

**FIELD 44**



**28**

**HYDRAVIONS 'EMPIRE' NEUFS**

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EUROPE AFRIQUE INDE EXTRÊME ORIENT AUSTRALIE



# FIELD

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS

NUMBER 44

SPRING 1991

OBERLIN COLLEGE PRESS

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*FIELD* gratefully acknowledges support from the Ohio Arts Council and The National Endowment for the Arts.

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions and manuscripts should be sent to *FIELD*, Rice Hall, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Subscriptions: \$10.00 a year/\$16.00 for two years/single issues \$5.00 postpaid. Back issues 1, 4, 7, 15-42: \$10.00 each. Issues 2-3, 5-6, 8-14 are out of print.

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ISSN: 0015-0657

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LITTLE BOY

They called the big one Little Boy:  
weighed in at five tons, carried

in the belly of a plane named  
for the pilot's mother, born, released,

excreted out the back (that old  
fantasy), relief, the letting go.

But victory was only the shout  
of a child on the street, hurrah

hurrah the generals cried,  
the people cried in the missing

city, missing buildings, missing  
bodies, missing faces, flesh.

The next one was Fat Man, with more  
to come, and now the generals speak

of *wargasm*, everything going off  
at once, and what do we say to that?

Because, sometimes, we want to.  
Birth is what we're after:

clean plates, table set, the wedding  
dress the baby dress the final

satin resting dress and everyone  
goes to sleep at the same time—

even the little boy with the pop  
gun under his pillow, even the fat

man, all gone, and then we can wake up  
and start over again, now can't we.



## HOME FIRES

A furnace broke, children disturbed  
the neighbors, husbands, wives ran off.

Now they sleep in streets, stations, old  
hotels, the children miss their lunch.

The apples are picked and boxed  
though the reckoning sheets are torn.

All is forgiven, go home,  
he said, the usual smile, and we liked

his little blunders, he was so  
a) cuddly b) cunning c) cussedly

*us*, you know, and he always  
sent the bad news on a pillow.

But home was where the heart  
lurched, A sandwich'll cost

you a sermon, Boy, the Lord  
has blessed us richly.

You can't have everything,  
he said: two slices of cheese,

please, one then, a little  
onion, cabbage, fruit— But the apples

are picked and boxed and shipped.  
Rust continues its dull life.

It's the nature of fallen bodies.  
Nothing's given. Nothing gives.

## FIELD

The window fell out the window  
and having only a frame  
to refer to, we entered

a new field, the space filled  
with lightness, wheat field, sweet  
field, field of vision, field

and ground, the puzzle became  
the principle, a page without  
a single tree, but you kept coming

back to the place, your fingers  
reading my skin, and I cried Love!  
before I could stop myself, love

is a yellow shirt, light  
is what it thinks when it thinks  
of itself, and now it shines

through both our skins, in  
the field, out of the field,  
two in the field where none

had been, field to field  
with particles stirred  
into being where we touch.

THE OLD CHILD

(*Progyria*)

According to Einstein  
one twin flies to the stars  
while the other merely grows older—  
as for us, if we  
parachute out of the sky  
at the speed of light  
at the same instant  
he will still be here: an old man, ninety  
before he's eleven.

This is time collapsing upon itself—  
those freight cars jam, and he  
is this sad old visage,  
the ears standing widely away from it,  
his fingers growing  
as they die.

Summer, and his young father  
watches him. With that startled  
look of the blamed,  
and the chosen.

The clouds are thin, delicate  
as herons they walk;  
gently, slowly.

## TINNITUS

*for John B.*

The baby sits with his hands over his ears,  
or the dog slinks off, her ears folding like leaves.  
Sometimes before anyone's said  
anything.

The waves of sound stayed in my head.  
Beating there.

They speak of yogis who will sit for years  
facing a wall. Waiting for the sound of a sea.  
A horizon.

I would like you to sit on my right side, the good  
side. Side of the world, of the father, Telemann  
and Mozart.

On the other is that madwoman, the sea.  
Do you hear it?

I would paint the sea now from inside. The anemones  
flesh-colored under the black. Shivering,  
as if they hear the whales, who are lonely  
and keep reinventing.

What voices we have! Piano wires, bassoons,  
washboards, flutes. A silver  
piccolo with the misery  
under.

Sometimes I'd like to let the sea just roll  
over them. Though today the air  
is quiet.

A few of us sit near the waves. The grass in tatters.  
Yellow palms. You, my friend, with your jumping around.  
Your tenderness of a dark  
violin.

NEAR BURNING

1.

My sister singing the Kyrie  
from Beethoven's Mass in C Major  
at Saint Clement's in Chicago, on tape,  
through headphones, in Iowa, in bed, dark,  
my pillow, the room suddenly perceptibly cooler,  
those tears crawling sideways down exactly  
to the mark where her voice passes in.

2.

Pulling the steaming teacup  
easily from the end table,  
lightly, so easily through  
the space above my baby in my lap,  
toward my mouth.

3.

Those Yellowstone fires making Iowa hazy.  
Dusk. Mercy. That sound the jay made leaving  
the empty feeder.

## PARTS

*If people have the love of nature in their hearts — if things out of doors call irresistibly, at any season — it will not really matter if their lives are pinched and circumscribed.*

—Julia Rogers, *Trees Worth Knowing*

*Found: Small beagle-type dog on Edgewood Road, one foot missing.*

—Crittter Corner

Come to the prints on this side  
of Edgewood Road, come  
to these patches where the one  
paw would have fallen  
in the pattern. Try and let  
the loss of an impression  
do its work on you,  
three paws and a space,  
the exact continuous failure to meet,  
like a man who can't  
pronounce his t's reciting  
multiplication tables in the evening  
with his daughter, how can she help  
being ashamed in the presence  
of such a thing,  
how can she forget her own wholeness?

Is the little dog less lost  
if the wrong one finds him?  
I think he's lost three times over;  
first, his foot, where is it,  
then the wrong road, then the impractical  
savior not letting him stay. How  
can we keep from thinking  
of the amputation first,  
as a sign of something  
coming, from the moment of entry

into the tissue of the leg,  
    from the moment of absolute severing,  
the body moved away from itself,  
    wet, the brain holding  
presence and absence intact,  
    its instant accord with the phantom,  
sending pain there. Here,  
    pooch.

I need to tell you  
    that I love to think about it,  
how I rode down the surgical lift  
    with a leg on a cart,  
how the calf and foot were so beautifully  
    shaped, a man's, I think,  
how I wanted to touch it under the sheet.  
    I can tell you this now,  
that girl on her honeymoon,  
    I think about her one leg  
clasping at her new husband's waist,  
    how she was especially  
kind to the man with the pincher  
    hand, putting money in it.  
I can say without laughing  
    my father wrote a letter to his foot  
and stuck it on, good-bye,  
    good-bye, how I love  
those drawings they do with their teeth,  
    that the body can be  
subtracted into grace.

Now I can also finally tell you,  
    fearing trees somewhat,  
I lack  
    the love of nature in my heart.  
Things out of doors  
    are not so hard for me



to resist, at any season.

That Chinese elm,  
living after winter on its one leg,  
with last summer's work,  
its tips, still attached,  
will never go away.

Its little red explosions,  
promises of leaves,  
terrify me with such redoubling.

Come over, come see how much  
my circumscription matters,  
see the pinch-voiced squirrels  
come down, come to break  
their food on the glorious stump.

## THE RAPTOR CENTER

I saw inside the body of a man. The intern drew me through the otherwise locked door; still in my hands were eight glass vials the pharmacist had sent me for, to keep the glittering permanganate. That was my favorite task, the weighing and dilution of the violet douche, administered before the hysterectomies. In autopsy, he'd opened like a box his arms had fallen from, neither looking at me or away. As if he'd come through wind, his hair was mussed. There was a funnel and a drain inside the floor. And today I saw a sidewalk in the woods, the handsome wooden cages and the smallest gravel pearls smoothed around the bottoms of the trees, and then a shock of feathers lifted on the damaged eagle's head. And the kestrel was afraid. Its open wing, so rarely looked down on, is grey rust, black and grey again, and black, and I have once today, felt my body drawn across its gaze. That one with the vivid dragging wing, and then from underneath I felt the other hovering.

OWLS

I heard one last night  
Hooing softly in the little stand

Of moonlight behind the house,  
And woke this morning thinking

About owls mating in the cold  
Among stars grown wild with ice.

Solitary, winged dreams  
Hacked out of deadwood.

I thought about barn owls  
And their pale, kabuki masks,

The gray owl with its face  
Like a bull's-eye

Or cross section of a branch.  
Rafters of snow-deep bones.

I remembered how the owl is a cat.  
I remembered the barked feathers.

And how at dawn it rises  
Soundlessly to enter its life

As sun-spot or shadow  
Or urn in the lofts of light.

## BROWN BAT

1

Collapsable mammal!  
That drawn-up pouch  
Of russet-colored velvet  
Hanging  
Like the first brown leaf  
In the tree.

2

In the cloistral green  
Of the branches  
He has latched his few  
Dark grams, lightly,  
And dangles, a plummet,  
Head-down in sleep.

3

We watched his cocoon  
Lightness, his tobacco-  
Cured, shrunken-head  
Face, the wings  
Above him like sheaths.

A tiny devout, furled  
And impervious to even  
The reveling gnats.

4

He never woke. His face  
In the flashlight  
Was still sealed shut,  
And the wings. The night  
Unfurled without him.

5

The next day he dropped  
Onto the lawn, a casing  
Full of small brown seeds.

## SKUNK CABBAGE

Finally, today, I found some  
In the boggy margins of the creek,

Green caps belling upwards  
Into the rank profusions,

The sopping ground around them  
Littered with last year's rot.

When her water broke, that second  
Time, flooding the bedroom floor,

My wife was already into labor,  
Pelvis fissuring, the deep cleft

Of her body unfurling its clamped  
Rhythmic spasms. There too

I could feel the planet gathering  
Beneath my feet, the way

The deaf feel music in their bones.  
Such flexed, slow florescence!

All through the delivery  
She gasped and splayed, opening

For that blood-covered bulb.  
This February I looked for them

Melting their slender chimneys  
Where the sun's granular dazzle

Lit the remaining banks of snow.  
I dreamt of them as storm-clouds

Massing warm spring rains our way,  
And of that lotus of a body

Being lifted above his waters,  
Umbilical like a long, wild root.

THE TWO-TONE LINE, BLUES IDEOLOGY,  
AND THE SCRAP QUILT

This meditation began from a desire to know why I am so attracted to Swedish poet Harry Martinson's line: "In summer there is no cow on the ice." Why is it a more chilling line than, say, "In winter there is a cow on the ice"? Why erase a cow yet give us a cow? Why use an ice scene in negative to describe summer?

I wanted to know why I liked these lines about a woman shopping:

She would buy the bulbs and the yellow bird;  
she would free the cage and step inside.

(Laura Jensen)

Why I so enjoyed Percy Mayfield singing, in bass-baritone voice, "My heart rejoices in the sadness."

My heart will make light of the sunshine.  
My heart will frown when skies are blue.  
My heart rejoices in the sadness  
Of the love that was left by you.

Neruda in "Toward an Impure Poetry" wants poems "smelling of lilies and urine." Why is that so attractive?

And why this: "a creamy basil mayonnaise a shade lighter than the Coast Range in August" (Robert Hass). And from "Seascape" Elizabeth Bishop's description of the mangroves' "bright green leaves edged neatly with bird-droppings/like illumination in silver."

And why my pre-school daughter's "You're brushing your hair like a dead bird."

I have called these, out of an interest in pattern-naming,



“two-tone lines.” Of Jensen’s couplet, the first line is one-tone and the second line is two-tone.

Why do these two-tone patterns delight as well when they are employed by blues musicians and by quilt-makers?

Galway Kinnell shows a tree struggling through juxtapositions within itself. He calls this normal:

Its grain cherishes the predicament of spruce, which has a  
trunk that rises and boughs that droop.

Its destiny is to disappear.

This could be accomplished when a beachcomber extracts  
its heat and resolves the rest into smoke and ashes; or in  
the normal way, through a combination of irritation and  
evanescence.

(“Driftwood from a Ship”)

“Normal,” the Reverend Robert Small said of an African-American quilt with its “center” in one corner, “That’s normal.” The normal in Kinnell’s driftwood poem is not just irritation or evanescence, or solely rising or solely drooping. Nor is the normal perfect balance and symmetry or even unification.

Adrienne Rich too accepts this multi-tonal melange as it is lived: she describes her kitchen table occupied by odd neighbors—objects that in the traditional thought of the old IQ test do not go together.

. . . a dry moth’s  
perfectly mosaiced wings, pamphlets on rape,  
forced sterilization, snapshots in color  
of an Alabama woman still quilting in her nineties . . .

(“Culture & Anarchy”)

In quilting terms, we could call this PIECED vision, the inclusion

of all the inconsistencies, the scraps, all you're left with. A salvage operation, it is more inclusive than a simplification, a uniformity of fabric or pattern, would be.

I am wondering if two-tonedness (or multi-tonedness) is perhaps its own aesthetic, as when African-American quilt designers reinterpret standard Euro-American motifs by aspiring to "a concept more important than order" (John Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts*). In such an aesthetic one design may be made to confront another. A pattern established in one square is varied, flexibly patterned, not repeated. Quilter Lucinda Toomer explains some of her aesthetic satisfaction in doing this: "I like to make them and put different pieces in there to make it show up, what it is . . . if you just know what to make of it and make a change of it, there's something good in it."

I also like this description by a scholar of African-American quilts: "Lines, designs, and colors do not match up, but vary with a persistence that goes beyond a possible lack of cloth in one color or pattern" (Maude Wahlman, *Traditions in Cloth*). Quilter Plummer T Pettway explains that many different patterns and shapes make the best quilts: "You can't match them. No. It take all kind of pieces to piece a quilt . . . You have to think about the next color." Placing her colors at uneven intervals, Plummer T creates patterns that appear to be constantly shifting. This process is like passages in Elizabeth Bishop's poems—she thinks about the next color, shifts her stance or assertion.

Mississippi quilter Pearl Posey, when just a few years short of 100, stated her aesthetic choice: "I just like mine mixed up . . ." And it does not mean at all an uncaring haphazardness. "When you cutting them little bitty pieces you got to study how to put them together, and you want it to hit just right," says Pecolia Warner. This is a woman who used nearly a hundred different hues in her finest quilts. Imagine if we used a hundred different tones in a poem!

Cavafy seems to have done so in "Myris: Alexandria, A.D. 340." This is an elegy but one never knows when a new tone will be introduced. The speaker is a man. All the italics are my own.

When I heard the *terrible* news, that Myris was dead,  
I went to his house, although I *avoid*  
going to the houses of Christians,  
especially during times of *mourning* or *festivity*.

I stood in the corridor. I didn't want  
to go further inside because I saw  
that the relatives of the deceased looked at me  
with evident *surprise* and *displeasure*.

They had him in a large room  
and from the corner where I stood  
I caught a glimpse of it: all *precious* carpets,  
and vessels of silver and gold.

I stood and *wept* in a corner of the corridor.  
And I thought how our gatherings and excursions  
*wouldn't be worthwhile* now without Myris:  
and I thought how I'd no longer see him  
at our *wonderfully indecent night-long sessions*  
*enjoying himself, laughing,* and reciting verses  
with his perfect feel for Greek rhythm;  
and I thought how I'd *lost* forever  
his beauty, lost forever  
the young man I'd worshipped so *passionately*.

Some old women close to me were talking *quietly*  
about the last day he lived:  
the name of Christ constantly on his lips,  
his hand holding a cross.  
Then four Christian priests  
came into the room, and said prayers

*fervently*, and orisons to Jesus,  
or to Mary (*I'm not very familiar* with their religion).

We'd known of course that Myris *was a Christian*.  
We'd known it from the start, when he first  
joined us the year before last.  
But he lived exactly as we did:  
*more given to pleasure than all of us*,  
he scattered his money *lavishly* on his *amusements*.  
Not caring a damn what people thought,  
he threw himself eagerly into nighttime scuffles  
when we happened to clash  
with some rival group in the street.  
He never spoke about his religion.  
And once we even told him  
that we'd take him with us to the Serapion.  
*But*—I remember now—  
he didn't even seem to like this joke of ours.  
And *yes*, now I recall two other incidents.  
When we made libations to Poseidon,  
he *drew himself back* from our circle and looked elsewhere.  
And when one of us in his *fervor* said:  
"May all of us be *favored* and protected  
by the great, the *sublime* Apollo"—Myris whispered  
(the others didn't hear) "*not counting me.*"

The Christian priests were praying *loudly*  
for the young man's soul.  
I noticed with how much *diligence*,  
how much intense *concern*  
for the *forms* of their religion, they were preparing  
everything for the Christian funeral.  
And *suddenly* an *odd sensation*  
came over me. *Indefinably* I felt  
as if Myris were *going from me*:

I felt that he, a Christian, was united  
with his own people and that I was becoming  
a stranger, a total stranger. I even felt  
a *doubt* assailing me: that I'd been *deceived* by my passion  
and had *always been a stranger* to him.  
I rushed out of their *horrible* house,  
rushed away before my memory of Myris  
was captured, was *perverted* by their Christianity.

(translators, Keeley and Sherrard)

The poem seems to be an elegy happening on the spot as the mourner gives himself leeway to change his mind and his feelings.

Blues too permits itself to change its mind—or express seemingly opposite opinions—in a very tight space. Here's Honeyboy Edwards in "Apron Strings":

Mother-in-law don't treat your daughter mean.  
Mother-in-law don't treat your daughter mean again.  
You know she ain't good lord she's full of sin.

(stanza five)

He doesn't use an "even though" or a "but" to connect these seemingly contrary sentiments.

Hip Linkchain, in a stanza of his original song "You Must Be Shampoo, Baby, You Keep Bubblin' All the Time," sings,

Gonna wake up early one morning,  
fix you breakfast while you in bed.  
Gonna put some shampoo on your foot,  
let you slide till you dead.

This kind of "logic" appeals to me immensely. In the Honeyboy

Edwards example you might anticipate the final line and it seems as if it's going to be too predictable; what the lyricist gives you is completely the reverse: the askew—the truth of Edwards' and Linkchain's closing statements ("You know she ain't good lord she's full of sin" and "Gonna put some shampoo on your foot, let you slide till you dead") has not been destroyed by the claims of the first two lines in each case. It is as if we had two Christian lines finished off by, say, a Buddhist line. One feels—not a cancellation but a "whole-er" vision.

Blues copes with Pearlie Posey's "mixed-uppedness" in its very definition. Robert Curtis Smith calls it "a feeling that it's hard to do anything about: it's hard to know which way to go, what to do, the blues." And Roosevelt Sykes says, "Blues is a person who went in trouble and feeled depressed, something worrying him, been mistreated . . . And there's a happy feeling of the blues. Play the blues with a good feeling, it makes you feel good. Blues is an emotion, you see, of many different feelings. So it's called 'individual trouble.' So you can't know how a man feel. Every individual has an own feeling. He tries to bring it out in his songs, some happy or some blue."

Certainly Laura Jensen shares the blues ideology—which allows only for what David Evans calls "temporary successes"—when she writes, "She will free the cage and step inside."

Recently I found that my undergraduates' favorite assignment, based on the Cavafy poem, was what I called a Tonal Insecurity Poem. It allowed them to be as insecure as they naturally were and they felt at ease making certain art out of insecurity. They did not attempt some final resolution of the issue they wrote about.

Some poets evolve characteristic ways of two-toning: there's Elizabeth Bishop's Or-style: at the end of "Large Bad Picture" she says, about the ships in the painting, "Apparently they have

reached their destination./ It would be hard to say what brought them there,/ commerce or contemplation.” Two tonally distant alternatives.

“The Bight” ends: “All the untidy activity continues,/ awful but cheerful.”

In “Faustina, or Rock Roses” Bishop describes the servant’s “sinister kind face”—she suggests the two qualities can occupy the same place or position at the same point in time or space. Later she concludes: “There is no way of telling./The eyes say only either.”

In “Crusoe in England” she writes about “the volcano/I’d christened *Mont d’Espoir* or *Mount Despair*/ (I’d time enough to play with names) . . .” Here is the blues ideology—like blues it’s seriously entertaining; Hope in French nearly being Despair in English is more than a word game.

“Under Our Window: Ouro Preto” opens up at the end to this:

Oil has seeped into  
the margins of the ditch of standing water  
and flashes or looks upward brokenly,  
like bits of mirror—no, more blue than that:  
like tatters of the *Morpho* butterfly.

Her method here is truly scrap-piecing. No one scrap alone is sufficient to keep her warm. Or to keep the vision warm, in the sense of lifelike. Why wasn’t she content with “flashes”? It has a flashy tone; “looks” is more of a humble gaze, tones the line down, is informal or inconspicuous. Why not then just be content with “looks”? It doesn’t allow the flash—of insight perhaps, or the sense of possible sudden intelligence. Or other interpretations one could add.

Then in the next line she goes on in her self-correcting way, which is really an acceptance of various tones all applicable—"That's normal"—even if contradictory, to the same object. One does not cancel the other.

In "Poem," Bishop's piecing is done for the expressed inclusion of several tones:

Our visions coincided—'visions' is  
too serious a word—our looks, two looks.

In "The Moose"

A moose has come out of  
the impenetrable wood  
and stands there, looms, rather

.....

Towering, antlerless,  
high as a church,  
homely as a house  
(or, safe as houses).

In addition to the literature many poets know and think themselves a part of, I have been using examples and analogies from arts which have not relied on academic training; the tonally rich line clearly is not a strained or artsy construction or the literati's game. It may actually represent a belief in scraps, like the quilter's. Or be a necessary singing comprised of many different feelings. Not a majority of any one feeling, just what you're left with.

Multiplicity solves the problem of "good behavior" for many a poet:

I stood and wept in a corner of the corridor.  
And I thought how our gatherings and excursions



wouldn't be worthwhile now without Myris;  
and I thought how I'd no longer see him  
at our wonderfully indecent night-long sessions . . .

These lines of Cavafy's reject too much refinement. As William Stafford says, "If we purify the pond, the lilies die." For every Ten Commandments there are thousands of testimonials as to why the artist can't be perfect. But more fascinating perhaps than perfection is a poetic which preserves what textile scholar Georges Meurant calls "all its stages of development at once."

I am not talking about classic irony, where you say one thing and mean another. In these examples the artists mean what they say. And they say discrepancy, when unavoidable, is singable, sewable, writable. Fully complex, the two-, three-, or four-tone line (see Bill Knott's *Outremer*), is something larger than "tension," richer than "bittersweet," more variegated than Yin and Yang, and less the scholar's darling than "ambiguity."

When David Evans says, "The pianist must play the major and minor notes simultaneously or in rapid succession to achieve the effect of blue notes," we writers can see that writing this way induces an emotion that no other way of writing can achieve, what Leonard Michaels calls "a kind of truth that isn't available to us otherwise."

In accepting the concurrence and interaction of unlike truths, one may feel a relief like that in Adrienne Rich's "Integrity":

Anger and tenderness: my selves.  
And now I can believe they breathe in me  
as angels, not polarities.

And in a later poem she grows to understand that

Trapped in one idea, you can't have your feelings,  
feelings are always about more than one thing.

Later, in the same sequence, she modifies those lines:

Trapped in one idea, you can't have feelings.  
Without feelings perhaps you can feel like a god.

It would seem that a two-tone aesthetic should preclude a poem's evoking only an emotion of the writer's own "holiness," righteous melancholy, and so forth. It would seem as if not only an acceptance of the ungodlike state, whatever that is, but a pleasure in exploring it is necessary for multi-toned vision. Call it mixed-uppedness, individual trouble, or confident uncertainty.

I've been looking for a happy definition of "ungodlike." First I found an entry to the concept in a catalog for an Oakland African-American quilt show: "Wanda Jones . . . says that when she was learning to quilt and would make a mistake, her mother would say: 'It's nothing about making it a little different. It's still the same pattern. You just added something of your own to it.'" Ungodlikeness may be our cherished predicament, like the grain of Galway Kinnell's spruce.

Then I ran across a testimonial by Bay Area quilter Arbie Williams: ". . . if you do it backwards, well sometime it fit in better than the way you had your ideals to go."

And then we encounter gods other than Greco-Roman, Nordic, or Judeo-Christian. Multi-toned gods. With Robert Plant Armstrong we travel to the scene of a chicken being sacrificed to "a simple mound of earth . . . a mere bit of mud . . . at a crossroads outside a Yoruba village." The mound is a "shrine to Eshu, the Yoruba god of indeterminacy," asymmetry, the isolated phenomenon, odd numbers. Here is a god a poet might do well to believe in. Be like. Perhaps.

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EDEN: THE LAST EXIT

Daily we developed our perfection.  
With these breaths perfumed  
the lion and the lamb; they walked  
beside us in their own true names.

Where bare heels bruised the grass  
violets grew.

Wandering in  
and out of watershine,  
always in the present tense.

Freshness kept right on unfolding.  
Like a high note held too long.  
Not knowing what they were  
we longed for endings,

Accidents. A furtive  
flaw or two.  
We saw the apple  
twisting on the tree.

All we remember of the Messenger  
was a belch of wind behind us,  
upward rush of dust,  
the plains empty of rain.

\* \* \*

The animals turned into others,  
necessary meats and slaves

Wound up for a limited run. Like us:  
distributed in wingless bodies

for office work,  
madness clouding our teeth.

Time as we knew it in the garden  
stored only in coffins now.

## DREAMING OF LIONS

What if we found that beach where  
lions play? Their broad, childish paws  
print roses in the yellow sand, gulls  
open white over the water  
and the dream slows down to a waltz.

All along the way our footsteps fluttered,  
threshed and fluttered,  
broke in two  
as we crossed the rice paddy,  
weighed with what we didn't have.  
Birds knelt on branches above us,  
called softly of desires that should have  
been perfected in the spring.

But the lions! As they turn their muzzles  
toward us sun-red sands dissolve.  
The warm first sorrow laps at our ankles again,  
steps that are no longer ours  
roll under us,

Shadowless our persons shine like gifts —  
we were never safe from arrival.

## WING SPACE

We walk the hills  
revised by summer,  
and the reddened woods,  
happy to be helpless  
against the insistence  
of leaves falling, like thoughts  
used and let go —  
cracked, heat-split. More wing  
space among the branches  
but the singers are gone.

The vine dried  
against the rock is  
a dead question mark;  
endings are answers we do not  
need to understand.  
Harvesters/scavengers  
hurried along, holding hands —  
no one knows  
which wind wiped out  
the lights of which tree.

SUDDENLY. IN DECEMBER

Suddenly. In December. I stand knee-deep in snow.  
Talk to you, get no answer. You say nothing.  
My love, so it's happened. Our whole life,  
the smile, tears, and the courage. Your sewing machine  
and all the nights of work. At the end, our travels:  
—under the snow. Under the brown wreath.

Everything happened so fast. Two staring eyes. Words  
I didn't understand, repeated and repeated.  
And suddenly nothing more. You slept.  
And now they're here. All the days, the summer nights,  
the grapes in Valladolid, the sunsets in Nemi  
—under the snow. Under the brown wreath.

Quick as lightning, a switch turned off,  
traces of pictures behind my eyes fade,  
erased from the slate of life. Or aren't they?  
Your new dress, my face and our stairs  
and everything you carried to the house. Is it gone  
—under the snow. Under the brown wreath?

Dearest friend, where is our joy now,  
the strong hands, the young smile,  
your hair haloed over your forehead, your courage  
and all your energy and hope?  
—Under the snow. Under the brown wreath.

Friend beyond death. Take me down with you.  
Side by side. Let's see the unknown.  
It's so barren now, time's darkening.  
Words so few— no one listens anymore.  
My love, you who sleep. Eurydice.  
—Under the snow. Under the brown wreath.



## GRASS

Enduring as hope.  
If you don't watch out  
it's up between your fingers,  
along the sidewalk or between the legs  
of the national monument.  
After only a year  
you see the green tinge on battlefields  
and catch a faint scent  
over the ashes of a bombed town.  
Persistent as life itself  
or oblivion.  
The poor's consolation. (The rich  
have lawn mowers.) But grass  
doesn't care about anything  
or anybody. Earth's gift.  
Stronger than Eros. Bearing all.

Try to walk barefoot on a June morning.  
Feel how it bends under your foot  
and straightens again. Washes your feet,  
like Christ and his disciples.  
Filled with goodness, but quiet. Even  
the Reaper becomes only a breath, a laugh.  
Because grass is everywhere. Comes again  
and again like life itself  
and our days. And this I will leave  
but not entirely.

## REFUGEE

He who lives in half-lit rooms. He who looks for burnt-out ruins.  
He who has small hands and hates the sight of violins.  
He who enters you without knocking, goes without farewell.  
He who stares at you from a place inside the future.  
He who has a thousand words but cannot make a sound.  
The dog's friend, he who lets the lamp burn. He who looks blind.

## SKY LAB

This is how far we've come, the astronomer thought  
by the third week, swimming around in his cabin  
having kicked a god in the eye by mistake  
— so far  
that there's no longer a difference between up and down  
north or south, light or heavy.  
How can we know justice then.

So far.  
Weightless, in a closed room  
we hunt for sunrises with great speed  
aching for a green straw  
or something to catch on to, resisting. Lift a rock.

One night he saw earth as an open eye  
looking at him, serious as a child  
waking up in the middle of the night.

*translated by Stephanie Hegstad and Aina Gerner-Mathisen*

PEDESTRIAN

All that's left, cars  
and one pedestrian,  
the last one, the only one left,  
required to cross streets  
all day long.

All this  
to convey the accident rate  
with exact precision.  
(Did it fall or rise?)

Possible, that he  
got away with his life —  
privately that was his  
golden dream, you might say —,  
possible, that he fell beneath  
some wheels,  
then a report was filed.

Once, he had the pressing need  
to look another human  
right in the eye,  
but when he turned around, looking for his shadow,  
all he saw was a frightened hare  
with an eartrumpet in its right ear.

## THE PATH

Lost in thought, hands behind my back,  
I walk along the railroad tracks,  
the straightest  
of all paths.

Behind me, full-throttle ahead,  
there's a train  
that doesn't know I'm out here.

The train,  
my witness is Zeno the Elder,  
will never reach me,  
because I'll always be a step ahead  
of things that can't think.

Even if it brutally  
runs me over,  
there'll always be someone  
going along ahead,  
lost in thought,  
hands behind his back.

The way I am now  
before the black monster  
that's closing in on me so damn fast  
but will nonetheless never reach me,  
never.

## SEEING CLEARLY

She covered his eyes  
and showed him the world,  
which was drawn large  
on a blackboard.

— What's this letter?  
she asked.

— Night, he answered.

— You're wrong, it's the sun.

Night's got no rays,  
we all know that. And this one here?

— Night.

— Don't make me laugh!

It's the sea, where would it  
get so much darkness from?

And this?

The man hesitated now,  
then said:

— Night.

— Oh no, it's woman.

Night doesn't have breasts, friend.

I'll bet her black hair

confused you. But what about this one?

Take a close look

before you answer.

— Night, again.

— Too bad, wrong again.

The letter just happened  
to be you.

Next!

## HORIZONTAL

In the beginning, nothing stood upright,  
neither mountain nor dream,  
so the rain didn't need  
to fall from above.

The rain came from the horizon,  
I mean the drops came just about  
from where on the map  
the North Pole lies.

But the emergence of the relief map  
and of people in particular  
shifted the earth's center of gravity.

Clouds rose up,  
puffed up by our magnetic field,  
like parachutes rising into heaven.

For that matter, it rains  
horizontally these days, from time to time,  
and then I look out the window  
or out into history  
to see who among us  
is running around on all fours.

## MY SOUL, YOU'RE GOOD AT EVERYTHING

Oh soul, you're good at everything!  
At looking out the window  
into the darkness,  
at the women passing by,  
at measuring the distance  
between two bugs.

Possible, I suppose, that we misuse you  
by turning you into a brush,  
a sponge,  
a star,  
a telescope,  
a rag.

You out there, digging at your souls  
like moles in the light of blinding air:  
what kind of claws do we need for the light  
and how do we build tunnels?

Seems to me you're confusing us on purpose,  
you're too quick for us, soul,  
oh soul, you're good at everything!

*translated by Stuart Frieibert*



I SEE CHILE IN MY REARVIEW MIRROR

*By dark the world is once again intact,  
Or so the mirrors, wiped clean, try to reason . . .*

— James Merrill

This dream of water — what does it harbor?  
I see Argentina and Paraguay  
under a curfew of glass, their colors  
breaking, like oil. The night in Uruguay

is black salt. I'm driving towards Utah,  
keeping the entire hemisphere in view —  
Columbia vermilion, Brazil blue tar,  
some countries wiped clean of color: Peru

is titanium white. And always oceans  
that hide in mirrors: when bevelled edges  
arrest tides or this world's destinations  
forsake ships. There's Sedona, Nogales

far behind. Once I went through a mirror —  
from there too the world, so intact, resembled  
only itself. When I returned I tore  
the skin off the glass. The sea was unsealed

by dark, and I saw ships sink off the coast  
of a wounded republic. Now from a blur  
of tanks in Santiago, a white horse  
gallops, riderless, chased by drunk soldiers

in a jeep; they're firing into the moon.  
And as I keep driving in the desert,  
someone is running to catch the last bus, men  
hanging on to its sides. And he's missed it.

He is running again; crescents of steel  
fall from the sky. And here the rocks  
are under fog, the cedars a temple,  
Sedona carved by the wind into gods —

each shadow their worshipper. The siren  
empties Santiago; he watches  
— from a hush of windows — blindfolded men  
blurred in gleaming vans. The horse vanishes

into a dream. I'm passing skeletal  
figures carved in 700 B.C.  
Whoever deciphers these canyon walls  
remains forsaken, alone with history,

no harbor for his dream. And what else will  
this mirror now reason, filled with water?  
I see Peru without rain, Brazil  
without forests — and here in Utah a dagger

of sunlight: it's splitting — it's the summer  
solstice — the quartz center of a spiral.  
Did the Anasazi know the darker  
answer also — given now in crystal

by the mirrored continent? The solstice,  
but of winter? A beam stabs the window,  
diamonds him, a funeral in his eyes.  
In the lit stadium of Santiago,

this is the shortest day. He's taken there.  
Those about to die are looking at him,  
his eyes the ledger of the disappeared.  
What will the mirror try now? I'm driving,

still north, always followed by that country,  
its floors ice, its citizens so lovesick  
that the ground — sheer glass — of every city  
is torn up. They demand the republic

give back, jewelled, their every reflection.  
They dig till dawn but find only corpses.  
He has returned to this dream for his bones.  
The waters darken. The continent vanishes.

THROUGH CORRALITOS UNDER ROLLS OF CLOUD

I

Through Corralitos under rolls of cloud  
between winter-stiff, ranged apple-trees  
each netted in transparent air,  
thin sinking light, heartsick within and filmed  
in heartsickness around you, gelatin cocoon  
invisible yet impervious — to the hawk  
steering against the cloudbank, to the clear  
oranges burning at the rancher's gate  
rosetree, agave, stiff beauties holding fast  
with or without your passion,  
the pruners freeing up the boughs  
in the unsearched faith these strange stiff shapes will bear.

II

Showering after 'flu; stripping the bed;  
running the shrouds of sickness through the wash;  
airing the rooms; emptying the trash;  
it's as if part of you had died in the house  
sometime in that last low-lit afternoon  
when your dreams ebbed salt-thick into the sheets  
and now this other's left to wash the corpse,  
burn eucalyptus, turn the mirrors over —  
this other who herself barely came back,  
whose breath was fog to your mist, whose stubborn shadow  
covered you as you lay freezing, she survived  
uncertain who she is or will be without you.

III

If you know who died in that bed, do you know  
who has survived? If you say, *she was weaker,*  
*held life less dear, expected others*  
*to fight for her* — if pride lets you name her  
*victim* — and the one who got up and threw

the windows open, stripped the bed, *survivor*  
— what have you said, what do you know  
of the survivor when you know her  
only in opposition to the lost?  
What does it mean to say *I have survived*  
until you take the mirrors and turn them outward  
and read your own face in their outraged light?

#### IV

That light of outrage is the light of history  
springing upon us when we're least prepared,  
thinking maybe a little glade of time  
leaf-thick and with clear water  
is ours, is promised us, for all we've hacked  
and tracked our way through: to this:  
What will it be? Your wish or mine? your  
prayers or my wish then: that those we love  
be well, whatever that means, to be well.  
Outrage: who dare claim protection for their own  
amid such unprotection? What kind of prayer  
is that? To what kind of god? What kind of wish?

#### V

She who died on that bed sees it her way:  
She who went under peers through the translucent shell  
cupping her death and sees her other well,  
through a long lens, in silvered outline, well  
she sees her other and she cannot tell  
why when the boom of surf struck at them both  
she felt the undertow and heard the bell,  
thought death would be their twinning, till the swell  
smashed her against the reef, her other still  
fighting the pull, struggling somewhere away  
further and further, calling her all the while:  
she who went under summons her other still.

1989-1990

MARKINGS

I

We marked the pitch: four jackets for four goalposts,  
That was all. The corners and the squares  
Were there like longitude and latitude  
Under the bumpy ground, to be  
Agreed about or disagreed about  
When the time came. And then we picked the teams  
And crossed the line our called names drew between us.

Youngsters shouting their heads off in a field  
As the light died and they kept on playing —  
Because by then they were playing in their heads  
And the actual kicked ball came to them  
Like a dream heaviness, and their own hard  
Breathing in the dark and skids on grass  
Sounded like effort in another world.  
It was quick and constant, a game that never need  
Be played out: some limit had been passed,  
There was fleetness, furtherance, untiredness  
In playtime that was ordinary and extra.

II

You also loved lines pegged out in the garden,  
The spade nicking a first straight edge along  
The tight white string. Or string stretched perfectly  
To mark the outline of a house foundation,  
Pale timber battens set at right angles  
For every corner, each freshly sawn new board  
Spick and span in the oddly passive grass.  
Or the imaginary line straight down  
A field of grazing, to be ploughed open  
From the rod stuck in one headrig to the rod  
Stuck in the other.

### III

All these things entered you  
As if they were both the door and what came through it.  
They marked the spot, marked time, and held it open.  
A mower parted the bronze sea of corn.  
A windlass hauled the centre out of water.  
Two men with a cross-cut kept it swimming  
Into a felled beech backwards and forwards  
So that they seemed to row the steady earth.

## FIELD OF VISION

I remember this woman who sat for years  
In a wheelchair, looking straight ahead  
Out the window at sycamore trees unleafing  
And leafing at the far end of the lane.

Straight out past the TV in the corner,  
The stunted, agitated hawthorn bush,  
The same small calves with their backs to wind and rain,  
The same acre of ragwort, the same mountain.

She was steadfast as the big window itself.  
Her brow was clear as the chrome bits of the chair.  
She never lamented once and she never  
Carried a spare ounce of emotional weight.

Face to face with her was an education  
Of the sort you got across a well-braced gate —  
One of those lean, clean, iron, roadside ones  
Between two whitewashed pillars, where you could see

Deeper into the country than you expected  
And discovered that the field behind the hedge  
Grew more distinctly strange as you kept standing  
Focused and drawn in by what barred the way.



## CASTING AND GATHERING

*for Ted Hughes*

Years and years ago, these sounds took sides:

On the left bank, a green silk tapered cast  
Went whispering through the air, saying *hush*  
And *lush*, entirely free, no matter whether  
It swished above the hayfield or the river.

On the right bank, like a speeded-up corncrake,  
A sharp ratcheting went on and on  
Cutting across the stillness as another  
Fisherman gathered line-lengths off his reel.

I am still standing there, awake and dreamy.  
I have grown older and can see them both  
Moving their arms and rods, working away,  
Each one absorbed, proofed by the sounds he's making.

One sound is saying, "You are not worth tuppence,  
But neither is anybody. Watch Number One!"  
The other says, "Go with it! Give and swerve.  
You are everything you feel beside the river."

I love hushed air. I trust contrariness.  
Years and years go past and I cannot move  
For I see that when one man casts, the other gathers  
And then *vice versa*, without changing sides.

THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

I set my hope to float  
in a little boat of words  
the way you'd maybe put  
a baby in a basket  
woven out of crisscrossed  
leaves of wild flag  
and caulked along the bottom  
with pitch and bitumen

and put it in the water  
among the sedge and rushes  
here at the river's edge  
thinking, you never know  
where the current takes it,  
hoping it might end up  
the same way Moses did —  
saved by Pharaoh's daughter.

*translated by David Young*

JAMES WRIGHT: IN MEMORY

Looking back at me  
from his death, from the feminine side, he asks me  
to touch him on his throat, on his breastbone,  
to touch the spots that have the life in them. His voice  
is closer to me than I am to myself.  
Unknowable, beginning in joy, his voice  
is closer to me than I am to myself.

## ALL WE CAN DO

Mark Strand, *The Continuous Life* (Knopf, 1990); *Selected Poems* (Knopf, 1990)

### WALK AT NIGHT

Nothing is *like* something else. What is not wholly  
alone with itself, what thing can really be expressed?  
We name nothing. All we can do  
is tolerate, acquaint ourselves  
with a single fact: here a sudden brilliance  
or there a glimpse momentarily grazes us  
as if it were precisely *that* in which resides  
what our life is. Whoever resists  
will have no world. Whoever grasps too much  
will overlook the infinite. Meanwhile,  
during such huge nights we are out of danger,  
distributed in equal, almost weightless  
parts among the stars. How they urge us on.

It has lately become fashionable again to summon up Rilke's name when reviewing, or even just talking about, contemporary poetry, recalling this or that line (I suggest a moratorium on using "You must change your life"). I want to go a step farther, by laying this particular poem (in Franz Wright's version) over my review as a sort of window through which to view Mark Strand's valuable contributions in both these volumes to what has been yet another bountiful year in poetry. Aside from the fact that some readers might have been fooled into thinking that "Walk At Night" was by Strand, given its ideas, the stately, even majestic way they are voiced, the measured phrasing that avoids unwanted exaggeration — like Rilke, Strand works in rhythms that one can safely sleepwalk to, as he guides us through recognizable, though always slightly displaced, terrain —, it strikes me that this is a walk Strand regularly takes, night after night, as he explores our

human neighborhood in language that finishes its thoughts, its sentences, and refuses to rush past:

## THE IDEA

*for Nolan Miller*

For us, too, there was a wish to possess  
Something beyond the world we knew, beyond ourselves,  
Beyond our power to imagine, something nevertheless  
In which we might see ourselves; and this desire  
Came always in passing, in waning light, and in such cold  
That ice on the valley's lakes cracked and rolled,  
And blowing snow covered what earth we saw,  
And scenes from the past, when they surfaced again,  
Looked not as they had, but ghostly and white  
Among false curves and hidden erasures;  
And never once did we feel we were close  
Until the night wind said, "Why do this,  
Especially now? Go back to the place you belong;"  
And there appeared, with its windows glowing, small,  
In the distance, in the frozen reaches, a cabin;  
And we stood before it, amazed at its being there,  
And would have gone forward and opened the door,  
And stepped into the glow and warmed ourselves there,  
But that it was ours by not being ours,  
And should remain empty. That was the idea.

This poem, in its melancholy but unfearful ways, its deliberate echoes of Stevens and Bishop, introduces Strand's *The Continuous Life*, his first new collection in ten years. Like Rilke, Strand seems preoccupied with not appropriating what is not ours to possess. Just registering one's steady "amazement" is perhaps enough for now, both poets suggest, assuming one does so by not "grasping for too much." The implicit injunction is not to name, in other words to resist what may be the poet's natural activity. But

naming is also an act that is distressingly prepossessing, perhaps the most controlling one we commit — something that masquerades as normal desire. I'm somewhat reminded of Schopenhauer's notion (which I admittedly oversimplify here, and which incidentally I believe Rilke took in deeply) of the necessity of closing down the will, limiting its power in order to insure what we've come to call ecological balance.

Poets like Strand understand how essential it is to use poetry's power carefully, in service of what might be a greater good: seeing to it that life remains "continuous," separate from our ability to control it, available to our senses but not subject to interruptions by way of our holding it up in poems, no matter how well we may do so. And so it seems no accident that Strand has been active in so many ways, as teacher, editor, translator, anthologist, children's book author, fiction writer (*Mr. and Mrs. Baby* is a collection well worth rereading), reviewer par excellence of photography and painting, and let us also add his recent designation as Poet Laureate of the United States, another station on his journey to getting "back to the place you belong," as the poem cited has it. It's also no accident that this new collection contains such a wide variety of pieces, from poems to prose poems to prose-somethings to dramatic dialogue and after-pieces, which may co-exist a bit uneasily under one cover, but co-exist on their own terms, give or take a few forays into "attitudes" that Strand more subtly delineated in earlier volumes — I'm thinking especially of *Reasons For Moving* (1968) and *Darker* (1970), two strong books that helped to define American poetry at the time.

Before turning my attention to individual pieces, let me conduct a roller coaster ride up and down some lines from many poems in the new collection, by way of illustrating, arbitrarily, the echoes among the poems and highlighting their variety at the same time. I'll allow myself some afterthoughts as the lines go by. My frame is "places, where . . . ," for Strand, born in Canada and widely travelled, has an unusually strong sense of landscape, or place (often remote), and keeps moving, to places where: "the person beside me was running away" ("Velocity Meadows" — the

second poem in the book); the sun's rays "shine upon the fatal sprawl / Of everything on earth" ("A.M."); "everything weeps for how the world goes" ("Centro Virgilianus"); "the moon *could* fall at any time" ("Fear of Night"); where it's "possible, moreover, to fall in love without acting out of character" ("Chekhov: A Sestina" — the sestina undergoes quite a transition in form here); "you sit in the ruby plush of an ugly chair" ("To Himself" — reading the journals of John Cheever lately, I couldn't help seeing him at the center of this poem); "if the end comes, it too will pass" ("Fiction"); "nothing was spared, not the couch we sat on, / Nor the rugs, nor our friends, staring off into space" ("Luminism" — with phrasing throughout that forms the backbone of Strand's earlier, masterly "Elegy For My Father"); "Like many brilliant notions — easy to understand / But hard to believe — the one about our hating it here / Was put aside and then forgot" ("Life in the Valley" — Max Frisch's "Man in the Holocene" revisited); "you live between two darks, the first / With an ending, the second without one, that the luckiest / Thing is having been born" ("The Continuous Life"); "There is so much not to do!" ("From a Lost Diary"); "There was nothing to remind me of where I was" ("Travel"); "The great forgetters were hard at work" ("Always" — dedicated to Charles Simic, and a poem that in its diction and strategy owes something to their close friendship); "I hope I haven't disturbed you. / If I have, then I'll be gone" ("Grotesques" — a piece contrapuntally composed, with independently dependent sections); "Was it written that I would be born into myself again and again" ("Se la vita e sventura . . . ?" — this poem seems to consume itself); "If we should lose ourselves in this weather, / Will anyone know us when we arrive? / Will mother and father feed us or let us go?" ("Danse d'hiver" — a quintessential piece); "Despite its ancient bounds, the empire has no shape" ("The Empire of Chance" — a sort of extended antidote to Simic's poem, "Empire of Dreams"); "Our masters are gone and if they returned / Who among us would hear them" ("The History of Poetry"); "How quickly the great unfinished world came into view" ("The Continental College of Beauty"); "The gifted have told us for

years that they want to be loved" ("The Midnight Club"); "One word after another erasing the world and leaving instead / The invisible lines of its calling: Out there, out there" ("Itself Now" — recall Rilke's "What is not wholly / alone with itself" — the emphasis is different, but the idea is central to both poets); the reader "forgets / Not only the poem, but where he is" ("Reading in Place"); "Not every man knows what he shall sing at the end" ("The End" — some readers will perhaps be irritated that this world seems male-centered; of perhaps larger moment is the biblical cast to "shall" in this line . . .).

Scouring every poem as I have, here, for a line or two to string together in an attempt to characterize the whole volume's nature, is a reductive and risky way to summarize what the reader's in for. What also came to the fore upon closing this book is how much deep humor there is mixed into the humus from which the pieces take root. David Kirby, in his solid monograph, *Mark Strand and the Poet's Place in Contemporary Culture* (Missouri, 1990), takes this aspect up some, as well as focussing on major themes and means.

As for me, it seems from this curious medley of pieces in *The Continuous Life*, as well as from the reissue of Strand's 1980 *Selected Poems* (a good idea, from Knopf; and another way to celebrate Strand's appointment as Poet Laureate), that he remains very much his own poet, centered in his own voice(s), never mind his knowledge of and allegiance to the literatures of many countries, and his carefully fostered relations with the other arts and their artists. Strand has the capacity to evoke original characters, in some cases historical ones, and to establish landscapes that transform our own experiences into more intimate portraits of ourselves. I happily confess that "Elegy For My Father" (from *The Story of Our Lives*, 1973; reprinted in *Selected Poems*), is, along with Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Childhood Is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies" (from *Wine From These Grapes*, 1934), a poem I re-read; it is a poem that makes one whole again, as it moves through each crucial stage, or "station," in the struggle to understand father, fathering, and the family as a whole. Read aloud, it affects



me as few poems have, and inches me closer to accepting what I must accept to keep growing, to stay alive.

Before I turn to "Orpheus Alone," my favorite poem in the new book, I want to mention another piece, "Translation," as an example of the rich variety Strand displays. Though it's an extended romp of sorts, its serious underside will be clear to anyone who's even remotely aware of the perils of translation. It deserves to be widely assigned in the many translation classes now being taught, and is devastatingly funny about what it is we do when we render. Strand knows so much about the art and practice of translation that he can afford to take the high and low roads here. In five short narratives, ranging from the prospect of answering the questions of a four-year-old translator, to a sexual adventure with the speaker's son's nursery school teacher, on past the nursery school teacher's husband's need to be counseled as well, to final leaps to encounters with someone who teaches at Southern Utah State, and Borges while taking a bath, Strand raises all the right questions without withholding all the answers. Would that Borges were alive to laugh along with the final move of the piece, even as the tears start.

O.k., here's

### ORPHEUS ALONE

It was an adventure much could be made of: a walk  
On the shores of the darkest known river,  
Among the hooded, shoving crowds, by steaming rocks  
And rows of ruined huts half-buried in the muck;  
Then to the great court with its marble yard  
Whose emptiness gave him the creeps, and to sit there  
In the sunken silence of the place and speak  
Of what he had lost, what he still possessed of his loss,  
And, then, pulling out all the stops, describing her eyes,  
Her forehead where the golden light of evening spread,  
The curve of her neck, the slope of her shoulders, everything  
Down to her thighs and calves, letting the words come,

As if lifted from sleep, to drift upstream,  
Against the water's will, where all the condemned  
And pointless labor, stunned by his voice's cadence,  
Would come to a halt, and even the crazed, dishevelled  
Furies, for the first time, would weep, and the soot-filled  
Air would clear just enough for her, the lost bride,  
To step through the image of herself and be seen in the light.  
As everyone knows, this was the first great poem,  
Which was followed by days of sitting around  
In the houses of friends, with his head back, his eyes  
Closed, trying to will her return, but finding  
Only himself, again and again, trapped  
In the chill of his loss, and, finally,  
Without a word, taking off to wander the hills  
Outside of town, where he stayed until he had shaken  
The image of love and put in its place the world  
As he wished it would be, urging its shape and measure  
Into speech of such newness that the world was swayed,  
And trees suddenly appeared in the bare place  
Where he spoke and lifted their limbs and swept  
The tender grass with the gowns of their shade,  
And stones, weightless for once, came and set themselves there,  
And small animals lay in the miraculous fields of grain  
And aisles of corn, and slept. The voice of light  
Had come forth from the body of fire, and each thing  
Rose from its depths and shone as it never had.  
And that was the second great poem,  
Which no one recalls anymore. The third and greatest  
Came into the world as the world, out of the unsayable,  
Invisible source of all longing to be; it came  
As things come that will perish, to be seen or heard  
A while, like the coating of frost or the movement  
Of wind, and then no more; it came in the middle of sleep  
Like a door to the infinite, and, circled by flame,  
Came again at the moment of waking, and, sometimes,  
Remote and small, it came as a vision with trees

By a weaving stream, brushing the bank  
With their violet shade, with somebody's limbs  
Scattered among the matted, mildewed leaves nearby,  
With his severed head rolling under the waves,  
Breaking the shifting columns of light into a swirl  
Of slivers and flecks; it came in a language  
Untouched by pity, in lines, lavish and dark,  
Where death is reborn and sent into the world as a gift,  
So the future, with no voice of its own, nor hope  
Of ever becoming more than it will be, might mourn.

Running across this moving poem in *The New Yorker* a while back, I thought, Now how can even a Mark Strand go back to that old well? There must be thousands of Orpheus poems in the world by now. On the other hand, have you noticed how few Eurydice poems there are? Other poets have been having a go at Orpheus *and* Eurydice poems, which I'd like to think Jean Valentine showed the way to some years ago. And Judita Vaičiunaitė recently took on both characters in a gripping, dramatic dialogue piece, set against recent Lithuanian horrors. But Mark Strand, by returning as it were to "Orpheus alone," and by virtue of his original "creation-myth," reignites the story by retelling it in such an expanded version that it not only affords matters the prominence of a chapter in the poetry bible, but also, as a colleague helped me see, conducts a history of poetry lesson: four sub-chapters, my friend points out, move us from Renaissance love poetry, through the Romantics' ways with nature poetry, next to a consideration of the symbolist-modernist attempts at transcendence, and finally to what the future may hold, with our own time's reluctance to make any definite commitments implied. This version provides new substance and detail, so that even as we wear away the myth by quick reference and easy afterthought, Strand's way with the story and the language of the story seems replenishing. He knows how to use partly inherited, partly invented stately poetic diction so that it doesn't lapse into mere rhetoric (just the positioning of "gave him the creeps" is enough to keep us from falling asleep to

older rhythms, not to mention the rhyming assonance "creeps" provides for moments like "sleep," and "Furies . . . would weep"). Even if he risks suggesting that it may be the male poet chiefly whose aloneness can give rise to what we next sing ("which was followed by days sitting around / In the houses of friends, with his head back"), such complaint may be a bit beside the point, inasmuch as Strand is doing a history of poetry, in which he mainly, though subtly, mocks the inherited role. It is of course essential to enjoy many versions of the truth, and we all have one to offer, so one can hardly fault Strand for not being Adrienne Rich, or Audre Lorde, or Joy Harjo, not to mention the countless other vibrant voices now being heard. For my taste, Strand does what he does with instructive modesty ("Remote and small, it came as a vision"), as well as in a clarifying way about how appropriate language must be "drawn": "Untouched by pity, in lines lavish and dark."

Strand's notions of time and death and gift and becoming are satisfyingly, if conditionally, hopeful, and what I am particularly drawn to here is the emphasis, in this acted-out parable, on slow-motion simplicity and the reverence for Orpheus' part in how poetry began. Finally, Strand's sense of how "the image of love" is shaken and in its place "speech of newness" is come to, necessarily clumsily at times, means we can reapply this or any myth to help us shape more coherent feelings about where we have been, and our best language to live by in the future. This may not be all we can do, but I suspect Rilke might be satisfied as well.

*Stuart Friebert*

## THE SECRET WORLD OF CHARLES SIMIC

Charles Simic, *The Book of Gods and Devils* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990)

*What I see is the paradox. What shall I call it? The sacred and the profane? I like that point where the levels meet. . . . We know what the Egyptians have said: as above, so below. This is the paradox, and I like to draw them close together. . . .*

— Charles Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty*

Charles Simic follows phenomenology all the way back to its hermeneutic roots in his marvelous new collection, *The Book of Gods and Devils*. The Egyptian god alluded to in my epigraph, and identified by Simic in a new book of essays—*Wonderful Words, Silent Truth*—is Hermes Trismegistos, a.k.a. Thoth. He was really the start of it all for the philosopher Heidegger — a major figure in hermeneutical or interpretative phenomenology — and the poet Simic, who has often expressed a deep and abiding interest in Heideggerian philosophy. It is possible to claim Thoth as a sort of unseen — of course! — charismatic presence in the book.

Simic is continuing the saga of the Chaplinesque — he would say Buster Keatonish — seer in a world as inscrutable as a sacred text. He's working again in the verse and stanza forms he virtually abandoned for the compact prose poems of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *The World Doesn't End*. And, as his mode of discourse has become increasingly expansive, so too has his cosmology. The dominant theme is still the search for determinate meaning and enlightenment in an indeterminate and secret world — as if in subliminal testament to its mystery, the last word of the book is "secret" — but all the hermeneutic goings-on extend beyond ontology; Simic is playing with the teleological. Who — or what — are these gods and devils? Are they within or without us? These are the questions.

In a sort of nostalgia for the noumenal discoveries of his ear-

lier, truncated “object” poems, where the odd stone, knife or broom — “things as they are” — were conceptualized, Simic reveals his fascination with the implications of concealment and disclosure:

## THE WHITE ROOM

The obvious is difficult  
To prove. Many prefer  
The hidden. I did, too.  
I listened to the trees.

They had a secret  
Which they were about to  
Make known to me,  
And then didn't.

Summer came. Each tree  
On my street had its own  
Scheherazade. My nights  
Were a part of their wild

Story-telling. We were  
Entering dark houses,  
More and more dark houses  
Hushed and abandoned.

There was someone with eyes closed  
On the upper floors.  
The thought of it, and the wonder,  
Kept me sleepless.

The truth is bald and cold,  
Said the woman

Who always wore white.  
She didn't leave her room much.

The sun pointed to one or two  
Things that had survived  
The long night intact,  
The simplest things,

Difficult in their obviousness.  
They made no noise.  
It was the kind of day  
People describe as "perfect."

Gods disguising themselves  
As black hairpins? A hand-mirror?  
A comb with a tooth missing?  
No! That wasn't it.

Just things as they are,  
Unblinking, lying mute  
In that bright light,  
And the trees waiting for the night.

In tight four-line stanzas that are nearly all complete syntactic units — stanzas 3 and 7 are the exceptions — Simic seems to be saying that he's done with hairpins and hand-mirrors; it's not the noumenon but the mysterious force that makes the noumenon so compelling, that makes us all Scheherazades, telling stories for our lives. He focuses here on the revelatory moment when one feels what Keats called "the burden of the Mystery."

What brings us to revelation is often antithesis; Simic's particular concern with opposites is again foregrounded in these new poems; they could be the textual children of Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, sharing its motto: "Without Contraries is no progression." Simic has fun with dialectic, and among the contraries

he toys with are mutability and immutability. It may be helpful to think of the way time works in a Simic poem by comparing it to the way Heraclitus and Parmenides viewed reality. For Heraclitus, reality was like a river: "One cannot step into the same river twice, since it is endlessly flowing with fresh waters." In other words, reality is constantly changing, nothing is stable or fixed, and, following that logic, the Truth is elusive (though one can enjoy looking for it, splashing around in all that water). For Parmenides reality was permanence. Extending Heraclitus's metaphor, the river is perpetually frozen, and Truth is therefore attainable.

The one reliable absolute in Simic's cosmology is that time passes:

Mrs. Digby's watch has no hands.  
But it keeps running.

("Mrs. Digby's Picture Album")

You forgot about time  
While you sought its secret  
In the slippery wheels,  
Some of which had teeth.

("The Pieces of the Clock Lie Scattered")

The other, almost reliable, absolute is that, in the midst of this Heraclitean reality, the philosopher-poet is a presence — sensitive to the tenuousness and fragility of perception, but deeply aware of its Parmenidean value:

Eternity jealous  
Of the present moment,  
It occurred to me!  
And then the moment was over.

("The Betrothal")



Time had stopped at dusk.  
You were shivering at the thought  
Of such great happiness.

(“The Immortal”)

The poor speaker in a Simic poem runs out on the ice — having waited so patiently for the river to freeze — and then falls through.

The one who seeks time’s secret, who shivers “at the thought / Of such great happiness” is the one susceptible to what can be called divine revelation. A paradigm for the whole collection is the amazing narrative poem “The Initiate,” an unusually long work for Simic. Here the revelatory moment occurs at the point of recollection which separates what are actually two surreal pilgrimages: the first is the quest for identity; the second is the acceptance of that identity’s burdens and the start of a new quest. Here are the first thirteen stanzas:

### THE INITIATE

St. John of the Cross wore dark glasses  
As he passed me on the street.  
St. Theresa of Avila, beautiful and grave,  
Turned her back on me.

“Soulmate,” they shouted. “It’s high time.”

I was a blind child, a wind-up toy.  
I was one of death’s juggling red balls  
On a certain street corner  
Where they peddle things out of suitcases.

The city like a huge cinema  
With lights dimmed.  
The performance already started.

So many blurred faces in a complicated plot.

The great secret which kept eluding me:  
    knowing who I am . . .

The Redeemer and the Virgin,  
Their eyes wide open in the empty church  
Where the killer came to hide himself . . .

The new snow on the sidewalk bore footprints  
That could have been made by bare feet.  
Some unknown penitent guiding me.

In truth, I didn't know where I was going.  
My feet were frozen,  
My stomach growled.

Four young hoods blocking my way.  
Three deadpan, one smiling crazily.

I let them have my black raincoat.

Thinking constantly of the Divine Love and  
    the Absolute had disfigured me.  
People mistook me for someone else.  
I heard voices after me calling out unknown names.

"I'm searching for someone to sell my soul to,"  
The drunk who followed me whispered,  
While appraising me from head to foot. . . .

What we have thus far seems more than a compelling poetics  
of applied Heidegger, where the essence of what it is to be human,

in a world where humans are not autonomous subjects contemplating an objective reality but somehow inextricably linked with that reality, is sought; Simic is interpreting the interconnectedness of the supernatural with the natural world. He has written what amounts to a teleological riddle: guess the initiate's divine identity . . . along with him. The initiate finds a nebulous self-definition through his interaction with or exposure to others — the mystic Spanish poet-saints, for example, or the implied other at the other end of a causal relationship — he is a Cartesian “wind-up toy,” a “red ball” in the deft hands of Death. Again, we can turn to Keats. In *The Uncertain Certainty*, Simic talks about translating Keats's notion of “uncertainty” as “Chance,” which he says was made famous and ontological by Dada and the surrealists: “They turned it into a weapon. Cause and effect as the arch-enemies.”<sup>1</sup> In “The Initiate,” Chance appears to be the recessive rather than the dominant gene: “I was a blind child,” setting up a dialectic struggle where “cause and effect” appear to have the upper hand.

The question of his identity becomes increasingly problematic and his situation increasingly threatening as more characters are met along the way. Do the four young toughs get the initiate's raincoat out of his own sense of fear and inevitability or out of benevolence? Simic evokes multiple visual icons in this brief scene — Christ's robe being divvied up, for example, or St. Martin of Tours and the beggar. Religious contemplation is cited as the source of his disfigurement: he is many things to many people. After the drunk appears on the scene, we begin to wonder: is he Mephistophiles or Michael? is it Faustus following him, or Adam? is this the point “where the levels meet,” or is he the Second Coming? This is beginning to feel a little bit like “What's My Line?” Whoever he is, one thought resonates: “Without Contraries is no progression . . .”:

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1. Charles Simic, *The Uncertain Certainty: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1985), p. 84.

At the address I had been given,  
The building had large X's over its windows.  
I knocked but no one came to open.  
By and by a black girl joined me on the steps.  
She banged at the door till her fist hurt.

Her name was Alma, a propitious sign.  
She knew someone who solved life's riddles  
In a voice of an ancient Sumerian queen.  
We had a long talk about that  
While shivering and stamping our wet feet.

It was necessary to stay calm, I explained,  
Even with the earth trembling,  
And to continue to watch oneself  
As if one were a complete stranger.

Once in a hotel room in Chicago  
I caught sight of a man in a shaving mirror  
Who had my naked shoulders and face,  
But whose eyes terrified me!

Two hard staring, all-knowing eyes!

Alma, the night, the cold, and the endless walking  
Brought on a kind of ecstasy.  
I went as if pursued, trying to warm myself.

There was the East River; there was the Hudson.  
Their waters shone like oil in sanctuary lamps.

Something supreme was occurring  
For which there will never be any words.  
The sky was full of racing clouds and tall buildings,  
Whirling and whirling silently.

In that whole city you could hear a pin drop.  
Believe me,  
I thought I heard a pin drop and I went looking for it.

The arrival of the enigmatic Alma marks the turning point in the poem. To see for myself why her name was “a propitious sign,” I looked her up in the *OED*; this gave me one of the joys of discovery which occurs so often when reading a Simic poem. The name comes from the Arabic — *calmah* — which means “learned,” or “knowing.” Alma also refers to an Egyptian dancing-girl. It is tempting to link Alma and Thoth, the Egyptian god of our epigraph whom Simic loves to quote: “as above, so below.”

It is after meeting Alma that the initiate reveals he once glimpsed Truth in a sort of Studs Lonigan milieu:

Once in a hotel room in Chicago  
I caught sight of a man in a shaving mirror  
Who had my naked shoulders and face,  
But whose eyes terrified me!

Two hard staring, all-knowing eyes!

Something about the combination of “Alma, the night, the cold, and the endless walking” operates on the initiate in a kind of alchemy, bringing about a change in his attitude toward himself and his destiny. He now finds comfort in signification: “There was the East River; there was the Hudson. / Their waters shone like oil in sanctuary lamps.” Naming is a solace against the abstraction of geography, but there is also an underlying sense that signifiers are illusory; their power is limited: “something supreme was occurring / For which there will never be any words.”

Despite the ultimate sense of the ineffable, there is a definite acceptance now of whatever or whoever he is, and what his purpose has been all along:

In that whole city you could hear a pin drop.

Believe me,  
I thought I heard a pin drop and I went looking for it.

This is the kind of idiomatic expression Simic has developed before — cliches like “it goes without saying,” or “chicken with its head cut off” become profundities in his hands. In this instance, I was reminded of Breton:

Life, undesirable life, goes on ravishingly. Each one goes at it with the idea of his own freedom that he has managed to frame for himself, and God knows that generally this idea is a timid one. But it is not the man of today who would consent to search in the stars for the head of the pin, the famous pin he can't get out of the game anyhow.\* He has patiently accepted his lot, poor man, has even been, I do believe, endlessly patient.<sup>2</sup>

The asterisk refers us to the translators' note: “The expression ‘*tierer l'épingle du jeu*,’ literally ‘to get the pin out of the game,’ figuratively means ‘to get out of something without a loss’ ” (198). It seems to me that this is what we're all trying to do — get out of something without a loss. For the initiate, whoever you decide he ultimately happens to be, the idea may simply be that he must somehow get out with as much of his soul intact as possible. And isn't this the poet's dilemma? Earlier in the same passage, Breton talks about the unhappiness of those who “have done what in all simplicity they believed they had to do . . . they have not taken *the orders of the marvelous*” (197).

In this respect, Charles Simic must be a happy man; he religiously follows “the orders of the marvelous” as he is called to explore — with sly wit and all the melancholy patience of an end-of-the-millennium, urban Job — a compelling, secret world.

Marci Janas

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2. Andre Breton, “A Letter to the Seers,” *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1989), p. 198; hereafter cited in the text.

## THE BLOOD BEES OF PARADISE

Charles Wright, **The World of the Ten Thousand Things** (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990)

Charles Wright's new book brings together three previous collections and a group of new poems. It covers a ten year span, from 1980 to 1990. Here's how it opens:

At night, in the fish-light of the moon, the dead wear our white shirts

To stay warm, and litter the fields.

We pick them up in the mornings, dewy pieces of paper and scraps of cloth.

Like us, they refract themselves. Like us,

They keep on saying the same thing, trying to get it right.

Like us, the water unsettles their names.

("Homage to Paul Cezanne")

We're in the presence of jumpy, highly original poetic language. A line may have three internal rhymes. Its length may vary from eight syllables to nineteen. The verbal music is intense: consonants crackling, vowels echoing, rhythms reaching toward the incantatory. But what strikes us most, disorienting us a little, is what we call the content. Here is a series of six or seven assertions, none of which could be thought of as literally true. We aren't dealing, as in some poets, with a literal level of narrative and reportage that then mixes in figurative language to move the level of discourse toward the poetic; instead, as in much of Wallace Stevens, we're confronted with the figurative, the indirect and playful, immediately. The moon's light is a fish-light, the dead wear our shirts, they litter our fields and we pick up scraps of cloth and pieces of paper that are evidence of their activity, their trying to stay warm. The dew on the scraps gives a "realistic" base to the passage from night to day, but everything else feels metaphoric, metamorphic, hallucinatory, surreal.

This opening set of assertions has to be translated into some kind of account of how we imagine, respond to and care about the dead, why we traditionally dress them in white (the stereotypic sheets here become, surprisingly, shirts), how it might be said that they wear our clothes or litter our fields. The imagination is dilated, the terms on which language communicates are redefined, and we are in a disturbing, exhilarating world. With the figurative base established, we can entertain abstractions. The claim of likeness, familiar signal for the figurative, here moves not toward the image but toward conceptual statements: like us, the dead refract themselves; like us, they keep on saying the same thing. And these assertions of likeness tease us because they ascribe likeness to a community that includes the speaker and the reader, those who are alive. They begin to erase the barrier between living and dead. A more normal mode of discourse would have posited the dead as objects, imagined by us as subjects. Wright's move is to start with the dead as subjects who are different from ourselves and then gradually subtract the differences. Language itself becomes key when both groups are seen as using it repetitively in the interest of precision, "trying to get it right," an attempt that seems never to succeed.

The assertion that closes the stanza returns to the figurative for the third "Like us," and we imagine, variously, gravestones eroded by rain (especially Keats's, with its famous epitaph, "Here lies one whose name was writ on water"), identities dissolved or carried away in floods, selves recognizing their instability by acknowledging kinship with an unstable element. Is this the same water that made the moonlight seem fishy, that dewed the scraps of cloth and paper? We're less apt to try to get literal sense from gnomic statements; we take them as atmospheric, part of the larger pattern of deliberate "misuse" of language to drive toward a visionary sense of being. If we tried to reduce the eight sixteen-line sections of "Homage to Paul Cezanne" to propositional status, that activity might clarify the poem's structure somewhat — the dead are all around us, the dead are more and more with us as we get older, the dead have a rhythm that allies them to the sea,



the dead are like the blue a painter like Cezanne puts everywhere in his paintings, etc. — but it would not begin to approximate the poem. The propositions, if we can call them that, are merely there as triggers, opening moves, ways of tuning up the music and the gorgeous, painterly succession of meditative stanzas. Often, they open the sections, as if to get the necessary relation to ordinary language use out of the way so that the enterprise of turning language into music, incantation, re-presentation, color and shape and texture for their own sakes, can get quickly underway. The poem teaches us how to read it (or not read it, if by 'read' we mean normal interpretive reading, translating the knowledge and information out for separate use) as we go, and learning how to take in the poem is the first step in learning how to take in the book, this book of ten thousand things.

Those are some observations on the first six lines of a page that has ten more such lines and a book that has 230 such pages. It seems safe to admit that Charles Wright is going to acquire his readers gradually. The intense pleasures and exploding insights that proceed from such concentrated and original poetry can come only from a willingness to submit, to put aside preconceptions about language and experience, from an enjoyment of play and risk and wild invention. Safer to read a poet who is more predictable (as William Logan, reviewing *Zone Journals*, tried to exorcise Wright's originality by invoking what he felt to be the excessive influence of Pound and then betrayed his own limitations by expressing preference for a much less interesting poet because he admired her "hexameters") or better still, a novel, or a mystery story, or, even safer, a television program. Who can blame us for our cowardly ways? We live in an information explosion, a bewildering world, and we would like to think that language is a stable element in that world, not a medium that unsettles our names like water and reflects our obsessions, secret and open, with mortality.

For readers who wish to forge an acquaintance with this book, let me set forth some guidelines and suggestions based on my own acquaintance, as an editor and a friend and an avid reader,



And across,  
    left to the Oratory and right  
Up under the chestnut trees to Ennismore Mews,  
Up past the gardens and Prince's Gate  
Across the main road and Rotten Row,  
And long grass down to the Serpentine,  
Ducks on the water, geese on the water, the paired swans  
Imperious and the gulls  
    neat on the slick edges,  
Then backtrack and a right turn  
To the west, across the road and into Kensington Gardens  
And out to the chestnut and beech grove  
As the dogs go by  
    and the Punks noodle along  
In their chrome and stud belts and Technicolor hair.  
    ("Journal of English Days")

This is a London walk from Chelsea to Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. The observing self may be sustained here by chestnut trees and swans, but it takes in architecture and punks and dogs as well. One wants to accompany Wright's persona first and foremost, I suppose, because of this capacity to notice and enjoy and articulate the crowded phenomena that the world makes available to the senses.

But this lover of the world of appearances is also deeply distrustful of them. He knows they are ephemeral and illusory. They turn back his inquiries, especially his metaphysical ones (does the world bespeak a creator? Is it divine or secular, order or chaos?), and they drive him into a melancholy awareness of the limits of his knowledge and the brevity of his life. In the poem cited above he "meets" another poet, Fulke Greville, who is of course dead, "in his stone boat in the church of St. Mary," and he marks the death-days of other poets, Sidney and Keats, and of his hero Cezanne. Everywhere he turns he finds the presence of mystery and death, "Charon, in slow motion, poling his empty boat." Hints of

a god fill his world too, but they are frustrating, tantalizing, always associated with loss and melancholy, "the Norman churchyard, / Grey flake and flame in a hushed mound on Delia Johnson. / *God Knows His Own.*" Late in this poem he muses, "How sweet to think that Nature is solvency," that there is something behind it "That will make us anchorites in the dark/ Chambers of celestial perpetuity —/ nice to think that,/ Given the bleak alternative, / Though it hasn't proved so before,/ and won't now/ No matter what things we scrape aside —/ God is an abstract noun."

But that is only one of the endings; the other is a moment of mystical oneness in a museum courtyard connecting with a Buddha, the oneness an experience of nothingness as well, the self a hand that unclenches and spreads open "finger by finger inside the Buddha's eye . . ." The eye is a holy thing, of course, because it is the means by which the self most often delights in the world of appearances. *I is eye*, one of our most reverberant puns, as in so much of Shakespeare, and vision is both seeing and epiphany, as in mystical poets like Cavalcanti. But where other mystics finally find God, Wright more often finds just himself or his sense of his own limits or his rueful acknowledgement that he is somehow terribly separate from the world he loves. The tension keeps the poems moving forward, stanza to stanza, perception to perception, hint to hint. It is the texture of life itself.

If the persona cannot help both loving and distrusting his world of appearances, finding in it both his pains and his pleasures, his strengths and his weaknesses, his intimations both of total fulfillment and total denial and collapse, he has a similar relation to words: a helpless love and need for them, an endless fascination with them, an irrevocable dependency on them and at the same time a profound sense of how they actually separate him from experience and fail him when he tries to realize himself through them.

This note is struck in the Cezanne poem that I quoted at the outset of this essay. The dead find that their names, verbal identities, are unsettled by water. Even such crucial and irrevocable words as names, names of the dead, prove unstable in this world

of change and process. As the poem moves forward, we learn that the dead “point to their favorite words / Growing around them, revealed as themselves for the first time,” and that “what they repeat to themselves, / Is the song that our fathers sing.” As the sea “explains itself, backing and filling / What space it can’t avoid,” the dead “Over and over, through clenched teeth,” tell “Their story, the story each knows by heart: / *Remember me, speak my name.*” The dead are of course finally us, and our projections of memory and desire, so their obsessive storytelling and singing, their pitiful dependence on speech, is our own. There’s something circular and meaningless in our constant conversing with them, they with us, something that may go nowhere but serves a little to relieve our sense of loss and separation: “Our words are words for the clay, uttered in undertones, / Our gestures salve for the wind.” Talking to clay or trying to heal the wind is ridiculous, but it is the story of our lives and of our dependence upon words.

The “Journal of English Days” I have also been citing here is less explicit about the love affair with words and the sense of their inadequacy, but it manifests the same preoccupations in its concern with other word-users, with getting things right, knowing the right names for things, and when, near the end, “God is an abstract noun,” His disappearance into arid language is precisely the result of the way appearance dissolves and language is unable to effectively take its place.

We could say that Wright’s dual sense that the two things he loves most, world and word, betray him by betraying each other is a tragic vision, and that would be partly correct. It would not, however, be the whole story. For the poems also tell us that if the two things that mean the most are notoriously unstable, it is probably their very instability that makes them so meaningful. And their similarity includes the possibility that they can mirror and interpret each other. It links them, unstable and ephemeral and beautiful, and then it links them to life itself, to the poet’s and reader’s mortality. Thus the melancholy news language and appearance convey, the news that the self must expire, is the very same information the self needs to make its identity complete, to

allow it to connect with the world and with words and to know them after all. There's a kind of triple paradox at work here. Three forms of instability — self, world and language — are involved in an intricate dance that choreographs uncertainty and change into a kind of celebration. We must call Wright's world tragicomic because we must include the wry playfulness, the melancholy pleasure, that comes from aligning all the things that enchant and then fail us, including our very own selves.

It is a trick of language and of experience and of self, for instance, to say that the hand unclenches finger by finger inside the Buddha's eye. We should understand that that's a trick, a bit of nifty rhetoric, because this poet keeps nothing up his sleeve. That it's artificial and manipulative does not destroy its value. Here too we come across what looks very much like Wright's allegiance to Stevens, never really articulated to my knowledge (though the "Journal of One Significant Landscape" in *Zone Journals* echoes Stevens's early "Six Significant Landscapes"). The connection may be accidental or deliberate, or both: the poet as clown-phenomenologist, the sleight-of-hand man who makes us believe in meaning even after he has shown us that it may be meaningless.

Now we've come to the heart of this persona (and others in our time, though I won't name names), to the poet's reason for featuring this version of the self so relentlessly and variously. There's a reluctant but necessary narcissism involved in Charles Wright's poetry. To show what he wants to show us about how the natural world mirrors our love, our moroseness, our mortality, he must portray a poet, a language user, discovering how he can play his language lovingly against the world, watching the patterns that emerge and acknowledging the inevitable solipsism of the enterprise. Self-portraiture of a kind is necessary to the equation of tricky world, tricky language and trickster poet, a pilgrim, a traveler, as Wordsworth has it in a line Wright cites here (p. 29), between life and death.

What then are the adventures and parameters of this collection? Where do they take the persona in his pilgrimage, where follow him? They cover the late middle years, age 45 to 55, when

memory begins to play a much more active role in the life of the self and when the completed creations that lie behind the speaker/singer/storyteller exert their own subtle pressures, making him wonder if he is simply repeating himself and how he may move on to what Hart Crane called "new thresholds, new anatomies." Wright's answer has been, especially in the second half of the decade, to design larger and apparently looser structures for his persona to inhabit, journal-poems that walk the boundaries between poetry and prose, trivial and profound, random and designed, contingent and self-contained. The risks he has taken in this process will challenge and frustrate even some of his better readers. He will seem to have abandoned the laconic, visionary style that was his hallmark, especially in *China Trace*, and to be indulging himself with a garrulousness and expansiveness that threaten to become swollen, overblown, self-important. Wright has already faced such reactions to the crucial collection, *Zone Journals*, and no doubt he has wondered himself from time to time whether he was up to something he could bring off.

For my own part, I think the journal poems deepen the meaning of the persona-world-word triangle I have outlined. They make the facing of appearances and the ambivalent affair with language a daily matter, a mundane concern, not simply associated with times of ecstasy and inspiration but with getting up and going through the day and going to bed. They bring the whole poetic enterprise closer to the texture of life, a gesture of inclusiveness that may recall Whitman as well as those Stevens poems that deliberately focus on repetition and trivia, that build up and break down, section by section, before our eyes, enacting their meanings by cyclic engagements with skepticism and belief (e.g., "Auroras of Autumn," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven").

If we think about the journal form for a moment, we realize how flexible a concept it is. The diarist or journal-keeper is only committed to some kind of timely recording of data. It may or may not be regular, but it will be fresh, born of the moment and a certain spontaneity, free of the need to be perfected and included in anything other than the steady stream of experience based on liv-

ing in time. The data may be as "trivial" as the weather, what one ate, the minute events of an uneventful life, or as "profound" as thoughts on life and death, the recording of philosophical or theological musings. I use quotes for these contrasting adjectives because I think that in the journals from the past that we tend to value — Pepys, Gilbert White, Boswell — what is technically trivial is precisely what emerges to us as profound: the capturing of the "dailiness of life" (Jarrell's phrase in "Well Water"), the glimpsing among the details of the quotidian a meaning, or meanings, as if in a powerful metaphor, or in a drama that marries absurdity to loss, as in Chekhov, a way of rendering experience that is ultimately more valuable than that of systems, generalizations, ideologies.

This, I think, is what Wright is after, and in my opinion he captures it. The section I quoted earlier, from the poem about England, is indeed made up of some trivial details: what one passes walking the route that the persona walks to get from Chelsea to Hyde Park and round back to Kensington Gardens. We don't object to this kind of detail in a novel, but we want to feel that poems get beyond it, that they shed the detritus of the mundane and soar up into visionary regions that are their special domain. But we need to admit that poetry has a domestic and mundane side, even in its visionary practitioners (think of Herbert, Wordsworth, Dickinson), and we need to recognize that Wright and his persona never lose their hunger for the absolute, their drive to find answers to the largest questions. "A Journal of the Year of the Ox," the longest (40 pages) of the journal poems, behaves like this in an excerpt I have deliberately chosen at random, an "entry" dated "9 April 1985" (p. 158):

— Such a hustle of blue skies from the west,  
the pre-Columbian clouds  
Brooding and looking straight down,  
The white plumes of the crab-apple tree  
Plunging and streaming in their invisible headgear.  
  
April plugs in the rosebud  
and its Tiffany limbs.



This earth is a plenitude, but it all twists into the dark,  
The not no image can cut  
Or color replenish.

Not red, not yellow, not blue.

None of the visionary concerns, none of the tension I cited earlier, is missing here. The difference is mainly that instead of being titled and collected as a poem on its own, this is included in a larger structure that is governed by what happens, what is thought about and read and felt, over the course of a year. My Wittgenstein motto, "The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world," still pertains. The mundane — sky, clouds, blooming crab-apples, budding roses — is cross-roughed by history (pre-Columbian) and by artistic tradition (Tiffany), and the vocabularies of technology (headgear, plugs in) are invited to participate as well. The drive to find adequate generalizations for experience is both fulfilled — the earth as a plenitude that twists into darkness — and frustrated: a pun, slippage in language, is used to admit that imagery can't get at nothingness, can't cut its knot, can't "cut it," as we say colloquially. And I would argue that the mature style is as sure and reassuring as anything Wright managed earlier, in his more predictably shaped and more obviously controlled poems.

We will need time to digest these journal poems, obviously, but I predict that they will become, because they are so ambitious and risky, among this poet's most admired efforts. He remains one of our most exciting current practitioners of the art of poetry, distinctive and powerful, a voice that continues to surpass itself.

I've said nothing negative here, I realize, nothing to qualify my praise for *The World of the Ten Thousand Things*. The task of discriminating relative success and failure seems to me less interesting at the moment than the effort to understand what the poet is up to. I can find lines that I think don't come off (e.g., "What tongue is toothless enough to speak their piece?" in the Cezanne poem), and passages where I think Wright's deliberately overwrought and expressionistic rendering of natural events shades into mannerism and self-parody. But even the weaknesses, in

truly original poetry, have a certain endearing tendency to become strengths, to jump on the bandwagon. I admire the courage and risk-taking that this book stands for, the questing spirit it evinces. It is wry, voluminous, high-spirited, and often gorgeously overwrought.

Let me close by quoting part of an out-of-the-way favorite of mine called "Cryopexy," from *The Other Side of the River*. The notes tell us that cryopexy is the name of "an operation to repair, by freezing with liquid Freon gas, a tear on the eye's retina." In other words, we can surmise that the poem draws on the poet's experiencing such an operation and the recovery period it entails, and seizing on it, journal-like, journalist-like (the journal poems may finally just admit and claim that journalists is what all poets really are), to choreograph those obsessions and frustrations that arise from his persona's pursuit of the sirens of appearance and language. Eye is I, again, here, in a poem that celebrates vision, in all senses of that word, strangely and with enormous originality:

Looming and phosphorescent in the dark,  
Words, always words.

What language does light speak?  
Vowels hang down from the pepper tree  
in their green and their gold.

---

The star charts and galactic blood trails behind the eye  
Where the lights are, and the links and chains are,  
cut wall through ascending wall,  
Indigo corridors, the intolerable shine  
transgressing heaven's borders . . .

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What are the colors of true splendor,  
yellow and white,  
Carnation and ivory, petal and bone?  
Everything comes from fire.

---



comings and precariousness, it sees nothing and in that nothing, everything, up to the blood bees of Paradise. If there were a heaven for poets, and Charles Wright had nothing but a scrap of his work to show, say these few stanzas, whoever is keeping the gate there, George Herbert or Guido Cavalcanti, would surely wave him in.

*David Young*

## IMPROVISING THE BLACKBIRD

Eavan Boland, **Outside History: Selected Poems 1980–1990** (Norton, 1990)

Eavan Boland, an Irish poet in her mid-forties, has been publishing memorable poems in American journals for some time. But only in encountering *Outside History*, which brings together selected work from her two previous volumes with a large group of new poems, have I become aware of what a major talent she possesses. It would be hard to overpraise this book: she's an original, dazzlingly gifted writer, and this first major American collection should attract widespread, if belated, acclaim.

The publishers have performed a considerable service by reprinting a generous selection of poems from *Night Feed* (1982) and *The Journey* (1987), both because they represent inherently distinguished work not otherwise easily available in this country, and also because they allow us to appreciate the huge leap forward Boland takes in her most recent poems. That leap is so profound that readers new to this writer might well want to read the earlier work (which comprises the second half of this volume) first, in order to prevent its impact from being overshadowed.

Boland's uncompromising intellect, wry perception, and verbal brilliance are constantly in view in the earlier poems. Again and again one encounters phrases worth savoring: she's a wonderfully elegant and sensual writer, keenly attuned to the pleasures of form and sound. What feels less original here is, simply, her subject matter: often the reprinted poems seem fairly programmatic in their feminist reappraisals of history. Many of the themes examined — the marginalization of women in the historical record, the need for women to uncover their own language, the monotony of housework, the mask and trap of physical appearance — feel awfully familiar, and even Boland's technique can't always transcend that sense of familiarity. Because I want to focus on the more recent poems, I think I'll try to let one example represent the strengths and relative weaknesses of the earlier work:

## THE WOMEN

This is the hour I love: the in-between  
neither here-nor-there hour of evening.  
The air is tea-colored in the garden.  
The briar rose is spilled crepe de Chine.

This is the time I do my work best,  
going up the stairs in two minds,  
in two worlds, carrying cloth or glass,  
leaving something behind, bringing  
something with me I should have left behind.

The hour of change, of metamorphosis,  
of shape-shifting instabilities.  
My time of sixth sense and second sight  
when in the words I choose, the lines I write,  
they rise like visions and appear to me:

women of work, of leisure, of the night,  
in stove-colored silks, in lace, in nothing,  
with crewel needles, with books, with wide-open legs,

who fled the hot breath of the god pursuing,  
who ran from the split hoof and the thick lips  
and fell and grieved and healed into myth,

into me in the evening at my desk  
testing the water with a sweet quartet,  
the physical force of a dissonance —

the fission of music into syllabic heat —  
and getting sick of it and standing up  
and going downstairs in the last brightness

into a landscape without emphasis,  
light, linear, precisely planned,  
a hemisphere of tiered, aired cotton,

a hot terrain of linen from the iron,  
folded in and over, stacked high,  
neatened flat, stoving heat and white.

This is characteristic of the earlier work in several ways. Twilight is Boland's element: in numerous poems she uses its "shape-shifting instabilities" to conjure up a mood of haunting melancholy and beauty, and often the delicate process by which solidity dissolves into darkness becomes an emblem for exploring the tenuous nature of identity. Her gift for the luminous detail — the "tea-colored" air in the garden, the spilled crepe de Chine of the briar rose, the "stove-colored silks" — is strikingly apparent. I think the poem's limitation emerges in its central section, where it loses energy and focus in the apparition of that fairly generalized collection of spectral, mythic women: it feels too predictable, too easy a gesture, especially since similar moments of identification and reclaiming recur in many of the poems that surround it. The vision seems to occur because the poem's program requires it.

But the last four stanzas take an unexpected turn, and in doing so reveal the imaginative risks of which this writer is capable. The speaker is jarred by her vision out of the rather self-congratulatory mood in which she went upstairs ("This is the time I do my work best"), shaken out of the "sweet quartet" with "the physical force of a dissonance." And the world into which she walks downstairs is no longer one of attenuated, tea-colored beauty; rather, it has strangely assumed the blank, abstract contours of freshly ironed laundry. The language of the last few lines, folding phrase on phrase, is both precise and obsessive, both neat and hot, conveying a psychology much richer than that which began the poem. This has the force of genuine vision, rather than thematic utility. The poem doesn't try to resolve itself neatly — it

simply trusts the event it tracks. I'm not sure precisely what Boland intends us to infer from the image, whether the "hot terrain of linen" is meant to seem arid or purifying, or somehow both at once. And indeed it's exactly that ambiguity, that sense of leaping from familiar ideology into mysterious waters, that gives the event its peculiar vitality.

"The Women" takes awhile to establish itself, in a fairly linear way, before shifting into high gear. Boland's more recent poems tend to be more economical and far bolder in their strategies, to layer themselves more elaborately. To test the point we might compare two more poems that situate themselves in the domestic. This is from *The Journey*:

## NOCTURNE

After a friend has gone I like the feel of it:  
The house at night. Everyone asleep.  
The way it draws in like atmosphere or evening.

One o'clock. A floral teapot and a raisin scone.  
A tray waits to be taken down.  
The landing light is off. The clock strikes. The cat

comes into his own, mysterious on the stairs,  
a black ambivalence around the legs of button-back  
chairs, an insinuation to be set beside

the red spoon and the salt-glazed cup,  
the saucer with the thick spill of tea  
which scalds off easily under the tap. Time

is a tick, a purr, a drop. The spider  
on the dining room window has fallen asleep  
among complexities as I will once



the doors are bolted and the keys tested  
and the switch turned up of the kitchen light  
which made outside in the back garden

an electric room — a domestication  
of closed daisies, an architecture  
instant and improbable.

Well, as a still life that's pretty nice, the way it assembles the complexities of the everyday into a composition that's both domestic and enchanted, both located in time and suspended outside it, containing past and future in the present moment. Again, though, the experience feels a bit familiar, a little too artfully managed, at least until the ending: the final image of the garden lit by electric light, "an architecture / instant and improbable," essentially encapsulates the perceptions of the rest of the poem in a single resonant phrase.

See by way of contrast how much this new poem accomplishes:

### MIDNIGHT FLOWERS

I go down step by step.  
The house is quiet, full of trapped heat and sleep.  
In the kitchen everything is still.  
Nothing is distinct; there is no moon to speak of.

I could be undone every single day by  
paradox or what they call in the countryside  
blackthorn winter.  
when hailstones come with the first apple blossom.

I turn a switch and the garden grows.  
A whole summer's work in one instant!  
I press my face to the glass. I can see  
shadows of lilac, of fuschia; a dark likeness of blackcurrant:

little clients of suddenness, how sullen they are at  
the margins of the light.  
They need no rain, they have no roots.  
I reach out a hand; they are gone.

When I was a child a snapdragon was  
held an inch from my face. Look, a voice said, this  
is the color of your hair. And there it was, my head,  
a pliant jewel in the hands of someone else.

It's a different order of accomplishment altogether. The situation that provides the poem's spine is strikingly similar to that in "Nocturne," yet this poem is not a still life, but rather a psychologically astute portrait of the particular consciousness that weaves experience and association together. The first stanza might be taken as naturalistic, but as the poem unfolds we begin to see that the trapped, still, undefined household actually mirrors the speaker's state of mind. The more expressive second stanza reveals her vulnerability, the daily risk of being "undone" by paradox; the rural lore that follows links her condition to the fragility of flowers beset by hail. The leap from the fourth to the fifth line *looks* like a non sequitur, yet a patient sensibility is stitching these assertions together. In the third stanza we return from reflection to the present moment and to the same image — the garden illuminated — with which "Nocturne" closed, but what was there a gesture of artifice, inventing the architecture of "an electric room," here becomes a connection to natural process. Fancifully, the speaker's godlike action seems to allow the flowers, no longer vulnerable, to grow (an especially strong claim since the eye's logic expects "glows"): "A whole summer's work in one instant!" Yet the following line acknowledges her separation from vital sources: she can see them through the glass, but only indistinctly. Her characterization of the flowers as sullen, marginalized "little clients of suddenness" is exquisite (as is the extraordinarily lush verbal music of lines 11-14), but it also continues to emphasize the peculiarly tenuous place her world has become. From her vantage

point nature seems artificial (“They need no rain, they have no roots”) and evanescent (“I reach out a hand; they are gone”). The final stanza moves again associatively out of the present, to a memory which casts the speaker no longer as magically in charge of nature, but as a vulnerable child. A disembodied presence and voice holds out yet another flower — this time the common but eccentric snapdragon — and tells her it’s a mirror. And instantly it is, reflecting both her value and her defenselessness, her head in the hands of a force that may protect or destroy her. Again it’s a particularly unstable ending, demonstrating the risks Boland is now allowing herself, which for me generate distinctive and powerful results.

Amazingly, virtually all the new poems demonstrate the same sort of advance over the earlier work. They continue to draw, of course, on the issues generated by the domestic and political life of women, but Boland’s insights about that life are notably more idiosyncratic, sharply delineated, and surprising. Here, for example, is the first poem in the volume:

#### THE BLACK LACE FAN MY MOTHER GAVE ME

It was the first gift he ever gave her,  
buying it for five francs in the Galeries  
in prewar Paris. It was stifling.  
A starless drought made the nights stormy.

They stayed in the city for the summer.  
They met in cafés. She was always early.  
He was late. That evening he was later.  
They wrapped the fan. He looked at his watch.

She looked down the Boulevard des Capucines.  
She ordered more coffee. She stood up.  
The streets were emptying. The heat was killing.  
She thought the distance smelled of rain and lightning.

These are wild roses, appliqued on silk by hand,  
darkly picked, stitched boldly, quickly.

The rest is tortoiseshell and has the reticent,  
clear patience of its element. It is

a worn-out underwater bullion and it keeps,  
even now, an inference of its violation.

The lace is overcast as if the weather  
it opened for and offset had entered it.

The past is an empty café terrace.

An airless dusk before thunder. A man running.

And no way now to know what happened then —  
none at all — unless, of course, you improvise:

the blackbird on this first sultry morning,  
in summer, finding buds, worms, fruit,  
feels the heat. Suddenly she puts out her wing —  
the whole, full, flirtatious span of it.

The play of invention is so rich here, the design so intricate, that I won't try to point out everything I find exhilarating about it. Like "Midnight Flowers," it counterpoints a narrative against a set of associations, but here the narrative is conveyed in a very odd way, quite straightforward in its details and yet dependent on the reader to piece together its implications. (Much of the interest of the poem lies in the nearly tactile play of its language, constantly forcing us to reevaluate our assumptions, to pay attention to poetic tactics. There's a deliberate pleasure, for example, in the fact that the "It" of the first line means something different from the "It" of the third, and that while "The streets were emptying" and "The heat was killing" look like parallel sentences, they actually operate quite differently.) Boland says in another poem that memory is in two parts, the revisiting and the reenactment, and I think this poem hovers in the space between them. Its acute interiority is partly evoked by the title, which as in other Boland

poems conveys crucial framing information not otherwise present in the text: what might seem fairly impersonal becomes revisited, reenacted family history. The notion of retelling helps in turn to account for the shifting timescape of the poem, in which memory has fractured and rearranged the chronological action.

As the speaker's attention shifts from the history of the object to the object itself, the language becomes more metaphorical, the fan more emblematic. In the references to the tortoiseshell's "violation" and the "overcast" lace there is perhaps the suggestion of a darkness in the relationship in which the fan was the first gift. Yet the poem remains reticent, teasingly intent on keeping its mysteries intact. And indeed, when we reach the penultimate stanza, that fact itself becomes the point. The past is as empty as the café after the woman has left and before the man has arrived ("A man running" is a brilliant stroke, catapulting him urgently and unexpectedly back into the poem), and no amount of scrutinizing the fan will reanimate it. And yet, and yet . . . At the last possible moment Boland, spectacularly unpredictable, allows the sheer power of improvisation into her story, and the poem veers off into what at first seems totally unrelated material. Apart from the hot weather, the image of the blackbird appears incongruous — how does it tell us "what happened then"? In a literal sense, of course, it doesn't. But the bird's sudden, luxuriant gesture of extending her wing "improvises" an answer by echoing the opening fan, thus reminding us that the gift was accomplished (the first of many) and that the fan became an heirloom. The last line is stunningly calculated: "whole" and "full" have crucial implications, and "flirtatious" locks the whole romance of the poem into place. It's a wonderful moment.

Not all of the new poems are as close to tour de force as this one. Others proceed more straightforwardly, though they too have complex surprises to offer. I'd like to end by quoting one such poem; it begins almost prosaically, but gradually builds toward a series of resonant epiphanies. It's the first poem in the moving title sequence in *Outside History*, whose dominant mode is elegy as Boland defines it in another poem: "the celebration of an

element / which absence has revealed." Unlike the rather generic encounter in "The Women," we focus here on the meeting between two very specifically defined women, and on the speaker's later recognition of its implications:

### THE ACHILL WOMAN

She came up the hill carrying water.  
She wore a half-buttoned, wool cardigan,  
a tea-towel round her waist.

She pushed the hair out of her eyes with  
her free hand and put the bucket down.

The zinc-music of the handle on the rim  
tuned the evening. An Easter moon rose.  
In the next-door field a stream was  
a fluid sunset; and then, stars.

I remember the cold rosiness of her hands.  
She bent down and blew on them like broth.  
And round her waist, on a white background,  
in coarse, woven letters, the words "glass cloth."

And she was nearly finished for the day.  
And I was all talk, raw from college —  
weekending at a friend's cottage  
with one suitcase and the set text  
of the Court poets of the Silver Age.

We stayed putting down time until  
the evening turned cold without warning.  
She said goodnight and started down the hill.

The grass changed from lavender to black.  
The trees turned back to cold outlines.  
You could taste frost

but nothing now can change the way I went  
indoors, chilled by the wind  
and made a fire  
and took down my book  
and opened it and failed to comprehend

the harmonies of servitude,  
the grace music gives to flattery  
and language borrows from ambition —

and how I fell asleep  
oblivious to

the planets clouding over in the skies,  
the slow decline of the spring moon,  
the songs crying out their ironies.

I suspect I don't need to say much about this poem. Its patient, eloquent music, its subtle refusal to sentimentalize ("but nothing now can change the way I went / indoors"), and what it has to suggest about the chastening realities of class and communication are surely impressive to anyone who reads it carefully. And this level of achievement is sustained throughout the collection. The reservations I've expressed about certain aspects of Boland's earlier work included here pale by comparison to my admiration, especially for the new poems. She's as musically gifted and as uncompromisingly intelligent as Seamus Heaney, and deserves comparable attention.

*David Walker*





## CONTRIBUTORS

AGA SHAHID ALI also appeared in our Fall issue. His second book will be published by Norton sometime next year.

JUDITH BERKE's first book, **White Morning**, was published by Wesleyan in 1989. She writes that she has recently completed a chapbook tentatively titled **Acting Problems**.

MARTHA COLLINS is the author of **The Catastrophe of Rainbows** (Cleveland State). She teaches at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

ROBERT GIBB's last book, **Momentary Days**, won a Camden Poetry Award. He lives in the country near Homeworth, Ohio.

The poems in this issue by SEAMUS HEANEY will be in his next collection, **Seeing Things**, due out from Faber and Faber this summer and from Farrar Staus and Giroux next fall.

ROLF JACOBSEN's first book, **Earth and Iron** (1933), is said to have identified him as Norway's first modern poet. Since then he has published twelve collections of poetry and gained international fame. At last count he had been translated into

some nineteen languages. His translators here, STEPHANIE HEGSTAD and AINA GERNER-MATHISEN, are Oberlin students.

MARCI JANAS, our guest reviewer of Charles Simic for this issue, is an Oberlin graduate who lives in Elyria, Ohio. She won the Academy of American Poets prize at Oberlin for 1990.

SANDRA MCPHERSON is familiar to our readers as a frequent contributor of poetry. Her essay in this issue reflects a number of her long-standing interests in the arts of her native country.

NUALA DI DHOMHNAILL lives in Dublin and writes in Irish. A dual language edition of her **Selected Poems/ Rogha Danta**, appeared from Ravens Art Press in 1988.

KATHLEEN PEIRCE lives in rural Iowa and is graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. In 1990, her work received an AWP award. Her book, **Mercy**, will be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press next fall.

ADRIENNE RICH's most recent book of poems in **Time's Power**. She is writing a book on poetry, society and politics.

MARIN SORESCU is Romania's leading poet and playwright, the author of more than 30 volumes. He will undertake a reading tour in the United States next spring, when a volume of selected translations will have appeared in the FIELD Translation Series.

LAUREL TRIVELPIECE's first collection, **Blue Holes**, was published in 1987 by Alice James Books. She lives in Corte Madera, California.

JEAN VALENTINE was recently Artist-in-Residence at Bucknell University.



DGA 89

**28 Hydravions Type 'Empire' (in flight)**

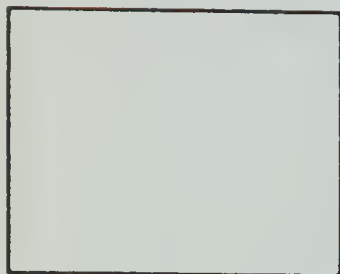
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ISSN: 0015-0657



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Printed in Great Britain by Beric Tempest & Co Ltd, St Ives, Cornwall