

FIELD



FIELD

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND POETICS

NUMBER 91

FALL 2014

OBERLIN COLLEGE PRESS

EDITORS *David Young*
David Walker

ASSOCIATE *Pamela Alexander*
EDITORS *Kazim Ali*
DeSales Harrison

EDITOR-AT- *Martha Collins*
LARGE

MANAGING *Marco Wilkinson*
EDITOR

EDITORIAL *Mark Allain*
ASSISTANT

DESIGN *Steve Farkas*

www.oberlin.edu/ocpress

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Poems should be submitted through the online submissions manager on our website.

Subscription orders should be sent to FIELD, Oberlin College Press, 50 N. Professor St., Oberlin, OH 44074. Checks payable to Oberlin College Press: \$16.00 a year / \$28.00 for two years. Single issues \$8.00 postpaid. Please add \$4.00 per year for Canadian addresses and \$9.00 for all other countries. Back issues \$12.00 each. Contact us about availability.

FIELD is also available for download to the iPad, iPhone, or iPod Touch. See the LitRagger app on iTunes for information.

FIELD is indexed in *Humanities International Complete*.

Copyright © 2014 by Oberlin College.

ISSN: 0015-0657

CONTENTS

	5	<i>Seamus Heaney: A Symposium</i>
<i>Lloyd Schwartz</i>	8	<i>Seamus Heaney: Artful Voyeur</i>
<i>Gail Mazur</i>	13	<i>Fluent at Their Task</i>
<i>Richard K. Kent</i>	16	<i>Writing the World and One's Place in It</i>
<i>Marianne Boruch</i>	25	<i>Saint Kevin, Saint Blackbird</i>
<i>Carl Phillips</i>	31	<i>On Heaney's "Postscript"</i>
<i>DeSales Harrison</i>	34	<i>Horizon Keep</i>
* * *		
<i>D. Nurkse</i>	41	<i>The Commands</i>
	43	<i>The Bowl</i>
<i>Andrew Juarez</i>	44	<i>Stairmaster</i>
<i>John Gallaher</i>	45	<i>Why It's Important We Not Talk Too Much About How Long Ago the Past Was</i>
<i>Fay Dillof</i>	47	<i>Bath Song</i>
	49	<i>Middle Age</i>
<i>Jean-Paul de Dadelsen</i>	51	<i>Alsatian Suite</i>
<i>translated by</i>	52	<i>Women of the Plain: IV</i>
<i>Marilyn Hacker</i>		
<i>Christopher Howell</i>	54	<i>Author, Author</i>
<i>Nancy Eimers</i>	55	<i>Man on a Stoop</i>
	56	<i>Greek Girl with Doves</i>
<i>Mario Chard</i>	58	<i>The Fall</i>
<i>Andrew Nurkin</i>	60	<i>Beauty for Beginners (i)</i>
	61	<i>Beauty for Beginners (ii)</i>

<i>Diane K. Martin</i>	62	<i>Muse Rebellion</i>
<i>Sarah Maclay</i>	63	<i>Night Text</i>
	64	<i>Circle</i>
<i>Nance van Winckel</i>	65	<i>I Had My Reasons</i>
<i>Judita Vaičiūnaitė</i> <i>translated by Rimas Uzgiris</i>	66	<i>Extravaganza</i>
<i>Alpay Ulku</i>	67	<i>Faust</i>
	68	<i>Building It</i>
<i>Martha Zweig</i>	69	<i>Bill & Coo</i>
<i>Elisabeth Murawski</i>	70	<i>Chicago Morning</i>
	71	<i>Merrily, Merrily</i>
<i>Aleš Debeljak</i> <i>translated by Brian Henry</i>	72	<i>Smugglers</i>
	73	<i>At Home</i>
	74	<i>Festival Hall</i>
<i>BJ Soloy</i>	75	<i>The Middle Distance</i>
<i>Philip Metres</i>	76	<i>The Bubble</i>
	78	<i>Dream</i>
<i>Mark Conway</i>	79	<i>in a state</i>
	80	<i>in the aftermath</i>
<i>Kuno Raeber</i> <i>translated by Stuart Frieibert</i>	81	<i>Rome</i>
<i>Mary Jo Thompson</i>	85	<i>Digestion</i>
	87	<i>Currently Showing</i>
<i>Laurie Blauner</i>	88	<i>Medical Marvel</i>
<i>Gerald Majer</i>	89	<i>Luisa Casati, Fountain Dress (1921)</i>
	91	<i>Contributors</i>

SEAMUS HEANEY

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM

SEAMUS HEANEY: A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

When we lost Seamus Heaney at the end of August 2013, the sense of bereavement, which was also a sense of celebration for a life's accomplishment, was global. This Irish poet, translator, and playwright was a beloved figure, not least because he handled his fame with such grace and modesty. From his beginnings on a small family farm (small farm, large family!) in County Derry, to his Nobel Laureateship and international fame was a long and even improbable journey, as he himself often noted, but its arc was consistent and reassuring, a testimony to the concept that important makers of art need not be doomed or tragic figures. To have Heaney be both a major poet and a thoroughly decent human being was a gift for all of us, so that his loss, while deeply mourned, was not flavored by regret for a life unfulfilled or blemished.

While many celebrations of Heaney's life and work have occurred in the year following his death, we feel there's nothing superfluous or redundant about the present symposium. As always, we present close and thoughtful accounts of individual poems that are particular favorites of the essayists. The rewards that careful examination of one poet by a fellow poet can provide are once again on display, and we think they speak for themselves, eloquently.

This is a farewell, then, to a favorite figure, but it is also a welcome to his once and future readers, who have the opportunity to discover and rediscover the signal accomplishments of an enormously productive and accomplished writer. The territory is large and varied, and one can only feel deep gratitude that it exists for us and that it was the work of such a fine individual.

PUNISHMENT

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,

who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

SEAMUS HEANEY: ARTFUL VOYEUR

Research into the matter has come to show that Seamus Heaney's facts about the bog people he wrote about in *North* (1975), his most powerful book about the Irish "troubles," were mostly wrong. In "Punishment," he writes about a young girl executed for adultery. Turns out the real "Windeby I," whose centuries-old corpse was found in a peat bog in northern Germany, was more likely a teenaged boy who died of malnutrition, the mutilations to the body not the penalty for a crime but wounds caused by the workers digging up the body.

But Heaney is creating myth, not reporting historical fact. And the cruelty the bog girl suffers in the poem is all too real and contemporary. "Punishment" is one of the great political poems of the 20th century. Like Yeats's "Easter 1916," it's a poem that implies that the very passivity of the speaker is one of the political problems. So it's not surprising that the observing "I" who begins the poem becomes one of the poem's major players. Though we don't quite take it in at the time, when the poet says, "I can feel the tug / of the halter at the nape / of her neck," he's already identifying with the guilty victim.

For such a brutal poem, the versification is startlingly delicate, or at least a mixture of brutality and delicacy: short-lined, unrhymed quatrains, with Heaney's familiar alternation of long and short vowels (mostly short) and emphatic, alliterative, almost onomatopoeic consonants; mostly dimeters—not even ballad length (or width)—occasionally expanding to a third foot, or truncating to a single one. Heaney has called his inspiration "the guttural muse," but the words are not just guttural: hearing them in our heads makes us imagine reading them out loud, and what happens is a kind of mouth-muscle exercise, a literal tongue-twisting and lip-curling, where no two sounds in a row are made from the same position (like Keats's "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways")—long and short vowels ("feel the tug," "blows her nipples") veering every which way, but connected by the sensual strand of n and m:

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads...

This is the familiar Heaney sound, but here it's at its most "useful," conveying the Chinese-finger-puzzle push and pull of the repellent and the alluring. He sounds both disgusted (*tug, neck, front, body, bog, rods, dug, dumb*) and aroused (*nape, naked, nipples, amber beads, exposed*) by this grotesquely deformed nude body (it's her brain that's *exposed*). He's not passive, but empathetic. And implicated.

Then even more startling, the poem turns baldly and tenderly personal—a confession/admission of affection and sympathy: "My poor scapegoat, // I almost love you..."—followed by the even more disturbing confession/admission of guilt at his own inability—or refusal—to stand up and protest the horrific treatment of this frail, helpless victim. "I almost love you / but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence..." The poet, maintaining his distance, if not his detachment, calls himself an "artful voyeur."

Then suddenly, Heaney takes us from the Stone Age to the shocking present, to the young Northern Irishwomen tarred and feathered for consorting with British soldiers, while the poet "stood dumb." This is no longer speculation but fact; not just "would have" but *did*.

Elements of ambiguity pervade the last stanza, especially the antecedent of "who would connive..." Is it the condemned young women, "cauled in tar" like their condemned ancestresses, who are conniving? Or is it, more likely but not with absolute certainty, "I," the poet himself, who would "connive in civilized outrage"—"connive" here meaning not so much to conspire as to stand by and secretly, civilly, allow these terrible events to continue (the phrase "civilized outrage" perhaps a deliberate echo of the grand oxymoronic

rhetoric of Robert Lowell's "savage servility"). Don't they all—not only the bystanders but even the victims themselves—accept, almost *excuse* these appalling sectarian atrocities, because they are all too understandable? Who *isn't* victimized? And isn't it Heaney's deep understanding of this tragic communion of guilt, this complicity (*his* complicity), that gives his poems—and this one in particular—such unshakable and heartbreaking moral authority?

CLEARANCES

3

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives—
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

FLUENT AT THEIR TASK

While much of Seamus Heaney's lyric poetry attends to the ancient and modern history, the politics and anguish, of Ireland's Troubles, "Clearances" seems to me the capstone of his writing out of the homeliness of his rural Catholic childhood in County Derry. An homage to his mother written in memoriam, a sonnet sequence, it was composed in the poet's mid-career, a son's elegy and tribute to both the sublime and the mundane attributes of his mother, his first teacher. Written in an era of grievances about family dysfunctions and abuses, it's also a beautifully observant, unsentimental declaration of understanding of and attachment to a maternal life.

"Clearances" is introduced by a proem of three italicized tercets that acknowledge how profoundly Heaney's mother had taught him *"what her uncle once taught her: How easily the biggest coal block split / If you got the grain and hammer angled right..."* (instructions in what we think of as a *man's* skills, in a "masculine" vocabulary). The proem pleads that she continue even now to teach him *"to listen, / To strike it rich behind the linear black."* Like anyone alive, he still has much to learn. (Heaney's metaphorical use of "linear black" takes us back to "Digging," where the father's shovel becomes the son's writing pen.)

The eight sonnets that follow include a sparkling idealized vision of his mother's domestic afterlife: "It is Number 5, New Row, Land of the Dead," then continue in familiar settings around her life and death, to the utterly emptied clearances, "forever silent," where he now imagines himself. Humble tasks shared by the eldest son and his mother—peeling potatoes, the do-si-do art of folding sheets—become, in the telling, life lessons, a way of life as constructed and as natural as Heaney's poetry.

In this third sonnet, the mother teaches her son patterns and minutiae of working, the material-spiritual pleasures of craft that will lead to his mastery of art, an art that in this elegy celebrates the mundane devotional maternal presence. In Heaney's poem, we read not self-absorbed posturing, but homely language and earned detail (*soldering iron, hammer and tongs*), and the "cold comforts" of the two of them together peeling potatoes, rural Ireland's emblematic prob-

lematic staple. With the analogy to soldering, the kitchen task is linked to the male bailiwick, again hinting his mother's expertise is not limited to kitchen domesticity. The poem's earned maturity of tone, of appreciation without complaint, is conveyed by a casual modulated rhyme scheme (*one/iron, splashes/senses, bedside/head*) and simple internal rhyme (*all/all/fall, tongs/responding*), which contribute to the lyrical balance of the octave and sestet.

The natural musicality of Heaney's diction and syntax, of his language, never frivolously employed, shifts momentarily at the start of the sestet to another kind of vernacular, "hammer and tongs," a not-so-understated flexibility toward the Church's ceremonies, already present in the first line (only mother and son not away at Mass—and surely, peeling the Sunday potatoes, a craft in itself, is here a peculiarly secular ceremony of adoration!).

The memory of harmony in their routine task, the implication of both the dreaminess and the physicality (*our senses*) shared, are followed by the deathbed priest's sudden violent interruption, the terrifying urgency of the last rites. These lines hammer at the memory of the scene the writer's been describing: the boy Seamus and his mother, fluent at their task—what might be called woman's work, yet in his recall, one life, one breath. After true and off rhymes, in the final definitive rhymed couplet—*knives/lives*—the poet, embracing those Sundays, wants to hold or commemorate their dexterous shared closeness.

Not only rueful, not only matter-of-fact, he accepts, as unself-consciously as a writer can, the healthy mother-son Freudian romance. It's woven into the marrow. Heaney knows the inevitable sorrow of letting go, of having let that closeness go. An intimate cutting bio told in that closure, "Never closer the whole rest of our lives."

ALPHABETS

I

A shadow his father makes with joined hands
And thumbs and fingers nibbles on the wall
Like a rabbit's head. He understands
He will understand more when he goes to school.

Then he draws smoke with chalk the whole first week,
Then draws the forked stick that they call a Y.
This is writing. A swan's neck and swan's back
Make the 2 he can see now as well as say.

Two rafters and a cross-tie on the slate
Are the letter some call *ah*, some call *ay*.
There are charts, there are headlines, there is a right
Way to hold the pen and a wrong way.

First it is 'copying out', and then 'English'
Marked correct with a little leaning hoe.
Smells of inkwells rise in the classroom hush.
A globe in the window tilts like a coloured O.

II

Declensions sang on air like a *hosanna*
As, column after stratified column,
Book One of *Elementa Latina*,
Marbled and minatory, rose up in him.

For he was fostered next in a stricter school
Named for the patron saint of the oak wood
Where classes switched to the pealing of a bell
And he left the Latin forum for the shade

Of new calligraphy that felt like home.
The letters of this alphabet were trees.
The capitals were orchards in full bloom,
The lines of script like briars coiled in ditches.

Here in her snooded garment and bare feet,
All ringleted in assonance and woodnotes,
The poet's dream stole over him like sunlight
And passed into the tenebrous thickets.

He learns this other writing. He is the scribe
Who drove a team of quills on his white field.
Round his cell door the blackbirds dart and dab.
Then self-denial, fasting, the pure cold.

By rules that hardened the farther they reached north
He bends to his desk and begins again.
Christ's sickle has been in the undergrowth.
The script grows bare and Merovingian.

III

The globe has spun. He stands in a wooden O.
He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves.
Time has bulldozed the school and school window.
Balers drop bales like printouts where stoked sheaves

Made lambdas on the stubble once at harvest
And the delta face of each potato pit
Was patted straight and moulded against frost.
All gone, with the omega that kept

Watch above each door, the good luck horse-shoe.
Yet shape-note language, absolute on air
As Constantine's sky-lettered IN HOC SIGNO
Can still command him; or the necromancer

Who would hang from the domed ceiling of his house
A figure of the world with colours in it
So that the figure of the universe
And 'not just single things' would meet his sight

When he walked abroad. As from his small window
The astronaut sees all he has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum

Or like my own wide pre-reflective stare
All agog at the plasterer on his ladder
Skimming our gable and writing our name there
With his trowel point, letter by strange letter.

WRITING THE WORLD AND ONE'S PLACE IN IT

It should be of little surprise that Seamus Heaney in "Alphabets," commissioned as the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem for 1984, turned an assignment into a deeply moving meditation on his own boyhood experience of language acquisition, which necessarily is the bedrock of all learning.¹ The poem succeeds in universalizing the autobiographical and personal. "Alphabets" leads off *The Haw Lantern*, a mid-career volume that appeared in 1987. It is a transitional book in which Heaney, as he did in earlier books, mines subjects pertaining to his childhood and youth that yield stunning evocations of his rural and familial past, as in the poem "The Stone Verdict" about his father or "Clearances," the tender sonnet sequence in memory of his mother. But the volume also shows Heaney exploring an allegorical mode, in part inspired by his reading of Eastern European poetry, that probes themes with large political reach: the fragility of a realm governed and sustained by a genuine concern for scruples in "From the Republic of Conscience" (another commissioned poem—for Amnesty International), or the complexity of belief in an inviolate cultural identity even in exile in "From the Land of the Unspoken." As various reviewers noted, the volume exhibits a new imaginative orientation, stylistic variability (from the rooted and concrete to the discursive and analytical), and a purposeful stoicism in the face of human history.² These qualities look toward much of Heaney's later work that seeks, in his words, to "make space... for the marvellous as well as for the murderous" (Heaney 423).

In three sections of mostly off-rhymed quatrains, "Alphabets" hews to the "marvellous" in its contemplation of the mystery and sheer magic that Heaney experienced as a child newly acquiring the ability to render his own spoken language and numerals in a system of written signs; and then proceeds to chart his learning of Latin,

¹Heaney spoke to the occasion and place of writing the poem in O'Driscoll, 286 and 291.

²See, for instance, Hunter. Not all reviewers responded to the volume so favorably: see Hart 461.

Gaelic, and, at some point, Greek. Possibly foreshadowing a poem that appears later in the volume—"The Stone Verdict," about his father's intensely taciturn nature—"Alphabets" begins with the image of his father using his hands to make a shadow puppet of a rabbit on the wall to amuse the children. Akin to the unreal shadow-rabbit that springs alive in his imagination, the marks he draws at school and that he first associates with everyday things like a forked stick and the backs of swans undergo a transformation as they become abstract signs linked to letters and numbers:

Then he draws smoke with chalk the whole first week,
Then draws the forked stick that they call a Y.
This is writing. A swan's neck and swan's back
Make the 2 he can see now as well as say.

Through the use of such plain, primer-like diction and syntax, Heaney reawakens in the reader perhaps long-buried memories of this startling process when marks designated as letters become a medium by which the world meshes with a network of conventional signs.³ The quatrain's rhymed lines summon up the way in which the child's mind becomes enlivened to connect one thing with another; moreover, on a deeper level, the individual letters of the poem's routine but expertly fitted words on the page enact the undeniable triumph of the innocent child now become accomplished poet.

This first section ends with Heaney's almost trademark gift for finding the perfect nexus between the visual and the verbal to engender the image of the teacher's check mark in the margin as a "a little leaning hoe" and the globe in its frame on the window ledge tilted "like a coloured O." In these images there is a deft, almost sleight-of-hand interplay between marks becoming things and things becoming letters. And the poet's recollected younger self is about to make the shift, called up in the second section, to seeing the world

³The simplicity of diction at the poem's start, Heaney has revealed, was indebted to Czeslaw Milosz's early sequence of poems "The World"; see Driscoll 291.

through the lens of yet another language as he embarks on the more demanding study of Latin—first at Anahorish, the local primary school, and then at St. Columb’s College, the Catholic boarding school in Derry, mentioned in the poem as “a stricter school” (Driscoll 246).

While at St. Columb’s Heaney also studied Gaelic, in whose lettering he finds a kind of refuge, which he refers to as “the shade / Of new calligraphy that felt like home.” The stanza continues by Heaney seeing an abundant pastoral landscape reflected in the forms of its alphabet:

The letters of this alphabet were trees.
The capitals were orchards in full bloom,
The lines of script like briars coiled in ditches.

This mating of imagined topography and script amplifies the elemental wedding of thing and sign introduced in the first section where, as in the pages of a primer, it is presented only as a sequence of separate icons that are not linked together to suggest a more unified scene. Here Heaney’s more integrated imagining mirrors his own maturing emotional nature that now is susceptible to romantic and sensual longings. The stanza’s image of the dreamed Celtic goddess, “All ringleted in assonance and woodnotes,” stands in stark contrast to the Roman legions hinted at in the beginning of this section by the phrase “column after stratified column” describing the textbook grammar in *Elementa Latina*. This binary opposition of the feminine and the masculine (the former seen as localized and the latter, foreign) perceived or thought to inhere in the languages Heaney was studying demonstrates one set of tensions (matriarchal vs. patriarchal; Irish vs. Anglo-English; etc.) found not only throughout this volume but also in other volumes.

This section’s last two stanzas conclude with Heaney as student back at the writing desk inscribing—presumably Gaelic—letters with the rhythm and orderliness of a farmer at work to plow a field’s neat rows. Rapt in his cell, he is the young calligrapher in tune with the earth’s seasons, while the “blackbirds dart and dab.” But Heaney reveals to the reader something of the intellectual push and pull of the

different linguistic worlds he inhabited at St. Columb's, especially because of its religious regimen and curriculum. By the last stanza he is still bent over his desk, though the script he labors at writing appears no longer to be Gaelic but the Latin of the catechism: "Christ's sickle has been in the undergrowth. / The script grows bare and Merovingian."

The poem's final section is the most imaginatively rich and transportive. Time speeds up, as the image of a globe returns but now spinning, and the opening stanza places Heaney perhaps at university as he reads literature, immersing himself in Shakespeare to the degree that he "stands in a wooden O"—the Globe Theatre itself. By then, the worlds of literature and literary criticism, whether the plays of Shakespeare or *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves had become crucial and orienting sources for Heaney's thought. And, indeed, Graves' spellbinding research, especially his discussion of the Druidic identification of trees as letters, informs the poem's previous section (Graves 33).⁴ And it is significant that Heaney overtly brings his name into the poem, paired with Shakespeare's as the other half of the line's seesaw: "He alludes to Shakespeare. He alludes to Graves." But it is also telling that in the same stanza he circles back to Anahorish, the local school where his learning to write English letters first began. Heaney records the fact that the school is now gone—"bulldozed"—and pointedly remarks that of course gone, too, is the window and its ledge upon which the little globe of the world rested: in his mind the imagined O of the Globe Theatre, its stage peopled by his ready knowledge of Shakespeare's plays, must make up for the absence of past places.

The stanza's last line zooms out to reveal the landscape of farms and fields that defined Heaney's growing up and identity. However,

⁴In the 1997 "Introduction" to *The White Goddess*, Grevel Lindop notes: "The illumination which struck Graves with such force was really a double realisation. One part of this was the perception that the mysterious 'Battle of the Trees' recalled in an early Welsh poem was actually a battle between *alphabets*. The Celtic Druids used tree names for the letters of their alphabet and the alphabet was structured so that it functioned also as a calendar and, in general, as a system of correspondences that could embody all kinds of knowledge" (x).

as the line leads into the next stanza, it is now a worked and changing landscape seen through the mind of one who has returned with knowledge of many more alphabets, specifically Greek, so that even the most ordinary things he remembers, like “stooked sheaves” or a “potato pit,” become transfigured by identification with linguistic signs (lambda and delta)—once again parts of the world becoming talismanic icons. But, as Heaney emphasizes, these mentally superimposed linguistic signs stand for or illuminate a remembered reality that now is “gone” in the face of new machines like hay balers and the disappearance of folkways that prompted hanging a horse-shoe (omega-like) above a doorway in hopes of good luck.

This emphasis on the ever-increasing absence of past places or persons, because of their momentary resurrection worked by the poem’s power to summon them forth, will be repeated again and again in the volume as a whole, though sometimes Heaney will sound a far more despairing note.⁵ Thus, as “Alphabets” winds toward its close, Heaney introduces the figure of the “necromancer,” what one close reader of the poem has referred to as his “alter-ego who, Lazarus-like, comes back from the dead to write rather than tell us all” (Hart 475). But the necromancer, interestingly, doesn’t produce written script per se; rather, he produces an illuminated “figure of the world” that magically encapsulates the entire universe. I suspect that Heaney knew that talk of such a mythic personage and his wondrous talisman required strategic updating; and therefore he shifts abruptly to a vision of another kind of “figure” with which almost all present-day readers would be familiar—that, in the third line quoted below, of the earth seen from outer space and hanging amid immeasurable darkness with all its fragile promise evoked compellingly by the succession of trochaic and dactylic adjectives:

⁵Heaney himself drew attention to “one of the main concerns of the book: call it loss of faith—or rather loss of faiths, of all kinds. Religious faith, as in ‘The Mud Vision’ or in the one called ‘The Spoonbait’. Faith in patriotism in ‘Wolfe Tone’ and ‘The Disappearing Island’. Loss of faith, to a certain extent, in language itself, or at least doubts about the ‘real presence’ behind it, as in ‘The Riddle’” (O’Driscoll 287).

... As from his small window
The astronaut sees all he has sprung from,
The risen, aqueous, singular, lucent O
Like a magnified and buoyant ovum—

In a sense, Heaney encourages the reader to float beyond all differences of competing languages and cultures and historical animosities. Only then can all the different alphabets be seen for what they are: expressions of the sheer miracle of a “singular” biosphere that gave rise to the evolution of human consciousness in all its myriad forms and “figures.”

Heaney has one more quick-change up his sleeve to bring the poem to its finale. He tethers the “lucent O” of the planet back to the wide-eyed stare of his remembered child-self, the individuated consciousness first taking hold of the rune-like letters of the family name the hired plasterer inscribes onto the gable. It is a moment of learning of the first order, “pre-reflective” though it might be: the child, ever so subconsciously and tentatively, beginning to absorb much of what will define him because of familial past and identity embodied in those “strange” letters. But at this moment the child’s “agog” gaze enjoys complete innocence from the way that name inevitably will expose him to sectarian rancor and corrosive, political realities—all that which obscures the “lucent O”; in other poems Heaney turned to face these themes. In “Alphabets” he leaves his child-self free to marvel at the forms of the letters themselves, which we as readers imagine and which for us of course conjure the name future generations of poets will reckon with and cherish.

WORKS CITED

- Graves, Robert. *The White Goddess*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013.
- Hart, Henry. “Heaney Among the Deconstructionists.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 16.4 (1990): 461-92.
- Heaney, Seamus. “Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture.” *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- Hunter, Jefferson. “The Cart-Track Voice.” *The Threepenny Review* 36 (1989): 16-18.
- O’Driscoll, Dennis. *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

ST KEVIN AND THE BLACKBIRD

And then there was St Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

*

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

SAINT KEVIN, SAINT BLACKBIRD

Certain poems have inside them the source of all poems. I've thought this, and probably said it many times. Because it is these I love instinctively, pretty much automatically, poems I read and reread. They share their bounty and radiate wildly or so quietly. They return me—and perhaps others—to the reason one writes poems in the first place. This is not sentimental. This is fact, real as fable to haunt and light the way forward, back to prehistory. Which is only to say I've been stuck for a while, like the ever-present but archaic needle to record (or to *vinyl*, as is said now), not on Seamus Heaney's well-known bog poems, admittedly quite wonderful, or on his childhood pieces dragging dusty behind father and plow, but on his curious later poem "St Kevin and the Blackbird," which seems to me a brilliantly deadpan and plain *ars poetica* as much as—what's the word for *life* in Latin?—a *vita poetica*, if only our days could be seen clearly enough.

Forgive me. I'm a sucker for the subject matter. Though profoundly and happily lapsed now, I was born and raised Catholic, as was Seamus Heaney. His Northern Ireland, his outskirts of Derry—of course, very different from the north end of Chicago and my parish school. But maybe this in our childhoods was similar: a fascination with saints and their fabulous exploits, often so crazy you'd be on safer ground believing you could fly or really were a foundling from Mars. Perhaps, as I did, he once collected so-called "holy cards" (mine still in a little wooden box), those stylized rapt, garish pictures of saints and their iconic accessories (cut lilies or flayed skin in hand, human eyes or breasts on a plate, a ladder, numerous doves, a raven, and so on), printed cards given out as party favors at funerals or to remind the young faithful of their duties (Sunday Mass, be nice enough, confess your sins before every first Friday, etc.), usually to end up as bookmarks left behind in missals. That said, I never had a *Kevin* in my cherished hoard. My loss, since his story that drives Heaney's poem is so visually memorable, an outrageous fantasy, a made-for-TV movie (à la fifth century) in spite of its excruciatingly slow motion and simple plot. Just try keeping your own hand out steady and long enough—days, weeks—for a clutch of blackbird

eggs to hatch there, as it's claimed Kevin did. One word: insane. Or at least not possible. But in poems, as in myth or one's highest hopes for the highest good, who knows? Plus, why the hell not?

Meanwhile, out of that questionable, quirky narrative comes this straightforward poem, managed in two acts, two movements, the first cast in a tale-telling mode from the start. "And then there was..." So the Irish legend unfolds and we get the hot skinny on the scene set in Glenadaluagh: the saint's cell, his position (kneeling), how it all plays out in Kevin's open hand—cast "close third person" in fiction writer parlance—where the blackbird alights, her "small breast," her "tucked / Neat head and claws," her "warm eggs" and then, in full omniscience and predictable simile, how our protagonist is

...moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

Thus we get the overview, the works—and a zoom camera into Kevin's very heart. Period, paragraph, as my mother would have said, sufficiently fond of saints though she never read or trusted poems much.

This is tricky, I think. Fully underway and however apocryphal, the story's culled, rounded and rounded up, the outside edges rallied to clarify action, then inside for whatever secret self to *mean* rather blatantly. So goes the prose of this poem. And its happily-ever-after, just so. But the unsaid—that great stillness—is having a moment. It's the *wait* duly inscribed into this by the section break and the little asterisk held up like a hand, *stop!* This small formal device seems to anticipate things still puzzling the poet. We know the "story." But our lot is to worry legend. And with any luck, get past the kneejerk proverbial. The truth is that Heaney's about to open himself to the genuine lyric mystery involved, to the *poetry* therein. And the barebones shape of the piece, the progression of thought—including its break from thought—shows the way it all comes up from inner space.

That break is a held breath between two surges of words, as if Heaney is mulling things over before going back in, this time to tell *and* show. We're down to zero, to *as it happens* after such white space,

pause, the emphatic starry dingbat of silence. By now the village-explainer has dissolved. The first section's default of rambling sentences (three!) threaded down through the lines is broken too. Ditto the reliance on the pre-digested, trumpeting declarative. Because really, how to absorb the miraculous? Syntax has all sorts of weird ideas. Syntax morphs into its various contortions long and short to *reveal*—attitude and sense and just what kind of human attention is at stake. Here the poem jolts tentative, full of hesitation and honest-to-god questioning, delivered with the triggering pretense of a quasi-reasonable shrug in that next section's first stanza, to raise the gates so the power of image doesn't blow up the border crossing.

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time....

Anyhow. This shift to the "well, whatever..." vernacular adds charm and interiority; it turns the discourse from certainty, saves it from the all-knowing adult-voice of section one. The nature of the question itself sets the formerly self-assured speaker back on his thumbs. The speaker starts wondering about the body, the misery of poor Kevin's frozen posture for weeks and weeks—"Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?"—until we're also caught up in the exhausting flesh and blood details. Just what *would* that feel like? I don't want to go there....

But questions *insist* that we imagine, enter the immediate realm of thinking all this quite real. And more unsettling, to grab us, it's Heaney asking deeper—"Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth / Crept up through him?" With one word—*underearth*, apparently invented by the poet for this occasion—everything shifts to a much stranger depth. That "underearth" even creeps, is "shut-eyed blank" and not a little scary. No longer plain physical distress in the making, not simple humility either. "Is there distance in his head?" I love this line, and this leap. Consider for a half-second: distance as a thingy *thing* in a human mind, vast beyond thought, and you *see* it in there, like you see fields for miles to the horizon though there's no horizon in this particular offing.

What I mean is: how long have we been here, wandering around this fast-becoming-eternal of the poem? Translation: in the world we thought we understood? No matter. Because Heaney is already on to his real territory where Kevin's state of mind to mindlessness means

Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,'" he prays,....

Enter more white space, a brief, silent hovering between tercets, that most unstable of seemingly orderly stanzaic pooling. Then a final stab, borrowed off the first section's assertive mode, to define Kevin's pity and patience and weeks of unearthly focus as

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

To my ear, this is beyond lovely into hardcore true, each repetition—*forgotten forgotten forgotten*—dropped and picked up so memorably that one keeps erasing how we got there, a slight-of-hand that mimes generosity itself. And what distance in the head? A certain kind of emptiness as good, maybe the best. Surely this kind, where at the river even one's claim to know the river's name disappears. Which is love, as stated earlier in an offhand phrase shrewdly easy to miss. Love!—of course, the name in question. Here, at the poem's end, rarely has that powerful reason to be or do been so delicately, aptly and surprisingly evoked. Most moral tales are stupid. This one is not.

It may be relevant to add that Seamus Heaney drew on this legend in his 1995 Nobel lecture, where his *anyhow* turns up too. "Anyhow, as Kevin knelt and prayed, a blackbird mistook his outstretched hand for some kind of roost..." There, eggs finally hatched into fledglings, the poet told his audience in Stockholm, "true to life, if subversive of common sense, at the intersection of natural process and the glimpsed ideal, at one and the same time a signpost and a reminder."

Is that not great? *Subversive, glimpsed, common sense, reminder*: always those few poems worth reading with wonder. And for those of

us who keep writing, plugging away toward the art of it—toward all of the above, I tell myself. But my favorite: the odd, hopeful but matter-of-fact miscalculation at the core, that the bird *mistook* the hand, how Kevin knew exactly and no matter, standing for weeks to aid and abet a transformation that might, or might never, come.

POSTSCRIPT

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

ON HEANEY'S "POSTSCRIPT"

Heaney's "Postscript" opens casually, notationally, like a reminder to self (so I have always read the "you") to make a point of looking carefully at a particular landscape. It's a decidedly athletic sentence, though, in its being sustained for eleven lines of this 16-line poem, and for its cinematic control of the reader's view: the way we're first given the generality of "out west," then specifically County Clare, then a particular spot in that county at a given time of the year. From here, Heaney tightens the focus even further—the ocean on one side, land on the other, and on the land a pond, and on the pond a flock of swans, and within the flock the heads and feathers of each individual swan. The sentence works telescopically and, because of its lack of full stop for so long, it works as well hypnotically, carrying us and—again, for eleven lines—refusing to let us go.

"Useless to think you'll capture it / More thoroughly." The brevity alone, here, is abrupt, immediately following the lengthier, more sinuous sentence. It's also a sentence devoid of any of the previous sentence's imagistic details—it breaks the spell, we might say, that we've been under for so long. But when I 'translate' this brief sentence, I think it's arguing that stasis is not the way to capture a moment in time—movement is. That's what the sentence says, but we also get an instance of that statement being *enacted* at the level of sentence construction. Heaney's opening sentence enacts movement, as we've seen, it doesn't stop for eleven lines, but it also moves constantly from image to image, without stopping until the swans (and the final image of the swans is neither head nor feathers, but activity, heads in motion, "crested or busy underwater"). Butting up against the movement of this sentence is the comparatively static, imageless sentence equating stasis with uselessness. This is craft at its most subtle, which is to say, at its best.

The third and final sentence of the poem further refines this idea about uselessness. It's not just that stasis is useless, the more immediate problem—if it is one—is that stasis is impossible for living human beings, the self is in a hurry, ever in motion, even as things hurry *through* the self. I take these things to be what comes to us via the senses, the extended vision, for example, of the poem's opening

sentence. But here Heaney has made a sentence that both opens the poem further and gives to it a decided ambiguity—all thanks to the word “As” in the penultimate line. “As,” as in “in the manner of”? If so, then “known and strange things pass like the wind (“big soft buffetings”) and those things “catch the heart off guard and blow it open.” On the other hand, “As” could mean “while,” in which case things pass through us while the wind’s buffetings “catch the heart off guard and blow it open.” In short, the word “As” leaves the subject of “catch” unclear, and the result is that an element of the surreal is added. I can understand how our perceptions of the world can enter us and affect the metaphorical heart in such a way as to open us up to the world, blowing the heart open as if it were a door to someplace else. But how does wind—physical, unabstract—catch the heart? I don’t think it can. But if it could, I presume it would do so physically, which gives to the poem’s final image a potentially more violent resonance, the heart as a kind of sentry caught dozing and blown open, as in exploded; heart failure? Heart attack?

We pass through the world. The world passes through us: via the senses, but also as memory, and also physically—as food, for example. The result of this commerce between self and the world is twofold, Heaney seems to suggest. It can open us to an understanding of and a relationship to the world—i.e., it can be the catalyst for something like compassion, an opening of the heart up. But can’t it also destroy us, a life of always feeling, thinking, knowing, life of memory and dream, of being built to desire what it’s useless to desire, to stop and capture the world more thoroughly than we already do just by experiencing the world?

And yet, what is a poem if not a momentary capturing (and enacting) of the world-as-experience? I think Heaney would agree with that, but would add that all such capturing is immediately also a failure, a failure specifically to capture the world as it actually is, ever in motion, and non-linear. For Heaney, the poet’s burden is its own strange gift, as well: to understand art’s limits—akin to the limits of what desire can do—and to keep on trying, anyway, to blow them open.

ELECTRIC LIGHT

Candle grease congealed, dark-streaked with wick-soot.
Rucked alps from above. The smashed thumbnail
of that ancient mangled thumb was puckered pearl,

moonlit quartz, a bleached and littered Cumae.
In the first house where I saw electric light
she sat with her fur-lined felt slippers unzipped,

year in, year out, in the same chair, and whispered
in a voice that at its loudest did nothing else
but whisper. We were both desperate

the night I was left to stay with her and wept
under the clothes, under the waste of light
left turned on in the bedroom. "What ails you, child,

what ails you, for God's sake?" Urgent, sorrowing
ails, far-off and old. Scaresome cavern waters
lapping a boatslip. Her helplessness no help.

Lisp and relapse. Eddy of sibylline English.
Splashes between a ship and dock, to which,
animula, I would come alive in time

as ferries churned and turned down Belfast Lough
towards the brow-to-glass transport of a morning train,
the very "there-you-are-and-where-are-you?"

of poetry itself. Backs of houses
like the back of hers, meat safes and mangles
in the railway-facing yards of fleeting England,

an allotment scarecrow among patted rigs,
then a town-edge soccer pitch, the groin of distance,
fields of grain like the Field of the Cloth of Gold,

tunnel gauntlet and horizon keep. To Southwark,
too, I came, from tube mouth into sunlight,
Moyola-breath by Thames's "straunge strond."

If I stood on the bow-backed chair, I could reach
the light switch. They let me and they watched me.
A touch of the little pip would work the magic.

A turn of their wireless knob and light came on
in the dial. They let me and they watched me
as I roamed at will the stations of the world.

Then they were gone and Big Ben and the news
were over. The set had been switched off,
all quiet behind the blackout except for

knitting needles ticking, wind in the flue.
She sat with her fur-lined felt slippers unzipped,
electric light shone over us, I feared

the dirt-tracked flint and fissure of her nail,
so plectrum-hard, glit-glittery, it must still keep
among beads and vertebrae in the Derry ground.

HORIZON KEEP

In Act 3, Scene 4 of *Hamlet*, Queen Gertrude—blind to the sudden apparition of the Ghost—exclaims in wonder at her son's terrified countenance:

...as the sleeping soldiers in th' alarm,
Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,
Starts up and stands on end.

Excrement here denotes any bodily effluvium or nonliving corporeal excrescence: in this instance specifically hair, though excrement could also refer to callus, scurf, toenails, or fingernails. The questions that Heaney asks in "Electric Light" are versions of Gertrude's. What life animates things no longer living? What living shadows are cast by things cast off?

The discovery that grounds this poem, however, is manifestly the young Heaney's first encounter with electric light. This encounter occurs at the house of an elderly woman (whom Heaney elsewhere identifies as his grandmother), a person both familiar and terrifying. He is left with her overnight, alone and inconsolable in her frightening company; in spite of her sorrowing desire to know "what ails" him, each one drifts in a separate helplessness. Despite and because of this misery, he is alive to the wonders of the alien setting: the blaze of the electric light, the amber glow of the radio knob, illuminated from within by the incandescing vacuum tubes. In Heaney's recollection, discovery and terror are fused within the crucible of new experience. The what-is-this? of electric light and radio is of a piece with the awful un-at-homeness of childhood displacement: who is this woman? where am I? what can be trusted?

If wonder is a metabolite of terror and curiosity, then Heaney's wonder at these amazing discoveries ("a touch of the little pip would work the magic") precipitates from his fear and fascination with the "smashed thumbnail" of his grandmother's "mangled thumb." Consequently, the electric, electrifying light competes with a dimmer but more peremptory glow, the "candle-grease," "wick-soot," and

“moonlit quartz” of the crushed nail. This nail is the particle, the irritant, around which the poem builds up its layered surfaces.

The electric light implies and participates in a linked-up, plugged-in world of cords and sockets, of antennas and radios, of roads and railways; in short, all the power stations, railway stations, and radio stations that enmesh the world in a limitless network of nodes and filaments, a network wherein (as Whitman anticipated) “it avails not, neither time or place—distance avails not” (“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”). Without budging, the young pilgrim can roam the stations of the world. In Derry, he stands in earshot, thanks to the BBC, of Big Ben and World News. The nail, by contrast, is monstrously unique in its deformity. It is not anyone’s nail, or a kind of nail, it is *that* nail, *her* nail, irreproducible and absolute. While “electric light” is a kind of light, novel then but ubiquitous now, the nail is utterly itself, and in being utterly itself, accedes to a sort of thingly immortality. The nail is that thing (Heaney imagines) which “must still keep / amid beads and vertebrae in the Derry ground.” It stands for all that is distinct, provincial, local, and unique in our origins—or rather, in Heaney’s origins, because my origins or yours are inalienably, inexpressibly, and unshareably my own or your own. The nail in this way affixes Heaney to a particular past, anchors his life-thread, nails it (if you will) to a unique point and moment of beginning. It establishes what Ashbery calls a “mooring of starting out” (“Soonest Mended”), a mooring that the poem returns to and makes fast at its conclusion.

This incorruptible, unsanctified relic centers the poem, and in centering it, paces off its perimeter. This circumscription paradoxically accords to the anomalous middle section its vast scope and freedom. What seems opaque, illegible, and sibylline about the grandmother in the first five stanzas entails also the whispered intimations of a world yet to be discovered. The “scareful cavern waters” of her “far-off and old” intonations will become in time the waters of Belfast Lough, where Heaney will depart on a ferry to England, a “brow-to-glass” train journey to London and the Thames’s “strange stronde.”

This journey will be a pilgrimage, not so much to a religious, political, or geographical center as to a vocational wellspring, the over-

flowing, cosmopolitan Hippocrene to which Heaney consecrates his labors. Unlike the irreplaceable, absolute specificity of the grandmother's smashed nail (and, perhaps, the rucked and fissured homeland it embodies), the wellspring of poetry is always for Heaney a blent source, in which the odor of the Thames at Southwark recalls that of the River Moyola, alongside whose banks Heaney spent his childhood. And if Englishness and Irishness are held here so equably in solution, so too are the past and present. The Southwark of the "tube mouth" is also the Southwark of Chaucer's Tabard Inn, as well as a new version of Augustine's (and Eliot's) Carthage: "To Carthage then I came / Burning burning burning burning." Heaney, however, writes, "To Southwark *too* I came." In this nearly imperceptible adjustment, he acknowledges the belatedness of his arrival in a London at once real and unreal, crowded with familiar, compound ghosts, even while appreciating that he—however much a latecomer—is in the best of company.

In "Tollund Man," an earlier and more solemn piece, one of the Bogland poems, Heaney concludes that when he visits "the old, man-killing parishes of Jutland" and their peat-cured relics of tribal, retaliatory, and sacrificial violence, he will know himself "lost, / Unhappy, and at home." At the moment of his arrival in the disorienting, echoing convergences of London's "straunge stronde," by contrast, Heaney knows himself to be lost, happy, and at home. Though always conscious of geography and landscape, of people and nation, this at-homeness is a state of being at once thrillingly volatile and reassuringly self-sufficient, "the very 'there-you-are-and-where-are-you?' / of poetry itself."

This situated non-place is distinctly Heaneyan, expanding the borders of the poem beyond Londonderry or London Town, or for that matter, beyond Denmark or Carthage or Rome. Heaney not only declares "what must still keep / among beads and vertebrae in the Derry ground," not only asks what we in turn must keep, must remember, must cherish, but inquires into the very meaning of keeping itself. If the nail "must still keep," what exactly does "keep" mean? "Electric Light" reminds us, fleetingly, in the glimpsed "tunnel gauntlet and horizon keep" that *keep* is not only a verb but a noun as well. A *keep* is a fastness, a tower of refuge, as in the keep of a castle.

Within the “there-you-are-and-where-are-you?” of poetry, one keep of this sort is the hoard of memory itself, whether in the solitary keep of individual memories, or the expanding, concentric keeps of cultural memory, widening from the small enclosures of a specific family or town out toward the broader regions of a nation, a people, a language, encompassing finally the whole field of language itself. In this way the keep that preserves the grandmother’s nail is in fact a compound enclosure. Solitary memory of solitary experience preserves the nail’s unique and private meaning, but this private meaning radiates outward through the public meanings of English. English is the language, the public dispensation, that allows the nail to keep within collective memory, made visible and legible in the poem, and more generally, within the great and ancient archive of poetry itself, practiced in every culture and in every era.

So if the poem has at its center the grandmother’s mutilated nail, it has as its circumference what Heaney calls in “Station Island” the oceanic expanse of “the whole sea.” Here he calls this circumference the “horizon keep,” a capacious precinct at once coherent and unlimited, glimpsed in youth but claimed in maturity, named and described for any future poet with eyes to see and ears to hear. The “horizon keep” is no less one’s possession than the most intimate of memories, but its perimeter is always at a distance. Though it cannot be encompassed or contemplated, it is as faithful a companion as any impression recorded in childhood’s indelible pigments.

In “Clearances,” his elegy for his mother, Heaney adumbrates and anticipates this “horizon keep,” this most spacious of possessions. “Then she was dead,” he writes,

The searching for a pulsebeat was abandoned
And we all knew one thing by being there.
The space we stood around had been emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

Peculiarly, after his mother’s death, the objective correlative Heaney finds for his loss is a tree, a “coeval chestnut” the same age as Heaney

and grown "from a jam jar in a hole."
I thought of walking round and round a space
Utterly empty, utterly a source
Where the decked chestnut tree had lost its place
In our front hedge above the wallflowers.
The white chips jumped and jumped and skited high.
I heard the hatchet's differentiated
Accurate cut, the crack, the sigh
And collapse of what luxuriated
Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all.
Deep-planted and long gone, my coeval
Chestnut from a jam jar in a hole,
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond silence listened for.

This tree is at once Yeats's "great-rooted blossomer" and Whitman's live-oak in Louisiana, "solitary in a wide flat space / Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend a lover near," but it is also crucially neither of these. Because the chestnut is Heaney's coeval, it stands not for the mother, or for the abstraction of rooted, verdant individuality, but rather for a relationship, an animated negative space between persons. The "clearance" whereof Heaney speaks is not the clearing away or effacement of a single life, but its perfect internalization and sublimation, released from the temporal world into the "bright nowhere" of its ramifications in the lives of others. This bright nowhere is a new field of power and light, an expansion of the horizon. It is, then, through Heaney's own instruction that we can comprehend his own vanishing. His disappearance, he tells us, is not a scaresome desolation but just such a clearing, a silence most voluble and given for keeps.

THE COMMANDS

The child taught the dog *stay*
by staying herself, in the dark garden,
and the dog imitated her.

The child taught the dog *fetch*
by pushing a twig with her nose.

She taught the dog *come*
by appearing out of the pines
(there were only two pines
and she had to bribe the dog
with a biscuit not to follow her).

She taught the dog *heel*.
Always there had been a gap
like a missing tooth, just out of reach,
and now apparently it was the dog
with his ropy ears, quirky itches,
and faintly hopeless grin.

She taught *adore me* and *don't die*.
The dog listened, head cocked,
but his square nose swiveled
to watch a firefly stitching
in and out of leaf shadow.

Immediately it was twilight
and a voice called *dinner*.

The child taught *voice*
and *you must obey*.
By now the dog was bored
and trotted away, perhaps hoping
to dig up a dead vole
out of the system of tunnels
that undermined those dusty peonies.

The child panted after
shouting all the lessons at once,
adore me, stay, dinner, come,
heel, fetch, don't die,
so they sounded savage
like a sob or the name of God
until the dog was scared
and bounded across Glenwood
into the neighbor's yard
or the neighbor's neighbor's,
and the voice (which was mine)
spluttered *now, this minute, at once—*

at once other voices were shouting
you always, you never, please,
no, come back, with an edge of panic
or triumph or unbearable weariness—

but it was night and the firefly
vanished into its own burning planet.

THE BOWL

My job was to fill the dog's dish.
But each night I poured less kibble.
Because he was always older, gawkier,
more swaybacked? Sometimes I hid
the bowl itself, in the washer-dryer
or mop closet, and watched him hunt
assiduously, poking a tentative paw
under the Kelvinator or Hotpoint. Surely
we both knew I was joking, tomorrow
I'd buy him a marrow bone, a sausage?
But it was still tonight, I measured
a teaspoon less, he ate and turned
three times at the foot of my bed,
guarding me from the Enemy while I lay awake
listening to the voices selling duji
or comfort, wooing and bickering—
but always as if distracted, and always,
long before daybreak, another dog barked,
rapt, hoarse, absent: then for a breath
perfect silence, dawn at last, and the cars
speeding down Dekalb to the next city.

STAIRMASTER

I am
the Stairmaster, I think to myself
as over and over
I climb out of this kinetic bracken of flex and pose.

I am Lizzie Bennet, skirt in hand,
trudging through the muddy pages
of chapter seven—

I am the arrow pinched in midflight,
the tortoise plodding along,
and a squadron of the dead
circling round the runways of heaven
without clearance to land.

I am only halfway there, wherever there is,
my legs lost in the jungles of another planet.
Today I'll have to return to the ground
since there is nowhere further I can tread.

Just for today,
Lizzie, in dirty stockings, will have to return home,
the arrow return to the quiver,
the tortoise patiently turn,
and the dead jolt upright in their beds,
wondering what all that was about.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT WE NOT TALK TOO MUCH
ABOUT HOW LONG AGO THE PAST WAS

The pope says, "Hi." The pope is a people person. Well, that's good. It's important to say hi, and it's important to be a people person. It's not critical or anything, but important nonetheless. Other popes are other ways. Used to be, there was a lot of bling and sing at the papal installation, now it's more like a business meeting. Gotta keep up with the times, and the times are always rolling. You want to know things, too. So do I. People are talking and they get all antsy when you get up to them. They're obviously talking about you, so someone makes a joke that they were just talking about you, but it kind of falls flat, as you all know they really *were* just talking about you. Great. What did I say this time? It feels depressing but it's also kind of triumphant. You know something now, even if the thing you know is disturbing. Or mildly disturbing, or, really, maybe not disturbing at all. Say you look at it like "Hey, they're talking about *me!*" You don't know, about anything you stumble into, how much is you wanting it and how much you've been pre-ordained to want it. I was born here and grew up here, and so I like The Beatles, or I want a dark green 1967 Mustang convertible, or to have these people talk about me. Niki's sister is about 20, I think, and has a bone or immune disorder, I forget the name of it. She's in a wheelchair, and she mostly stopped growing at about six or eight, I think. I always thought I was good with all that. I've read all sorts of things and talked with people who have various conditions, and you're supposed to always treat everyone normally. "Normally." And so here I go thinking I'm a normal treater, and then Niki tells me the other day that I look at her sister with "sad puppy in a kennel" eyes. And she thinks it's because I have kids, and that I'm projecting. So now, have my eyes given me away? Quick, act normal, but in an empathetic, and not condescending or pitying way. She's gone a lot and is in a lot of pain, which the drugs help usually, but they also zap her in other ways. It's OK, to try, but to screw it all up. Forgive me if I see my daughter when I look at you in the various

waiting rooms of love, as everyone falls apart. And that's part of it too, how we're trapped in the isolation of our own minds. How fear can make part of you say that you'll live in some numb middle, and part of you say you'll scream, and part of you say you'll keep cool, as mothers are lifting their babies to the pope as the pope works the crowd, their healthy and their broken babies.

BATH SONG

Any little boat
filled, like this,
will sink.

Hair and ash
in the toilet bowl.
On the bathroom shelf

the antlers,
like a tiny altar,
lean against a field guide

that leans against another.
A Field Guide to Wildflowers:
Right before a flower dies,

it blooms. The ghost
jasmine scent last January.
Sometimes we believed it

was him,
and other times
we didn't.

A Field Guide To Mammals
or How To Tie One Hundred Knots.
We're supposed to be happy

for the farmers
that the rain has come
and yet this three-day storm

against myself,
plus one year ago
today.

A siren
is a map
of distance,

same as.
One Mississippi.
Two.

A lightning bolt.

MIDDLE AGE

Someone has moved the green plastic chair
to the far edge of the lawn

where it has turned its back on everyone.
Little folded fortune tellers

of flowers in the trees.

This morning, trying not to cry in the car

and crying, I told our daughter I need the grown-up equivalent
of ice cream. *How about ice cream?* was her idea.

These are the beautiful days.

A tangle of roses bullying the fence. The garden, ripe

with disregard.

How many times today did I stand in the attic

watching our neighbors, two yards away?

How many times did I reheat

this single cup of tea?

I wanted to grow old with you,

just not so soon, we joke.

We are dolls inside dolls

inside dolls: different ages
opening within us, bright

as goats' eyes,

and if I told you in bed last night

that I wanted to talk first,

just a little,

it doesn't mean that shy dizzy goat
won't still faint,

like that one breed of mini goats do,
falling

at the clap of your hands.

ALSATIAN SUITE

In a convenient walnut tree, a stone's throw from the village
barely awakened from its winter somnolence
a flock of crows has landed, one on each solid branch,
there they are, how many, thirteen, seventeen?
like big black fruit on the bare tree.
Is this the Consistory of the Church of Augsburg?
That stout one there, is he Pastor Schaeffer
with a fat neck, comfortable plumage, who married
a pharmacist's daughter, or was it a doctor's?
Is it a committee? Is it a family council, a council of war
against the buzzard always flying solo, and the male
pheasant who stands in the road in his bronze plumage,
standing you'd say on one foot, with his delicate pointed tail.

WOMEN OF THE PLAIN: IV

The wind above the glaciers that rushed from the desert comes, barely cooled, to worry the tall pine tree's branches. When everything is in labor, how can you sleep, how can you die?

On the slow supple waters, the black boats, the flat boats, tomorrow nudged with slow hooks toward bales of hay on the shore are, like the soul, indefinitely anchored.

The year drags on, before it will bring back the distracted daughter, the son loved so long from afar. The children who laughed in her arms, on her breasts rarely write to the tax-collector's wife.

Odile, who sometimes seemed to give us a sign, when, after a storm, mountain villages glistened beyond the vineyards in brief flashes from fortunate windows, Odile, help us not to forget, regret, our youth.

Beauty isn't worth much, except as a last plea that will not be heard. O captive among the seasons, the barrel of fresh-cut cabbages in the cellar at October's first frost, when, with the swallows suddenly gone, we awake in the first silence of the changed season.

Odile, the plain is merciless. At night frogs at a loss to reproduce complain. The stork will plunge its long lewd beak in other chimneys. The grandfather clock in wooden clogs, the heavy-footed heart measure the night which slowly, barely, drifts like a boat stubbornly anchored against the black water's tugging.

How hard it is to break loose from the moorings. How long it takes for the water's tugging to drag away the rusted chain that tethers to the shore.

Tulle and cretonne and raw silk
georgette and discreetly printed cottons
became, under the needles of the seamstress come for a day's work
ludicrous sails for an always-delayed departure
while the tall pine moaned in the
November night where the feverish child vainly protested
all the separations he was growing towards.

Odile, help us when youth
that should not be lost has been wasted, when night
cracks and moans as it did in labor toward an empty morning
in the silence following the swallows' departure.
Soft nest, so round, earth-colored, made of
earth and saliva, mud and satin, hung in the roof's armpit,
nest from now on empty to the sparrows' sarcasms.

The heart in its heavy clogs paces the nighttime plains,
lingers on the shore of the smooth black slow waters
which it soon must cross.

Yet every river has two banks, every river
runs between two prairies. Outside the empty tomb
soldiers sleep like putrefying corpses
while in a yellow light the uncanny
chrysalis unwinds, the chrysalis come
to term of its last and first nature.

Oh earth, rich everywhere and yet light, ploughed by two oxen,
oh sparse fruits of an autumn of roads, oh sensible girls
whose wombs go back to sleep so quickly after the frenzy of solstice!
Odile, oh blind girl who washed your eyes at the source
and saw new blondness and Marial blue
at the height where, with great unhurried wingbeats
the lascivious perpetual stork passes by.

Stork, like a phoenix on its nest of thorns,
round, shaped like a bitter crown.

translated by Marilyn Hacker

AUTHOR, AUTHOR

The snow came circling
down like the midnight white clad woman
dancing with her dog as I stood
dreaming of her beautiful arms, the half-shell
alabaster of them tuliped above her
as she stepped and turned and the dog
ran, circling, mad happiness itself

and Pirandello sat back in his chair.
*It must be so. The woman and the moon's dog
snowing.*

What was I doing there, fast

asleep, covered with lumber while a bell
hooted and flew from my tree-like fingers?
Pirandello is thinking of it still
in his stony house outside Palermo.

So much solitary dancing. A life
of secrets from which we cannot wake
no matter the hour or moon
or depth of snow. No matter how lovely
her arms.

Is that all? *Are you one
of the Six Characters, up all night
in its empty clothes.*

Yes, that's all. There would be no howling
and the snow came down
and she danced
and there was no author. Even the lunatic, his wife
nailed into her house and he bound
to a stone post in the courtyard,
knew that.

MAN ON A STOOP

The face of any neighbor
is a shot in the dark,

friends on the driveway
embarrassed

fear is using
us again,

don't kick me out,
don't go don't mean

a thing to me
my smile so gone inside

when it gets like this
my son my house

nor face nor lantern
in this hard-

won dark.

GREEK GIRL WITH DOVES

Stele, bas-relief, ca. 450-440 BC

Greek girl with doves,

your face is in a darkness
the doves want never

so soft to stir

from under,
flicker of leaves, the calm so deep

shall we move?

your sadness
one of the marble islands.

So much chiseled away
goodbye

arise come forth
pass out of

stone.

Dove with its face rubbed off,

dove with a round eye
glazed to tenderness

oh children
boredom rain

come home,

a call looping over the trees.

You should have

brought my son, should have brought him

Miguel Hernandez sobbing softly

in jail on his earth's

last day,

on his body a tiny family

of lice,

on scraps of paper

canefields blades of grass

a lake, a moon aroused—

his prison poems—

You should have brought my son

comes forth

passes out of

every stone

with its hate rubbed out,

no marble in this instant,

there is a child who sees that way.

THE FALL

She disappeared, and left me dark.

—*Paradise Lost*

1

Small rain on the lake,
its glacial blue. Last at the tail
of a continental range.

I followed you until the trail

grew too arduous to climb
without a stick. All rock
along the border of two countries
whose only war was which

still had the farthest city south.
The sticks we used kept snapping
in the roots. I found a branch
too heavy for the climb,

bare except a spiral knot.
You took it by the throat,
left me behind. I watched the knot
turn back into an eye.

2

That night I woke
and pulled the bed sheet back
to see the wound,
how the first bruise in dark

still blue beneath your naked foot
grew lines to others
like a trail of every rock
you broke against

cast in the half-light of the room.
In that dark I saw you climbing
over rock again, the yellow stakes
still bright against the trail.

When you turned I watched
the straight branch break in two:
one half still standing in the rock
where you fell.

3

That morning when I took our sons
outside, made each hold
the corners of a sheet
and pull it taut

to teach what I learned young
of gravity and constant fall,
in that moment
when they watched a heavy ball

sink down a star
into the bed sheet's heart,
pull lesser weights toward it
in a curve, I thought

I saw you naked underneath,
alone, but now the swollen veins
had made your bruise a sun
to other wounds and other men.

BEAUTY FOR BEGINNERS (I)

In restaurants
I welcome strangers

with a glance of recognition, kiss them
that way. *Are you one*

I will succumb to? Splendor
of a dry leaf in the shallows.

Succor of the whip-
poor-will. Poor man's

bread, the sky. Poor man's
song, this repetitive singing.

Spoon, kiss, leaf, lash.

BEAUTY FOR BEGINNERS (II)

First, put your pen
to the father's tongue.

What then
will you write about?

Plastic cups of water on a silver serving tray
after the wake, his daughter on the diving board
bouncing while she sings

I am the alpha and omega,
the pool full of flowers
fallen from the tree.

Here are the words you may use
only once: unknowing, Geronimo, inconsolable,
daguerreotype, river, father, ashes, silver tongue.

MUSE REBELLION

Because seven people sat in a bar,
agreeably disagreeing about Art,
she hovered, a spirit like vermouth
in a martini, in the purple light
some feet above the table.

But she was sick of being slave
(*White Goddess*, really!), commanded
to appear, breathe the right words in his ear
in the right order or resuscitate him
lip to lip until the susurrus evoked

the perfect pitch vibrato of his heart.
All those years chasing Enlightenment
and yet another saint or angel, charming
the hand scraping palettes, groping chiaroscuro
grottoes, pointing toward the vanishing point.

Didn't they know without her they'd have
only their science and their cynicism? Arriving
at the moon, they'd forget why they ever went.
Descending to the ocean floor they'd
find it neither pearled nor profound.

She'd heard it all before: *Neoclassic-impressionist-
surrealist-pop, dada-metaphysical-jazz-funk-bop,
fusion, expressionist, conceptual, rock,
imagist, modern, post-, hiphop—*
she wanted very much to lie down.

NIGHT TEXT

Let's imagine I'm translating something to you—
you, asleep, or sleepless or naming
that third place—between—

with the tips of your tapering fingers—

I don't know the language.
It bends.

In the mind—in that strangely shared chamber—
that is, I mean, in your hands,

where you show me those scenes of confusion and flight
with such intimacy, and don't know it—

even *sans* color, *sans* liquor, *sans* shape,
we are twins. Fraternal. Unknown.

The moon, invasive, huge,
lunging in through the windows,
makes no exceptions—

It's true: it will never happen / you'd be surprised.

CIRCLE

Seven days of weeping drown eleven years of being wrong—
and now, at dawn, steam rises off the lake.

You slumber in a penumbra of anesthesia
as I kayak toward the lily pads, their petals reaching up like fingers

into the ceremony of our speaking, once again,
as we once did. Lichen hangs in loose black beards;

you turn your head—I sense this—on a city pillow
as a peacock walks across the lane

from the yard of the house I grew up in
toward the house where my grandparents once lived.

In a field, a farmers' market: I buy feathers for my earlobes—
feathers I will wear for you, as my body kneels again

in what I've come to recognize as prayer

I HAD MY REASONS

e.g., so weary from my own bellyaching, I fell off
the edge of the third drink, the second dessert,
 & was provoked to more dancing & necking
 & a shameful tuppence I tossed
 to the pauper, & I confess
the migraine made me lose track of time,
 the gut cramp had me on another line
 after the ill-advised trade of this tit
 for that tat, which got me stuck
in the last millennium's traffic, thereby exacerbating
 the past-life trauma of being ground
 into the too-white flour & baked
 into a dough rejected & sent
 back to Ecclesiastes,
where I was deemed not purely enough bred &
 consequently left off the ark, which is why
 I'm late & why I'm in no way
 & no how to blame.

EXTRAVAGANZA

There is a woman in a black musketeer's hat
among the violet houses and strange courtyards
overgrown with moss—children and vagabonds
shout until hoarse. Heavy as a sailor's chest,

the gate will open, and I'll walk, tentatively,
through the bluish glass of broken bottles.
Cobwebs, the decay of sails, we are in
the time of old records. (With a kiss,

I'll mark you.) The dusty, rickety banisters
cannot hold our dreams. Stick close to the walls.
The sweet song of a yellow wind, grasses—
the bird store—parrots, canaries, hummingbirds...

translated by Rimas Uzgiris

FAUST

1.

He seems stiff, ill at ease. He taps the ground with an old-fashioned cane as if feeling for the trap door, someone stranded here from the Old World. He wants to get back, but he can't.

He thinks this era is a gaudy carnival piñata painted gold, technology's false miracles packed inside.

Too bad. Once you kill a living web, you can't bring it back.

2.

Another prize: the freedom to do the opposite of what your gut is telling you. And another: the soldier who didn't step up to stop what was happening, but wouldn't join in.

It's possible to snuff out the lamp each one of us keeps in a niche inside, but only you can do it, and only to yourself, and you have to try and try.

3.

The student revolutionary who wished and wished, till one day he awoke in the future. Success! He lives here a while.

BUILDING IT

Alloy of vision, fusion of will, triumph of unfettered capital. The screech of mass and velocity. The clash of heat and cold. Girders blasted into the mantle, to raise the tower miles high. Pipes and cables twisted through bedrock. The river covered by bridges until there is no river. The stars a handful of countable dots. None of this is without purpose. The analysts of systems pushing us to see ourselves as systems. As resources to be used judiciously. Our time a resource. Leaves falling in the morning light, to be used judiciously. Bullied into thinking that the human spirit is a language trick, that piety is for the poor. What are they building? Think about it. What do they want?

BILL & COO

Poor pre-ex lovers haven't quite tucked their cotton-candy vendetta away in carnival time as even they might've managed back home in drawer space, rolling it up inside itself like dried socks. Ergo

they court & divert each other's malign ingenuity in reciprocal vice-versa. What's that? —missing in auction action a heartbeat behind them? —there! just past the merry-go-going

going & gone struck down to the first bewildered passerby who, of some other mind entirely, swatted the buzzing air of recriminant rumor & tale, why,

it's the pool cue. the musical chair. Buddy's beagle. — no: Adorable Dora the bureau doll remember we won at the foul fair. *You dropped me in the frydaddy slick* she winds herself up & whines.

CHICAGO MORNING

A girl in star-print pajamas
is running up the stairs.
It is the daylight called broad

in crime stories.
She reaches the landlord's porch
with its tall thin windows

and a rocking chair
severe as Whistler's mother.
The door to the landlord's flat

is closed. She crouches
behind the chair, shivering
in the summer sun pouring gold

on the red linoleum.
She stays there, huddled
inside her dark wood

like a kid in an air-raid shelter
waiting for the all clear.
No one comes after her

from the flat below. Her father
doesn't need a gun.
He has hands big as a bear's.

MERRILY, MERRILY

He is an actor who plays doctors
and losers. Gawky
and boyish, the type

old ladies like to feed.
I am not afraid, a good sign.
It's my dream, so I'm in charge

of central casting.
He keeps waving good-by,
a six-foot-two firefly,

and he's there for a reason.
I put him in the light
as if he were a difficult

boss or in-law, for which
there are seminars. Abracadabra
and he's gone, as if Circe

sucked him back into the woods.
The BBC arrives with camera crews.
I tell them I have found

the blue door, through which I row
with infinite dexterity. Where
would I be without these oars

from the Salvation Army, without
the cast of thousands before me
who slept on stones?

SMUGGLERS

Early in the morning, before the first rooster crows,
silent children build cities without windows and doors.
Those who wear glasses wipe them, those who rub
their astonished eyes are prey to insomnia. When only

candles burn, it is time for long smuggling routes,
migration to the other side of the mirror and soft, warm
intimacies. A gentle hand on the belly doesn't rest,
it's possible forbidden fruit rots the soonest,

but something barely tolerable lives
in the way city streets still breathe,
although every evening the houses change color
and shape: bricks sink into shared memory.

Early in the morning, before the last future lawyer
was pulled from the game, we alone remained,
recruits of a useless army: we carry
the palace stones to where a meadow once was.

AT HOME

Tesarska Street, Ljubljana

Opportunities aren't lacking: I only have to step through the back
gate,

into a suburban garden under a small canopy. A peony nods to me
knowingly. Here you are again, you will stare at me and wrinkle
your brow like a lull before the storm that doesn't come

and imagine that you were once a glass-blower. You followed a great
river,

which furrowed the air of the workroom and gushed through a long
pipe,

so that you were heat and chill and leaves on the surface of skin, a
time

for music in a painful place, a lot of Mingus. Opportunities aren't
lacking:

I only have to step through the back gate, lured by the shallows of
days,

and I surrender, as wet as a stray dog, water running off me,
like that time when I forgot to pull the yeast from the scent of the loaf
and we walked all afternoon, dizzy, from one room to another,

bricklayers sweating in front of the ankles of a young nun, someone,
I don't remember his name right now, wore a red sock.

I nod knowingly: it is good to wash your hair and dry it
in the cold air, it is good to know who pays the bills.

FESTIVAL HALL

To a friend who does not wish to be named.

You dance charmingly only at a distance, like explanations
of moral guidelines you could live with
if you understood them in the first place, you lead long skirts
across the parquet, tender hands across the skin's surface,

apostle of hidden faith and fun. Many have praised you,
but not everyone. It is true, if it is new. Beautiful, if
it is yours. You are full of fruit, mostly watermelons. Despair
appears when you need to explain. As if you were to blame

because the world was poorly prepared for the coming flood,
the return of history and boots crushing glass?
This time there will be no foreign lords and leaders,
our own Judases were quick to say: stop singing and dancing.

Overtured garbage cans, stinking mattresses, dripping water,
crude curses, banned gatherings, imprisoned opposition.
Only at a distance do you measure the cracks between embracing
bodies,
the water level rises in the hall, in the world with no exit.

translated by Brian Henry

THE MIDDLE DISTANCE

Birdie, it's always Autumn
wherever you are
& What's-her-name is orbiting
our block with a face
made for winter. She circles
and loses form as the hours
turn to tallies on our wall.
The glowering wind has stuffed
the ash in its pockets
as I wait here patiently
for my first stroke.
Earlier, in the laundromat,
you said, "Yes, thumbtacked flyer,
I am ready for a career change.
I would love to learn
Aikido, the piano, & see
your handsome band in concert."
It seems they've named your storm
& the shadows, Birdie, continue
to bleed across the lawn. We all chew
on our vernaculars & blink
in stereo. The smoke, too,
becomes just more night
while the highway insists
& the windows will need to be closed.
The dog kills a sock. Don't ask
me too many questions tonight
but don't sweat into the sheets
without me either. The morning
will give us our fill. This town's
uninflected sadness has plenty
to learn & I've a twenty somewhere
I'm sure & no one else waiting
up for me. When the last ice thins
the whiskey & I nibble your lip,
let's assume there's something stupid
on the jukebox—something stupid
& perfect that spins & spins.

THE BUBBLE

The airtight interior
 wags in the turbulence as I flip through
some glossy tourism
 trying to forget my body's obedience

to gravity's law
 and its longing to fall, miles and miles
above western sky.

 Would fall faster, faster than leaflets

hauled from a hull
 declaring all young men should gather,
Jaffa center, May 1948.

 Nahida's father would stash

one in his briefcase his
 daughter resurrects for each PowerPoint
half a century, half
 a world away. In SkyMall, I spy

a catalogue of the latest
 newfangled gizmos—a video surveillance
analogue clock, motion-
 activated, 2 gigabyte USB cufflinks,

World's Largest Write-On
 Map Mural. "Three Days in Tel Aviv,"
glossy headlines read,
 where in "Jafo" you can haggle the gruff

proprietors of the local
 junk shop, full of ancient castoffs, dice
of life others placed
 their bets upon. The jet shimmies on

the jet stream, quaking
ice in the plastic cup. O Tel Aviv,
"The Bubble" in which we
don't live but live in nonetheless.

O White City, where
walls keep changing. "Sometimes we feel
like we're in the mouth,"
one artist says, "of a volcano, sometimes

we want to drink
and dance." The artist wants to translate
everything that's written
on the walls from the native language into

a language the tourist
can understand. I keep reading posts
from Nahida, the photos
housing the only version of her past

she will ever
get back. The plane jumps in the river
of turbulence, the one
we never will leap in, again and again,

as the unnameable
flyover cities burn their little lights
so far beneath us
it seems one breath could blow them out.

DREAM

I dreamt I walked through Jaffa
like teeth the buildings crowded a street
nude of sound & people / balcony
curtains waved to no one inside no
clothing on the drying lines no body
sitting on chairs propped against gaping
doors / when we curved behind
the smile / when we walked behind
the eyes we saw the walls now
no longer walls / rising dust / frames
without doors the blades of a fan
cutting nothing / the blazing white
city within / a city / ruined stage set
for a film / still / being shot

IN A STATE

riding rivers alluvial and urinal
down to the delta—
you came back to us / camoed
in kohl
then talked to yourself
in hit lyrics /
mumbling to q-tips / lip-synching to spoons:
so now meister-singer sing us—
in descant—sing up
the bog and the prairies
where po-faced dog farmers
live on subsidized mush:
sing up the cottonwoods filling the flat air / making it
white with weed seedlings—
bring back the days before
you took the dayjob
when you lived easy in the stink
of barn swabbing
and doctored the milk with a whole jug of bleach—
sing with your gray tongue
singalong with... wait... there now—
you hear them?
let's rejoin the hunters
where ancient hound dogs wail
over losing treed raccoons
to their sons

IN THE AFTERMATH

after him the bedroom sagged—
the wallpaper peeled like fruit;
after his canoe went past
wild rice wove the way back shut—
hiding his last way through;
acids made a shroud of gas
his face became cement...
after him the mallards whistled in
unafraid of his gray gun /
acids made a shroud ::
after him the gases raced like gnats—
mallards whistled in
his photo grayed like his remington
after him the prayers flew up
like shot into the middle sky
the children drew their prayers with pens;
wavy lines stood in
for the speed we couldn't see
his eyes lay heavily at rest
after him the stories stayed lost inside the north
after him his brother broke the seal
and lay there drinking last-man scotch
acids made a shroud
his face gray as the wildest rice
after him a transparent cloud of gas
followed for a while
after him / then trailed off

ROME

I

Rising way up the
rubble the swarms
of pigeons the dog
old her teats hanging down
the rutting
twitch of tongue the smell
still there
sharp between the stones.

II

The shadow
suddenly on the emptied
square. The ash
under the rust the
dried up drops
memory of
heavenly love a whirl
now nearer now distant. The wheel
turning in the rain.

III. *Thermal Baths of Caracalla*

The dust the
wind the
whirlpool in the portal of
the huge red
wall
and within the basins
dried up laughter
loud cheers lost in the vaults
the shit
of the birds and the embrace
later
belated in the car.

IV

And a thought
long
aloft and
not dispensed a shadow
undecided off in
that direction over the garden the roofs
seesawing and then the
gusts the abrupt
resolution of rain.

V

The stormy wind from the Palatine
coming on and then
the rain you don't need to buy
any more cake at Giolitti's just simply
jump down from the roof and
over the gusts quietly
and softly go forth
over the domes softly
and quietly forth
over the squares and when
the motorcycles down by
the Maddalena blow their
horns so loudly and when
that voice down by
the Pantheon keeps
shrieking so shrilly
o rapture
happiness of entrancement.

VI. *Thermal Baths of Caracalla 2*

And then the basin
emptied out the warm
the cold waters not even a dead
fish the attendant in a dark
suit and never bathed in the warm
never in the cold waters yet against
the rain a folded-
up newspaper.

VII

Fragrance from flowers
never smelled the breezes
thick with clouds and
run thicker the bones
out of the bandages
and washed
away by the muddy flood.

VIII. *Catacombs*

Under the walls
you say under the roots
we should look for the entrance
into the vault:
the niches down there the walls
dripping that's more
after our hearts.

The howling but the hooting
the echo of the walls
the vault down there and of the
niches and of the walls
dripping below the roots
what do you say?

IX. *Via Appia*

The grave
buried under
scrub the car
groans our breasts
ooze
slippery steps
silenced the
growth of shadows.

translated by Stuart Frieber

DIGESTION

Near to the discovery of my faulty
uterus, I worked with owls—
I studied their well formed

gullets and their pellets, uniform,
blue-gray. Palm sized bundles, derived
from the marriage of owls' large eyes

and rather puny guts.
Small prey swallowed whole
and large prey torn to bits,

creatures roughly plucked,
a few skinned and this: owls
have no crops, no stones

to mortar and pestle things up.
Digesting several hours
after dining at a favorite roost

the owl takes on a pained
expression—squinting eyes,
swollen face—and a cough

brings up remains
without intention, yet
no retched blood, no spit.

The pellet quietly drops to be perhaps
found, perhaps stolen
by a sufficient seeker. Inside

I found exquisite bones, cleaned
of all flesh. Arrested tags of fur,
cornrows of teeth, a few

organic stories to assemble,
which is why I stopped,
not to think so much about my recent loss,

her tender cheek
and truffled ear, her tidy, cold
though perfect compact form.

CURRENTLY SHOWING

The Indian tiger is eating my hand again.
Another paddle wheel knocks my mother
into the lake. And one about work,
the colleague with a black eye
showing videotapes of her preacher husband.
He's chasing her through a marsh and whipping her
with the toaster cord, and I'm struck
that she never cries out—it's such a surprise—so
fresh, something I haven't seen before,
except for the last part, when the man
becomes my husband. He's standing above my coffin
with his girlfriend—they're kicking dirt down the sandy hole.
I don't care. I'm distracted. I've given birth prematurely.
This time, for once, the tiny baby is breathing without help.
He is actually speaking in a small bright voice—*Everything
will be all right*. I've reached so many times into the box,
its darkness. There are times that you wake up for.
Faces come round on the chain.

MEDICAL MARVEL

The little engines of my organs go round and round.
Every object bleeps its approvals as I'm startled open
under manufactured light. Pull out the excesses,
loudnesses, the stones, lesser sums, the marriages,
and wild horses. Leave fragments of love, leaks,
an emptied oboe, all that personal human traffic.
I'll wear a heroic hat and small sky-colored booties
to entice the magic machines closer. We kiss,
then disappear into one another in so many ways.
You are a god and I'm lost in my usual thoughts.
Suddenly I'm between molecules, wanting to say:
that's no way to treat someone. But we hurt
each other unintentionally. We must continue
"as is." My tests tell me so. Afterwards,
the world is before and behind me and all
my affection passes through it. With my precise
smile and easy, new body I speak only when spoken to.

LUISA CASATI, FOUNTAIN DRESS (1921)

The absolute decay of everything

where I brim and pool it
where I leak and trickle it
in these icy skirts, these tinkling jewels
where I am molested by light, by refulgence,
I am smiling I am shaking free
I am a hive of brittle quiverings

ladders climb me in flummy spirals
lacy veils sprig and wetly flower
I tell the naiad no but she's coming
I tell the naiad no I want no root no source
I tell the naiad no no she is smiling
I have walked too far fair rot

fair riot I have gone too far
the silver feather losing shape
it is losing me taking shape
the silver feather in the rain
the silver feather wilting its light
unquilling the silver feather
bound for disaster
bound for welcoming

the absolute decay
of everything

that time
I was breaking up myself
and I was floored, I was bowled over
the apples of the sunlight
stacked in stone boxes
dropped flocks folded into sheets
and keeping me always doing something—

Save not your leakage graceful line
your holinesses leave me alone
the cats of you, the trails of you,
the swinging arms of you,
the merciless traces of you

the leaking drains
that foggy hand wringing itself.
the fallen gaze, the letter
in its tears. Mother: tell me broken
rain. Tell me stumbles.
Tell me: *can't stop*.

CONTRIBUTORS

LAURIE BLAUNER is the author of six books of poetry and three novels. She had a chapbook from Dancing Girl Press last year, and a new poetry book, *It Looks Worse Than I Am*, is out from What Books Press this fall.

MARIANNE BORUCH's most recent poetry collections are *Cadaver, Speak*, published this past spring, and *The Book of Hours*, winner of the 2013 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. She teaches in the MFA Program at Purdue University, and semi-regularly in the low-residency Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

MARIO CHARD, a former Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford University and winner of the 2012 "Discovery"/*Boston Review* Poetry Prize, currently writes and teaches in Utah.

MARK CONWAY's poems are from a new manuscript with the working title *fuse*.

JEAN-PAUL DE DADELSON (1913-1957) was born in Alsace, worked as a journalist for the BBC's French Service after World War II, and began writing poetry seriously in his 30s. He died of a brain tumor aged 44, and most of his work was published posthumously. His complete poems appeared in the Poésie Gallimard series in 2005. MARILYN HACKER is the author of twelve books of poems, an essay collection, and thirteen collections of translations from the French.

ALEŠ DEBELJAK has published eight books of poetry and twelve books of essays in Slovenian. *Without Anesthesia: New and Selected Poems* ap-

peared from Persea Books in 2010. BRIAN HENRY's most recent book of poetry is *Brother No One* (Salt Publishing, 2013).

FAY DILLOF works as a psychotherapist and is currently a student at Warren Wilson's MFA Program for Writers. She lives in Berkeley, California.

NANCY EIMERS' most recent poetry collection is *Oz*. She teaches creative writing at Western Michigan University.

JOHN GALLAHER's most recent book is *Your Father on the Train of Ghosts* (BOA, 2011), co-written with G. C. Waldrep. His next book, *In a Landscape*, is out this fall, also from BOA.

CHRISTOPHER HOWELL has published ten collections of poems, most recently *Gaze* (Milkweed Editions, 2012), and *Dreamless and Possible: Poems New and Selected* (University of Washington Press, 2010). Since 1996 he has taught at Eastern Washington University's Inland NW Center for Writers, in Spokane.

ANDREW JUAREZ recently pecked his way from the egg of Whitworth University. He is a fledgling of *FIELD* and poetry everywhere. He lives on Vashon Island, Washington, where he tries to harmonize together farming, literature, and an engagement.

RICHARD K. KENT teaches at Franklin & Marshall College. Recent poems have appeared in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *FIELD*, and *Tar River Poetry*.

SARAH MACLAY's newest release is **Music for the Black Room** (University of Tampa Press). She teaches creative writing and literature at Loyola Marymount University and lives in Venice, California, where she conducts workshops at Beyond Baroque.

GERALD MAJER is the author of **The Velvet Lounge** (Columbia University Press) and **Jazzed** (2002 AWP Poetry finalist). He teaches literature and creative writing at Stevenson University in Baltimore, Maryland.

DIANE K. MARTIN's work has appeared in *FIELD*, *New England Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Harvard Review*, *Narrative*, *Rhino*, and elsewhere. Her first collection, **Conjugated Visits**, was published in May 2010 by Dream House Press.

GAIL MAZUR'S six books of poetry include **Zeppo's First Wife: New and Selected Poems** (2005) and, most recently, **Figures in a Landscape** (2011). She is on the faculty of Emerson College's graduate writing program and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.

PHILIP METRES has written a number of books and chapbooks, most recently **A Concordance of Leaves** (Diode, 2013) and **abu ghraib arias** (Flying Guillotine, 2011), which won the 2012 Arab American Book Award. He is professor of English at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio. See www.philipmetres.com.

ELISABETH MURAWSKI is the author of **Zorba's Daughter**, which won the May Swenson Poetry Award, **Moon and Mercury**, and two chapbooks.

ANDREW NURKIN's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Be-*

liever, *The Massachusetts Review*, *North American Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Rattle*, and *Drunken Boat*. He lives in New Jersey, where he directs a public interest nonprofit and teaches writing in two New Jersey prisons.

D. NURKSE's most recent book is **A Night in Brooklyn** (Knopf, 2012).

CARL PHILLIPS' most recent book is **The Art of Daring: Risk, Restlessness, Imagination** (Graywolf, 2014). **Reconnaissance**, a book of poems, will be out from FSG in 2015.

One of Switzerland's major writers of the twentieth century, KUNO RAE-
BER's work has now been collected in a definitive, seven-volume edition (Nagel & Kimchel/I-V; Scaneg/VI-VII; edited by Christiane Wyrwa and Matthias Klein). **Be Quiet: Selected Poems of Kuno Raeber** will appear in 2014 from Tiger Bark Press in translations by STUART FRIEBERT.

LLOYD SCHWARTZ is the Troy Professor of English and teaches in the MFA Program at UMass Boston. His recent publications include the Library of America edition of Elizabeth Bishop and **Music In—and On—the Air**, a collection of his reviews for NPR's Fresh Air. He was awarded the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism.

BJ SOLOY lives in Missoula, Montana, with Julie Rouse, Solomon Longfellow, and FUBAR the cat. He's just getting ready for dinner and has poems published or forthcoming in *New American Writing*, *Guernica*, *Colorado Review*, *Court Green*, *CutBank*, and *DIAGRAM*, among others.

MARY JO THOMPSON's poems appear or are forthcoming in **Best American**

Poetry 2011, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Rhino*, *Indiana Review*, and *Carolina Quarterly*. She teaches art education at St. Mary's University in Minneapolis.

ALPAY ULKU's first book, **Meteorology** (BOA Editions) was selected as a "Notable Debut" by the Academy of American Poets Book Club. His poems appear in journals such as *APR*, *AGNI*, *Boulevard*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Poetry Northwest*. His website is www.alpayulku.com.

JUDITA VAIČIŪNAITĖ (1937-2001) was one of Lithuania's leading poets of

the second half of the twentieth century. Her translator, RIMAS UZGIRIS, is a recipient of a Fulbright Scholar Grant and an NEA Literature Translation Fellowship, and teaches literature and creative writing at Vilnius University.

NANCE VAN WINCKEL's sixth book, **Pacific Walkers**, was published by University of Washington Press last fall.

MARTHA ZWEIG's poetry collections include **Monkey Lightning** (Tupelo, 2010), and **What Kind** (2003) and **Vinegar Bone** (1999), both from Wesleyan.

FRIENDS OF OBERLIN COLLEGE PRESS

As of July 15, 2014

FIELD and the other publishing efforts of Oberlin College Press receive financial support from the Friends of Oberlin College Press. In a time of increasingly scarce resources, we are particularly grateful to these individuals for their continuing support of our mission. We invite others to join the Press in our efforts on behalf of contemporary poetry. Friends at the Supporter level receive a free subscription to FIELD. Friends at the Sponsor, Patron, and Benefactor levels receive copies of all our new publications. Contributions are tax-deductible to the full extent allowable by law. To learn more about joining the Friends, please contact our Managing Editor, Marco Wilkinson.

Benefactors and Patrons: Anonymous, Ray Amorosi, Tracy Chevalier, Marvin Krislov and Amy Sheon, Anne Marie Macari, Georgia L. Newman, Nina Nyhart, Wes Sanders, Diane Vreuls and Stuart Frieber, David Walker, David Young

Sponsors: Edward Derby and Caitlin Scott, Barbara Florini, Dennis Hinrichsen, Dore Kiesselbach and Karin Ciano, Thomas Lux, Tom and Mary Van Nortwick

Supporters: Anonymous, William Aarnes, Ray and Alice Andrews, Linda Bierds, Andrew S. Brenneman, Peter Buchman and Jolene Hjerleid, Henry Carlile, Michael Chitwood, Steven D. Culberson, Ruth Dinerman, Angie Estes, Stephen J. Farkas, Jr., Carol Ganzel, Paul C. and Susan E. Giannelli, John Hobbs, Ben Jones and Tanya Rosen-Jones, Richard and Shu-hua Kent, David Kertis, Martha Moody, Mark Neely and Jill Christman, Gert Niers, Kurt Olsson, Carl Peterson, Carl Phillips, Lynn Powell, Gretchen Primack, Kevin Prufer and Mary Hallab, Peter Schmidt and Lisa Aaron, Dennis and Loretta Schmitz, Elaine H. Scott, Charles Wright

\$1000 and more: **Benefactor**

\$500-\$999: **Patron**

\$250-\$499: **Sponsor**

\$100-\$249: **Supporter**

Our appreciation also to the following donors: Rebecca Calvo, Alena M. Jones, Sarah Maclay, Rebecca Newman, Mary Ann Samyn, Amy Schroeder, Linda Slocum, Etta Ruth Weigl, and Mimi White.

The Press also receives essential operating support from Oberlin College.

\$800

ISSN: 0015-0657

MARCHESA LUISA CASATI, WEARING
FOUNTAIN COSTUME BY PAUL POIRET (c. 1920)

