an anemone head.
An orchid as the spread wing

of the owlet moth,
the furies of silkworms,

a blastoderm.

This orchid:
the necks of bitterns, herons,

ibises. The mutant
cattlyea labiata:

the curved instep
above the holdfast,

intimate in its motion.
Perverse and broken-backed:

brushing

tri-folded petals.
Here a stricken body

rises to the surface,
a white carp

breathing an air
of parachute fibers.

Disappearing, the body
is a ghostly tendril,

speechless, annunciatory.

Yet would it matter,
returning,

anyone's eyes having seen
us here?

A monster
warming the air in which

it is
jerked by a tiny branch.

## A LONG AND RISKY JOURNEY

Denise Levertov, **Evening Train** (New Directions, 1992)

In her twentieth book of poetry, *Evening Train*, Denise Levertov has lost none of the care, verbal skill, emotional force, and imagination of her earlier books, but in *Evening Train* she has used a quieter tone, a sensation of aloneness that is not loneliness, and a way of watching from a distance that she has not used before. The title poem, which occurs in Part V of the eight-part sequence, establishes this tone:

### EVENING TRAIN

An old man sleeping in the evening train,
face upturned, mouth discreetly closed,
hands clasped, with fingers interlaced.
Those large hands
lie on the fur lining of his wife's coat
he's holding for her, and the fur
looks like a limp dog, docile and affectionate.
The man himself is a peasant
in city clothes, moderately prosperous —
rich by the standards of his youth;
one can read that in his hands,
his sleeping features.
How tired he is, how tired.
I called him old, but then I remember
my own age, and acknowledge he's likely
no older than I. But in the dimension
that moves with us but itself keeps still
like the bubble in a carpenter's level,
I'm fourteen, watching the faces I saw each day
on the train going in to London,
and never spoke to; or guessing
from a row of shoes what sort of faces
I'd see if I raised my eyes.

Everyone has an unchanging age (or sometimes two)
carried within them, beyond expression.
This man perhaps
is ten, putting in a few hours most days
in a crowded schoolroom, and a lot more
at work in the fields; a boy who's always
making plans to go fishing his first free day.
The train moves through the dark quite swiftly
(the Italian dark, as it happens)
with its load of people, each
with a conscious destination, each
with a known age and that other,
the hidden one—except for those
still young, or not young but slower to focus,
who haven't reached yet that state of being
which will become
not a point of arrest but a core
around which the mind develops, reflections circle,
events accrue — a center.
A girl with braids
sits in this corner seat, invisible,
pleased with her solitude. And across from her
an invisible boy, dreaming. She knows
she cannot imagine his dreams. Quite swiftly
we move through our lives; swiftly, steadily the train
rocks and bounces onward through sleeping fields,
our unknown stillness
holding level as water sealed in glass.

The poem is not broken into stanzas, but drifts from observation of sleeping figures in a train, to inferences about the lives they are living (the man seems to be a peasant), to what has happened in their past lives, to their personalities and present conditions ("How tired he is, how tired").

She then considers herself in relation to these people ("he's likely/no older than I"). She remembers herself at fourteen, on a similar train, watching them, as she does now, and guessing at

their occupations, in terms of her childhood interests and knowledge. She would have imagined him as a country boy, working a few hours in the school room and going home to help work the farm ("a boy who's always making plans to go fishing his first free day").

The train is now traveling in the dark, an Italian dark, though whether it is Italian because Levertov has been on an Italian train all along or because she is recalling a specific night trip in Italy or because she is using dark as a metaphor is not quite clear. Whichever it is, the Italian darkness seems ominous. The silent watcher knows that both she and the other travelers have conscious destinations, and she wonders about their hidden ones, perhaps hidden even from themselves, and about the plans and purposes that are still developing.

The poem seems to wander as if by accident, giving us a series of apparent free-associations that might occur to anyone merely sitting out a journey with nothing particular on her mind. But its position as title poem of the book makes clear that this train ride is taken in the evening of a life that is beginning an important and uncertain journey. She comments, "quite swiftly we move through our lives," but she knwos she cannot imagine our dreams or the dreams of those we watch.

Reading the book from the first page, one notes a movement in both intensity and theme: from the low-keyed, detached wonder at the majesty of a neighboring western mountain, to a peak of rage at what humankind has done to its world, to an intensity of a different kind, an almost desperate yearning for something more certain than this world and someone more able than herself, a yearning for deity, even though she can believe in deity only by means of blind faith, and she has never trusted blindness. The book, in other words, is the story of a spiritual ripening.

To watch this ripening in more detail, one needs to examine the eight parts consecutively:

Part I (*Lake Mountain Man*) is quiet and matter-of-fact. Levertov has recently moved to the Pacific Northwest, is pleased with its benign autumn, and is mentally preparing herself for a sullen winter. She has found majesty in this landscape, a mountain and a

stately blue heron. She rejoices that "*This is the day the Lord hath made,/ let us rejoice and be glad in it.*" ("Daily Bread"). And in the last poem of the section, "Open Secret," she finds the mountain "always loftier, lonelier than I ever remember."

In Part II, *The Two Magnets,* she considers old gods and their rituals, those that have become worn out, either in ancient times or in our own, here or in other countries. She thinks of Medieval cathedrals, Greek idols and nature deities, stone gates guarded by griffins, Americna Indian rites to bring rain or salmon harvests. She plays with humorous distortions, such as Ruskin "walking with John Muir in the wilderness." Or she studies "The Woman at the Harpsichord," by Emanuel de Witte, 1617-1692, which depicts a young wife in a "red jacket/basqed with ermine tips" playing the harpsichord while her young husband watches from his bed, "A human scene: apex of civilized joy,/ attained in Holland, the autumn of 1660 . . . ," and she wonders whether, if that vibrant scene were "reduced to anecdote," the magic of it, the ritual power of it would have been destroyed forever.

Part III, *Ancient Airs,* is the shortest in the book, only four poems. It is about the aging of the body and of the heart as part of that body and thus about love and how love resists aging. The fourth poem, "Time for Rivets," demonstrates this struggle. The aging heart can't express love in the usual way, but can't resist it either: "Reinforced though it was/with Stoic strapping,/my heart was breaking again. Damn!" She thought of her heart as "long since well mended" and laughs a bit ruefully at it. Like an old plate, it was cracked with hard use and needed rivets, though "For the moment I'd have to make do with tape and crossed fingers."

Part IV, *Flowers of Sophia,* is a cluster of short poems, not proclaiming nor even implying a need for diety, but musing on bits of daily experience with delight or longing and letting herself wonder about the mystery above and beyond her. She observes a polar bear delight in playing with her cubs and a dog, left alone by its master, stealing ripe figs from a tree. She observes how a rare snow-melt lake in a dry country becomes as blue as "a cupful of sky." She notices that clouds over a western landscape that no

one has noticed" hang also above/ascensions, veils, ecstatic saints, and the heads of cherubim . . ." She sees a landscape from a plane and imagines the painting that might be made from "the desert pattern's original mystery." She half wakes in the early morning and finds herself not yet ready for the brightness of daylight: "I must still grow in the dark like a root." And in "The River," a poem spread out on the page, she uses the river metaphor to say, "I have enough depth/ to know I am shallow . . . I must brim my own banks, persist,/ vanish at last in greater flood . . ." She must move toward "the calling sea." She seems to have worked through her musing about mystery to an awareness of what that mystery may be and where it may be taking her.

Part V, *Evening Train*, in which the title poem of the book examined above appears, contains several other poems that prepare readers for that dark train ride at the end of the section. The most significant of these is "Letter to a Friend." Like the title poem, "Letter to a Friend" seems to drift in and out of dream, reminiscence, and guesswork to conclude that what she values in this experience is the solitude and the courage.

In this poem Levertov receives a letter from a friend (apparently female) that encloses a card picturing a woman sitting outdoors by a white-covered table. The friend writes that the picture reminds her of herself. Levertov studies the picture and finds that it reminds her of *her* self: not young, yet not faded, with a knowledge in those eyes that is also innocence, and lips that are "firmly closed." The woman is solitary, but "not sad,/ not angry, not joyful: but open to what shall befall." What those eyes express is courage: "Courage knows the price of living. Courage itself is a form of innocence, of trust or faith." As I understand the poem, Levertov has begun to trust herself to trust, begun to dare to travel that night train:

LETTER TO A FRIEND

As if we were sitting as we have done so often,
over a cup of tea, and I knew how

to read the leaves, let me look closely into
this card you have sent, this image you say
holds for you something you feel is yourself.
A woman sits outdoors by a white-cloth'd table
(blue in shadow); but it's not a café;
there are columns, masonry, perhaps a ruin behind her,
and also a stretch of open lawn or pasture,
and trees beyond. She has opened — a parasol?
or an umbrella? There's enough light to suggest
a parasol, but the coat she wears
is not for summer: passionate red is muted
almost to russet, and high collar, sleeves
that narrow from elbow to wrist, imply weight,
warm cloth. Yet the silken shelter's pale cerulean,
shot with gold, seems too light for rain.
Perhaps it is rainbow weather, flying showers
on a gleaming day in spring.
Not a young girl any more, this woman's
fresh color and shining hair are not yet
beginning to fade; but in her eyes one sees
knowledge, though in their clear, steady,
almost challenging gaze there's a certain innocence;
and her lips are firmly closed. Bareheaded,
(despite her coat) she is quietly seated,
not poised to leave; one arm rest on the chair's
green embracing arm.

Most notable in this portrait:

her solitude. She may or may not be waiting for someone;
whether or not, she looks out from the picture-plane
not at the painter but straight through time
at me looking back at her. She's not sad,
not angry, not joyful: but open, open
to what shall befall.

The image is only

a detail, fragment of a larger whole.
The context might change my reading. Companions
perhaps are nearby, unseen by us; perhaps she too

doesn't see them. The place she is in
might be defined if one saw the rest of the painting.
One might deduce from it why she is there,
where she will go. But the more I look, the more
I perceive what her eyes express: it's courage.
That's what told me this woman is innocent but not ignorant.
Courage knows the price of living. Courage itself
is a form of innocence, of trust or faith.
Your sense of being portrayed no doubt refers
to less than this; to her solitude, it may be.
It's against the rules to tell your own fortune,
and I, after all, am able only to descry
the images in the leaves, not to construe their meaning.
Some day one of us may discover the painting's whereabouts,
see the whole of it. Then we'll divine
what fortune her gaze betokens.

Again Levertov has written a key poem in an apparently random manner. She does not even see the person she is writing about or know the place the card pictures. She can only guess at the solitary courage she admires and can only daydream or woolgather her own possible relation to it. But again, as in "Evening Train," the carelessness is deceptive. It involves her self in a choice: a solitary courage as against solitary nothingness, an active solitude as against flabby passivity, and a waking future instead of sleep.

Part VI, *Witnessing From Afar*, is the angriest part of the book. Levertov reviews her battles against war and pollution, grieves for their failure, and shudders for the continuing failure that the next generation must suffer. But do we still realize it? Do we still care? Are our words also polluted? Have we been euthenized by "reproachful clarities of tense and sense?" ("Mysterious Disappearance of May's Past Perfect"). In a climax of angry despair she remembers our past moral failures, and, in what her endnote describes as a found poem, she makes the words of the Gulf War generals condemn themselves:

News Report, September 1991
U.S. BURIED IRAQI SOLDIERS ALIVE IN GULF WAR

*"What you saw was a*
*bunch of trenches with*
*arms sticking out."*
"Plows mounted on
tanks. Combat
earthmovers."
"Defiant."
"Buried."
"Carefully planned and
rehearsed."
*"When we*
*went through there wasn't*
*anybody left.". . .*

"Private Joe Queen was
awarded
a Bronze Star for burying
trenches with his
earthmover."
"Inside
the juggernaut."
"Impervious."
*"A lot of the guys*
*were scared,* he said,
*but I*
*enjoyed it."*
*"A bunch of*
*trenches. People's*
*arms and things*
*sticking out."*
*"Cost-effective."*

This poem needs no exegesis. It consists of quotes from

newscasts during the Gulf War and selects as its refrain repetitions of "People's arms and things sticking out" and "Cost-effective."

In Part VII, *The Almost-Island*, she returns to the Transcendentalists, to Emerson's and Wordsworth's sense of oversoul and begins the section's title poem with the observation that the apparent wilderness around her is a park built in the city limits on a peninsula, an almost-island, yet it is still "Nature, metonomy of the spirit's understanding/ . . . concentrate of all that Thoreau or Wordsworth knew by that word . . . 'Nature a never-failing principle/of and purest passion' . . . All of my dread and all of my longing hope that Earth/may outwit the stupidity of its humans, /can find their signs and portents here, their recapitulations/of joy and awe."

Finally, in Part VIII, *The Tide*, Levertov looks upward, not so much in affirmation as in need. She is lonely without God. She feels "in moments of bleak arrest, panic's black cloth falling" ("After Mind Walk"). She feels the need of "ways to survive,/ ways to grow wise" ("Namings"). In a four-part poem, "Embracing the Multitude," she befriends a repulsive looking tiny caterpillar, "not cute," but "you have time/ to give it your heart, a work of mercy." She asks the worm where it's going, and it answers, "God knows. /God would hide in our midst/ and we'd seek him." She wonders how any creature so lowly could claim God as its intimate. In her musing, a voice answers, "Cherish the mystery."

In the next five poems Levertov chooses Biblical subjects. In a monologue by a barren fig tree ("What the Fig Tree Said") the fig tree says, "I knew that helplessly barren though I was,/my day had come./I served Christ the poet." The tree's barrenness, it said, "stood for [mankind's] barren hearts." In the poem "Contraband" she says that eating the forbidden fruit left just enough of a slit under Eden's wall to get occasional glimpses of Paradise, like "a strain of music heard/then lost, then heard again." In "On a Theme by Thomas Merton" God searches for Adam: "God's hands/palpate darkness, the void/that is Adam's inattention." In "Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis" she wonders how Christ felt when he con-

demned Himself to die. Did not all human beings fear death? In "Ascension" God both enjoys the release from bodily pain and at the same time regrets leaving his familiar body. But He is still God and will enjoin Himself to be embodied again and again.

In the last two poems of the book, "The Tide" and "Suspended," Levertov comes as close as she can come to stating her own religious beliefs. They are questioning and uncertain, small crests of hope backsliding into doubt. Like the tide, her faith ebbs and flows, as do the stanzas on the page. But this ebbing and flowing of single waves also signals the slow progress of waves that rise to flood tide. In this poem Levertov brims. Her aloneness has created a need for a God, but not a firm belief in one. "In this emptiness / there seems no presence." "Perhaps God wants/ something quite different./Or nothing, nothing at all." She imagines images of faith . . . "They pass/as I turn a page." She dreams that she's on a train, ready to disembark, only to wake "and discover/ you have not left/ to begin the journey." And she ends with a paradox: Faith is "emptiness in a cup, and holds/ the ocean."

THE TIDE

Where is the Giver to whom my gratitude
rose? In this emptiness
there seems no Presence.

*

How confidently the desires
of God are spoken of!
Perhaps God wants
something quite different.
Or nothing, nothing at all.

*

Blue smoke from small
peaceable hearths ascending

without resistance in luminous
evening air.
Or eager mornings — waking
as if to a song's call.
Easily I can conjure
a myriad images
of faith.
Remote. They pass
as I turn a page.

*

Outlying houses, and the train's rhythm
slows, there's a signal box,
People are taking their luggage
down from the racks.
Then you wake and discover
you have not left
to begin the journey.

*

Faith's a tide, it seems, ebbs and flows responsive
to action and inaction.
Remain in stasis, blown sand
stings your face, anemones
shrivel in rock pools no wave renews.
Clean the littered beach, clear
the lines of a forming poem,
the waters flood inward.
Dull stones again fulfill
their glowing destinies, and emptiness
is a cup, and holds
the ocean.

In the final poem, "Suspended," only nine lines, she states her need and her doubts simply and strongly, as if the pause of full tide had resolved her fluctuating doubts into decision. It is not

triumph, but acceptance of the facts that faith will always be blind and unprovable and necessary:

SUSPENDED

I had grasped God's garment in the void
but my hand slipped
on the rich silk of it.
The 'everlasting arms' my sister loved to remember
must have upheld my leaden weight
from falling, even so,
for though I claw at empty air and feel
nothing, no embrace,
I have not plummetted.

The pattern of eight parts has resolved itself into a single poem. Emotion rather than logic has fused them together. If the book has been read at one sitting, front to back, the reader will have realized that the heron that began as a symbol of an eat-or-be-eaten universe is now the symbol of spiritual royalty, that the mountain that invited her physical awe now invites her to a spiritual climb, and that the dark train that invited her distant and silent wonder is now inviting her to go on a very long and risky journey.

*Evening Train* is a rare book. I was used to poets who grew tired as they grew older and careless as their fires burned out. But Denise Levertov's relaxed, reflective, convoluted manner in such poems as "Letter to a Friend" and "Tide" and the title poem is not a signal of weariness, but of fresh energy. And there are no signs that *Evening Train* will be her last book.

*Alberta Turner*

## THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

Julia Kasdorf, **Sleeping Preacher** (Pittsburgh, 1992);
Yusef Komunyakaa, **Magic City** (Wesleyan/New England, 1992)

These two books, Kasdorf's first (and winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize), and Komunyakaa's mid-career volume are measured and sober books that settle within the lines of their subjects and stories, and do not fool around with things the poets don't know. Though they celebrate very different cultures, lives and landscapes, both pursue the "facts" of human existence, often in similar ways and strategies.

There's something of Rita Dove's strategy with *Thomas and Beulah* in Kasdorf's ways with her relatives, her past — she was born into Mennonite and Amish communities in Pennsylvania — and her early experiences; she keeps the focus on the grown-ups and stays mainly out of the way except to record and denote. She almost never chooses to judge, which is welcome in any writer, especially one hoping to speak for so many; the reader is left to make the emotional calls, though sometimes that can be exasperating when complex situations aren't always fully sketched in. "Clear Night at the End of the Twentieth Century" is a case in point. It's an ambitious poem, and attempts to deal with a devastatingly ironic situation: "Jews rode in cattle cars east to their deaths, /and the wives and children of Mennonites/rode west in those cars, bound for Berlin,/delivered from Stalin. . . ." The narrator's mate in the poem is a Jew who would have trouble saving a German in a life-threatening situation, we are pretty much told as the poem ends; the narrator provides none of the reaction I feel is necessary at that point. Far more attention is paid along the way to the narrator's Mennonite ancestors, so I complain of a disturbing imbalance that does not reflect the complex nature of the "children" of such a past.

Quite a few of the poems laze along, seeming at times to be aimless, and don't follow up on emerging themes sufficiently for my taste, while losing themselves at times in unnecessary details. "Sunday Night Supper for a Mennonite, 1991" is especially diffuse

and laggardly. A few other, stronger poems probably require half their length to get launched (see especially "Freindschaft," which would be quite arresting if quickened). But why dwell on these shortcomings? All books have them, first or not. Who is it who said, "Often a poem is worth its own best line?" Let's look at two of the handful of fine poems, poems that convince me that Kasdorf will get stronger as she moves on:

ALONG OCEAN PARKWAY IN BROOKLYN

Three Hasidic boys talk like Amishmen,
hands in their long black coats that flap open
at the knees, heads nodding under hats.

They do not raise their pale, Prague cheeks
as I walk by. I am the world to them,
as I would have been to my father,

who once stood like this speaking low German
in a knot of boys at the edge of an auction lot.
Which of these will be the one to leave

our neighborhood of lavish bakeries
closed up tight for Passover,
as though leavening might leak into the streets

and keep the Children of Israel in Egypt?
I bless the one who leaves in anger or hurt,
bless the memory of his first cheeseburger

and the mind that returns for the rest of his life
to this corner, to the Hebrew storefronts
where old men drink dark tea in tumblers.

I praise equally the ones who stay
clustered like Amish farms in the dusk,
no phone lines running in, no circle

of light in the farmyards —
house, barn, coop, and crib
on the edge of the fields.

We all carry our own "cubic inch of ground" with us, even as we tread new earth, and what could at first glance be farther from Kasdorf's roots than this Brooklyn neighborhood? I like her determination to connect with what she does know, even as she struggles to ponder the otherness of the Hasidim. She might perhaps have stayed with the "boys" on *their* terms more, and not assumed so central a stance ("I am the world to them . . ."), but genuine regard and even affection arise for the foreign culture, while she plumbs her own, in the sketch-pad details of the closing stanza with their uncanny Hopper-like tone and mood, and the quiet force of the unrhymed tercets, in which the voice is (sometimes bleakly) under control. Note too the humor in the blessing of the memory of that first cheeseburger! But underneath all this is Kasdorf's expansive sense of what it means to leave one's familiar part of the world, as well as to stay rooted (or "behind," as it were).

Here's the poem that most haunted me in the collection:

WHEN OUR WOMEN GO CRAZY

When our women go crazy, they're scared there won't be
enough meat in the house. They keep asking
but how will we eat? Who will cook? Will there be enough?
Mother to daughter, it's always the same
questions. The sisters and aunts recognize symptoms:
　　she thinks there's no food, same as Mommy
　　before they sent her away to that place,
　　and she thinks if she goes, the men will eat
　　whatever they find right out of the saucepans.
When our women are sane, they can tomatoes
and simmer big pots of soup for the freezer.
They are satisfied arranging spice tins
on cupboard shelves lined with clean paper.

> They save all the leftovers under tight lids
> and only throw them away when they're rotten.
> Their refrigerators are always immaculate and full,
> which is also the case when our women are crazy.

Never mind the initial uncertainty about the lineation, which reduces the import of the opening "facts" and seems little related to the last half of the piece. The crazy-sane dichotomy, implicit in the homely lives of women in this culture, who hand down with what seems like biological force their domestic duties to their children, is a chilling reminder of how baleful it is to be solely responsible for preparing the table in the presence of one's own, so to speak. There is even no relief in going crazy; the worries only multiply. In the cultures and subcultures we sometimes romanticize — I have bought bread and honey and pies from "immaculate" Amish women, while their children grouped nearby — we are damned if we do and damned if we don't. I especially respect the matter-of-fact tone that blueprints the scene.

*Magic City* is too simple a title for Yusef Komunyakaa's stirring auto- & biographical "tales," that poke you to read them aloud. The many incidents and details that sometimes seem too extended on the page take on a life of their own, because the voices of the narrator and the other characters are so well heard and tracked. I'm reminded in passing that someone said at a reading by Maya Angelou, "I never heard them like that!" But even the untrained eye and ear will sense how carefully orchestrated the poems are, how they pulse along, pointed phrase to pointed phrase.

While it would be too much to claim that all the poems are parts of one long poem, they do come out of the same place, or neighborhood, and are mostly spoken the same way. At the same time, the poet has challenged himself, in the same way Kasdorf has, by trying to move out from autobiography and into a larger world. These poems make you want more, quite frankly, because they do so well what they set out to do.

Garrett Hongo's blurb overreaches, as blurbs will, but sums up the volume well, noting its celebration of "the natal world of

Bogalusa, Louisiana with its lightning bugs, Mardi Gras flambeaus, pigweed, and chain-gangs . . ." I could add 100 other such subjects and objects that have seldom been treated in poetry. From "Banking Potatoes" to "Boys in Dresses," the lived or imagined escapades are so comprehensive in their inclusiveness that an extended autobiography emerges, with its focus on a childhood. Not since reading Frank Conroy's *Stop-Time* and Harry Crews' *A Childhood, the biography of a place* have I been so willing to look back at the *stuff* that presages, through the mind's eye of these writers, what we're in for next.

Any reader will have favorite poems but the two I have time to quote here stand for quite a few more:

SLAM, DUNK, & HOOK

Fast breaks. Lay ups. With Mercury's
Insignia on our sneakers,
We outmaneuvered the footwork
Of bad angels. Nothing but a hot
Swish of strings like silk
Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
Labyrinth our bodies
Created, we could almost
Last forever, poised in midair
Like storybook sea monsters.
A high note hung there
A long second. Off
The rim. We'd corkscrew
Up & dunk balls that exploded
The skullcap of hope & good
Intention. Bug-eyed, lanky,
All hands & feet . . . sprung rhythm.
We were metaphysical when girls
Cheered on the sidelines.
Tangled up in a falling,
Muscles were a bright motor
Double-flashing to the metal hoop
Nailed to our oak.

When Sonny Boy's mama died
He played nonstop all day, so hard
Our backboard splintered.
Glistening with sweat, we jibed
& rolled the ball off our
Fingertips. Trouble
Was there slapping a blackjack
Against an open palm.
Dribble, drive to the inside, feint,
& glide like a sparrow hawk.
Lay ups. Fast breaks.
We had moves we didn't know
We had. Our bodies spun
On swivels of bone & faith
Through a lyric slipknot
Of joy, & we knew we were
Beautiful & dangerous.

In an age of films like *White Men Can't Jump*, how reassuring it is to have quite a different look at the phenomenon of the neighborhood pick-up game that is such a nucleus, guided as we are here, by a poet who is both seer and thinker, to much more than we've "seen" there before. (Several sociologists I know read poetry regularly alongside their other research.) I especially like the "sidemoves" here — to such connections as "bad angels," "the roundhouse labyrinth," "like storybook sea monsters," "the skullcap of hope and good intention," "sprung rhythm" (a nice in-joke), "we were metaphysical," "mucles were a bright motor," "swivels of bone & faith" — that comment on the vocabulary of the game itself, on its way to that "lyric slipknot of joy" in ways the ancient Greeks would have understood.

Notice too the episode, that rightly quickly passes almost like a footnote, of Sonny Boy's mama's death. The truth of the matter is indeed that he not only played on, but that he was likely wise to do so, only harder, "so hard/Our backboard splintered." That is both "beautiful & dangerous," and takes us past easy rhetoric, like "black is beautiful," even as it is sharply etched, like an epitaph.

Finally, here's a magnificent poem that recalls the humility and generosity of Hayden's *Those Winter Sundays*:

## MY FATHER'S LOVE LETTERS

On Fridays he'd open a can of Jax
After coming home from the mill,
& ask me to write a letter to my mother
Who sent postcards of desert flowers
Taller than men. He would beg,
Promising to never beat her
Again. Somehow I was happy
She had gone, & sometimes wanted
To slip in a reminder, how Mary Lou
Williams' "Polka Dots & Moonbeams"
Never made the swelling go down.
His carpenter's apron always bulged
with old nails, a claw hammer
Looped at his side & extension cords
Coiled around his feet.
Words rolled from under the pressure
Of my ballpoint: Love,
Baby, Honey, Please.
We sat in the quiet brutality
Of voltage meters & pipe threaders,
Lost between sentences . . .
The gleam of a five-pound wedge
On the concrete floor
Pulled a sunset
Through the doorway of his toolshed.
I wondered if she laughed
& held them over a gas burner.
My father could only sign
His name, but he'd look at blueprints
& say how many bricks
Formed each wall. This man,
Who stole roses & hyacinth

For his yard, would stand there
With eyes closed & fists balled,
Laboring over a simple word, almost
Redeemed by what he tried to say.

I can't imagine how hard it must be to render a fair, accurate, and yet searching account of everyone's role in what has become an all-too familiar story of abuse, an account that doesn't dodge the deep human issues. Very little seems forgotten or overlooked here, though only a few things are beginning to be forgiven. Even the speaker himself, who in a younger writer might have been allowed easy judgment, or, worse, victimization, is at pains to recall, "Somehow I was happy / She had gone . . ." The agony and ache of "Words that rolled from under the pressure / Of my ballpoint: Love, / Baby, Honey, Please" is huge, as the ballpoint becomes the one tool that might bring what has been missing between the parents.

What the poem is especially fine with and about is the ways it registers "the quiet brutality," not only of those meters and threaders. And fine too in seeing that sunset pulled through into the toolshed, a place that rings with paradox — here the father is most alive and at home among the artifacts of his life, even as what issues from them is anything but life-building. What the narrator restores to his parent is the decency, at least and at last, of guiding him along in the struggle for the language of love, the instinct to try to say a few "magic" words that will somehow atone and be accepted for what they mean, that will "almost" get said, but not by him.

*Stuart Friebert*

## DOUBLE EXPOSURES

Susan Prospere, **Sub Rosa** (Norton, 1992)

Reading through books of poetry published in 1992, I've been struck yet again by what a high percentage of the best of them are by women. Among the volumes I wish I had space to discuss are Betsy Sholl's *The Red Line* (Pittsburgh), Alice Jones's *The Knot* (Alice James Books), Susan Mitchell's *Rapture* (HarperCollins), Karen Fish's *What Is Beyond Us* (HarperCollins), and Frances McCue's *The Stenographer's Breakfast* (Beacon Press), all well worth considerable attention and praise. I've decided to explore in some detail the particular gifts of a single volume, but I do want at least to recommend the achievements of these others.

Susan Prospere's *Sub Rosa* begins with an epigraph from Blake: "Forbid all Joy, & from her childhood shall the little female / Spread nets in every secret path," and the delicacy and risk this evokes are both present in multiple ways throughout the volume. Prospere's most persistent subject is childhood, and while her youth in Mississippi and New Orleans seems to have been far from joyless — many of the poems recreate childhood experience in loving, even ecstatic detail — it does provide her an axis from which to cast out mysterious and often quite haunting filaments. Initially one notices the vivid, precise articulation of detail, the clarity and economy of her language, the sly brilliance of the images: lightning bugs "open[ing] their topcoats / to fly," two women "sitting under the morning glories, / open like a showroom of Victrolas." But Prospere's art is not simply that of virtuosity: eventually what emerges most powerfully is the emotional complexity those images evoke.

Hers is a dreamy, highly stylized, yet strikingly unsentimentalized view of childhood, infused as it often is with intimations of mortality, separation, and loss, as in these stanzas from "House of Straw":

> I read *The Password to Larkspur Lane*, lying on the horsehair
> sofa.

Look, I said to my brothers, I'm holding the key to the
world.
Then I curled the lid backwards, and we lifted the sardines,
lying in rows, and smeared them on
saltine crackers.
We ate them on the balcony while the poinsettias rotted
below.

Would you say this was the beginning of sadness?

My brothers threw a baseball in the evenings in their
bedroom —
the light outside, the color of Four Roses poured into
glasses —
until one night they threw it through the wall.
They covered the hole with a map of the world,
and for years they kept it a secret,
the darkness spiraling, unknown to our parents, under
Louisiana.

The language here seems on the whole resolutely ordinary, controlled by the exactitude of the child's observation. With absolute authority Prospere recreates a sensibility in which any word can be a password and any key the key to the world, in which the child who intently observes her parents' parties elsewhere in the book might think to compare evening light to the color of glasses of whiskey. But what gives the passage its special plangency is the way it is infused with adult understanding: it is the present, authorial self who links the sardine feast to the rotting poinsettias, and who interposes the phrase "the darkness spiraling" into the final line. The ordinary experience is suddenly revealed to have metaphorical, even mythic resonance: the secret hole under the map leads to a dark truth about the world. And the double consciousness — the adult patiently shadowing the child — through which this truth is revealed seems an essential part both of Prospere's aesthetics and of her metaphysics.

The world of childhood that emerges here is ruled by inexpli-

cable mysteries and coincidences. The father who teaches you to see the universe can end up blind, his cataracts floating in a vial in the medicine chest. The brother who dreamed of being abducted by aliens can take the terrible voyage into intensive care:

*Speak to him,*
the nurse says, and we call to you, each in turn,
though I'm afraid you've traveled
too far already to hear us,
the instruments beside your bed,
the ventilator and the sphygmomanometer,
monitoring you as you go.

Another good example is the ending of "Passion," the opening poem in the book:

The time my brother crawled under the house to fix the plumbing
in the wet darkness, he carried a pinup lamp shaded with roses.
I think he was drawn by something provocative that we haven't discovered,
the electrical current from the lamp charging through his body
until he cried out to register the pain
of that terrifying moment when the voltage lit up his life.

Again here, as in "House of Straw," a realistic (if more dramatic) memory becomes the conduit for larger knowledge. The brother's plumbing adventure serves to reveal to him — and to his sister —unspeakable mysteries in the "wet darkness," a dark desire that is both vitalizing and deadly. The rose-decorated shade of the lamp he carries is a perfectly plausible detail, but it serves simultaneously as an image of beauty, a talisman that helps to establish — if only subliminally — his link to Orpheus. (It also sets up the motif of roses that will pervade the volume, as for instance in the "Four Roses" reference in "House of Straw," obviously not a ran-

domly chosen brand name. The recurrence of these roses, with their cumulative emotional freight, is one of the ways the book's careful aesthetic design is conveyed.) And again the memory acquires emotional depth through the way it is framed in the adult speaker's consciousness; here are the two lines that precede the passage I've quoted:

> What [my father] didn't teach us is the mystery that holds
>                                                                  a man and woman together,
> my brothers and I each with marriages dissolving.

By providing a connection the child couldn't have made at the time of the incident — and indeed by emphasizing that disparity — Prospere adds another layer without displacing the others. The dark compulsion becomes partly erotic, the pain and terror partly those of failed relationships. And there are even further implications in light of the first half of the poem. These poems' multiplicity yields an almost archaeological sense of discovery: while a first reading allows considerable pleasure, patient sifting reveals the place of even the most casual details in the design.

Here's how the title poem begins:

> In the distillation process, what can be
> extracted from subterranean waters
> makes a slight list: my mother, the depetaling
> of a rose, and boarding houses.
> In Tennessee even the darkness is a gradient
> the insects climb, so when we grow tired, we rent rooms
> at Red Boiling Springs for a whole season.
> We say we have a suite for the summer
> because the passage from room to room
> takes us past the robins
> as they flop against the earth,
> having all day drained the chinaberries
> of their spirits.
> A boarder in the room next door has carved a mandolin
> of an opulence we can't endure —

my brothers and I are only children.
While we are sleeping, the adults go down
to the healing waters to recover their losses.

The perpetual present tense allows the voice to vibrate almost indistinguishably between the child's ("we rent rooms . . . for a whole season") and the adult's ("even the darkness is a gradient / the insects climb"), but its distinctiveness induces a sort of heightened consciousness. The result is that an otherwise ordinary sounding line like "my brothers and I are only children" (meaning, *merely* children) is apt to reverberate until we hear the other meaning of "only children" (having no siblings) — illogical here, but far from meaningless, since Prospere's view of childhood is often both unremittingly social and poignantly isolated. In the "distillation process" of memory, the poem's nostalgia is sharply qualified: the summer vacation seems vaguely hallucinatory, nature torpid and estranging, the adults trying to "recover their losses" while the children sleep away the season. The name of the resort — Red Boiling Springs —, the robins reeling from eating fermented berries, the unendurably opulent handcarved mandolin: all the weird details contribute brilliantly to the sense of enervation and ennui.

The second stanza plunges back farther into the past:

My father drives my mother into 1934,
the stars fizzing over the top
of the open convertible as they head towards
the Peabody Hotel in Memphis.
They are dancing on the hotel roof
the night of their engagement,
chrysanthemums in pink and silver foil
lining the floor around them,
while the music of Buddy Rogers widens
like the Mississippi River towards Mary Pickford.
She has come tonight to join him,
her purse blooming
with tissues of blotted lipstick.
The small pressure of my father's hand upon her back

leads my mother into marriage.
They move together slowly, as the ducks,
gathered in from the fountains in the lobby,
rise on elevators to the hotel roof,
where they have flown loose into the present.

This is obviously much cheerier and more romantic, like the last scene of a great old movie, all fizzing stars and chrysanthemums — and indeed that's exactly the point, as the Mary Pickford image suggests. Nostalgia can be less constrained here precisely because this is a scene from which the speaker is excluded, which she can only imagine or import from family lore. There is celebration here, but I think there's also longing, as well as the recognition that the unpredictability of nature reflected in the first stanza can't be so neatly contained as this stanza tries to suggest, any more than those ducks can be domesticated by the elevator ride. And this seems confirmed by the jarring shift in time-scheme at the end of the stanza, as though the speaker herself were surprised at the turn the poem takes, breaking the nostalgic frame.

The ducks stitch the stanzas together, introducing a third scene that will uncover the poem's underlying design:

They settle on our pond as dusk
diffuses into the flowers.
Confederate roses grow redder in darkness;
all of us are older.
I watch my mother and father from the lawn
as they move into the kitchen,
though the light has made a double exposure,
casting the reflection of the garden on the glass.
They appear to settle their chairs,
not in the kitchen, but in the arbor,
the trees of papershell pecans enclosing them.
My mother, reaching into what she believes
to be the cupboard, will find it empty,
her hand drawing back from the bluebird house
suspended from the barbed wire fences.
In the bowl of his spoon, my father holds a rose

> though he will not lift it.
> The hour of secret consumption is over.
> When darkness dissolves the reflection from the window.
> I see them as I imagine they will appear
> in the firmament — slightly abstracted,
> caught, as they are, on the other side of glass.

Rather than being "extracted from subterranean waters" or recycled from the movies, this third image seems to arise naturally, surfacing unbidden in the speaker's consciousness. In opposition to the depetalled rose of the first stanza and the pink-and-silver-wrapped chrysanthemums (and "blooming," lipstick-blotted tissues) of the second, roses are now rooted in the garden — and they are now "confederate," which I think we're entitled to take in the sense of allied in the speaker's cause, no longer alien. The difference seems to be that "all of us are older": freed — for the moment, anyway — from the anxieties of childhood, the speaker can simply observe and accept what she sees. The accident of the "double exposure" situates her parents in the garden, suspended as though in a timeless world. Much of the poem's meaning seems to coalesce in the line "The hour of secret consumption is over," which plays on both the fanciful conceit of her father's eating/not eating the rose and the notion of the speaker's own secret consumption, the unnamed, "sub rosa" anxiety that has provided the poem's subtext. She seems to have discovered resolution in the process of defining the need for it. Yet Prospere is much too scrupulous to allow the poem to end there: as she says in another poem, "our contract with this world is not complete." Nature still exerts its sway, and the suspended moment can last only as long as the daylight. The garden dissolves, mortality asserts itself, and the speaker has a last vision of her parents, caught again in a different world from her own. But the tone here is utterly different from that of the poem's beginning: chastened, clear-eyed, resolved. The poem whose organization initially seemed casual and undeliberate, as though the details were assembling themselves, is gradually revealed to be remarkably centered and true.

Not surprisingly in a first volume, I do occasionally find parts less compelling than the rest. There's a series of poems embody-

ing fantasias on preexisting folktales — Odin and his twin ravens Thought and Sorrow, Kay and the Snow Queen, Thumbelina and the mole — that seem to me somewhat less distinctive, less interestingly transformed. A group of poems about a failed love affair is delicate and evocative, but several of them feel too brief and insubstantial, as though Prospere were unable to pursue her subject in more than a glancing, tentative way.

But these are clearly anomalies in what is on the whole a rich and remarkably accomplished book. What I think I most admire in Susan Prospere's work is the way in which the double consciousness I've been describing allows the reader to experience simultaneously meanings that we would normally have to experience separately. The double exposures illuminate the past in the present, innocence hovering inside experience, childish wonder playing against adult irony, but neither canceling out the other. Time is folded back on itself in order to reveal what one poem calls "the way we travel in life / through multiple dimensions." At the same time, Prospere never loses herself in this multiplicity: the Nabokovian precision of her language allows her enough distance to recreate it for the reader. I'd like to quote one more poem by way of demonstration. Again we're largely in the consciousness of an observant child who, here, describes and fancifully transforms the world of the farm where she lives; at the same time, the language constantly surprises us into deeper meanings, more complex implications, that compel us to recognize the vision of the adult who remembers, shapes, and renders those meanings.

FARM LIFE

Our contract with this world is not complete.
The natural objects seem reticent,
the dogwood hesitates up and down the ridge
to open its skim-milk blossoms.
It is afraid of our disapproval,
or that we will be merely obtuse
in not seeing its analogies,
the petals rusted as if nailed shut all winter.
They are wallflowers,

so I assure them again that they are invited.

We will do so much for money.
My father allows the lumber company
to come in for selective cutting.
The trees hide behind each other
because they have nothing to gain by standing
on tiptoe, the graceful ones,
or at attention, those that are serious
and make efforts at subservience.
They only end up in other people's woodboxes.
I can promise them nothing.

Only the machines rest easy in the shed.
They know they will clear the fields adequately
and will turn chaos into saleable bundles.
This is farm life, where we work
at cross-purposes with what was intended.
The monolithic bodies of the cows turn shy
as we move across the grass toward them.
Ahead of us they mingle with the trees.
The calves unfold from their mothers' wombs
In the equivalent dark of the forest.

Once we cut a hole too large in the nipple
of a bottle and drowned a calf with nourishment
My father and I are complicitous on this earth,
though there are things we don't speak of:
the way he stacks his pennies in regular columns
and places his shoes by the bed
as if he stood over himself while sleeping.
He knows the mimosa leaves will close
if he touches them with his hands,
that the earth as yet is reluctant to receive him.

Like Blake's spiderly "little female," the texture of this extraordinary poem "spreads nets in every secret path." Its panoply of agri-

culture and wildness, of profit and loss, keeps opening up hidden dimensions. The imaginative child can charmingly anthropomorphize the dogwood blossoms and trees ("I assure them again that they are invited"), yet she knows her limits ("They only end up in other people's woodboxes. / I can promise them nothing"). The adult, meanwhile, knows them more deeply, through her recognition that the work of farm life is "at cross-purposes with what was intended." The best of human intentions can "[drown] a calf with nourishment": the effort to domesticate nature, to "turn chaos into saleable bundles," is at best provisional, and must eventually fail. Haunting, evanescent, the poem succeeds in evoking ambiguity, "the equivalent dark of the forest," by not trying to locate it too precisely. The girl and her father are "complicitous on this earth," but they don't speak of the deepest mysteries — the need for order, the imminence of mortality — because she doesn't yet have adequate language for them. The existence of the poem, however, and indeed of the whole volume, is evidence that she eventually will.

*David Walker*

## THE BORDERS OF ASTONISHMENT

Donald Revell, **Erasures** (Wesleyan University Press, 1992)
Carl Dennis, **Meetings with Time** (Viking, 1992)
Eamon Grennan, **As If It Matters** (Graywolf Press, 1992)

Here are three good books of poetry. I have taken them almost randomly from among the many review copies of 1992's publications of poetry. I need not choose among them; there is room in the world for all three, and many more. Just at the moment, however, I happen to be interested in pursuing a somewhat unfashionable question: poetry's relation to the redemptive, its salvaging from experience of those moments and meanings that seem to give us renewal.

It isn't particularly fashionable to discuss the redemptive possibilities of literature, but I have been trying to be clear with myself about why I like some poems better than others, why I return to some writers while ignoring others I know are very gifted. I think one answer has to be that there are certain poets whose use of language and whose treatment of experinece gives me something I can bring back to my own life as a way of replenishing it. I'm well aware that what comforts or reassures me may be somebody else's poison, or treacle; as I say, this is more an effort to understand my own patterns of reading and preference than to prescribe, either to fellow poets or to fellow readers.

I can summon a clarification of what I'm after from Italo Calvino, one of my favorite writers. Toward the close of his *Invisible Cities* Marco Polo and Kubla Khan are leafing through the great Khan's atlas, which contains both utopias (New Atlantis, New Harmony, etc.) and dystopias (yahooland, Brave New World, etc.) among its contents. Khan is discouraged about the direction his experience seems to be taking him and remarks that it is all useless if the infernal city is one's final and only destination. In other words, the world seems to be going to hell and they are heading there as individuals too. Here is Marco Polo's reply:

> The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where

> we live everyday, that we form by being togther. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek to learn and recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.

It is unusual for Calvino to let himself, or one of his creations, be so explicit about an aesthetic aim. And the search through hell for what isn't hell is not necessarily what anyone would describe, at first encounter, as the aim of *Invisible Cities.* My interest here is to ask how much some of our current art can be said to accept the inferno, and whether we usually recognize that as the easier alternative; I also want to consider in what ways the second alternative is risky, and to inquire what *making that which is not inferno endure, giving it space,* consists of in contemporary poetry.

I'm going to consider each of the three poets I've chosen, Donald Revell, Carl Dennis, and Eamon Grennan, by looking at the first poem in their respective books. The point at which we first meet the work, adjusting to its tones and moves, is usually the one that can best characterize the book to come; it would be strange to put an uncharacteristic or anomalous poem first in your work. You lead from strength, and you try to be in character.

Donald Revell begins *Erasures,* his third collection, with a poem called "Muse":

> You are somewhere very close to the porch.
> The evening makes crazy sounds, but makes sense.
> The unpackaged, greeny neighborhood settles
> into true night far from the expressway
> and farther from the calligrams of the downtown.
> The visits to the paintings failed me.
> The new music faded underground with the last trains,
> with stripped hours and many lovers.
>
> I did not imagine a stronger life,
> listening for your step on the porch step,

imagining your dress a size too large
billowing the obscene print of summer.
Anything composed is an obscenity:
a painter's phlox in vertical brushstrokes,
a dressmaker's parody of stupid earth,
a radio's jazz clawed by cats.

A stronger life exists but is no one's friend.
She lives in the crook of the expressway
in a high building. She tucks her hair behind
her ears and carries a clear drink to the window.
No one ever paints her portrait. Her name
is ugly and can't be put to music.
And at her neck and ankles a long dress
blackens calligrams I read with my fingers.

I pause here, halfway through the poem, to remark on some of its characteristics. The language feels cold and brilliant to me. Unexpected combinations create a sense of excitement, signaling the presence of a lively imagination. By using certain details over again — "calligrams" and "expressway" and the "paintings/painter's phlox/paints her portrait" string over three stanzas — Revell creates some of the same curious feeling of inevitability and obsessiveness that one encounters in, say, a sestina. But for all this liveliness, it's possible to suspect the presence of the arbitrary. That can lead to a negative reaction, the discovery that there's less meaning, less intention to communicate, than the poem seemed to promise. What exactly does it mean to say "the obscene print of summer"? That adjective turns out to be one of Revell's favorites — it shows up in the next two poems, for instance — and it may be there more for general purposes of characterizing the world than as a necessary adjective to "print." The very large assertion that follows it, "Anything composed is an obscenity," with its three examples of painting, dressmaking and music, tells us that the speaker is very disaffected with his world but tells us, I suspect, very little else. I don't think I could explain to anyone how the absent muse's long dress blackens calligrams that the

speaker reads with his fingers. It's an arresting detail, but does it really tell us anything? We are studying an art/nature opposition in which nature is chaotic and meaningless and art is futile because in counteracting that chaos it falsifies experience. The tension recalls Wallace Stevens, but the treatment is darker and more postmodern, which is okay, but it also feels a little facile and lacks, I think, Stevens' remarkable integrity.

My point here is that I begin to suspect Revell is partly getting by on negativity. By deriding art and language and meaning, undermining his own enterprise, he may be hoping to win us over to the view that his sensibility is especially honest and his vision accordingly powerful.

But might not this also be the easier way to deal with today's world? Might it not be what Calvino partly means by accepting the inferno, indeed embracing it? Here is the poem's second half:

> The truth of those black messages is cold.
> The imagination has no power over life,
> and between inspirations that are lovers
> and inspirations that are a kind of machinery
> repainted every year but irreparable
> the only thing actual at day's end
> is night's uncomposed, leafy tunelessness.
> I will not open the door when you arrive.
>
> I will not call my lost loves to wish them well.
> In my house in darkness behind the porch
> I pound the walls and make an animal noise
> as the neighborhood rises and runs en masse
> onto the expressway to be destroyed
> or dragged downtown to touch the calligrams
> and feel nothing that is green, made, or harmonious.
> It is loveless time, the neck and ankles of time.
>
> I need more loneliness than alone is,
> the deep, uninspired dark of America
> where sexy lawns, the phlox, the print dresses

and hymn stanzas like tiny circular railroads
ask for no response and no love
but a clear drink in the solitary evening
where no muse visits, when crazy animal sounds
make sense and I read the truth with my hands.

This really is very elegant and assured. Its combination of the explicit and the indirect is Ashberyesque, if such an adjective can be coined. Certain adjectives, like "sexy" and "crazy" feel a little glib and easy, like "obscene" earlier, but the movement, a kind of crescendo of repudiation in which a poem denounces poetry, is impressive.

And yet, in another sense my suspicions are confirmed. I still admire the brilliant details of the poem, the way individual phrases leap out and grab me, but I've begun to feel that the poem as a whole gets nowhere, that it lives too much on its own embrace of the negative and meaningless things it finds in the world around it.

At the same time, I don't really feel that I am witnessing the speaker's, or writer's, despair about art or about anything else. The dominant impression I have is of somber, deliberate fun, fun with dread and nullity and meaningless repetition, a game that is made out of its own denial, amounting more to a heady cleverness than to gloom or angst or anything truly substantial in the way of emotion.

And that is all right. Revell can do that, and does, with considerable invention, throughout the rest of the book. And not surprisingly, he has a blurb on the back from John Ashbery, whose school or wing of current American poetry he might be said to belong to. I am not suggesting that what Revell does is not legitimate, pleasing and remarkably inventive. I am thinking about it solely in terms of what Marco Polo talked about as the easier alternative: accept the inferno and become a part of it. Is that a problem here? I'm not sure, just as I'm not sure in the case of Ashbery. I certainly don't think Revell has gone as far as Polo says one can go: "become such a part of it that you can no longer see it." Revell sees it, and his blurbists all feel he draws back from it:

Ashbery says that "through the erasures the old life, life as we know it, continues to gleam, desperately, winningly." I say "Hmm." Marjorie Perloff says that the book is "rare among collections of poetry today in being first and foremost, genuinely moving." I say "Hmm" again. Methinks these blurbists do protest too much. And David St. John, who calls the book "astonishing and sobering," feels that Revell "strips bare the fleshy veneer of culture to reveal the machinery of terror and history of oppression underneath."

Well, yes, he does. All this praise points to a morality and integrity that are certainly nothing like an acceptance of the inferno; these readers, and they are certainly among our most astute ones, see *Erasures* as protesting the inferno, and as being *moving* in that protest. Yet that's not quite the way my ear picks up on "Muse." I don't see that much risk here; I see a kind of giving in to the meaningless and a sense that there's no way to make what's not inferno endure and have space, so why bother? I suspect that for all my pleasure in his language and his brilliant combinations, I will not return much to Revell's poems. They have, finally, a kind of emptiness and tonelessness, a playing with language, as in those loosely appropriated adjectives like "sexy," "crazy" and "obscene," that is attractive but a little too familiar by now; it doesn't call me back to them.

My second poet, Carl Dennis begins *Meetings With Time*, his sixth collection, with a poem called "The Photograph":

> The background's blurred, so I can't be certain
> If this showboat is docked on a river or a lake,
> But the clothes of the dancers on deck
> Make clear it's summer in the early forties,
> And the long shadows suggest it's almost sundown.
>
> No way to guess the song the couples are dancing to
> But it looks like most are enjoying it.
> The sadness that seems ingrained in the late light
> Is the usual sadness of photographs, not theirs,
> The feeling that comes from wondering
> How few of the dancers welcome the light now.

And if I see them as ignorant, too confident in the future,
It's only because they're dancing in my childhood.
No reason to believe that the chubby man in the foreground
With his hand on the waist of the smiling blonde
Hasn't stepped back often to observe how his life
Is almost half gone and then returned
To press the moment more eagerly than before.

Here he is, back with the blonde girl,
Whose smile seems nervous now, who may be wondering,
When he's silent, if he's drifting off.
Did she say something she shouldn't have,
Or is he distracted by the man with the camera
Focusing by the taffrail?
Is he troubled to think of himself as old
Looking back on a photograph of this moment
When his heart was younger and more beautiful?

Don't worry about it, I want to tell them.
Don't waste your time with recollection or prophecy.
Step forward while the light and shadows are still clear,
The sun, low on the water, still steady.
Enter the moment you seem to be living in.

We are never informed about the relation between the speaker and the people in the photograph, a subtle and finally pleasing omission. We are certainy apt to infer that they are his parents, and that this poem has ties with such antecedents as Rilke's "Jugendbildnis meines Vaters" and Delmore Schwartz's famous story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." In any case the indistinctness of the relation of all three characters to each other takes its place among a number of carefully informed uncertainties that constitute the tone and tissue, so to speak, of this muted and graceful meditation.

We start with the blurred background, then move to some discoveries about season and time of day. The music can't be recaptured or identified, and the speaker is rightly suspicious of the

melancholy that seems to belong to the light but is more likely to have its source in the viewer's perception of the passage of time. This moves him to further doubt about the inferences he has been making — that the dancers are ignorant and overconfident. Now his empathy allows him to enter their lives, and fill them out a little. The "chubby man" is seen as deeply aware of the passage of time, and the blonde girl with him finds herself speculating about his silences. This is a speculation about a speculation within another one, and it even leads the girl to imagine that chubby man doing what the speaker has been doing, looking back at the snapshot from a distance of time. In other words, the speaker's imagining leads him through the two characters' imaginings in a way that brings him round back to himself and his own subjectivity.

All these events are located within the mind of the speaker, who if he feels he has some advice to convey to the couple — that they live in their moment and enjoy it — is having a hard time practicing what he preaches. There's a gentle irony about his using these speculations about lost moments — wasting his time, in effect, on "recollection and prophecy" — as a means for advising his own parents (if that's who they are) to do what they probably are doing anyway, to a much greater degree than he is. Or is his entering this moment of looking at an old snapshot with such thoughtfulness a nice variation on their lives, a mental dancing that sustains and entertains him too?

It's worth noting how simply and directly this poem is put together. It has, in effect, nothing up its sleeve: no special vocabulary, no effects that would normally be described as poetic (distinctive movement, musical use of sound, repetitions of one kind or another, surprising turns). Its virtue is its plainness and the way it qualifies and interrogates itself, sometimes with fairly complicated syntax ("No reason to believe . . [he] Hasn't stepped back often . . . and then returned . . .") but never in a way that isn't perfectly limpid and straightforward. If is requires careful reading, that is more for its subtle development of the speaker's thoughts than because of any contortions or confrontations in its language and behavior.

Indeed, that quality seems to me to characterize both Carl Dennis's strength and his shortcomings. His plain style creates trust in the quiet, honest voice that mulls over simple and familiar situations. But it also feels a little bland at times, lacking in pressure or tension. One wishes for a little more of the excitement — about language, about the bewildering realities we face daily — that can give a sense of occasion to the individual poem. Dennis's speakers always have something to say, something mildly or even, gradually, intensely interesting, but one has again and again the feeling that they might easily have said something else, that the poet is not very interested in pursuing uniqueness or identifying anomaly. This gives his poems a certain universality, but it also gives them a generic feel, in the sense of generic brands at the grocery store. One begins to long for stronger effects and sharper flavors. So the issue here — and I believe that the poem I've just discussed characterizes Dennis's work quite fairly — is not whether the poet gives in to the inferno of the living because he is tempted by the easiness of negativity, but whether he *resists* it with sufficient vigor. His poems do indeed affirm the entering of the moment, the loving of it, the making it endure and giving it space, all that which is not inferno. But more energy and purpose, more risks with language and form and tone, may be called for to achieve a fully successful realization of Calvino's/Marco Polo's agenda.

I hope I have not made Carl Dennis and Donald Revell sound like opposites. Indeed, it seems they are friends, for Dennis mentions Revell with thanks as one of those who read and gave advice on his manuscript. Both poets are quite adept, though in slightly different ways. Dennis has his quiet irony and deliberate plainness; Revell has his recurring, nightmarish visions of history and of contemporary society. Both poets please me, but both also leave me feeling still slightly unsatisfied, looking for something more. I do not find, in either poet, a stylistic power that seems truly capable of fulfilling Calvino's poetics. I have written about this before, and if I risk repeating myself it is partly because I see few other commentators trying to address the issue. I am arguing that a certain kind of concern for language has to characterize

truly effective poetry. That means, among other things, that there is a significant relation between sylistic concerns, the question of exactly how the poet chooses to handle language, and the metaphysical concerns that Calvino makes Marco Polo articulate. Calvino's own practice confirms the relation as he is, among other things, a brilliant stylist.

That something more I wanted to find in Revell and Dennis seems to be present in Eamon Grennan's new book *As If It Matters*, as soon as I pick it up and begin reading the first poem:

TWO CLIMBING

1

After the blackface sheep, almond coats daubed
to the blush of slaughtered innards,
all I saw going up was a small frog
speckled rust and raw olive, slick
as a lizard, with a lizard's fixed
unblinking eye. It splays and tumbles
to a safe shadow
where heather-roots wind through limestone
while I keep climbing
behind Conor, who's twelve, my heart
starting to knock at thin air, effort. He loves
leading me on, and when I look up
to where he stands waiting — legs apart and
firmly planted on a rock spur, gazing round him
at mountains and the sea, the thin
ribboning road beige below us, my figure
bent over the flat green hands of bracken —
I'm struck sharp as a heart pain
by the way this minute brims
with the whole story: such touched fulness
and, plain as day, the emptiness at last.

Many poets might walk away from this subject — a father and son climbing a mountain together — before they even started on

it, rejecting it as too clichéd, too risky to become new and interesting. There is a great feeling for the way color can aid the power of detail; one realizes that Revell's green and black were rather generic, and that Dennis's poem was as colorless as the photograph it studied. It's clear that Grennan's love of color and detail is partly what sustains him and makes him trust his subject and its uniqueness. The almond-colored coats of the sheep, the frog's raw olive, speckled with rust: these details tease us out of our sense that the situation is familiar and into a fresh and wondering relation to it. As in the Carl Dennis poem, there's an intriguing shift of perspective. The father looks up toward the son, who has outdistanced him, and sees himself, part of the whole view, through the son's eyes. And calling it "the whole story" acknowledges the temptation to turn moment into value, our habits of symbol-making, then uses a cliché, "plain as day," to nail a truth into place that feels well beyond cliché.

The first section has already taken the boy and his father to the mountain top. What else to say? Just as some poets would avoid this subject, others would be tempted to settle for the accomplishment of the first section. Here, the reader turns the page and finds two more sections; Grennan is a great one for follow-through:

2

Once down again, safe home, we both
look wondering up to the top of Tully Mountain
and the barely visible concrete plinth
that peaks it, on which he sat
exalted for a time and took
*the whole of Ireland* in, he said,
with one big swivelling glance, and took twelve snaps
to prove it: a windy shimmer of cloud, mountain,
water — a rack of amphibian spirits drifting
over our heads. I saw the way our elevation
simplified the lower world
to rocky crops and patches, neat
green and tea-brown trapezoids

of grass and bog, bright pewtered spheres
of pure reflection. We sat out of the wind
on two flat rocks, and passed
in silence to one another
another sweet dry biscuit
and a naggin whiskey bottle
of water, pleased with ourselves
at some dumb male thing for which
he finds the word: *adventure*. Going down,
he lopes, leads, is deliberately solicitous,
pointing out loose rocks, the treacherous
bright green surface
of a swampy passage, a safer way.
His knowing talk
enlarges airily our trek and conquest.

There's lots of fun in this, not least in the way that Grennan keeps us dazzled by the things he can do with language while presenting himself as rather speechless at the time, leaving the knowing talk and word-finding to the boy and apparently content to gaze and absorb, often a bit wryly ("our elevation / simplified the lower world," "some dumb male thing"), taking a back seat, so to speak. But his characterization of the clouds as "a rack of amphibian spirits drifting / over our heads," will outlast any of those twelve snapshots and may well lodge in our memory for good. Grennan's love of sound keeps him away from the predictable ways of rhyme, but allows him to discover patterns whereby "deliberately" turns into "solicitous," which then turns into "treacherous," linked next to "surface," while, at the same time, for example, "rocks" is getting ready to be echoed first by "talk" and then by "trek." The pressure on language to reveal such pleasing relationships of sound — "another sweet dry biscuit / and a naggin whiskey bottle" — feels exactly matched to the pressure of observation to achieve exactness of representation — "grass and bog, bright pewtered spheres / of pure reflection" — a twin agenda that creates both trust and pleasure in the reader. We want to go along on this climb because we are learning steadily from the

masterly use of language that characterizes it, because our imaginations are dilated by what we are hearing and seeing.

And now the poem's final section:

3

Walking at last the field path
to the house, he is all
spine and limber stride
in his muddied wellingtons,
while I note how stone silent
the plum-coloured broad back of the mountain is,
keeping the wind off our lives
in this hollow. Before going in,
he sets on an outside windowsill
the horned sheep skull we salvaged
from the bracken, weathered to a cracked adze
of jawbone ringed and bristling
with broken teeth. Bone-flanged, the great
eye-sockets gape, and like fine stitching
the skull's one partition seems dead centre.
In less than a week from now
he'll have forgotten this bony trophy,
but not the journey we took together
to find it — that hammering brisk ascent, the luminous
view of everything, those buffeting winds, unruffled
interlude of quiet, then, in the end,
that sweet leading down. While I'll go on
watching the split skull — colour of crushed almond
of washed-out barley muslin — shine.

The son strides, the father notes. There is no condescension toward the less thoughtful, because less mature, boy, nor is there any sentimentalizing of his youth or hand-wringing about the father's larger awareness of time, change and death. If the skull seems like a symbol whose poetic viability is unlikely — given the long history of memento mori — so that the risk of cliché is even greater than with the father and son mountain-climbing, the

faithfulness of observation, once again, rescues it. This is not just any skull. It has such particularity that we cannot help but see it at least as much in terms of its uniqueness as in terms of its semiotic function. And the final stroke is particularly convincing. The speaker says he will go on noticing it not because it makes him think of his own death — the predictable explanation — but because of its shine. The morbidity can of course be a subtext, but the joy of observation, the ecstasy of looking and noticing, overrides it. And Grennan makes the verb "shine," which might by itself be too clichéd or easy, valid by the double particularity ("colour of crushed almond / or washed-out barley muslin") that he interjects between subject and verb. What the shining means and what it is really like is acted out before our eyes by the syntax. Again, the pressure on language to mount to more expressive possibilities by means of vivid music and exactness of detail succeeds in overcoming all the weight of familiarity in emotion and signification. This is sleight-of-hand, this is weightless and gravity-defying, this is a kind of flying where most thought and experience and language must rely on a kind of trudging. We've been up the mountain and back down, but we are enlightened, filled with light and made a little less heavy. Hard work lies behind this achievement, no doubt, but what we feel is its apparent ease and legerity.

I think I have come to something like an articulation of the source of my mild dissatisfaction with the not insubstantial achievements of Revell and Dennis. I wanted each of them, by whatever means was appropriate to his experience and situation (there can be no one way to do this), to go this extra distance with language, with experience and detail. That would have truly brought them to that level of stylistic accomplishment where the poet makes room for what is not inferno, making it endure most vividly. Grennan has an edge here because he works to a slightly higher standard of how language must perform in the poem, how expressive and dance-like, ecstatic if you like, it can be.

And is this, as Marco Polo tells us, risky? It most certainly is. There are times in Grennan's book when he fails, when his language seems too pumped up and his treatment of a subject too distended and intense. Things do not always fall into place or

seem inevitable, and the gamble of seeming ornate or precious or sentimental isn't one he can wholly escape. But who would not grant him such problems, given the successful results? Here he is, three pages later, in the first two stanzas of a poem titled "Walking Home As the Rain Draws Off":

> Bright pools of crowded light
> I step across, odd drops
> making the lot of it shiver,
> giving each radiant
> diminished world the shakes.
>
> Crossing the borders of astonishment
> a coppergreen roof after heavy rain
> starts out of mist and flickering spume
> and the eye sings in fright, is full
> of weird joy, as if suddenly you heard
> Vivaldi rising over broken houses,
> the bombed city being dreamed
> whole again, a swollen slope of
> mineral green, light hatching on it.

Here it is again, a daring use of subject (you mean it's just a poem about walking and about weather?) and a formidable evocation of the delight of truly seeing things like light, color, shape and texture. But while one is responding to those things, to the exactness of observation, one is also responding at the level of language itself, as a thing in itself, to the exactness and joy of word choice. Think of how well and carefully "hatching" is chosen, in that last line, not to mention "mineral."

I can't resist quoting at least one more stanza:

> Spirit weather, wreaths of mist
> rising off the graveyard, the grey stones
> gleaming to life again: nearby
> I hear the dance instructor
> shouting behind an open window

*One and Two and One and Two and . . .*
brusque commands so in the end
they'll move, the dancers will,
as light as mist in air, and pause
up there like second nature.

Grennan is usually funny into the bargain, so that the delight and wonder that seem to ease up into the visionary here do not have to leave behind the comedy of the spooky mist in the graveyard and the less than competent dance students. Again, the tonal complexity fosters trust, along with enthusiasm, as the poet leads us forward through dance figures of his own.

A few final thoughts to round out this look at three interstring poets. One is that I may have raised the issue of cultural difference, since Grennan, though he teaches full-time at Vassar, is Irish and, the book jacket tells us, "spends his leave-time in Ireland." Greywolf Press is in fact giving us a book that was published first in Ireland, in 1991, by the Gallery Press. But for me the issue is not that Grennan, as an Irishman, has a unique access to the values and accomplishments I have identified as especially present in his poems. He may well have strong encouragement to explore the musical possibilities of language through his own cultural tradition, but there is enough of that combination of music and exactness in modern and contemporary American poetry to make one feel that there is nothing exclusively Irish about it. True, one finds it in Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland, but one also finds it in Stevens and Roethke and Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, in Sylvia Plath and Charles Wright and Stanley Plumly and many other contemporary American poets, finds it in Montale and Mandelstam and Neruda, finds it wherever poetry occurs, in many languages and cultures. It's possible that we contemporary American poets need to remind ourselves a little more frequently of its special value, its intimate relation to significant poetic achievement, but so does any other culture where a great deal of poetry is written. So, no, this has not been about the difference between Irish and American poetry at the present moment.

I also want to emphasize a point that may not have emerged

as fully as it should: all three of these poets are quite good and all three have what I would describe as a mixed success. There are strong poems in each collection, along with weaker ones, and if I made Grennan sound as though he could do no wrong, I misrepresented him. My point is how right and admirable his aims are, how what he asks a poem to be and do is what I think I most like to see poets try for: achieve the redemptive by an intensity of regard that is unusually precise both as to language (both in its music and its precision) and to the textures and varieties of experience. That is my own translation, as a working poet and a reader of poetry, of the formulation I borrowed from Calvino: *seek to learn and recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.* That this is risky, that this demands "constant vigilance and apprehension," and that it must be done with language or not at all, is something any poet ought to be able to confirm.

*David Young*

## CONTRIBUTORS

TOM ANDREWS's new book. **The Hemophiliac's Motorcycle**, is due out this fall from Iowa. He was recently awarded an NEA Fellowship.

ANGELA BALL is the author of **Kneeling Between Parked Cars.** She lives in Hattiesburg, Miss., where she teaches in the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Writers.

DINA BEN-LEV lives in Seattle. She is finishing up a first collection of poems, **Sober on a Small Plane**.

MARIANNE BORUCH's third collection, **Moss Burning**, will be the second title in FIELD'S new poetry series, and is scheduled to appear next fall. She teaches at Purdue University.

BECKIAN FRITZ GOLDBERG is the author of two collections of poetry, **Body Betrayer** and **In the Badlands of Desire**, both published by Cleveland State. She teaches at Arizona State University.

DEBORA GREGER has published three books of poetry with Princeton University Press, most recently **the 1002nd Night**. She teaches in the creative writing program at the University of Florida.

GRAHAM HETTLINGER tells us he hopes to one day finish a series of poems about the year he spent in Leningrad.

TIMOTHY KELLY lives in Olympia, Washington. His collection, **Articulation**, won the 1992 King County Publication Award, and will be published this year.

ISABEL NATHANIEL was a winner of Discovery/*The Nation* in 1990. She lives in Dallas, Texas.

CAROL POTTER, author of **Before We Were Born** (Alice-James, 1990), lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

MARIN SORESCU, the Romanian poet, appeared in the FIELD Translation Series in 1991, with **Hands Behind My Back**, translated by STUART FRIEBERT, GABRIELA DRAGNA, and ADRIANA VARGA, and with an Introduction by SEAMUS HEANEY.

PAMELA STEWART's most recent book is **Infrequent Mysteries**, from AliceJames Books, 1991. She currently lives in Weston, Massachusetts.

TU MU, the late T'ang poet, sometimes known as "Little

Tu" to distinguish him from his great contemporary Tu Fu, was particularly gifted with short poems, usually four lines in Chinese.

LEE UPTON's second book of poetry, **No Mercy**, a winner in the National Poetry Series, was published by the Atlantic Monthly Press. Her critical study, **Jean Garrigue: A Poetics of Plenitude**, appeared in 1991.

JONAH WINTER is currently living in Maine, spotting lynx tracks and writing poems.

Ireland

Also, I'll write you a postcard when my mind's made up. Thanks for the help + best wishes,

Love,

Reina

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