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POETRY

FEATURING

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POEMS

Kant. Last Days

It is truly no evidence of a great soul
— O nature —
and if you aren't magnanimous
it may be you don't exist at all

Could you really not treat him to a sudden death
like a candle guttering
like a wig slipping off
like a ring's short trip on a smooth tabletop
spinning and turning
at last standing still like a dead
beetle
Why these cruel games
with an old man
loss of memory
dull awakenings
nocturnal terror
wasn't it he who said
"beware of bad dreams"
he who has a gray glacier on his head
a volcano where a pocket-watch should be

It is in terrible taste
to condemn a man
learning the trade of apparitions
suddenly to become
a ghost

The Last Attack. To Klaus

Permit me to open by expressing joy and wonder
that we're marching at the head of our companies
in different uniforms under a different command
but with a single aim — to survive

You say to me — look here we should probably let
these boys go home to their Margot to their Kasia
war is beautiful only in parades
but apart from that as we know — mud and blood
and rats

As you speak comes an avalanche of artillery fire
it's that bastard Parkinson who is taking so long
he caught up with us at last when we took a walk
on an irregular route our collars loose at the chin
our hands in our pockets we were on leave already
when Parkinson suddenly reminded us that it was
not the end yet that this blasted war isn't over yet

Mr Cogito and the Little Creature

It's unclear whether anyone knows its personal zoological name, so small is it, so low, near the very bottom, beyond the naked eye. It is something that wavers between existence and absence, insignificant, fleeting as a scrap of print, a particle, the paring of a diacritical mark, the chip of a comma, a speck of lead from the printer's cabinet.

I open my winter reading and there it is crouching down on the page, a Very Little Creature, motionless at first, but soon it is off on its way, sniffing between the lines, and then it lurches ahead like a horse from the stable, forward at the speed of the Very Little Creature's light (the creature is blind).

This season (it may be the last season of my life) — everything was as before, the Very Little Creature amused me and warmed my black heart, when one day I decided to give the book to friends in London. I made a parcel of it and sent it off. With the Creature inside.

What does it do during the long sea voyage? It has plenty to read; it doesn't eat very much; but what does it think of me, its old companion who proved so treacherous?

Stuck in the Mind

in common parlance
stuck in the mind
means a fixation
on a single unmoving object

stuck in the mind
can be represented
by a powerful peasant
in a furry winter coat
appearing in the midst
of objects all too mobile
he steams like a horse
has a thick oaken eye
— easy to have something
stick in the mind all it takes
is a moment of inattention
but to get it out is harder
another thing altogether
big inept stuck-in-the-mind
simply stands cap in hand
panting like a stable of studs
— not clear how to address it
"Sir" would be too much
"*beat it Jack*" — would be
too familiar
so stuck means stuck
stocky and apathetic
a medium quake might help
say 4.6 on the Richter scale
but no way glorious weather
he's like a rock
a general sense of fatal
paralysis
stuck in the mind
a whale of a guy

The Cat Sat on the Mat. In Defense of Illiteracy

From the fact that he managed
to learn the cat sat on the mat
Mr Cogito has drawn
some exaggerated conclusions

does the ability thus acquired
authorize him to pass sentence
to found schools of good taste
opine on projects for mankind's
reconstruction
after the example of the comical
August Comte

would it not be better
to abandon
that cheap
knowledge
and to stick
with the wisdom
of old mountain folk
devoid of real
progress

it would mean
rising unemployment
a large number of facial openings
without a job
the lucid knowledge
that all philosophy
is superfluous
and even harmful

Mr Cogito. A Calligraphy Lesson

Once in his lifetime
Mr Cogito attained
the height of mastery

in the first grade
of Saint Anthony's
elementary school
seventy years ago
in Lwów

the calligraphy competition
Mr Cogito broke the record

he wrote the most beautiful
letter *b*

he won Petrarchan laurels
with the letter *b*

history's storm
sadly devoured
the masterpiece

destroyed
for good
the soaring tower
Renaissance belly
of the *b*

the grand competition
took place under the eye
of the Polish teacher
(her passport gave
the name Bombowa)

the nursemaid
of Cogito's mind

history's whirlwind
wholly devoured
the soaring tower
Renaissance belly
of the *b*

and in chronic distraction
Bombowa herself as well
she slipped into mythology
and since then she lives
and reigns
over Mr Cogito
and the orphaned letter
b

Portrait of the Fin de Siècle

Ravaged by drugs stifled by a mantle of fumes
the supernova smolders burned to a fiery star
of three evenings — of chaos desire and torment
steps onto the trampoline begins all over again

dwarf of our time star of evenings long extinct
you goat-footed artist mimicking the demiurge
apocalyptic funfair O prince of somnambulists
hide your loathsome face

while there's time call the Lamb cleansing waters
let the true star ascend and Mozart's *Lacrimoso*
call the true star the realm of the hundred leaves
let the Epiphany be fulfilled the New Page open

Translations from the Polish by Alissa **Valles**

RHODA JANZEN

Ormesby Psalter

East Anglian School, c. 1310

The psalter invites us to consider
a cat and a rat in relationship
to an arched hole, which we
shall call Circumstance. Out of

Circumstance walks the splendid
rat, who is larger than he ought
to be, and who affects an expression
of dapper cheer. We shall call him

Privilege. Apparently Privilege has
not noticed the cat, who crouches
a mere six inches from Circumstance,
and who will undoubtedly pin

Privilege's back with one swift
swipe, a torture we can all nod at.
The cat, however, has averted
its gaze upward, possibly to heaven.

Perhaps it is thanking the Almighty
for the miraculous provision of a rat
just when Privilege becomes crucial
for sustenance or sport. The cat

we shall call Myself. Is it not
too bad that the psalter artist
abandoned Myself in this attitude
of prayerful expectation? We all

would have enjoyed seeing clumps of
Privilege strewn about Circumstance,
Myself curled in sleepy ennui,
or cleaning a practical paw.

Whisk

Here is some itchy
sumac, a thick oak,
a ladder, a birdhouse,
a tarp with a spider.

Here is a man atop
the ladder, calling
the birdhouse a cunt.
Here is his wife,

folding the tarp.
She finds the spider
and shrieks in circles.
The man calls, for

the love of christ
what now. She yells,
a spider, dead but big.
This man does not see

how a dead spider
presents a problem.
She says, that is
theoretically correct.

She gets the whisk
broom and whisks.
It's true, there is no
problem. The day

is fine. The cunt
will eventually
attach to the oak.
More spiders will

die or be dead.
The sumac will
spread according
to season, no problem.

Strongly Scented Sonnet

Just kissing the skin, inside the chemise,
she tucked a modest apple in the nest
of hair beneath her arm, a scent like cheese
extruding musky fragrances when pressed.
And for two months the apple crabbed and freaked
the hollow armpit, ripening, the smell
about to hatch, a chicklet plump and beaked
that taps suggestively against its shell.
She wrapped and sent it to her fiancé,
who amorously kept it by his bed,
inhaling it — superb! — until the day
when he and its contributor should wed.

Dear sir, do you detect the perfume of
what I have used as substitute for love?

CARL DENNIS

Birthday

Now that the time remaining is insubstantial,
I need to review my history while asking
What exactly it suggests I've lived for,
What pleasures or duties, what moods
Of brief elation or extended calm.

To expect a meaning deeper than that,
To believe in a purpose beyond my own
Furthered by me all along without my knowing,
Is to warm myself at a fire painted on canvas.

If I want the company of the non-existent,
I'm better off with the crowd of shadows who lost
Their only chance to escape the darkness
On the night I happened to be conceived.

I wonder how many of them would have felt more lucky
With the family allotted me than I did, more pleased
With the neighborhood. So many chances for them
To go out and investigate, in streets that often bored me,
Rumors that the beautiful had been sighted locally.

The sassafras tree in the lot behind the shoe store
Might have been mentioned by some,
Or the straight-backed, white-haired woman
Waiting for the bus in the rain at Main and Biddle.

Even the bowl of cherries she left in her kitchen
Is worth their regard, a bowl they might have painted
In a rush of sympathy for objects small and frail,
Insubstantial and insignificant, or a rush of awe
At how ready the cherries and the bowl appear
To give themselves to the light that's left them,
With nothing held in reserve for a better day.

MEDBH McGUCKIAN

Notice

Architectural inscription in the site,
Centered on, emphasized by, the vegetation
(Solemnity), or drowned in vegetation
(Integration, disappearance, discretion);
A command of volumes: the horizontal (rest),
The vertical (resurrection), a combination
Of both (opposition, reflex action).

People selected for transport must leave their homes
In complete order. One piece of luggage
Weighing sixty kilograms, and hand baggage
Of a maximum of ten kilograms, will be allowed
Per person. The remaining effects must be left
Where they are in the home e.g. curtains,
Carpets, table lamps, wall mirrors, wash basins,
Pieces of furniture, table cloths, two towels,
And on the beds mattress, bedlinen,
And at least one pillow and bedcover,
All freshly made up.
Luggage must not be wrapped in carpets
Or coverlets. If on inspection
It is observed that these instructions
Have not been obeyed, the person concerned
Will not be taken on the transport
But will be sent to the interior to work.

Horizontal lines (stability), vertical lines,
(Spiritual longing), oblique lines (sadness).
A combination of all these (opposites).
Naturalness of the materials: stone
(Strength, durability), concrete (flexibility,
Resistance) brick (color, cleanliness),
Wood (warmth, ease of use).

The military has requested me to make it known
That under no circumstances may food supplies
Be assembled among the local inhabitants
In order to deliver them to the prisoners of war.
Those who violate this command and nevertheless
Try to circumvent this blockade
To allow something to come to the prisoners
Place themselves in danger of being shot.
Special individual cases, contributions of near
Relatives, will be negotiated through the commander.
I request you accordingly to make every effort
To stop possible collection and to explain
To the local inhabitants in suitable terms
About the facts of the matter — by order, signed,
The President of the Government, May 1945.

A sense of proportion in the modeling of forms;
Vigor and sobriety (perenniality), refinement
Without affection (spirituality); finally, openness:
Narrow openings (seclusion, intimacy),
Wide openings (admittance, communion).

The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter

Lordship is the same activity
Whether performed by lord or lady.
Or a lord who happens to be a lady,
All the source and all the faults.

A woman steadfast in looking is a callot,
And any woman in the wrong place
Or outside of her proper location
Is, by definition, a foolish woman.

The harlot is talkative and wandering
By the way, not bearing to be quiet,
Not able to abide still at home,
Now abroad, now in the streets,

Now lying in wait near the corners,
Her hair straying out of its wimple.
The collar of her shift and robe
Pressed one upon the other.

She goes to the green to see to her geese,
And trips to wrestling matches and taverns.
The said Margery left her home
In the parish of Bishopshill,

And went to a house, the which
The witness does not remember,
And stayed there from noon
Of that day until the darkness of night.

But a whip made of raw hippopotamus
Hide, trimmed like a corkscrew,
And anon the creature was stabled
In her wits as well as ever she was biforn,

And prayed her husband as so soon
As he came to her that she might have
The keys to her buttery
To take her meat and drink.

He should never have my good will
For to make my sister for to sell
Candle and mustard in Framlyngham,
Or fill her shopping list with crossbows,

Almonds, sugar and cloth.
The captainess, the vowess,
Must use herself to work readily
As other gentilwomen doon,

In the innermost part of her house,
In a great chamber far from the road.
So love your windows as little as you can,
For we be, either of us, weary of other.

H.L. HIX

If a Babylonian astronomical diary in cuneiform on a clay tablet records the observation of Halley's Comet on 22–28 September of 164 BCE, then

why not say *cluster of leaves still clinging*
to the tip of one branch (the others bare
that bloomed crimson last week) slowly turning
red to brown, rather than name the lover
who is not here? Why not *bored boy sitting*
on his front steps, sun going down over
the duplex across the street, white siding
letting direct sun send it shades whiter?
Why not savor this porch, call this warm day
girl measuring her front yard, heel to toe,
obsolete antenna on a chimney,
dry leaves in drifts beneath a parked Volvo,
trees trimmed at the top? Why not love the way
even her absence shines, and rustles so?

If the maple in the neighbor's yard needs trimming, ***its branches*** *having grown against the slant of his roof, then*

birds first of all: copper-feathered pheasant
collared white, with one curled plume for a crest;
a black-trimmed stork's arced wings and awkward flight;
one sparrow with gold cheeks and a striped breast.
My task today in place of purpose: list
what the world offers me when it withholds
you. Bushes bare of leaves but still aburst
with red berries. Green fields freckled by moles.
One woman standing on a stool, washing
windows; one with a poodle the exact
color of her own hair; two men watching
out a window; one woman shaking out
a rug; a small boy, crying, not waving
at the train so much as reaching for it.

HARRY CLIFTON

Oweniny, Upper Reaches

1

The sheepdogs flash, close in and disappear
In the rearview mirror. No, there is nothing here —

Or so they tell you, in the incestuous fug
Of Bellacorrick bar — from Nephin Beg

To the Belderg fields. Nothing for miles and miles.
So switch your engine off, be lost for a while,

Tune in to the skylark's high, unearthly stations,
Teach yourself humility and patience

That a day might pass, beneath Atlantic skies
And apperceptive light, through half-closed eyes —

The bog-cotton infinite, shimmering like a sea,
The gulls blown in on the wind, off Blacksod Bay,

The power station shut, the stock derailed
On rusty tracks. The obsolete, epic scale.

2

The mountain ash is lonely for the mountain.
Where there is no one, let yourself be haunted.

Father, who tapped the Atacama wells,
Alone at twelve thousand feet, with fossilized shells —

You yourself in the Niger, decades later
Drunk on vastness, solitude, one nude bather —

Nearer to home, the unsung engineer
Of Bellacorrick, who drank himself senseless out here—

Crowding in, the alcoholic ghosts,
Home to original homelessness, glad to be lost,

To find the empty space on the Mayo map,
To park the car in a blind spot, or a gap

In knowledge — exiled souls, self-haunted,
Mountain ash trees, lonely for the mountain.

3

Only so far, they tell you. Here, the track
Fades out, and the river is a switchback

Of shallows, glides, and salmon spawning beds
To the back of beyond. Pure watershed—

The arguments, the human cries torn off
In a crosswind, the tree grown through the roof

Of an abandoned house, where the cattle winter.
Nobody went through the door, they broke and entered—

Terrible years... And now, sweet smells of hay
On the other side of suffering, after a wet May

In a car already rusted, the tires all blown,
Coming, on shattered fragments, into your own,

Crashed out, in the wreck of enterprise,
Wondering is it here the waters rise.

THEODORE WOROZBYT

From *Aphorisms I–XV*

I

The most devout long to breathe the dirt's scent once more.

The cat runs faster at night; he sees you better.

Only the ordinary is reprehensible, but praise disgusts the just.

Wine is not drunk enough.

Be bitter but only about the Truth.

With a friend, poison is sweet; sweetness, with an enemy, poisons.

The colder things are, the slower, unless they are flowers.

You will never know the river wets your hair.

What is sweetness, that bees do not remember honey?

Work is wings.

II

If you would judge, then be a Judge.

If you would be judged, be just.

The color of a stone is darker in water.

To be loved, love no one.

The catacombs are not the end. Past them lies a wall.

I am an enemy to what I have forgotten.

If a bell rings, then a bell has been moved from its sleep.

Change admits error, but will prove correct in its assumptions.

Every antipole is itself. Every identity is another.

As I walked along the river, an old man carried a walking stick on his shoulder, as a soldier will carry a rifle. When we passed I greeted him, but he could not bring himself to answer, though I too am an old man, taking pains as I go.

ELEANOR WILNER

"Wreck" and "rise above"

Because of the first, the fear of wreck,
which they taught us to fear (though we learned
at once, and easily),
because of the wreck
that was expected (and metal given velocity
and heft to assure it) —
we became adepts in
rise above: how many versions: the church
steeple that took the eye straight up to
heaven (though it seemed snagged on
the cross-beam of that cross, torn blue
at the top, where sense leaked out). And
rise above, transcendence, on that higher
plane, the vertical direction of virtue (a bony
finger pointing up to where matter dissolves
into distaste for it);
the space program, expensive
tons of rocket (soon to be debris) fired off
the planet's crust at anything out there, pocked
moon, red rocky Mars, *ever the upward*
urge, carved in the marble arch of the old library
door under which generations passed,
hoping to rise above it all —

like the woman the magician levitates
over the table, her body floating an unlikely
inch or two above the velvet-draped plateau ...
watch her hovering, weightless,
the crowd staring
in wonder, the trick of the thing still hidden,
and the magician doing something now
with his hands, a flurry of brilliant
silk in the air, as she floats
in the endlessness of art,
the magician

still waving his scarves, the air a bright
shatter of wings, doves from a hat,
our disbelief suspended,
while below, the wrecks accumulate:
scrap yard, broken concrete slabs, and
all those bodies not exempt from gravity,
beneath our notice as we ride
above it all, like froth on a wave
that will be water falling by the ton,
soon, when the tide turns.

Thinking About Unamuno's San Manuel Bueno, Mártir

Joined by Emily Dickinson, Muriel Rukeyser, and Theodore Roethke

San Manuel the priest who kept
his poor parish in the faith
burnished their bright hope of heaven
(hope is a thing with feathers)

it is best not to think these days
about what what the newspapers report so reasonably
(I lived in the first century of world wars,
most days I was more or less insane)
today's weather an endless rain of feathers

when the passenger pigeon now extinct
had not yet been converted
to fashion slaughtered its plumage plucked
for the elegant hats of America's women
(those catlike immaculate
creatures for whom the world works)
when the migrating flocks still passed
overhead a billion strong the farmers said
bird lime turned the woods white
the sky was dark for a week

And San Manuel? Late in the story we learn
he did not believe in the hope
he kept alive believing as he did
(like his author) in the sustaining power
of fiction

History as Crescent Moon

The horns
of a bull
who was placed
before a mirror at the beginning
of human time;
in his fury
at the challenge of his double,
he has, from
that time to this,
been throwing himself against
the mirror, until
by now it is
shivered into millions of pieces—
here an eye, there
a hoof or a tuft
of hair; here a small wet shard made
entirely of tears.
And up there, below the spilt milk of
the stars, one
silver splinter—
parenthesis at the close of a long sentence,
new crescent,
beside it, red
asterisk of
Mars

ATSURO RILEY

The Roses

The house with the nick- and snigger-name *Snort and Grunt.* Shunned trailer-house, (pocked) scorn-brunt. Side-indented, thorn-bined, boondocked in a hollow.

In a green-holler clamber-mire of itch-moss and bramble. Tremblescent ditch-jellies, globberous spawn-floss. Drupes of (dapple-clinkling) bottle-glass in trees.

Strangs them old oaks of his with NEHI *and liquor-pints. Magnesia!* Yard-splayed magnolia-blooms, carved of tractor-tire. Milk-painted (fangle-plaited) barbwire-scapes and -vines.

And -fronds. A palm-shape gold with birds at the end of the yard. Elaborated branches, branching. What is fixing to be a rose-bush caning and twining. Is leaves.

JACQUES RÉDA

Return from the Ball

The old fathers in their stiff habits
Also passed the door one summer evening,
And for a honeybee's age,
The little immortal flame
Danced in their eyes.
Late that night, back from the ball,
They peed in the canal,
Against the cemetery wall,
And out of the surrounding silence powerful as a mountain,
The silk deluge descended from the poplars.
Many of the dead were already working underground,
But Sunday and even forgetting appeased them,
And the upside-down harrow at the start of the field gleamed,
Holding hay mixed with stars between its teeth.
Halfway up the hill, they shouted:
For nothing, for the pleasure of hearing
Their voices disappear into the depths of the barns, the granaries
Filled with wheat as billowy as the bodies of women,
And then into the noise always underway beneath the night.

Translated from the French by Andrew Shields

NANCE VAN WINCKEL

Nest

We have a rental car, and thank you, no
we won't get out. We can see the animals
quite well from here.
                We cinch up the lapbelts.
No way we'd turn back on a quarter tank.

        I have you and you have me,
                and we have, suddenly,
                        a slowed-down moment.

What *was* that waterfall doing?
        Oh, just exploding
                its veil of ice.

* * *

Cruise control, lipstick — after what'll need to be
a last kiss, we drive into the very nexus
of the nest: scrappy twigs, string.
                And what?! — is that a claw?
Do we just drive *on*?
        Drive *through*?

* * *

Pump and pay; sign and leave.
There was a day for the lake
        and we could go around,
                spy the rich folks'
                        ballcaps. We could smell
                                our brethren. Never be
                                        without the smell.

Coupon. Moon-pull.
Cash back and the needle north.

E for East. We've gone around.
Some trip. This traveling toward, this
never but nearly approaching
whatever the barely alive
had lived this long to see.

TODD HEARON

After the President's Speech You Dream of Corpses

Those bodies that last night
stormed the bosses in your brain
— some picket-line or strike —
and were beaten down
so brutally, batoned
corpses piled the streets,
men and women, naked,
massive, Blakean physiques:
where are they now?
Anonymous,
faceless in the mass
grave your mind's become
at morning after dream.
So you are the mirror
of your times: a century
rots forgotten, storyless
in you. Sepulcher, articulate
and ambulating tomb. Packed
charnel house. Dead to the very eyes.

Where will you be that morning when they rise?

COMMENT

Does Poetry Have a Social Function?

STEPHEN BURT:

What is the social function of poetry? Well, what is the social function of ER nursing? Of plumbing and carpentry? Whatever you think of the folks who fix your pipes, you know roughly what they get paid to do, and why the people who pay them value their services. An individual poet may think she knows such things about poetry, but put two or more poets (let alone critics) in a room, and their so-called knowledge may reveal itself as clashing opinions or axioms — even though "social," as the antithesis of "individual," implies some ground of agreement, something shared. (One reason we keep seeking a "social function" despite this lack of agreement: those of us who make a living through poetry — by teaching other people how to write more of it, or by writing about it — often feel a bit guilty for getting paid.)

Compared to the writing of poetry, few other human activities take place so widely, at least in America, absent even a tacit consensus as to why we do them, what good they do, what function they serve. When you read a lot of contemporary poetry, you discover that the presumed or stated, implicit or explicit, social function of poetry (if any) varies wildly with the poet. Rae Armantrout's poetry, for example, seeks — at times, it seems to despair of finding — a social function we might identify as the inculcation of skeptical thinking. That's a social function in the sense of "social good," even of "social policy." James Merrill's poetry has a social function in the sense of "social event": it tries to produce — often, in the face of mortality, or dejection, or bodily ills — a sense that the poet has friends who get his jokes, who share his sense of things, who respond in kind. Late Merrill — the Merrill of "Self-Portrait in Tyvek Windbreaker" — wonders whether his poetry might resound beyond that social group. Both poets want to say something about a society, and both poets want to do something we might call "social" — to imagine, and to cause, some sense of relations that extend beyond one-on-one intimacy — but they differ in what they want to do, and in why. To speak usefully about the social function of poetry, we need to decide what — or whose — poetry we intend.

DAISY FRIED:

People who talk about poetry's social utility often concentrate on content. They think, perhaps, that poetry Tells the Truth, or Provides Solace. These notions make me queasy, and are treason to poetry. If you're crawling to poems on your hands and knees, as I once heard a famous poet remark — in my view, you're not crawling to poetry. Prozac would probably work better.

Poetry's social function comes not from what it means but from what it is. Its utility is to shake us out of our standard American buy-stuff-and-watch-TV half life. A poem's content matters very little to that utility.

I read the phrase "social function" particularly in terms of politics. Plenty of things need to happen in this country, like impeaching George Bush, nationalizing health care, legalizing same-sex civil union, and bringing the troops home now. Poetry can make none of these happen. Anne Winters's "The Mill-Race," about office workers in lower Manhattan, contains virtuoso description of the urban scene: workers, weather, light, limos of the bosses, buses of the employees. Though its subject matter and politics are both clear and attractive, content has very little to do with why the poem is extraordinary.

Is it a useful poem? I like political poetry; it acknowledges that politics are part of life. Certainly at this historical moment, many of us are hungry for poems that look outward, not just into the self or into what seems like another kind of narcissism, a turning away via the knee-jerk (therefore empty) "avant garde" linguistic gesture. America's crimes may be forcing poets back into the world. It's not as though it's optional. Eventually it becomes political necessity.

But politically-alert poetry is no more intrinsically *useful* than any other poetry. The only kind of poetry that *doesn't* have social function is that which tells us how to think about X, Y, or Z, or tells us to buck up, or that the world is a wonderful place. The kind of poetry written to make us *feel better,* for example, after 9/11, is pro-establishment falsification, for it lets us pull the comforter back over our heads and go on sleeping.

For the record, I never feel guilty getting paid, ever.

MAJOR JACKSON:

The function of poetry is that it does not have any function beyond its own construction and being-in-the-world. For this reason, poetry

makes everything (and, yes, nothing) happen, especially in a consumer society prone to assessing and dispensing value to everything from lap dances to teachers' salaries. Whether as a form of witness, as a medium which dignifies individual speech and thought, as a repository of our cumulative experiences, or as a space where we "purify" language, poetry, like all imaginative creations, divines the human enterprise. This is poetry's social value.

I hope this does not sound like an exercise in ambiguities. If so, let me add another: one of poetry's chief aims is to illumine the walls of mystery, the inscrutable, the unsayable. I think poetry ought to be taught not as an engine of meaning but as an opportunity to learn to live in doubt and uncertainty, as a means of *claiming* indeterminancy. Our species is deeply defined by its great surges of reason, but I think it high time we return to elemental awe and wonder. Such a position is necessary to our communal health.

I try to teach my students the full magnitude of what can happen during the reading of a poem. The readerly self, if the music and strategies of the poem are a success, fades away to assume the speaker's identity, or the poem's psychic position. Once a reader has fully internalized the poem's machinations, she collects a chorus within her and is transformed. This ritual generates empathy and widens our humanity. These might seem like grand dreams, but it is just such a belief in the power of poetry that spurs my pen to action, whether I am getting paid or not.

EMILY WARN:

Here is a guess at Will Shortz's crossword clue for your collective answer to our question: "A six-letter word for an art form with no public use other than the one each artist defines. You can separate its content from its uses, which are to shake people from their consumer stupor and usher them into indeterminate mystery."

Plato need not have stewed about poets, you seem to be saying. They have banished *themselves* from the republic, having abdicated their role as loud-mouth rousers of weeping and gnashing. They won't discombobulate the young, especially young soldiers, whom Plato warned off poetry lest it remind them of their dirty little fear of death. Now it is the poets who soldier on; they have, after all, paying jobs to perform, not for the republic, but for the realm of the personal which has subsumed it.

Does the social function of poetry vary so wildly that we cannot generalize about it? What can be commonly said about a skeptic who turns for clarity to a Rae Armantrout poem, a plumber who searches on Yahoo for a wedding toast, a harried person who seeks in poetry refuge from a grueling job, or a Guantanamo prisoner who, denied pen and paper, uses pebbles to scratch poems on Styrofoam cups?

I'll hazard an answer. Poetry binds solitudes. It enacts a central human paradox: we exist as singular selves, yet can only know them through our relations. A poem creates a presence that is so physically, emotionally, and intellectually charged that we encounter ourselves in our response to it. The encounter, which occurs in language, preserves and enlarges our solitude and points out our connections. Pyrotechnic poets, such as Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and Adrienne Rich, set a charge that reverberates among multitudes, changing the shape of our social relations and, inescapably, our individual and collective consciousness.

"The Mill-Race" by Anne Winters serves as proof text. How can its content not matter? How can one not relate to the drained faces of the women office workers on an evening bus, to their scant hope that, despite their misspent, dwindling hours in the service of Labor, they have preserved a shred of self?

> It won't take us
> altogether, we say, the mill-race — it won't churn us up altogether.
> We'll keep
> a glib stretch of leisure water, like our self's self — to reflect the sky.
> But we won't (says the bus rider now to herself). Nothing's
> left over really, from labor. They've taken it all for the mill-race.

Will this poem end drudgery? No. Does it disclose the pathos of other human beings and the source of their suffering? Yes. Is it this capacity that will help us, better than ammo or dollars, find a way through these harrowing times? Absolutely.

STEPHEN BURT:

I hope I share Emily Warn's passionate optimism about the scope of our art form, but I either fail to understand, or cannot believe, her argument. Is there some function we should call "social," in some ordinary meaning of that term, which all good poems, and only poems

(no non-poems: no sculptures, for example) attain? Emily says yes: "poetry binds solitudes," creating "a presence" in whose contemplation we "encounter ourselves" alongside other readers and writers.

Certainly many poems — one might say all good poems — have this effect. So do many objects and events which are not poems. Would it be nonsensical to say that by building houses with Habitat for Humanity, through the hard work of hammer and nail, on the one hand, and the contemplation of poverty, on the other, I might encounter and come to know both my society and myself? What about reading my great-grandmother's love letters, reading Studs Terkel's oral histories, contemplating Brancusi's "Bird in Flight"? We are more likely to experience great visual art in the presence of others (in museums); we might say such experience connects us more evidently than can the silent reading of verse whose authors we have never met.

Ah, but poetry binds our solitudes, creating this self-encounter which becomes paradoxically social, *through language alone*. Our current — our late-Romantic — understanding of poetry (by which all poems are really or fundamentally *lyric*) posits this binding-together through language alone as poetry's chief goal: poetry becomes that way of using language in which that goal (rather than, say, exposition or persuasion) takes center stage.

If that is what Emily means, I accept her claim, with two demurrers. First, it is a historically specific understanding, one which describes many superb poems, but leaves out many — to say the least — wonderfully memorable uses of verse (e.g. Milton's sonnet against the Long Parliament). Second, hers appears to be a sense of "social" by which "social" denotes any experience or quality shared among two or more people, friends or strangers, living or dead. Otherwise a poem could not bind — as many poems do bind — solitudes and make connections among readers who do not live in the same society, nor even in the same century. If we use any more conventional, more restrictive senses for "social" — for example, "having to do with a particular society taken as a whole," or even "having to do with people in large groups" — then there is no social function which all good poems have.

DAISY FRIED:

How about a moratorium on using plumbers and other "common" people as mythical readers of poetry? Of course Ms. Hardworking

Roto-Rooter reads poetry, at least casually, like anyone who reads at all. I'm only sorry more poets don't know how to fix toilets, myself included. It's easy to talk about some "them" for whom poetry is useful. "Them" seldom includes "us."

Emily Warn seems to argue that content supplies poems' utility. Content matters — poetry is far more than a formal game — but does not supply utility. Quality does. "The Mill-Race" is good and useful because it presents in extraordinary language an aspect of the human condition, not some false solution having to do with feel-good "relat(ing) to drained faces." Emily should reread the very lines she quotes if she thinks this poem is about workers "preserv(ing) a shred of self." The poet is there on the bus, *we* are there, we are *all* in the mill-race.

I've never found an explanation for why poetry, apparently alone among the art forms, is asked to do more than be itself. Some people devote their lives to Art Song. They take it quite seriously and expect a small audience, without worrying about whether their obsession is useful or that their audience is small. No one says, "Hey lyric soprano, make me feel better, hey basso profundo, help me understand societal problems."

But poetry's the High Art which is also democratic: inexpensive, portable, reproducible, quickly consumed (except for epic and very difficult poetry), requiring only literacy to participate. So maybe it's good that poetry carries this extra burden, even if it means that the idea of poetry is more necessary to people than individual poems, and that people tend not to pay attention to what's happening on the page. But this doesn't explain why the superfluous demands are often made by educated poetry experts. I doubt most poets, good and bad, political or not, put these demands on their own work. Why should we make them of poetry in general?

I'm also disturbed by Emily's romantic scenario relating to Guantanamo prisoners. I'm not pooh-poohing poetry of witness, quite the opposite. Art of witness is essential. But we should beware of using witness poetry as some cliché of the triumph of the human spirit, providing ourselves with a sop to make us feel better about our government's victims. Poetry's point is not to make safe middle-class readers say, "Poor things! They have it tough. Thank Heavens I vote Democrat!"

MAJOR JACKSON:

Daisy Fried wonders why poetry is called to duty, why it "is asked to do more than be itself," especially during moments of political or national crisis. Hers is the same annoyance expressed by disapproving poets who sniff the air upon hearing a 9/11 elegy or an inaugural poem, or upon learning of a famous poet penning her own line of greeting cards. Why do we, as poets, find this function of poetry so regrettable? Is it because it is *too* social?

Just ask the poet who reluctantly agrees to contribute to a wedding program, a funeral, or a political rally: the assignment pales in comparison to those poems that arise out of his own mysterious and idiosyncratic need. Such poems come forth from a comparatively minor — yet compulsive — desire. They may enact, for example, an obsessive rhythmic movement in the body onto the page, or explore the significance of a gripping image. But they'll likely never mean as much in the public sphere, where content definitely does matter.

And here's where I disagree with Daisy. If a poem has something to say and says it well, it will be remembered. However, what may give a poem its originality and heft — extraordinary language, searing imagery, high lyricism — may be too arcane for the layperson. Ms. Hardworking Roto-Rooter could care less about your dithyrambs. For her, the poem has value and purpose because it says something meaningful to her.

Most poets must admit that they would cherish being seen by their community of friends and relatives as "functional," the voice who sanctions and gives formal expression to their lives in verse, who serves as the repository of their thoughts and experiences, much like the West African djali or griot. One only wishes more poets took on with greater awareness the higher calling of their art, which has always had embedded within it a vision of the social. Instead, what we have been cultivating, probably since the Romantics, is a vision of the self, either as lonely and overly sentimental, or as beleaguered and fractured, and thus modern. Maya Angelou, Billy Collins, as well as the more politically-minded poets like Adrienne Rich, Sonia Sanchez, and Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad all reach beyond mere aestheticism and challenge accepted notions of the above solipsistic poet toiling away at a few columns of free verse. Personally, I find the cynicism and disdain for such poets, even mildly detected here, overly familiar and somewhat nauseating.

EMILY WARN:

After twenty-four hours of traveling, I get home to Seattle bleary-eyed. A headline swims into sight: "Shooting at Jewish Federation Offices Leaves 1 Dead, 5 Wounded." On high alert, I stop to read. Is my Talmud teacher among the wounded or dead? Is anyone else I know? No names have been released. The next morning Israel bombs a Lebanese village and more than fifty people, most of them children, die. Indeed, as Daisy says, "we are all on the bus." Inevitably, someone here, or in a bomb shelter in northern Israel or southern Lebanon, will turn to poetry to read at a funeral service, or to jump-start terrorized lives and pulverized communities.

Why is poetry called to duty during these crises (Major Jackson)? We avidly read poetry written about repression in other countries (Milosz, Ahkmatova, Darwish, Celan), and yet American poets who write of repression (Cornelius Eady's *Brutal Imagination*, for instance), we call — often with a slight sneer — "political."

Poems such as "The Mill-Race" make us aware of the social conditions that shape our relations; their language helps us dwell in, puzzle out, and *feel* the conditions and the relations, no matter how terrible, making a change in them more possible. It is this possibility, this hope, that makes poetry as necessary as a paycheck.

"The Mill-Race" ends on the word "salt," ("but it's mostly the miller's curse-gift, forgotten of God yet still grinding, the salt-/ mill, that makes sea, salt"). The salt sting is both our empathy for the workers' weariness and the fact of their individual lives ground to salt. Over centuries, the poem also says, these workers have raised cathedrals, invented art. The work, "the curse-gift" of the poet, is to tell the story of a person who has no story other than the story of relations. As Celan wrote, "I am you / if I am."

But do all poems do this? I agree with Stephen Burt that if we prescribe a single ethical purpose to poetry, if we write toward an ideal, then we stymie the possibility that each poem can address a question raised by particular conditions. Yet if we reject tangled relations to insist on the isolated, fragmented self of modern consciousness, then we remain self-absorbed and self-limiting — and certainly incapable of responding to the woman standing with Ahkmatova in the prison line who asked, "Can you describe this?"

STEPHEN BURT:

A clarification for Daisy Fried: I meant what plumbers do (fix pipes), not who they are or what they read. (I could have used ASL interpreters, or oncologists.) Plumbers (or interpreters or oncologists) do something which we can easily describe, and for which most of us understand the demand. Poetry, like most of the other arts, cannot be defined in general terms that also make clear its utility; plumbing, ASL translation, and oncology can. I continue to maintain that poetry cannot be defined in terms of a social function at all, even if (and here Emily Warn and I agree) most of the great *modern* poets do project visions of self which imply paradoxical communities of solitude, social in one sense, antisocial in another.

Maybe no one asks mezzo-sopranos to justify their work in terms of purported political utility, but composers have long encountered such demands. Dmitri Shostakovich faced (and sometimes tried to satisfy) the demands of Soviet musical realism. Theodor Adorno's social (and antisocial) theories demanded that composers, and writers, protect that "isolated, fragmented self of modern consciousness" against the false claims of a bad social whole.

I have no desire to insist on such protection, nor to deny that poems have social functions. Rather, my point is that different poems do different things, and good poems (such as "The Mill-Race") do many things at once. If there are universal truths about the communicative functions in poems — truths about all good poems, not just about "The Mill-Race" — they are so universal that they do not count as social, by my lights: they concern communication among just two persons at a time, whether the two meet face-to-face, or whether implicit author and genuine reader live thousands of years apart. One good reason to read poems from distant times and places is that they take us out of our society, showing us how much emotion and thought isn't social (for, about, or addressed to one particular society) at all.

DAISY FRIED:

Why not a summation made up of parts?

1 *History matters.* The claim that the Romantics weren't interested in politics or society (Major Jackson) can be disproved by anyone who reads Shelley, Byron, or Blake. If, before

the Romantics, the poet's job was speaking for society, the Romantics moved towards speaking to and for the individual, including the poor and oppressed. They were revolutionaries opposing the system.

2 *Words matter.* Use is not function. *War and Peace* makes an excellent paperweight; I've *used* it that way myself, after reading it. The *function* of *War and Peace* is greater than its many uses. So too poetry. Bad poems are often more useful for healing, persuasion, and celebration than good ones. They lack that rich ambiguity which Keats called negative capability, and so fail as poems. Take, for example, bad 9/11 poems, at which I do "sniff the air." There are good 9/11 poems. The degraded Romanticism of the mass of bad ones often amounts to decorative displays of the poet's own sensibility. Such displays may be emotionally or politically useful, but who needs them? They seem to claim authenticity for individual experiences derived from watching TV — and fail to ask the question, *why do these people want to kill us?* Good 9/11 poems sustain the possibility that America was both victim and guilty. I believe 9/11 solace poetry has given support, however indirectly and unintentionally, to the Bush administration. Solace poetry is to serious poetry as pornography is to serious art. Sex pornography has its uses, even positive ones, but nobody confuses it with serious art about love. The difference between solace porn and sex porn is that solace pornographers seldom seem aware that they're making pornography. Shame on them.

3 *Poetry matters.* Great poems don't always fit categories of usage: Martial's hilariously filthy invectives, Dickinson's apolitical lyrics, and, despite their stupid fascism, Pound's *Cantos,* all function as great poetry. Meanwhile, the four of us write poems. We might begin by intending to be merely useful (I never have). But at some point the poem takes over, makes requirements of us instead of vice versa. That's the moment of poetry; poems exist to let readers share in that moment. So our focus on mere use strikes me as odd: is this really all we know about our poems? Why exclude ourselves from our own readership?

4 *Enjoyment matters.* Poetry is fun! I mean this seriously. In "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats insists on the gaiety of human existence alongside its tragedy. Yes, there is terrible suffering; we are all going to die. And when, on the carved lapis lazuli, a man "asks for mournful melodies;/Accomplished fingers begin to play;/ ... their eyes,/Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay." The gaiety of great poetry reinforces and deepens our humanity. That's personal — and therefore social. Forget that, and we forget poetry's true function.

MAJOR JACKSON:

Daisy Fried grossly misreads my critique of excessive egoism in Romantic poetry — which an even closer reading of literary history would reveal I mostly cop from Eliot and other anti-Romantic critics. But anyway, let's face it: were Daisy's nineteenth-century poet-revolutionaries alive today, they would be unemployed and writing in obscurity. They would likely be committed to mental institutions for claims of having visions, of the socially relevant *and* supernatural variety; at least one would be labeled a terrorist or terrorist-sympathizer for speaking against the state and/or professing anti-Christian beliefs; another ostracized for brazenly exercising self-proclaimed, progressive forms of natural love. All, except Keats maybe, would be ignored and cast aside as *personae non gratae* by the critical, academic, and literary establishments: no Guggenheim for you, Mr. Shelley.

True revolutionary poets are stripped of their laureateships or never reviewed in these pages, for some reason probably having to do with the worn-out argument of lack of aesthetic worth or little merit. Martín Espada, John Yau, and Nikki Finney are just a few of many poets who write poetry that "embraces experience in its full complexity," yet their books never receive a nod in *Poetry*. Even when the Establishment posthumously highlights a poet such as June Jordan, whose poetics and social vision coalesce into a rich model of the best of art created in a democracy, and whose poetry never suffers from mere narcissism, it does so patronizingly (see Dan Chiasson's review in these pages, November 2005).

What I also read in this exchange is a distasteful cynicism about poetry's ability — its *responsibility* — to affect lives. If a reading public feels consoled or seeks "a momentary stay against confusion," and

poetry provides them this, why deem such works of art failures? Is healing really the domain only of prescriptive drugs?

The worth and importance of all poems is at least partially determined by the context in which they are read and the nature of the audience reading them. I once had a social worker approach me after a reading to thank me for writing a particular poem. "I run a weekly group for abusive men," he said. "I open each session with your poem." Now, I have no idea if this poem will "endure," but it was immensely gratifying that it was "of use" beyond my own desire to write it. I've talked to many other poets who have had similar experiences; it is a sobering moment when one realizes the extent to which art and grace are truly factors in people's lives. Poetry *can* have an immediate impact in the world. We shouldn't denigrate this capacity, no matter how much we are being paid.

EMILY WARN:

Stephen Burt's logic is airtight. Yet his claim that "poetry cannot be defined in terms of a social function at all" except that it "concerns communication among just two persons" seems cramped and unmoored. A long line of poets and thinkers have made great claims about poetry's social use. Burt seems to be stacking and storing different types of poetry in a container ship, removed and protected from the world as it journeys across the sea. The stacks of poetry can be referenced by poet-engineers, not of the sacred or the social, but of the aesthetic.

In contrast, Emerson claims that "Poets are... liberating gods." Emerson thought poems could change reality because they uncover its hardwiring, then jimmy with it. Poetic insight, he wrote, "does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others." Emerson named the current flowing through things divine—a fire our bodies and poems externalize. "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing."

Poets, he's saying, weld new relations and add new forms to the world. (Think, for instance, of D.A. Powell's poems about living and loving with HIV, or A.R. Ammons's poems about inlets, woods,

and garbage.) In making our circuitry—our social and biological nerves—translucent, it becomes perceivable and so changeable. Our social reality is thus enlarged to include relations and facts that have been obscured (not yet discovered) or repressed. "Poems are born dark," Celan wrote, because language is "loaded with world."

Do other forms of art and work carry out this same task? Yes, of course, but poetry is especially adept at helping us experience, and so understand, celebrate, mourn, curse, or philosophize about our relations. The fact that most often this poetic "exchange of energy" (Rukeyser) is between two people does not mean it ends there. Poets do not know how their poems will be used in the future. Whitman did not know his work would inform a gay liberation movement. Housman did not know *A Shropshire Lad* would speak to people suffering the horrors of WWI.

Poetry can leap across and charge the synapse between us and the world, altering both. If we abandon this use, then poets become one more group of wage-laboring specialists, gathered into "ghettos," speaking our own language, and designing complicated objects which serve as prophylactics to protect us from people still naïvely seeking this life-making force.

DURS GRÜNBEIN

The Poem and its Secret

I

The problem of the meaning of poems, and of literature in general, just cannot go very far, for everybody has a different idea of that meaning. That's how it is, and how it has been since poetry became conscious of itself as part of Modernism in art in general. Since then, every answer to the unwieldy question of meaning has shattered into hundreds of individual pieces. No two poets (let alone several) have ever committed themselves to one and the same position. A healthy distrust is one of the natural laws of their profession. It is the invisible identifying mark on every poet's brow. Any explanations they may provide for their activity primarily serve to keep a secret. As uncertain as this secret may be, all poets, in their own ways, will clutch it to themselves and barricade themselves behind it.

This has been a purely protective measure ever since a certain Plato tried to see through the secret. In his dialogue *Ion*, his informant and alter ego Socrates draws out an artist who earns his money as a traveling singer. Socrates's pretended naïveté, later revealed to be a refined method of interrogation, is intended to expose Ion, a doughty interpreter of Homer, as a fraud and a witless parrot. The point is to discredit not just this particular rhapsodist but, along with him, all other poets as well. This turns into a Wanted poster, so to speak. On one hand, the poet is a confidence man: in his epics and songs of praise, his odes and dithyrambs, he pretends to have specialized knowledge he cannot possibly have. The poet does not think; he only receives what a god whispers to him. On the other hand, he is only a dreamer and deadhead at heart, a man possessed, a creature made of nothing but antennae and nerves. If you know one of them, you know them all. As Socrates says: "The poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him."

However true that might be, the philosopher's description has only one goal: the infantilization of the poet. Even apart from the contradiction (how can one be enlightened and completely clueless at once?), this description is incoherent. How can it all fit together:

to be inspired, a mouthpiece and medium of the gods, but still to all intents and purposes ignorant, bereft of any specialized knowledge (*techné*, writes Plato), an eternal dilettante? Homer is like this, the argument goes, when he provides the formula for a healing potion without ever having been a doctor, when he describes a chariot race without ever having had the reins in his own hands. Given such arguments, how could Aristotle, himself a philosopher and not a poet, write his treatise on *Poetics*? As the teaching of pure ideas, wasn't philosophy itself most untouched of all by any empiricism?

But another dialogue shows that the issue here was actually jealousy. In the *Phaidon*, the very same Socrates boasts of his own good connections with the muses. There, suddenly and explicitly, he claims the mystery of supernatural inspiration for himself. The intention is utterly transparent. Once the favorite of the gods, the poet is downgraded to a mere juggler of words without meaning or reason; in contrast, the philosopher is henceforth the true correspondent of Olympus. The aftermath is well known, even though everyone knew that philosophy was originally a mere by-product of the great narratives that were already there long before it (handed down orally by rhapsodists like Ion) and that already contained almost everything. In the shadow of those stories, philosophy prospered as arabesque and commentary on the margin of the heroic epics and origin myths, until one day it rose up as proverbial wisdom and, a wild sunflower, blossomed in the riddling, oracular speeches of the pre-Socratics.

The fragments of Parmenides, for example, are still marked by their origin. Their hexameter form attests to their proximity to universal imagery and song; they begin with an appeal to the muses who inspire all knowledge. The prose fragments of Heraclitus, in contrast, already speak another language: that of conscious ambiguity, even of mystery, and the defection from lexical rules, that first precondition of any future order of meaning.

What had happened? Nothing less than a total usurpation. Basically, all philosophizing began harmlessly as clever textual exegesis and interpretation. But soon this turned into the theft of the message by the messenger—in this case, Hermes, the fleet messenger of the gods. He became the patron saint of thinkers by stealing the fruit of the poets. It had to be: "The plenum is defined by thought," as Parmenides puts it in his treacherously dazzling way. And that is how a history of conflict set off down the path it still follows today. It begins with the dispossession of poetry and ends with its complete infantilization.

After the public challenge to its ancestral, narrative authority, it was only a stone's throw to Plato's perfidious suggestion to banish the poets themselves, that band of liars and illusionists, from the republic. Yarn spinners became sinners. Millennia of familiarization and self-discipline helped this act of violence be forgotten. The beautiful and the sublime had been subordinated to ideas once and for all.

For over two thousand years now, every poet's biography has been evidence of the success of this coup. The poets have come to terms with their stigma, with their status as exiles within society. They have had to learn to disown themselves, to camouflage their true intentions. What they call poetics (from Callimachus and Horace all the way to Cavafy, Eliot, or Rilke) is a game of hide-and-seek: defensive, cryptic, and clandestine through and through. Do not be blinded by occasional counter-offensives like Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Hölderlin's philosophizing hymns, or Novalis's ingenious *Pollen* reveries. Ever since its early humiliation in classical Greece, poetry has seen itself demoted to a mere pastime. It was an art for art's sake long before it defiantly accused itself of being *l'art pour l'art*.

Hardly did he look beyond his craft when the poet — like Lessing, like Herder — immediately addressed questions of style and form and the limits of his artistic genre, becoming his own critic, more subaltern than modest, abstaining from all greater signification. Out of their snail shells, though, most of them peeped at transcendence. Their secret comfort was that, on the silent wings of words, their souls maintained a connection to worlds before and after ours. Well hidden in the hideouts of their writings, they knew, like the members of a secret society, that their verses were what would outlast even brass, the walls of Troy, and Rome's palaces. A single aphorism was enough to make this existence as a tiny minority bearable, in the diaspora of the mother tongue common to all. And this is the situation: while the philosophers are immersed without a care in their games of truth, paying great attention to each other, the poet stands to one side, where he can do what he wants and leave other things be. Each poet cultivates his own orchids. None of the omnipotent epistemologists since Plato's day has ever taken him entirely seriously.

2

After being chased from the banquets of the philosophers and excluded from the symposia and dialogues of adults, what was left for the poets but to reflect on their own position? If they wanted to preserve their dignity, they had to renew their contract with the gods. And that is precisely what they did, inwardly and secretly. They did this by entrusting the most sacred thing they had, their psyches, to the divine. In order to be entirely undisturbed, to be left to themselves, they behaved in public like the sick, like the mentally ill, either infantile or cagey according to their whims. Outwardly, they pretended to be alternately sentimental or naïve, while appealing to their patron saint, Orpheus, who had long since been dismembered, his corpse mutilated, his mortal remains scattered to the four winds.

They tried to play for time; they all turned to what they could do best. One wrote epigrams cursing his fellow men. Another wrote elegies decrying his solitude here on earth. A third competed as a tragedian at the annual theater festival and afterwards vented his anger at the wayward audience in malicious satires. One polished his tender, bucolic verses for so long he ended up inventing his own meter. One wrote noble songs of praise to the winners at the Olympic Games while athletic male bodies filled his nights with wet dreams. And yet another worked off his desire for the obscene in bawdy comedies. Thus were the meters created — alcaic, asclepiad, hexameter, iambic, trochaic — as well as the stanza forms: the Sapphic, the Pindaric, etc. Thus did the genres emerge, competing with each other whenever they could.

From today's perspective, the advantage of the poets' newly won autonomy can be seen clearly. What has since fallen under the rubric of classic literature owes its good reputation primarily to one characteristic. It could be called the primary quality of all true poetry and literature, its cardinal virtue. It is what keeps it alive across the ages: its vividness. If Hegel's observation that the genuine philosopher always thinks one thing is true, then here, in imagination alone, in the gift of vividness and plasticity, is the lever the poet used to turn that one thing upside down over and over again. His observational skill and his expressive capacity towered over a rationality that could, at best, accept individual phenomena. Philosophy could only theorize about the imagination. Hardly any of its protagonists had the slightest clue as to its correct use or its misuse. Having become mistrustful

of his own guild, Immanuel Kant was at least honorable enough to concede, in his *Critique of Judgment,* how central this aporia was. Respectfully, he fences it in and defines it as an impregnable territory sealed shut by the *autonomy of art.*

What artist, what poet, would not be obliged to thank him for that? *Infantilized, but not disenchanted:* what more can they ask for after their whole odyssey, always only on the shadowy side of the history of ideas? Who can be surprised that, over centuries, poets have so thoroughly constructed their autonomy as a kind of fortress? More still: as barely accessible catacombs. They themselves hardly know what is hidden in those walls, those labyrinthine halls. Perhaps what is kept down there, deeply subterranean, is now only the specter of poetry's former sovereignty. Every poet avers that he has seen it once with his own eyes. Certainly something is moving down there. Once in a while, in the poem, it keeps time beneath the cranium. Something diffusely mysterious, never wholly explicable, the remnant of an old family secret, jealously guarded by every neophyte who enters the secret society and goes down again into this inner labyrinth. It is surely the main reason poems are still written even today, despite all the disrespect and all the resistance, in an age when everyone is in the know. It contains the true source of poetry's survival.

3

I may now have shed new light on the conditions in which the art of poetry is created, but I am still not a bit wiser when it comes to its radioactive core, its magical power. Its mental prerequisites, however one describes them (whether archaically as *the action of genius* or in modern terms as its specific neurophysics), are one issue. The other is how to make an art out of something whose purpose is to set off fireworks in the reader's psyche. After decades of practice, it seems to me that the true basis for this lies in what is hidden. Or at least in a kind of twilight. Still, as long as the thing cannot be wholly explained, it nevertheless remains legitimate (for the expert as well as for the layman) to talk about its mystery.

Poems can be so variegated, so heterogeneous in their texture and style, yet the good ones stand out because of a certain something that can never be entirely unraveled. Whether it is a matter of special verbal humor, the magic of syllables, or mere technical or atmospheric hocus-pocus; whether the poem captivates us with a collection of

unusual dream faces or seduces us as a painting created from singular fantasies — all that says little about its mysterious side. This emerges only as the surplus of the whole, as it were.

But I admit that all this talk about "the secret of poems" keeps circling around a blind spot. This blind spot can be just about anything. Perhaps it is the spirit of the mother tongue itself, which in the moment of its appearance immediately escapes from the poet again. Perhaps it is the certainty of a beauty and natural harmony that are officially denied again and again, a beauty that here burns inside oneself; outside, however, the feel for it seems to have long been extinguished. Perhaps it is an empathy that can only be found in such spontaneous form in verses, the empathy with one's posthumous listener, with a Thou summoned from the future. Or it is the movement, which only poems make so alive and heartrending, towards an end that is more than just a finale and is prepared for, line by line. Perhaps it is something like megalomania, but of a kind that helps one become a better person. However clearly it may appear here and there, though, each individual poet can never get entirely to the bottom of it. Some have known more of it than others; the best have noticed that it is something that leaves the author aside, makes him an anonymous creator. The metaphor is cannier than the author, one says. Somebody must have dictated a few lines to me, exults another. Yet what always remains, unrecognized, is this blind spot.

Personally, I believe that what comes out in poems is the human devotion to the transcendental — with a simultaneous fidelity to this world's prodigious wealth of details. For me, what makes up the consistency of poetry's secret is twofold: a mix of love of this world with curiosity about metaphysics. The proof? Only among the poets does one come across them, those successful moments of reconciliation of something purely ideal with its unexpectedly concrete manifestations, less often among theologians, and almost never among philosophers. The offer of reconciliation always comes from the side of poetry and rarely otherwise, from the ranks of the Platos and the Kants. All the more precious are the rare moments when the latter do break through the wall of silence. Just recently, one of them, the American Richard Rorty, was given to such an act of mercy when he explained: "It is in the nature of intellectual and spiritual progress that philosophers constantly shift back and forth between quasi-scientific argumentation and non-argumentative flights of the poetic imagination. They move to the one whenever they become frustrated with the other."

4

When an average intellectual today reflects on the last century's great artistic and intellectual achievements, he first thinks of such names as Freud and Picasso, Stravinsky and Heisenberg, Hitchcock and Wittgenstein. It is impossible to imagine that one of them could be a poet. Not a single poet from the ancestral gallery (whether Pessoa, Cavafy, or Rilke, whether Yeats, Mandelstam, Valéry, Frost, or Machado) will cross the mind of the historically-informed thinker, who dares to claim a monopoly on Modernism anyway. It is as if the art of poetry, of all things, were the blind spot in the cultural memory of modern man. It does not make much sense to brood over why this is the case. Presumably, it has to do with that fickle memory itself, with its amnesia for everything that is not useful, that has not become primarily power, technology, capital, ideology, or physical force. Thus does it come to pass that the poets are still alone with their little secret. A secret so large and momentous that it could change the world, if it were only noticed one day.

Imagine that there was a thinking that only occurs in certain otherwise quite hard-to-reach places, like dental floss between the wisdom teeth or an endoscope in the stomach. For the first time, it will make certain places visible, individual branches of the anything-but-straightforward psychic cave system that runs through the bodies of all humans and can only be discovered by a resourceful imagination audaciously pushing forward into still unsecured galleries. This thinking is poetic thinking, and it is not the domain of poets and writers but more the method of many small search parties who have set out from several starting points without knowing of each other, an army of phenomenologists working on expanding the world of the imagination common to all of us.

Translated from the German by Andrew Shields

PETER CAMPION

Eight Takes

Selected Poems, by James Fenton.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. $14.00.

This selection of James Fenton's poems begins with promising force. During the seventies, when so many poets lost themselves to domestic melodrama, or else in the mists of Deep Image, Fenton was writing with genuine political urgency. Most of these early poems derive from his experience as a foreign correspondent. His narratives about Cambodia carry particular power. "Dead Soldiers," for example, recounts an eerie lunch with Pol Pot's brother. In "Children in Exile," Fenton paints a group portrait of young refugees from Southeast Asia waiting in Italy for passage to America.

The strength of the work comes from more than its subject matter. Fenton learned from his compatriot Auden (whose voice he echoes a little too often) how to temper grand subjects and fulsome emotions with wit and condensation. The phrasing and rhythm in these poems are vivid and swift. Here, for instance, are the ending lines of "Children in Exile":

> Let them come to the crest of the road when the morning is fine
> With Florence spread like honey on the plain,
> Let them walk through the ghostless woods, let the guns be silent,
> The tiger never catch their eye again.
>
> They are thriving I see. I hope they always thrive
> Whether in Italy, England or France.
> Let them dream as they wish to dream. Let them dream
>
> Of Jesus, America, maths, Lego, music and dance.

The expansive tone of the first two lines leads to the particular, jumbled, proper nouns at the end. The effect is one of tempered and strengthened sympathy: the poet attends both to his feelings about

the children's future and to their individuality. His skill for making his moral imagination manifest in specific formal features dignifies all of Fenton's best poems.

But reading the best poems, it's hard not to regret the trajectory of Fenton's work. Few poets have begun so powerfully and then fallen off so suddenly. In recent years Fenton has fashioned himself into a lyricist. Here are some characteristic lines from "I Know What I'm Missing":

> Do you wonder if I'll remember?
> Do you wonder where I'll be?
> I'll be home again next winter
> And I hope you'll write to me.
> When the branches glisten
> And the frost is on the avenue
> I'll know what I'm missing—
> My friend
> My friend
> I'm missing you.

Cole Porter has little to fear. Add a synth track and this poem would be great in a Jazzercise class.

Fenton fares little better when he attempts to apply his song-writing skills to his larger ambitions. This book offers his entire libretto to "The Love Bomb," a rock opera about a religious cult much like David Koresh's Branch Davidians. The action begins with John, who has lost his lover Martin to a woman named Anna. Anna in turn has fallen for Brother Paul and his band of millenarians. Martin follows Anna into the circle of the cult. At the end, Brother Paul and his followers, including Anna, go out in a suicidal whirlwind of fire and poison, while Martin escapes, returning to the ever-faithful John. The plots of good operas are often overblown and thin, but this one makes for some wonderful comedy, of which Fenton seems wholly unaware: the cult comes to resemble nothing so much as a gay man's nightmare of heterosexuality.

Maybe the most telling of Fenton's lyrics is the new poem, "Down to the Twigs and Seeds," a ditty about running out of dope. Here the poet does appear conscious of his depleted inspiration. The chorus goes like this:

Down to the twigs and seeds,
Down to the twigs and seeds—
I'm feeling rough,
I need a puff
But I'm down to the twigs and seeds

The mere fifteen pages of new poems in this selection might not seem so "mere" if they weren't stuffed with such doggerel, if "Down to the Twigs and Seeds" weren't such a convincing ars poetica.

Man and Camel, by Mark Strand.
Alfred A. Knopf. $24.00.

Mark Strand may seem the opposite of James Fenton. It's hard to think of a poet whose ambition so consistently matches his execution. To read through Strand from his first book to the present is to see a single course pursued with exquisite precision: despite his open-ended, mysterioso tones, Mark Strand has a strategy. Alan Williamson put it best when he described Strand's poems as "anti-epiphanies." Again and again, these poems move toward moments in which transcendence equals the disappearance of the self, in which the only revelation is the futility of knowledge and experience. The effect is not despair, however. That feeling of isolation balances against one of elegant calm, as in the opening of Strand's anthology piece, "Keeping Things Whole":

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

It might seem odd to quote a forty-year-old poem in a review of a new book. But although Strand now tends to write in ampler measures, the same tones and assumptions pervade this recent work. The poem "Error" ends with the characteristic line, "like the pages of a book on which nothing was written." In "My Name," the poet gazes

up at the sky and hears his own name "as though it belonged not to me but to the silence." There's so much vanishing in Strand, it's a wonder the vanishing itself has held on so resiliently.

The problem is that, in parodying the conventions of Romantic discovery, Strand radically limits the courses he can pursue. He begins to fall back on posture. Certainly it's a posture that he's shown a genius for maintaining. He varies it, but only to the extent to which he can conjure new, weird settings and tonal swerves for his familiar plots.

There's another resource he has: imitation of Wallace Stevens. The best poem in *Man and Camel*, for example, is "Poem After the Seven Last Words," which the Brentano String Quartet commissioned to be read between movements of Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Christ*. Here's the opening of the fifth section:

> To be thirsty. To say, "I thirst."
> To close one's eyes and see the giant world
> that is born each time the eyes are closed.
> To see one's death. To see the darkening clouds
> as the tragic cloth of a day of mourning.

There's intensity to this passage, for sure, an impressive amplitude that often arises when Strand abandons his cleverness and drollery. But the echo of Stevens begins to drown out the lines, and Strand can only suffer by the comparison. You feel that Stevens would push those infinitives further, weaving his sentences into the unforeseen; he would also temper the tone with something strange (a "Dr. Eucalyptus," say, or a "planetary pass-pass.") In Strand, the series of fragments begins to fizzle into Apollonian bromides. Strand is to Stevens what Olive Garden is to fine Italian dining: reliable, easy, popular, at times better than expected, but rarely the real thing.

Green Squall, by Jay Hopler.
Yale University Press. $30.00 cloth; $16.00 paper.

Jay Hopler has what musicians call "attack." He enters his poems immediately, and no matter how ironic or strange his sentences become, his voice clamps each phrase to the page with conviction. Here's the beginning of his opening poem, "In the Garden":

And the sky!
Nooned with the steadfast **blue enthusiasm**
Of an empty nursery.

In "The Frustrated Angel," he gives these lines to an otherworldly tormentor much like Henry's infamous "friend" in the *Dream Songs*:

That's mighty big talk, isn't it, Hopler — coming from a man who lives with his mother?

And here's an epigrammatic barb from "Self-Portrait with Whiskey and Pistol":

Maybe if I surrounded myself with prostitutes and strippers, my celibacy would feel less like a lack and more like an act
Of heroic self-denial.

You begin to get a sense from these passages of Hopler's obsessions, and the idiom with which he embodies them. This is a book about intense solitude, a state which for moments seems an ultimate good, but more often feels like imprisonment. Hopler speaks from a literal and metaphorical garden, haunted by extravagant fantasies of escape, and by the Mother who hovers oppressively but never really appears.

In the best poems, this pull between imaginative departure and chastening containment becomes a formal principle. I'm thinking in particular of the two strongest lyrics in the book, "That Light One Finds in Baby Pictures" and "The Boxcars of Consolidated Rail Freight." Here's how the latter begins:

Those angels of history are whispering, again,
That I'm the product of two people who should have known
Better.

Now one of them is dying. The other is going
Crazy over it. I know — . To this day, there's a space behind

My eyes that stays lit like some small-town museum's North
Atlantic collection.

I admire how the self-effacing humor of that enjambment into "better" opens into the sincerity of the following sentence, and how that bald statement slides into the strangeness of the museum simile. You can tell that Hopler's at his best when the poems move this dramatically.

His weaker moments come when he replaces such dramatic action with mannerism. Hopler has several stylistic tics. He repeatedly makes past-participial adjectives out of nouns, so that the moon, for example, becomes "vampired." He slides often into a gallows humor that overdetermines and numbs the poems. (Cynicism is the flip side of sentimentality: they both quickly induce then foreclose on feeling). And at times he buys his lush phrasing on the cheap:

> Look at the garden: dew-swooned and with fat blooms swollen,
> With shade leaf-laced between the lemon trees.

In the end, though, I'm grateful for Hopler's raggedness. These days, we're fond of praising first books for not seeming like first books. We're accustomed to faulting work for being "uneven." But who's ever said, "I love that book. It's so even?" There's a volatility in Jay Hopler that promises much more than competence and reliability. And I'm eager to see what that will be.

Louis Zukofsky: Selected Poems. Ed. by Charles Bernstein. Library of America. $20.00.

Second-generation Modernists like Lorine Niedecker and Basil Bunting looked to Louis Zukofsky as a first among equals. Although their friendship eventually chilled, George Oppen for a time felt similarly about "Zuk." So is something wrong with me? I'm crazy about those three poets, and yet I've never been able to appreciate Zukofsky's poems. They feel like cold demonstrations to me.

Consider "I Sent Thee Late," the lyric that Charles Bernstein places at the front of this new selection:

> Vast, tremulous;
> Grave on grave of water-grave;
>
> Past.

Futurity no more than duration
Of a wave's rise, fall, rebound
Against the shingles, in ever repeated mutation
Of emptied returning sound.

There's no waste here. The words are unbudgeable. But the poem remains an exercise, a self-enclosing box. There's little feeling in the stiff, stoical tonelessness of a line like "Futurity no more than duration." Certainly it's an early poem. But look at lines like these from the late sequence "80 Flowers":

Honesty lunar year annual anew
birdsong your lifelode blazing sunned
moon Lionmane Sickle quiet waiting.

The demonstration (five words per line: provocative, no?) feels, if anything, colder still.

Often Zukofsky's poems read like copies of Williams or Pound. There's the ninth section of his epic "A," which he models on Guido Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega," just as Pound adapted the poem in Canto 36. There are probably scores of doctoral candidates who could write a thesis chapter on the intertextuality. To me, it sounds like copy-work. The same goes for Zukofsky's urban tableaus. These poems smack everywhere of Williams. And yet there's none of the exuberance, none of the wholesome seediness and ragged edges that you find in the Williams of the twenties and thirties. Instead of charging the scenes he writes about, Zukofsky's condensation and his analytical knowingness desiccate them.

Reading Zukofsky feels strangely like reading E.E. Cummings. Both adore word play for its own sake. In Cummings you get cloying charm, in Zukofsky, cloying didacticism. For me, the effect turns out to be the same: I'm left eager to re-read *Spring and All* and *The Descent of Winter*.

Hapax, by A.E. Stallings.
TriQuarterly Books. $39.95 cloth; $14.95 paper.

A.E. Stallings is obsessed with those small misunderstandings and missed opportunities that fissure into huge aporias. In "Aftershocks,"

for example, one of the two or three strongest poems in this second book, she compares the effects of an earthquake to a fight between two lovers, ending with "Each standing on the wrong side of the fault." Turn this theme over, and it reveals a less ominous side as well. Stallings takes for her title a Greek term meaning "a word or form evidenced by a single citation." If "hapax" hints at the failure to make connections, it also suggests moments of uniqueness and the wonder they provoke.

But there's another, unfortunate gap here. I mean the distance between the poet and her content. Form, which should temper and intensify feeling, tends to constrict it in these poems. Here's a quatrain from "Clean Break," a narrative about two young lovers meeting and then parting in Europe:

> They parted well on the appointed day,
> Out in the plaza, underneath the noon,
> While that summer's iterative tune
> Pulsed from a café.

The meter and rhyme unfold elegantly, but at the expense of idiom. The stiffness of "on the appointed day" makes these two college kids sound like a medieval lord and lady. "That summer's iterative tune" is worse: it advertises the superior, ironic knowledge of the narrator. The couple, their affair, even the music they listen to become tinny props.

Often Stallings's technique itself feels slipshod. Here's the opening of "The Village in the Lake":

> It is not a natural lake,
> It was made for pleasure's sake:
> For speedboaters, and those who swish
> On water skis. It's stocked with fish.

The unnatural phrase "those who swish on water skis" exists merely for the rhyme. Here's another example, from "Visiting the Grave of Rupert Brooke":

> Odysseus, recruiting, in disguise,
> Set out for sale a range of merchandise,
> Stuffs no princess easily resists—
> Fine brocades, and bangles for the wrists.

If it's a range of merchandise, isn't it already "for sale"? If it's a bangle isn't it already "for the wrists"?

Maybe it seems persnickety to fault Stallings for small missteps. But they accumulate in these pages, and trip up what would often be fine poems. ("The Village in the Lake," for instance, has a wonderfully strange ending.) These fuddled passages also betray a tendency to purchase urbanity and cleverness at the expense of felt texture. They make it seem that Stallings values formal conventions more than the actual, essential forms of the poems.

With the so-called "New Formalists" still hanging on, managing their own journals, conferences, and presses, there will always be readers who reward poems simply for falling into rhyme and meter, since such poems contribute to their silly polemic against Modernism. It's too bad. The great lesson of Modernism was formalist at heart. When Pound demanded "no word that does not contribute to the presentation," and even when Williams railed against "the traditionalists of plagiarism," they were writing as supreme formalists: they wanted to tear away the drapery of moth-eaten Romanticism and test poems for their sheer formal integrity. This hardly applies to free verse alone. Reading, say, Thom Gunn, you can see those same beliefs strengthening "traditional" verse movement. The Neo-Edwardians of today are in fact anti-formalists. At least from the evidence of the work they produce and promote, they seem to demand convention and display alone.

A.E. Stallings is too good to be lumped with these muggles. In this new book, "Aftershocks," "Implements from the 'Tomb of a Poet,'" and "Ultrasound" show her ability to match prosodic talent with intensely rendered feelings. I hope she'll look to these poems as guides into her future work.

Messenger: New and Selected Poems 1976–2006, by Ellen Bryant Voigt. W.W. Norton. $25.95.

Maybe the best way to get a sense of Ellen Bryant Voigt's new selected poems, of their force and precision, would be to look at the first two sentences of "Messenger," the title poem, and the last in this book:

> First I smelled it, hovering near the bed:
> distinctly saline, as in a ship's wake;

a bit of dust and mold, like moth-found fur;
also something grassy, crushed herb, sharper.

After that, when they turned the ward lights out,
the space ship glowing at the nurses' hub,

his pod stilled and darkened, only the small
digitals updating on the screen,

then I could see — one "sees" in deep gloaming,
though ground-fog makes an airless, formless room —

how fully it loomed behind and larger than
the steel stalk, the sweet translucent fruit.

If a young poet wanted a model for dynamic verse movement, she could do a lot worse than to memorize these twelve lines: they offer a treasure trove of good examples. There's a subtle drama, for instance, in the way the propulsive rush of the extended syntax balances against the particularity of the images and phrases that drag against it. There's also the unobtrusive, strange metaphor of the spaceship, and the expert lightening of tone it effects. These are more than formal tricks: they work to embody, gorgeously, what would otherwise seem like hocus pocus — the poet's impression of her father-in-law's soul leaving his body.

If these six couplets provide an opportunity for appreciation, the thirty years of writing represented in this collection offer even more. Most poets fluctuate. Voigt has consistently grown stronger. Her poems from the seventies are slender sculptures, built on an armature of small, striking images and statements. In this, they resemble the work of Voigt's contemporary and colleague, Louise Glück. In the following years, though, Voigt turns toward narrative. At first the results are solid but unsuperlative. The short-story-like poems in *The Lotus Flowers* (1987), while cunningly constructed, seem to repose beneath a glaze. Voigt's big temptation is to rely on her own mastery, to speak from above, instead of from inside, experience. The third person point of view can be deadly to someone with this tendency. Despite some enthralling moments, such as the astonishing and disturbing ending of "The Field Trip," these poems suffer too often from such knowingness.

But reading the work that follows, you sense that the experiment with narrative was a departure the poet needed to take. Her next book, *Two Trees*, marks a genuine breakthrough, one that continues and builds in the book length poem *Kyrie* (1995) and in *Shadow of Heaven* (2002). In these collections, without abandoning her narrative ambitions, Voigt returns to the formal strategies of lyric. When she intersperses her ars-poetical tour de force, "Song and Story," with the lines of a lullaby, her two approaches twine together, coiling into a new intensity. Voigt's best poems often appear now in series, a structure that both allows narrative expansion and juxtaposes the stories with white space.

And as in those lines from "Messenger," the sentence itself becomes Voigt's base measure. Her commitment to the syntactic energies that Frost once called "the abstract sound of sense" lends presence and dynamism to Voigt's primary subjects. She has always been obsessed with forging some link between the living and the dead, and with making a home in a natural world that she sees, shifting her cold eye, as both beautiful and fatal. In the recent work these themes become active pursuits, given life in the sentence itself, which Voigt employs for all its suspensions and surges, its stop-times and asides.

The intensification shows no sign of letting up. Wanting to end my review with a list of Voigt's best poems, I was stopped short. How not include all ten of the new poems in the collection?

Strong Is Your Hold, by Galway Kinnell.
Houghton Mifflin. $23.00.

I once heard a famous British poet pronounce that most American poets merely make home movies. You get what he meant: the shrinking of ambition, the jittery technique, the staged sentimentality, the private moments that should have remained private. But is there anything necessarily wrong with domestic poems? Reading Galway Kinnell's new book, I'm grateful for the homemade quality. Kinnell might just be our great poet of family life, and even more so, of that rarest thing in our poetry: happy family life.

Certainly when he goes for grand cinema, he fails. His poem here about September 11, "When the Towers Fell," remains a huge mistake. Puffed up with tags from Crane and Whitman, and from Paul Celan and Alexander Wat (untranslated), the poem reads in places

like an inflated parody of Modernist collage. In other places, the language and imagery turn thuddingly prosaic. Throughout the poem, Kinnell seems deaf to the ethical challenges of his occasion. Here, for example, is the opening:

> From our high window we saw them
> in their bands and blocks of light
> brightening against a fading sunset,
> saw them in the dark hours glittering
> as if spirits inside them sat up
> calculating profit and loss all night.

To aestheticize the dead of September 11, most of whom were incinerated alive, with that winking allusion to Eliot's Phlebas, in the glib figure about their spirits calculating profit and loss (get it? they worked in finance), feels stunningly crude to me.

And yet somehow it's not offensive. Kinnell is simply out of his element here: the interrogating intellect has never been his thing. In fact, the bardic afflatus which ruins "When the Towers Fell," and which laces much of the earlier work with cant, becomes a virtue in the domestic poems. You feel that Kinnell hasn't so much abandoned his brute force as kept it in check. The bull walks through the china shop and does just fine, thank you. Take the opening of "Everyone Was in Love":

> One day, when they were little, Maud and Fergus
> appeared in the doorway naked and mirthful,
> with a dozen long garter snakes draped over
> each of them like brand-new clothes.
> Snake tails dangled down their backs,
> and snake foreparts in various lengths
> fell over their fronts. With heads raised and swaying,
> alert as cobras, the snakes writhed their dry skins
> upon each other, as snakes like doing
> in lovemaking, with the added novelty
> of caressing soft, smooth, moist human skin.

If this were a home movie, it would certainly be the weirdest, most thrilling one I've ever seen. The bucolic merriment shows its tense, creepy-crawly edge, and yet remains good fun.

This scene could stand as an emblem for all of Kinnell's best poems. Here at the threshold to the house (think of the "hold" of Kinnell's title) appear the ultimate figures of eros and thanatos, intertwined. Yet they're also just what they are: harmless garden critters. The poem, like the home, gains strength and vitality by allowing this creaturely life. Other equally successful poems include "Burning the Brush Pile" and "The Stone Table." All of these poems are made from the tension between the modest resolve of the householder and sheer animal energy. Those two forces fuse to give this collection its strength.

Interrogation Palace, by David Wojahn.
University of Pittsburgh Press. $14.00.

Reading David Wojahn's superb selected poems, one has two seemingly contrary feelings. First comes the sheer pleasure of surveying Wojahn's range. Here's a poet who can write as convincingly of a backstage interview with Bob Marley as he can of Aeneas's reunion with Anchises in Hades. Wojahn has a fiction writer's talent for building panoramas. But such novelistic pleasure might belie the uneasiness one has reading this work and seeing the grief that runs beneath it. The bare biographical facts behind these poems include the nearly suicidal depression of the poet's father, the son's own depression, and the addictions and early death of his first wife, the poet Lynda Hull. The poems don't stop there. Wojahn is one of the few American poets since Lowell who has believably joined private and public life: individual suffering appears in the poems within the context of history. At times this perspective seems to enrich individual experience by giving it greater dimension; elsewhere it appears to trap the individual within a nightmare. In "Interrogation Palace" Wojahn picked the perfect title: these are poems of both largesse and terror.

Like Ellen Bryant Voigt, whom he resembles in few other ways, Wojahn has developed from book to book, and found formal strategies to give his obsessions and ambitions their full presence. His early poems, most in a granular free verse, show the influence of Philip Levine, James Wright, and Richard Hugo, who chose Wojahn's first collection for the Yale Younger Poets series. These poems are accomplished and often poignant, especially in the treatment of family and relationships. But Wojahn comes into his own with his third book, *Mystery Train* (1990). The title poem is a sonnet series about the

history of rock and roll, as it parallels and contrasts the larger history of the time. One suspects that it's Wojahn's excitement about that subject itself which gives his voice a new immediacy and bite. The full intelligence of the poet—allusive, dense, playful, often darkly deadpan—galvanizes these lines.

Wojahn also begins to write in and against traditional forms, which he tests for their acoustic properties the way a guitarist might push his amp to the point at which a little, but not too much, distortion leaks out. Wojahn's weakness shows when this electrified verse movement takes over, when his dirge-like procession replaces the movement of the mind itself, and the lines fall into a lockstep, mechanical fatalism in the manner of Frederick Seidel, whom Wojahn overrates in his criticism. But on the whole, his technical mastery gives his work its depth and intensity. From *The Falling Hour* (1997) through to the new poems in this selection, he writes with as much formal and emotional strength as any poet alive. Consider, for example, the opening of his sonnet, "Fort Snelling National Cemetery, St. Paul, MN":

> Thirty thousand dead, the markers all identical,
> and with a map I find his stone,
> find my own name chiseled
>
> here between the monoliths of airport runway lights
> and "the world's largest shopping mall," its parking lot
>
> nudging the cemetery fence. The spirit in its tunnel
> does not soar, the spirit raised by wolves.

It's humbling to see what Wojahn can do in seven lines. Look at the cunning slant rhymes, the small modulations in tone (for instance from "monolith" to "shopping mall"), the balance between the images of personal loss and the insinuations about national decay. All these lead to the big curve in the structure, from the literal scene to the territory of fable and myth.

As in these lines, so in the larger work: Wojahn's formal skills give the movement between the everyday and the mythic its believability. Such range and scope lend distinction to this entire collection. I wish the anthologists and the prize committees would start paying attention. But in the meantime, who cares? We have this powerful, panoramic book.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

While I enjoyed Danielle Chapman's review of *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks* ["Sweet Bombs," October 2006] I was struck by her narrow analysis of the poetry Brooks wrote during the sixties and thereafter. It was insulting to read yet another slanted analysis of an African-American poet writing in, or attempting to create with other black writers, her own aesthetic. Chapman's review is particularly vexing because it relies exclusively on the Western literary tradition to judge Brooks's late work. Chapman writes that Brooks's "formal leanings" were "deep sixed" and that Brooks wreaked "violence" on her own style to "match" the "newfound purposes" of the political sixties. Such a summary sounds disturbing to this reader, who adored Brooks's celebrated formal writing but also her decision to embrace African-American traditions and styles in her later work.

Not surprisingly, Chapman's positions have been advanced against nearly all black poets who decided to embrace the cultural nuances of black America and reject Western literature. To dismiss Brooks's efforts just because she decided that segments of the Black Arts aesthetic were useful to her new work suggests a bias that Western poetic tradition is "the" tradition. But Western poetry is "a" tradition, not "the" tradition. If Chapman was inclined to dig deeper, she would understand that the Black Arts Movement was not just about politics but was specifically about the rejection of the Western formalism that represented, at least to the writers of the period, a denial of self. The movement was, as many a writer from the period has noted, about the creation of new forms, new language (even new words), and an art that was singularly noteworthy not only for its politics but for its acceptance of black cultural traditions infused into the poetry. Haki Madhubuti, whom Chapman mentions as one of the culprits who led Brooks astray, wrote poetry not necessarily in a "hip languor" but with the jazz riffs of John Coltrane incorporated into the text. Jayne Cortez, another fabulous poet from the period, wrote in the jazz tradition as well. This meant that the poetry, and its form, included call and response, improvisation, repetition (the Blues), and an inherent ode to the tradition of poetry as an oral art. These ideals are

African-American down to their core, and Brooks wrote many notable poems to join in this important historical moment for black poets. As the unofficial matriarch of black poetry at the time, it would have been unthinkable for her to do anything else.

BRIAN GILMORE
TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

Danielle Chapman responds:

Brian Gilmore mischaracterizes my article when he implies that I object to all of Brooks's later work, or to the Black Arts movement as a whole. In fact my intent was to praise, not disparage, the "violence" that Brooks wreaks in "Second Sermon of the Warpland" and several other poems from the sixties and seventies. However, Gilmore's summary of Brooks's career, a version of which has been circulating for decades, is just the sort of reductive understanding that I was trying to move beyond. I think that Gwendolyn Brooks was a great poet, and to force her into any box—whether it's "formal," "Western," or "Black Arts"—is to minimize the accomplishment of a fiercely individual artist whose work defies such blunt categorization.

Dear Editor,

I found D.H. Tracy's discussion of seriousness in the November issue of *Poetry* bracing and enlightening. Recent decades have given us a plethora of poets adopting mythological, botanical, or astrological personae they don't really believe in—at least not enough to commit body and soul.

Writing poems about, say, Aphrodite or The Hanged Man seems risk-free. Unlike previous adherents of Greco-Roman mythology or tarot, we don't really believe and don't ask readers to imagine that we do. This saves us from the slings and arrows of outrageous critics who might call us to task. It also spares us from the ridicule, pain, and even shame that might accompany true conviction

We see everywhere around us the poetry of safety. This is not surprising in a culture in which hedging of bets plays a major role. This is also why the works we encounter from writers under genuine duress—like Neruda, Darwish, Akhmatova—seem so striking and

refreshing. The threat of imminent arrest or bombing concentrates the mind amazingly, resulting in a kind of authenticity not available to dilettantes.

It is important that we deal honestly with our own posing. Poems from the war front are not necessarily better than random musings on Bodhisattvas, but they *are* different in assumption and seriousness. D.H. Tracy has given us a useful means to evaluate our own integrity and that of others.

DAVID RADAVICH
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

Dear Editor,

Michael Hofmann's essay about the poetry of Gottfried Benn reminded me of the surprise I always feel at the surprise evinced by audiences at the conjunction of medicine and poetry. Physicians are surrounded by drama and are trained to listen to their patients and elicit their stories. So is it any wonder that so many eminent writers were trained as physicians and, as Hofmann points out, actively practiced their craft throughout the years of their creative endeavors? In addition to William Carlos Williams, Bulgakov, and Céline, the roster of physician writers includes Rabelais, Tobias Smollett, Schiller, Keats, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John McCrae, and Somerset Maugham.

The ability of physicians to identify with the struggles of their patients, that special empathy that takes one person out of himself in order to believe the reality of another, may be what Keats meant by negative capability. Though Keats quickly abandoned medicine for poetry, Arthur Conan Doyle invented Sherlock Holmes while suffering the dolors of a failing ophthalmology practice, and Anton Chekhov died of tuberculosis, having spent seven years as a physician in a sanitarium for consumptives. In a letter to a friend (c. 1886), Chekhov wrote: "Medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress. When I get fed up with one, I spend the night with the other. Though it is irregular, it is less boring this way, and besides, neither of them loses anything through my infidelity."

MICHAEL SALCMAN
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

MAJOR JACKSON is the author of *Leaving Saturn* (University of Georgia Press, 2002) and *Hoops* (W.W. Norton, 2006). He is a professor of English at the University of Vermont.

MEDBH MCGUCKIAN was born in Belfast in 1950. Her recent books of poems are *Selected Poems: 1978–1994* (1997) and *The Book of the Angel* (2004), both published by The Gallery Press.

JACQUES RÉDA was born in Lunéville in 1929 and lives in Paris. His most recent collection of poems is *L'adoption du système métrique* (Gallimard, 2004).

ATSURO RILEY was brought up in the South Carolina lowcountry and lives near San Francisco. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *McSweeney's*, and *Threepenny Review*.

WARD SCHUMAKER* is author/illustrator of the children's books *Dance*, *In My Garden*, and *Sing a Song of Circus*, as well as limited-edition letterpress versions of Gertrude Stein and M.F.K. Fisher.

ANDREW SHIELDS received an NEA award to translate the poetry of Jacques Réda. His most recent book of translations is *Tousled Beauty: Selected Poems* by Dieter M. Gräf (Green Integer, 2005).

ALISSA VALLES* is a poet and translator currently living in Warsaw.

NANCE VAN WINCKEL's fourth book of poems is *Beside Ourselves* (Miami University Press, 2003). A new book of poems, *No Starling*, is forthcoming from the University of Washington Press in 2007.

EMILY WARN's* third collection of poems, *The Shadow Architect*, is forthcoming from Copper Canyon Press. She is the editor of PoetryFoundation.org.

THEODORE WOROZBYT's first book, *The Dauber Wings* (Dream Horse Press, 2006), won the American Poetry Journal Book Prize. His work appears widely.

ELEANOR WILNER's most recent books are *The Girl with Bees in Her Hair* (2004) and *Reversing the Spell: New and Selected Poems* (1998), both from Copper Canyon Press.

* First appearance in *Poetry*.

Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowships

Two Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowships are awarded annually through a national competition open to undergraduate and graduate students in creative writing or English. Students must be American citizens born on or before April 16, 1976 and must not have published a collection of poetry or had one accepted for future publication.

Writing program directors are invited to nominate one student-poet, regardless of the student's current field of study. In the case of schools without creative writing programs, nominations from the head of the English department will be accepted. Students who have completed, or plan to complete, a graduate program in either English or creative writing by August 31, 2007, are ineligible for a fellowship.

In the case of a poet who is not currently enrolled in a university but who is independently pursuing a poetic career, nominations may be made by a teacher or colleague familiar with the poet's work.

All nominations must be accompanied by an official application form, along with samples of the candidate's work. Complete rules and application forms are available on request or can be downloaded at poetryfoundation.org. **Applications must be postmarked by April 16, 2007. Electronic submissions will not be considered.**

Each Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship is in the amount of $15,000, for use in further studies of poetry. The fellowship winners will be announced early in the fall. For further information contact:

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CALL FOR LETTERS

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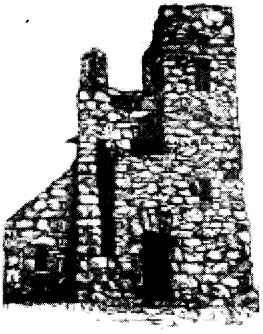

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People who talk about poetry's social utility often concentrate on content. They think, perhaps, that poetry Tells the Truth, or Provides Solace. These notions make me queasy, and are treason to poetry. If you're crawling to poems on your hands and knees, as I once heard a famous poet remark—in my view, you're not crawling to poetry. Prozac would probably work better.

DAISY FRIED

ALSO