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PAUL CELAN

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM
Paul Celan’s influence and importance seem to have grown steadily in the thirty-four years since his death, and this despite—or, in the case of working poets, more likely because of—the notorious difficulty of his poems. Even readers fluent in German find the poetry slow and difficult going, while those who must read him partly or wholly in translation must also face the fact that he is more problematic to translators than any comparable figure of the twentieth century.

Since poets enjoy challenges, then, Celan has not lacked for readers and translators among contemporary poets. The conversation about his work has been much stimulated by John Felstiner’s efforts, spanning biography, critical interpretation, and deeply pondered translation. Michael Hamburger’s versions have circulated widely and been much discussed and admired. More recently, Heather McHugh and Nikolai Popov collaborated on the prize-winning volume Glottal Stop, published by Wesleyan (2000). Julian Semilian and Sanda Agalidi have given us the Romanian poems (Green Integer, 2003). Meanwhile, work on the especially difficult later poems was initiated by the late Katharine Washburn, collaborating with Margret Guillemin (Last Poems, North Point, 1986), and has continued vigorously in the work of Pierre Joris, whose translations of the late volumes Breathturn, Threadsuns, and Lightduress (Green Integer) have done much to illuminate Celan’s late phase. The University of California is scheduled to publish Joris’ Selected Poems of Celan sometime in 2005. Other notable Celan translations by Muska Nagel and, many years back, Joachim Neugroschel help round out this picture of courageous attempts to bring this poet over into English.

The poems often seem intensely private. There can be no doubt that they are deeply inflected by the historical events, primarily the Holocaust, that haunted Celan’s mature years. Yet it is also becoming clearer that this poet positions himself uniquely with respect to his medium, the German language, questioning it fiercely, and that he is often reporting on experiences that involve
perception at the edge of the senses, an opening into visionary experience, sometimes intensely painful, sometimes cautiously redemptive.

As is often the case with poets, whose aberrations journalists and the public love to dwell upon, the facts of the life, including the episodes of depression and eventual suicide, have been used to misread and oversimplify the poems. In that sense Celan can be seen as a challenge to read, first in the light of history and personal suffering and then on beyond those facts, taking in the way his poems transcend both personality and circumstance. The poets who have contributed to this symposium are engaged in that enterprise, and their contributions, we hope, will contribute to the larger ongoing conversation about this important poet's place — in world literature in general and lyric poetry in particular. Out of desperation and pain Celan seems to have built something lasting and beautiful, or as McHugh and Popov have put it: “In the face of grief, in the light of death, in the vale of tears, what does intellect do? Of sinking things, thinking sings.”
FUGUE OF DEATH

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
drink it and drink it
we are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie there
A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden hair
Margarete
he writes it and walks from the house the stars glitter he whistles
his dogs up
he whistles his Jews out and orders a grave to be dug in the earth
he commands us now on with the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink in the mornings at noon we drink you at nightfall
drink you and drink you
A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden hair
Margarete
Your ashen hair Shulamith we are digging a grave in the sky it is
ample to lie there

He shouts stab deeper in earth you there you others you sing and
you play
he grabs at the iron in his belt and swings it and blue are his eyes
stab deeper your spades you there and you others play on for the
dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon in the mornings we drink you at nightfall
drink you and drink you
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He shouts play sweeter death’s music death comes as a master
from Germany
he shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you shall climb to the sky
then you'll have a grave in the clouds it is ample to lie there

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death comes as a master from Germany
we drink you at nightfall and morning we drink you and drink you
a master from Germany death comes with eyes that are blue
with a bullet of lead he will hit in the mark he will hit you
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete
he hunts us down with his dogs in the sky he gives us a grave
he plays with the serpents and dreams death comes as a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

translated by Christopher Middleton
Certainly the most powerful aesthetic experience I can remember as an undergraduate at Oberlin College was hearing the poet Stuart Friebert reading, in the German, Paul Celan's great poem "Todesfuge."

I had been raised with fugues. My father Alan's favorite music was Bach cantatas. As he got older, and his health deteriorated, he began to think of death, and his favorite cantata became Bach's Cantata 106, *Actus Tragicus*, but that cantata presents the act of dying as a stately passage between this world and Paradise where a man and a woman join. It's a sexy piece of music. (Indeed, much of Bach is sexy.)

Until hearing "Todesfuge" I had believed that musical "counterpoint" was impossible in literature. How could you have two or more parts at once? But I've since found a few poems which appear to. One of the most beautiful is "The Bittern," by Sandra McPherson.

Like all great music, "Todesfuge" transcends its occasion. As the poet Stephen Dunn writes in his memoir *Walking Light*, "the poem's greatest risk: to make a 'beautiful' construct out of material that is heinous. . . ."

The orchestration of those voices is what breaks our hearts, more than the voices themselves.
SPEAK YOU TOO

Speak you too,
speak as the last,
say out your say.

Speak —
But don’t split off No from Yes.
Give your say this meaning too:
give it the shadow.

Give it shadow enough,
give it as much
as you see spread round you from
midnight to midday and midnight.

Look around:
see how things all come alive —
By death! Alive!
Speaks true who speaks shadow.

But now the place shrinks, where you stand:
Where now, shadow-stripped, where?
Climb. Grope upwards.
Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer!
Finer: a thread
the star wants to descend on:
so as to swim down below, down here
where it sees itself shimmer: in the swell
of wandering words.

translated by John Felstiner
Lee Upton

WHAT ISN'T A RIDDLE ISN'T SPEAKING

“Speak You Too” puts forward injunctions immediately, through its title. How are we to understand such a title? As imperative? As prescription? The body of the poem is marked with demands: appealing, advising, defending. The poem refuses to divide contraries between presence and absence, affirmation and negation, clarity and obscurity, repeating its words for speech and shadow. Famously, Gertrude Stein argued that she never repeats. In Paul Celan’s poem, words return and announce their repetitiveness, as filaments between stanzas and across contraries. Like a riddle, the poem keeps its opposing terms circulating, for Celan suggests that what isn’t a riddle isn’t speaking. The furthest speech of poetry must enclose the deepest contradictions.

Once we apprehend the sense of magnitude of Celan’s images, their opening out into limitless space, we may suddenly be brought close to some other fine, barely visible point — to the image of a stray hair or starlight. Perceptions of the obdurate and the stony rise in Celan’s poem, but so too does an acute enactment of what dissolves — as if the body were a thin membrane, nearly transparent, poised to disappear, and betrayed into vulnerability. If we attempt to describe what Celan does in making such oscillations for us, some of them occurring within a single line, our words for action and relationship announce their insufficiency. Certainly any notion of paradox hardly seems adequate. His poems claim speech, but it is a vertiginous speech in which time burrows into us. As Celan writes, “[A] poem is not timeless. Certainly it lays claim to infinity, it seeks to reach through time — through it, not above and beyond it” — and thus not above or beyond Celan’s own experience of forced labor in Romanian work camps, and the disappearance of his parents into a concentration camp and their deaths there. At times we may be taken by the way Celan’s poetry is abetted by lyric traces of what might be called beauty, but it is impossible to imagine Celan saying with Wallace Stevens, “Death is the mother of beauty.”

In David Markson’s strange novel, Vanishing Point, an author, troubled by failing health, creates a compendium of anecdotes,
quotations, and unusual facts as a tentative hoard against his losses. One statement he collects may draw us up short: "Paul Celan was apparently comfortable in translating verse from no fewer than eight languages." We may be moved by Celan's facility, and by his determination to transport meaning across the borders of many languages. Despite the temptation to disengage from translating the incomprehensible nature of human suffering, Celan is an advocate for assuming speech, but it is a particularly demanding speech in any language that he advocates: a speech attuned to betrayal.

Any poem may seem stamped with fate, as if what we do to language we will do to ourselves. Even in poetry repulsed by violence, if we are looking for self-annihilation we may find it. It is hard not to read "Speak You Too" as a prophecy of Celan's suicide in its final image of a poet, standing on a reduced platform, exposed and vulnerable. Yet the poem releases us in the act of translating meaning as star and reflected light, body and shadow, meet. His concluding images resonate with those in his "Speech on the Occasion of Receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen" in which Celan argues that the "ways of thought" in his poetry "are the efforts of someone who, overarched by stars that are human handiwork, and who, shelterless in this till now undreamt-of sense and thus most uncannily in the open, goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality." In "Speak You Too" the body becomes as fine and barely visible as a thread, but a thread upon which both the known and the unknown travel, where something never before apprehended may find a route to us.

"Speak You Too" refuses to allow the mind to rest, sloughing off assured knowledge in favor of enacting mental processes that resist containment. In less extreme circumstances, such an impetus toward volition is a motive force for much poetry: the refusal to be anyone's prey. The poem doubles and divides, overwhelms and splits, untying referents until a conceptual system is lifted by the corners. To make one claim is to bring its opposite into the open. Celan urges us to make our claims without betraying the
riddle of what we are — beings whose origin and end we can only begin to imagine.


I wish to thank Theodore Ziolkowski for generously answering my questions about “Sprich Auch Du.” Any errors, of course, are my own.
Ravenswarmed wheatsea.
Which heaven's blue? The lower one? The upper one?
Late arrow, shot from the soul.

translated by David Young
A man with his back to you, muttering. That might be many readers' first impression of Paul Celan and his poetry. As they begin to make out the muttering, it may strike them as some kind of weird allegorical speech, all staring eyes and stony slopes and icy cliffs, along with the blurry presence of unidentified persons who may or may not be alive. Knowing that the Holocaust is involved helps focus the poems, increasing our respect and mustering our patience for deciphering what seem to be allegorical representations of it, but sooner or later many readers retire in defeat, either from the German originals or from the available translations, and Celan seems to remain a poet's poet, the special enthusiasm of a few dedicated souls.

Celan hated labels — surrealist, hermetic — and he was right to imply that they are not so much shortcuts to understanding as distortions of any good poet's individuality. So applying two more of them — visionary, allegorist — is not likely a gesture he would have welcomed. In experimenting with the way these terms might apply to Celan, I am mostly mapping my own slow progress toward an appreciation of this difficult reading experience. I want to use the term "visionary" because I believe that this side of the poet's temperament accounts for a large proportion of the poetry's difficulty. It isn't so much that Celan is being deliberately obscure as that the things he is reporting on are experiences most people don't have: encounters at the outer limits of language, consciousness, and the material world. And I want to use "allegorical" because I think when the reporting falls short it strikes readers as allegorical rather than symbolic — a sort of encoded systematic speech that needs to be replaced with a second system of abstractions and events to which it deliberately does not refer directly. Thus, for example, Celan says "I saw my poplar descend to the water" (in "Ich hörte sagen," the first poem in Von Schwelle zu Schwelle, 1955) and John Felstiner argues that through the sound link of Pappel to the Latin populus, along with the resemblance of the tree to a human figure, Celan wants the
tree to stand for a people, “those arrested by untimely death” (Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew, 65-66). This feels to me not so much like standard literary symbolism as the employment of a specialized vocabulary of signs, the kind we sometimes get in allegory. When used in lyric poetry it can feel flat, arbitrary, and reductive. That, I think, is one frequent response to Celan. When he fails, or when we fail him as readers, his world tends to reduce itself to allegory, while when he succeeds he rises to a visionary level that few poets can attain and sustain.

When the poems fall into allegory, that may be the poet’s shortcoming or, just as likely, the reader’s. When they rise into vision, again, both poet and reader need to bring significant effort to bear. My history of reading and translating him, a gingerly exploration of his strange world, has increased my respect for his accuracy, his integrity, and his mastery. I’m not ready to worship yet, like those enthusiasts I mentioned above; but I’m a lot more comfortable in their company, and his, than I used to be.

We say we are in the presence of allegory when we feel that the details of the text are systematic references to something else and that we can read the “real” subject out from the apparent system of veiled reference. And in the case of Celan, of course, this “real” subject is, on a historical level, the Holocaust, and on a personal level the loss of his family, especially of his mother, whose simultaneous absence and presence seem to make his world almost unbearable. Her loss, along with all the dead who accompanied her, is an erasure from the world that the poet cannot ever overlook. It is a nothingness that has become an everything. The dead can neither be forgotten or appeased. They torment the speakers of the poems relentlessly, until the poet’s suicide allows him to join them.

Without repudiating this way of reading Celan, I wish to propose a broader approach, one that contends that even without the historical catastrophe and the personal losses, this poet would have found himself working, again and again, on the borders of the inexpressible. Here’s an example from Von Schwelle zu Schwelle (From Threshold to Threshold):
FROM DARKNESS TO DARKNESS

You opened your eyes — I saw my darkness live.
I see to the root of the matter:
it's mine there as well, and it lives.

Is this a river crossing? Will it waken us?
Whose light follows at my feet
searching around for a ferryman?

The speaker here is reporting an experience of near-death and a set of recognitions about the presence of death in life, and perhaps vice versa. While it may be useful to identify the Holocaust as the motivating event, and the absent mother as the "you" addressed, it may also be useful to put those identifications to one side and take the experience more literally. There is darkness and there is light. The speaker surmises a river crossing and a ferryman. The poem seems to recognize that the darkness of our existence is ubiquitous and that there may be another possibility beyond life, one that we grope toward as an alternative. As in the best of Rilke, the poem provides questions, not answers, and it deserves to be taken at face value rather than simply decoded into personal guilt and clinical depression. I think Celan is not trying to be obscure here; he's simply reduced to reporting his conjectures and questions.

If a poet is a visionary, then he or she isn't really an allegorist, in my sense of the word (Dante and Petrarch, belonging to a different world, are an entirely different matter), though he or she will sometimes resemble one. I sometimes think we are all heirs of Mallarmé, who wanted poetry to express the inexpressible and who sometimes reads like an allegorist when either we or he are not up to taking him more literally. Celan may have understood his line of descent through the Symbolist master, and he may have wished he could build a vocabulary and a poetics that would do justice to the Mallarmean agenda. That is certainly suggested by the poem I have chosen for my exemplary text, the kind
of poem, I would suggest, by which bewildered readers can begin to find their way into this master's world.

Here we are helped by several facts: our familiarity with van Gogh's art, with his own tormented existence, with the notoriety that surrounds his last painting. Celan is ekphrastic for once, commenting on a well-known work of art, so that we can see more clearly what interests him about it: not the fact of the painter's suicide, nor the violence of his style, but rather his experience at the edge of transcendence. Here is the German:

**UNTER EIN BILD**

Rabenüberschwärmte Weizenwoge.
Welchen Himmels Blau? Des untern? Obern?
Später Pfeil, der von der Seele schnellte.
Stärkres Schirren, Näh'res Glühen. Beide Welten.

There are at least two other translations of this poem. Here is John Felstiner's:

**BELOW A PAINTING**

Corn wave swarming with ravens.
Which heaven's blue? Below? Above?
Later arrow, that sped out from the soul.
Stronger whirring. Nearer glowing. Two worlds touching.

*(Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan, 98)*

And here is Muska Nagel's:

**UNDER A PICTURE**

Ravenswarmed wheatbillows.
Blue of which sky? The lower? The upper?
Belated arrow, sped from the soul.

*(A Voice: Translations of Paul Celan, 51)*
The economy is typical of Celan. The title does not suggest "standing under a picture," but rather carries (as Stuart Friebert pointed out to me in conversation) the sense of motion and activity. I've settled on the idea of writing a caption or legend for the picture, following a suggestion made to me by Walter Strauss.

Then comes the four-line text. One line is given over to a general characterization of the painting. Notice that Celan, in "translating" van Gogh, is perfectly willing to change his crows into ravens, those Symbolist favorites. He packs a good deal of sensation into just two compound words, a gesture that I have, a little dubiously, tried to follow. The second line lists the questions the painting raises, about what is being represented and where we are located. A third line connects the painting and the painter, using the metaphor of the arrow, an ambiguous object that may wound or transform, or both. The final line records the speaker's experience, which resembles transcendence but is anti-transcendental in insisting on "both worlds." He does not leave this world; instead he is somehow present in both at once, as he clearly feels is also the case with the picture. To experience this picture is to hear the whirring wings, to feel a glow coming nearer (the glow of the wheat, the glow of the sun that ripened it, the glow of the light of God's countenance?), to be in "beide Welten." I submit that this sense of simultaneously occupying two different realities is one that Celan had regularly, and that it is often what his poetry tries to represent.

The popular mythology that surrounds the painting is that it represents the state of mind that may have led to the painter's suicide. We now know that it is not really his last painting and that it is more celebratory than that popular view allows for. Van Gogh struggled with increasing bouts of depression, but his paintings, he felt, including this one, reflected "the health and restorative forces that I see in the country" (brochure for the National Gallery exhibition, Van Gogh's Van Goghs). Celan seems to have understood this, for his emphasis is not on the threatening nature of the sky or the grain or the birds, but on the approach to the ineffable, the inexpressible, that van Gogh enacted and that the sensitive onlooker, "undergoing" the picture, may replicate.
Celan was a lonely man, looking for kindred spirits — Char, Buber, Dickinson, Heidegger, Mandelstam — and addressing or translating them when he found them. This poem would seem to record such a moment of connection with van Gogh, and its value for us, as a guide to reading this poet, is that we are less likely to succumb to the urge to allegorize, either on an historical or a psychic level. We may take it as it is, a thing in itself, a complete experience, carefully rendered. Celan’s poems do not always make it easy for us to follow this practice, but that is how I believe he meant them to be taken, and how we should try to respond.

The man with his back to you, muttering? He might just be a priest, handling the preparations of a sacrament. Or a rabbi, or a shaman, conversing with the dead.
FLOWER

The stone.
The stone in the air, which I followed.
Your eye, as blind as the stone.

We were
hands,
we scooped the darkness empty, we found
the word that ascended summer:
Flower.

Flower — a blindman’s word.
Your eye and my eye:
they take care
of water.

Growth.
Heartwall by heartwall
adds on petals.

One more word like this, and the hammers
will be swinging free.

*translated by John Felstiner*
I love Celan’s work one poem at a time. I love each to the degree I understand it, after work and a certain kind of submission — even a certain amount of impatience. Other poets (Stevens, Rilke) teach me how to read them. At times, in different poems, Celan works in registers and in traditions about which I don’t know enough; often I don’t even know that I don’t know what I’m missing.

I like that stretch. Maybe that’s why I do love the poems I do, because they expand to include me. Celan’s “Flower” works like that. Eventually it moves me because it shows me something about the longing of the solitary consciousness for connection, about the grief of the lyric (and of translation), and about the difficulty of working in a language that is informed (as all languages are) by its own history — the history of the poem’s birth-language and of its family of form.

In “Flower” Celan seems to me to be thinking through a question of inheritance. That is, he thinks-the-question-through, toward a resolution of the limits of the lyric as he inherits it, and he moves it forward (watch the sounding image at the end, when the stamens of the flower promise to ring like “hammers,” in an open future space). He also thinks-through-the-question, as the poem realizes itself by means of its own alienated linguistic history (as the flower in the poem emerges from the stone in the air).

The poem summons images from the history of the German lyric, in order to use them and to reframe them at the same time. From Novalis’ idealist journey-novel Heinrich von Ofterdingen (pub. post., 1802) comes the image of the flower. In Novalis it’s a blue flower, a future-oriented Utopian dream/image that comes to represent, for the medieval poet-hero’s quest, a vision of an ideal distant woman whom he loves. For several generations of Continental poets, that blue flower came to embody a quality of Romantic yearning.

Further, the relation of the mind-flower to the air-stone in the Celan poem recalls poems by early-20th-century Austrian poet Georg Trakl, especially because Trakl uses Novalis’ metaphor ex-
pressionistically: Trakl meditates about how a unified consciousness emerges, through a fierce self-articulation, at the point where painful material and historical realities clash with an individual sensibility, in the form of language ("At your feet / the graves of the dead ones, / if you put the stone in the silver hand... // ...Blue flower / that softly resounds in the yellowed stone"). ("Zu deinem Füssen / Öffnen sich die Gräber der Toten, / Wenn du die Stirne in die silberne Hände legst... // ...Blaue Blume, / Die liese tönt in vergilbtem Gestein" [Trakl’s “Verklärung,” 1914].) Here is Trakl’s famous poem/homage to the older poet:

TO NOVALIS

In dark ground, the holy Stranger rests.
God took the cry of grief from his gentle mouth
as he sank back, in his blossoming.
One blue flower
sustains his song, in pain’s nocturnal house.

Echoing Novalis, Celan recalls Romantic/Symbolist theories of an ideal Utopian verbal union of language and consciousness. Echoing Trakl, Celan recalls a disillusioned post-Romantic tradition that longs for such implausible union and that identifies consciousness with such desire — a desire not for language but for what language displaces, what poetry names but cannot be (or can it?). As the flower emerges within his poem, aligning with those others, Celan recalls that lyric tradition of paradox and desire and displacement and absence, a lineage his poem-flower belongs to, submerges, advances, and resists. That inheritance is complicated by Celan’s resistance to it, because of German history. In part because of his resistance, the tradition lives beneath the surface of Celan’s poem, both functional and ambivalently repressed. (It is especially invisible to translation; that inaccessibility is the grief of translation, that it can’t provide, but needs and displaces, a formal history, a context or ground, for its target-text.)

This technique isn’t postmodern, nor ultimately contextual or inter-textual. If you believe that language is the material of
consciousness, such rootedness is the form that consciousness requires. Celan’s flower becomes the figure of the Poem/mind, as the particular poem describes its own emergence. It has a past, and it promises a future: a future of hammers (construction? violence? pollinating stamens?). And yet the poem doesn’t seem to be a poem “about” poetry or literary history. It shows me about how the mind looks for continuity and community, often in retrospection (“We were / hands”); it shows me how the poem’s discovery of its own verbal nature makes a shape, in a diction that embodies the only thoughts consciousness can know (“we found / the word that ascended summer”), because the mind is made of language. It shows me how the mind joins others through language, building through intimate connections (“heartwall by heartwall”) toward a precarious, powerful, open, delicate future that can be anticipated but that never arrives. That future is only promised — that’s the nature of a future — : it survives as the poem’s desire. I recognize that longing, and that recognition moves me.
Etched away by the radiant wind of your speech, the motley gossip of pseudo-experience — the hundred-tongued My-poem, the Lie-noem.
a path through human-shaped snow,
through penitent cowl-ice, to
the glacier’s
welcoming chambers and tables.

Deep
in the time crevasse,
by
honeycomb-ice
there waits, a Breathcrystal,
your unannullable
witness.

translated by John Felstiner

* 

ETCHED AWAY from
the ray-shot wind of your language
the garish talk of rubbed-off experience — the hundred-tongued pseudo-poem, the noem.

Whirled
clear,
free
your way through the human-shaped snow,
the penitents’ snow, to
the hospitable
glacier rooms and tables.

Deep
in Time’s crevasse
by
the alveolate ice
waits, a crystal of breath,
your irreversible
witness.

translated by Michael Hamburger
An encounter with Paul Celan’s poems often raises the question of whether or not it is possible to translate them. In his introduction to his 1972 translation of a selection of the poet’s early poems, Michael Hamburger says “much of the later work is virtually untranslatable,” though Hamburger eventually took up that task in a selected poems in 1980. John Felstiner’s recent biography of Celan is an extended and profound meditation as well on the possibility of translating him — at one point Felstiner writes hopefully “his genius at uncalled-for repetition becomes a symptom proving that translation, a form of repetition, can indeed occur” and at another, “because we cannot translate Ziv [a word for the light in the Shechinah found in Gershom Scholem’s Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit], we must not.” Felstiner also went on, in 2000, to publish a selected poems.

Yet perhaps instead of asking whether it is possible to translate Celan’s work, we should first ask if it is ethical to translate his work — that is, ethical to resolve the poems into the fixed forms of new poems in other languages, for in many ways questions of what can and cannot be done in translation are not adequate to the problems of witnessing, facing, and addressing that Celan’s work raises. Of course we can take our clue from the poet himself, whose lifelong project of translating poems and prose by Mandelstam, Blok, Dickinson, Shakespeare, Cioran, Esenin, Ungaretti, Apollinaire, Rimbaud, Valéry, Char, Michaux, and many others speaks to his regard for, and the hopes he placed in, translation. And we can argue for a literal translation that stays as close as possible to the meanings of individual words. But words live in speech as well as in language, and by insisting on a decontextualized German, by in many ways treating German as if it were a dead language, Celan forces us to read between the uncertain traces of etymology and the unheard resonances of the colloquial. Celan said in conversation “no one person is like another ... only distanced can my reader understand me ... always grasping only the grilled bars between us.” These “grills” can be seen to split words into morphemes and regroup them by force.
Celan relies on condensation and displacement, neologism and historical resonance at once, so that translation seems to have begun from the start — in composition.

Nevertheless, poems are not persons and whereas the linguistic capabilities of persons may seem to be able to transcend the differences between poems, it is not at all clear that similarities between poems can transcend the differences between persons and, specifically, that poems can remedy the problem of the unintelligibility of the expression of suffering even, or perhaps especially, when the expression of suffering is inseparable from the poet’s intention. Behind Celan’s comments on likeness, we can hear the imploring questions of Lamentations 2:13: “What shall I take to witness for thee? what shall I liken to thee ... What shall I equal to thee, that I may comfort thee?”

The particularity of Celan’s art demands an inexhaustible and universalizing labor of attention and semantic judgments, a task for the present and the future. But this very particularity demands that we also refuse all efforts to universalize or simulate his practice, or to merge the historical specificity of his referents with other historical terms. Two of the greatest torments of his post-war life — the ready adaptation of his “Todesfuge” by German audiences in the generations after the war and the false accusation of plagiarism brought against him by Claire Goll — are centered in the negation of individuality that joins too-ready appropriation and too-facile similarity. Doesn’t seriously translating Celan’s intention commit us to refusing the finitude of translations — to turn instead to the literal German words of his poems and books of poems and, whether we know no German or some or are native speakers, learn and re-learn the German he writes as a perpetually foreign language?

Perhaps the only way to approach Celan’s work is to attempt to create a manifold reading that, as Felstiner indicates in his remarks on Ziv, does not forget the ever-present possibility of untranslatability and even invisibility and so constantly defers the creation of a new or substitute work. All translations of Celan’s work can be brought under the consideration of an unfolding understanding that also leans against, continually comes back to
rest upon, his inscribed German words. Looking at versions of "WEGGEBEIZT" by these two well-known translators of Celan, we can see some of the places in the German that resist translation, or open to it, or in various ways cause gaps or disparities.

Both Felstiner and Anne Carson, in her study Economy of the Unlost, discuss the importance of the initial capitalized word "WEGGEBEIZT" and its relation to acid techniques in printmaking and particularly in the work of the poet’s wife, Gisèle Lestrange-Celan. Felstiner suggests that the poem "has a curative effect just by sharing in his wife’s art." And Carson writes: "both etching and epigraphy are processes of excision which seek to construct a moment of attention by cutting away or eliding away what is irrelevant so as to leave a meaning exposed on the surface. Drastic negation is inherent in the physical act." Yet once the translator makes a judgment to emphasize beizen in the opening weggebeizt as "etched," the word’s secondary meaning in geological erosion is submerged. Reading vom as "by" or "from" in turn results in varied ideas of agency, and it is not clear if the wind is the bearer of radiance or the beneficiary of it. Strahlen also merges the largest scale of nature with that of human marks in that it can indicate radioactive rays or penciled rays, and bunte can mean “motley” or “garish,” but it also means “colorful,” and is a word used in speaking of color printing. Later zvirbeln will similarly have a visual effect in gewirbelt’s resonance to the whirled state of snowflakes, smoke, and drum-rolls released into the air.

The break after Mein indicates that a noun will arrive on the next line and here the possessive is linked to Meineid, a perjury or false note. Gedicht would mean “poem,” but suggests, with this hovering prefix, “Falsepoem,” also thereby indicating the invisible echo gedacht (imaginary or made up) once we reach the interposition of Genicht — the “not poem,” which both translators, though in different order, convey as the “noem.” But does the

neologism "noern" really carry over the subtle shift in perception that occurs at the line break and then continues in the unfolding sequence of sublimated words and echo effects?

In breaking off at durch den Menschen — "through the men," Celan evokes a letter he wrote to Margul-Sperber, "mensch during the Nazi-time seemed a rhymeless word calling for rhyme" (Felstiner 192). He goes on to explain that Nazi guards called their Jewish prisoners "dogs" and their German shepherds "men" (Felstiner 27). Celan often practices a reversal of letters that Felstiner calls an "inverse" translation. Earlier we could say that the opening weggebeizt has such a relation to gebieten (order or command as the inverse of erase) and here "menschen" finds a "rhyme" in [men]Schnee. Earlier weg indicated something disposable, thrown away, or erased, and these meanings now come into contrast with Weg, which Felstiner decides to translate as "path" and Hamburger as "way." Felstiner's version thereby carries slightly more strongly how Weg as a noun in Celan's work resonates to Heidegger's famous essay on the Holzweg — a timber-track or forest path. Such a path is a way to thought and poetry as "under way" toward truth in language. Weg as path and weg as wiped out become contrary referents to the same signs, as something with the authenticity of the possessive and first-hand earlier bore as well the inauthenticity of the fake or lie.

Snow in Celan has a complex resonance as early as his 1942/43 "Winter" ("it's falling, Mother, snow in the Ukraine"), written after he learned of his mother's murder by gunshot in the camp where she was imprisoned. It was a particularly cold winter and in 1943 he changed the title of his poem "Mutter" to "Schwarze Flocken," evoking black or dark flakes that could refer to the descent of ash or snow alike. In "Mutter"/"Schwarze Flocken" Celan also wrote "autumn in its monkish cowl brought tidings my way," and both poems allude to a 16th-c. German folk song, "The snow has fallen" (Felstiner 18-19). The Büßerschnee are fields of clean glacial snow melted by the sun into single peaks that resemble figures wearing cowls. Buß indicates penitent or repentant, and hence "penitent's snow." In English these phenomena are called "sun cups." When Celan goes on to speak of
Wabeneis, using another compound, he evokes a different geological formation — the thin dust film over snow found at high altitudes that is then melted by the sun into the shapes of polygons with clean hollows in the center. Again, two contrary images are presented — the peaked pristine landscapes of sun cups and the chiaroscuro surfaces of honeycomb snow formations. When Felstiner writes “the time crevasse,” he indicates geological time, whereas Hamburger commits himself to the more symbolic and allegorical choice of “Time’s crevasse” and ends up allegorizing the ice as well as “alveolate” ice. But Wabehonecomb is already a metaphorical term, and we are thrown back to the initial image of Sprache as both the everyday speech that animates the fixity of language and the language that freezes the metaphors of everyday speech.

Atemkristall also resists singular reference. Celan composed, in tandem with his wife’s work, a series of lyrics called Atemkristall, which he referred to as “a word to witness for us both ... born from your etchings.” The first poem of this group begins “Feel free to / regale me with snow,” and Lestrange-Celan’s engravings were made in fact in shades of white, black, and gray. “Atem” also signifies Celan’s long-standing motif of the pneuma and ruach (Greek and Hebrew respectively for the spirit or breath). Kristall is as well metonymic, according to Felstiner, throughout Celan’s work, to Kristallnacht, which Celan had glimpsed as he passed through Berlin on his way to France in 1938. In the early 1950s his poem Kristall yoked the crystal’s perfection and solidity to the breakage of Nazi violence. Yet Kristall also recalls the basic difference between natural forms like waves and snow cups that are events in process (moving, freezing, thawing, shifting) and crystalline structures, where the form is inseparable from the persistence of the material.2

In his classic 1922 study of iconology, Iconostasis, Pavel Florensky wrote of engraving as a deliberative and rational practice.

He suggested that engraving “manifests the intellectual construction of images from elements wholly unlike the elements in the object being depicted; i.e. from the rational intellect’s combining of various affirmations and negations. The engraving is therefore a schematic image constructed on the axioms of logic (identity, contradiction, the excluded third, and so on); and, in this sense, engraving has a profound connection to German philosophy, for, in both, the essential and definitive act is the deductive determination of reality solely through the logic of affirmation and negation, a logic with neither sensuous nor spiritual connections — in short, the task in both is to create everything from nothing.”

Florensky goes on to point out that on a piece of paper, an ephemeral surface that is “crumpled or torn easily, absorbs water, burns instantly, grows moldy, cannot even be cleaned,” lines appear that have been made on a “very hard surface, one attacked and torn and deeply cut by the engraver’s sharp knife.” Hence the hard engraved strokes constantly contradict the fragile printed surface. Furthermore, by “arbitrarily choosing a surface,” he contends, the engraver works with individualism and freedom: “in proclaiming its own law, [the engraver] thinks it unnecessary to attend to that law whereby all things in creation become authentically real.”

“WEGGENBEIZT” as the “bitten away,” that which cuts into surface by acid (mordant) to reveal negatively the underlying image or content, seems to rhyme inversely against the accumulating fixed structures of Wabeneis and crystals. And just as the engraver’s lines are hollows made in a hard surface from which the crushed paper picks up the black ink, so does the glacier inversely plow its whiteness up and through the earth. Under the glacier and under the acid, too, “ground” awaits its figuration. Thus the initial term of the poem surely indicates an important context for the work; yet to emphasize the initial idea of the poem as central is to underestimate much of the work of the poem in time.

To cut into matter is the inverse of to free, whirling, in the air. Perhaps under and over the inauthentic, the authentic is uncovered or takes shape. The black and white and gray imagery of the poem etches away colorful lies and deceptions on a field of white. The mother as source of life is associated with the frozen snow that accompanied her death, yet human shapes begin to take form. The penitent’s snow, like an engraving, and like the familiar profiles/chalices gestalt, can be “read” as positive and negative, humanly inhabited and empty, space at once. Like a pocket of air trapped within a block of ice or the crevasses of an avalanche, a “breathcrystal” can hold a possibility of life — a fixed shape that is also immaterial and so cannot be obliterated; the breathcrystal emerges with the “breath turns” (Atemwende), as Pierre Joris has translated this term, of the poetic line itself.

Nevertheless, such a redemptive reading of the work of acid in the poem depends upon our not hearing the “tief” sounds or motifs of the poem. We make snow angels and snow men (another image of menschen-gestaltigen Schnee) to convince ourselves of the relevance of the human figure to nature’s blankest canvas; we carve snow huts and rooms to make a space of dwelling where there is none. The biting away of the plate is not a final state, but an intermediate one. Similarly, Celan steps his poem, suspending the certainty of nouns throughout. The lines of the poem are themselves like rays; their sources and referents are bedazzled by the unfolding language that conveys them, and the clearest, most irrefutable, words are those of undefined process and relation. A witness in turn is irrefutable, unannullable, and irreversible because he or she attends and waits — there in the world of description rather than explanation. Can we, too, not attend this poem as a work that is “bitten away” — one that has not yet revealed its content? Sometimes the print-maker leaves a thin veil of ink over the plate, giving it what is called the “plate tone” — an ineffable veil over the image, a negative rhyme for the veil of snow.5

5. My thanks to Marjorie Perloff and Martha Collins for their suggestions regarding these brief notes; whatever errors I have made remain my own.
FLOATING BORDER

Floating border: the conductor wants to see the yellow star. Skin-today, soapy. But here comes, more crystal than memory, the drink-doctor. Slurp him down. The larches are starting up, too. In the damnedness.

With water ink seeming greetings waste away,

French, I spoke it so well, finally got better on its own.

But what was it really besides halfsmallness? It didn’t go off so far that it came close.

Translated by Stuart Friebert and Gert Niers
Stuart Friebert and Gert Niers

PAST PRESENT

With all its devils and demons, the past was never over and gone for Paul Celan. How could it be? Especially following the murder of his parents in a death camp in 1942 — his mother's perhaps the hardest to bear. Many critics see this experience of loss infusing everything Celan wrote afterward, inasmuch as his mother had been instrumental in binding him to German and German literature, from his earliest days on. So even after the war ended, when Celan found it problematic to continue writing in German, he nonetheless reported to relatives in Israel, "There's nothing in the world on account of which a poet would stop writing poems, not even if he's a Jew and German's the language of the poems."

Miraculously, Celan himself, having been "sentenced" to forced labor in 1941, eventually negotiated dangerous paths to safety and refuge, with seminal stops in Bucharest, then Vienna, finally in Paris, where he would live and work, for the most part, until he drowned himself in the Seine in the spring of 1970 at the age of fifty. He was hounded, some say, by a legion of ghosts let loose by Claire Goll. As if possessed, she accused Celan far and wide of having plagiarized the works of her husband, the poet Yvan Goll, who shortly before he died had engaged Celan to translate some of his poems. The charge was as baseless as it was mean-spirited, to put it charitably. Equally mortifying for Celan, numbers of prominent critics echoed the charges, for their own disturbing reasons. Fortunately, facts have since been tracked that demonstrate the reverse was more probably the case.¹

¹. See Wolfgang Emmerich's Paul Celan. Also helpful to our work: John Felstiner, Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew; Heather McHugh and Nikolai Popov, Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan, with an introduction that documents the difficulties of translating Celan; Michael Hamburger's "On Translating Celan," the afterword to his Poems of Paul Celan, revised and expanded in 2002; Amy Colin, Paul Celan. Celan's correspondence, especially with Nelly Sachs, Franz Wurm, and Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, greatly widens one's appreciation of Celan's nature.
Seeing almost five hundred poems into print in his lifetime, Celan left almost as many behind among his papers, of which a good many were marked "do not publish." The editors of those poems, now collected, point out that while Celan may not have wished to see them in print at the time, he also did not destroy them. Indeed, he may have been working on pulling together a new collection in the last stage of his life.

"Dehngrenze" — let us call it, though it remains untitled — seems to be one of the last poems Celan paid serious attention to. It was probably written in July 1968. That summer and the subsequent fall Celan was battling deep depression yet again. There had been previous suicide attempts, and he even underwent shock treatments, a problematic therapy at best, as a last resort.

Mindful of Celan's own superb translations of a number of challenging poets, among them Dickinson and Mandelstam, as well as canny versions of Shakespeare sonnets that are among the finest extant in German, we confess to great trepidation in offering, so far as we know, the first English translation of "Dehngrenze." We have likely missed some elements, misunderstood intentions, and lost layers as well. Has there ever been a German poet as linguistically, philologically resourceful as Celan? Hence it helps to come across a remark reputedly made to Hugo Happert, namely that he, Celan, lived in another space-time plane from the reader, who therefore can only understand him from afar, and who can't grasp him, just the bars between — an image eerily reminiscent of Rilke's famous panther poem.

On to our version of "Dehngrenze," with this preamble: one might define Celan's beginnings as a leading figure in "Cernowitz Surrealism," hesitantly, because in fact Celan hated the "S-word." Its chief practitioners, among them Rose Ausländer, Alfred Gong, Immanuel Weisglas, and Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger, were mostly German-Jewish writers with roots in the region around Cernowitz, Celan's home ground. Much of their

work exhibited a lofty, easy-going approach to metaphor, and much consisted of unusual, striking images, often free-floating, something virtually unknown in the poetry of the period. "Stay suggestive" was the unspoken motto. Meanwhile, German, and German literature, were already being poisoned by Nazi notions. With their poems from behind the lines, Celan and his fellow poets tried to overpower "the other poetry" with their mesmerizing inventions. Matters of raw content, or philosophical meaning, were afterthoughts at best. Given what was sweeping across the landscape of the "Fatherland(s)," the human experience was so overwhelming that inherited, traditional, not to say "approved," German turned out to be more and more unreliable for truth telling. For a taste of the poison, drink Celan's "black milk" in "Death Fugue," his most famous and most powerful poem.

So it's little wonder that creating a translation which lives up to his poetic acts and the "facts" of his time may be impossible now that he is gone and one can no longer consult him (not that such exchanges always led to more clarity and understanding!). Celan did respond to some questions during a visit to his Paris quarters in 1966, observing at one point that if one's eyes are too close to a text, everything else blurs. Hence a "re-creation" in another language may do the original more justice than the closest reading, provided, he said with a sly smile, that the "invented, other language" does not stray too far from a certain literalness of the original.3 Everything he said that gloomy afternoon seemed crystal clear one moment and fully blurred the next. It's said he was fond of Pascal's admonition: "Do not reproach us for a lack of clarity, because we make a profession of it."

We offer now the German text of "Dehngrenze," followed by a catalogue of some particular difficulties we've considered and

3. Celan and Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, an acclaimed artist in her own right, graciously received Stuart Friebert and David Young in their apartment on this occasion to discuss a number of Celan texts the visitors had selected for an anthology they were planning. We were presented with a copy of Atemkristall, with poems by Celan and lithographs by Lestrange, now in the Rare Book Room of Oberlin College Library.
debated in working together on it, along with some of our unanswered questions:

DEHNGRENZE

Dehngrenze: hier will der Schaffner
Doch kommt, kristallischer als
Gedächtnis,
der Trinkarzt. Schlürf ihn herunter.
Auch beginnen die Lärchen. In der
Staudammnis.

Mit Wassertinte
kümmern die scheinbaren Grüße,

Französisch, ich sprach es so gut,
besserte endlich an sich.

Aber was wars denn als
Halbkleines? Es entfernte sich
nicht so weit,
daß es nah kam.

“Guess Goethe,” an old teacher once advised, when discussing the identification of quotes on an exam: “More often than not, you’ll be right!” So guess Celan, we’d say, upon encountering a word like “Dehngrenze,” especially if it’s the first word of a text. Who was fonder of welding together new amalgams, taking to the nth German’s penchant for joining existing words to make new ones? But Celan’s not-so-hidden agenda in doing so is to stop the reader from going down worn pathways, thus forcing a reorientation.

“Grenze” (border/boundary) is common enough, though anyone with memories of the Nazi scourge will supply a darker context for it. It’s the “Dehn” particle that stops you in your tracks: “dehnen,” the related verb (to lengthen/extend/stretch),
is common enough, even if sliced into a noun-particle, but exactly how it informs the made-up compound is not abundantly clear. So let’s take a look at the larger scene for a moment. We’re at some sort of border and the speaker’s being confronted by a “conductor,” which is what “Schaffner” ordinarily means. However, it can also mean, more ominously, “guard,” depending on the context. In this case we’re partial to “conductor,” which seems to reflect the bitter irony implicit in his wanting to see “the yellow star” (“your yellow star” is an alternative, because German uses the definite article [“den”] where English relies on the personal pronoun). Moreover, it seems uttered in the routine way conductors talk when checking tickets, except that the situation’s anything but routine.

After all, what kind of train carries passengers with a yellow star affixed to an outer garment, such as Jews were required to wear under Nazi rule? It’s hard not to conjure up frightful images of freight trains lumbering toward death camps. By insisting on seeing the star, the conductor “dehnt die Grenze,” extending it in effect. It’s tempting to see him as a sort of Charon, taking his load of souls to their final destination — the humans locked in those trains were virtually dead. Such a parallel seems reasonable, even if one can’t prove it was intended; but it’s risky on other hand, given Celan’s fractured sense and sensibility, rarely encountered in German poetry, besides which the text is itself incomplete. That said, it’s also worth recalling that Celan insisted, on several occasions, that anything and everything in the poems could be looked up in dictionaries and encyclopedias. “It’s all there,” he said to us.

Which runs us smack into “Haut-Heute” — yet more evidence of a master welder at work, albeit in a smithy from Hell. We were hoping to find something in English that mirrors the lack of strangeness to the sound of this curious compound, even as the image itself is deeply estranging. To wit, “Today’s-skin” clarifies more than seems implied. However, in the stark, dictionary voice of “Skin-today” a chilling, matter-of-fact tone heightens the horror beneath the surface. Ending the line, “seifig” is at first disarming, because of its soft suffix (“-ig” is normally pronounced as
if it were "-ich"). Again, one might posit that it’s a fairly “normal” situation: the speaker is tired from a long journey; he probably didn’t sleep well; his skin feels “soapy” — from sweat and grease, as inveterate travelers put it. However, the mind lurches when recalling the brutal scenario involving soap: human remains were indeed processed into soap in the camps.

“Seifig” may also echo a searing line in Wozzeck, Georg Büchner’s powerful drama, which Celan knew and loved. Taking Wozzeck’s pulse after having subjected the “poor creature” to his little scientific experiments, the army doctor intones, “Klein, hart, hüpfig” (“Small, hard, hopping”). Like “seifig,” “hüpfig” is a word one might use with a child, adding a frightening aura to what Wozzeck is enduring.

Having arrived at “soapy,” we realized we could mimic the German rhyme, “Dehn/sehn,” if we risked using “floating” to modify “border.” Not only for the internal rhyme but to underscore as well the floating consciousness adrift on the flotsam of the text as a whole, in which nightmarish memories mingle with disorienting associations. Finally, if “Dehn” is from “dehnen,” a transitive verb calling for an object, shouldn’t there be someone doing the lengthening?

In something of a split-screen, dreamlike shift, a most curious character, “der Trinkarzt,” appears — “more crystal than/memory” the stage direction, as it were. (One is immediately reminded of Celan’s early collection, Atemkristall, and, by extension, of the infamous “Kristallnacht.”) Recalling Celan’s hospitalizations, one likely around the time “Dehngrenze” was conceived, it’s tempting to cast his attending physician in the role, and Dr. Mengele, who performed those hideous experiments on the living and the dead in the camps, as a dark alternate. In a mind as tortured as Celan’s, paradox seems to prevail here once more. “Slurp him down” indeed! If only one could devour evil and turn it into harmless waste material.

Note “Gedächtnis” and “Staudammnis,” like a porous ceiling and a final floor framing the oppressive scene between. As for those larches: they’re not harmless, impressionistic touches to the otherwise grim picture. For one thing, their timber’s really tough;
for another, their bark is used in tanning. And the possibilities positively boil up around “Staudammnis”; “Verdamnis” (damnation); technically, “Staudamm” is a cofferdam, but the word is usually used to mean any structure that holds back water; so of course coffins, and more, also come to mind.

It might have been more effective if we’d been able to duplicate the aural-visual rhyme of “Gedächtnis” and “Staudammnis,” thus intensifying the reversal of current, from the mildly positive charge of the former to the decidedly negative force of the latter. We hope the choice of “damnedness” somewhat reflects Celan’s inventive way with the word. In any event, the speaker’s clearly at some risk, although not without a measure of self-defense (“Slurp him down”). This dualism continues on different ground as we read on.

In the first of the two mid-text couplets, we encounter more water imagery. “Wassertinte” is once again pure Celan, but the made-up word reminds one of many things that were watered down during the barren war years to make them last longer (recall “dehnen”/to stretch). It also speaks poignantly of the writer’s situation in such a time: will I have enough “ink,” enough words?

Then there’s the curiously fashioned verb “kümmern,” normally known as the intransitive verb “verkümmern” (waste away/pine away/atrophy/starve). If used as a transitive verb, it would be reflexive without the prefix “ver,” and carry a preposition (”sich um etwas kümmern”/to take care of something). Here, ”kümmern” is attached to ”greetings” that are suspect at best (the conductor’s? the drink-doctor’s?), or, as the enjambment allows, emanate from a conversation the speaker had, or perhaps merely imagined? In French at that!

Whatever else is happening, the speaker’s thoughts criss-cross from one association to the next while he indulges in a moment of reverie about his adopted language. He not only used to speak it well, it even got better on its own! Once again, the verb “bessern” is normally used in a reflexive sense: “sich bessern” (to better oneself/to improve), which is transitive. And not incidentally, “an sich” (in and of itself) has an undertone of Kant (“das
Ding an sich") and an overtone of Heidegger, the German philosopher with a checkered past (to put it mildly), with whom Celan had a terrifically complicated, if brief, relationship.

Bilingual speakers who are as much at ease as Celan was in French, his adopted language, know nonetheless that there is an undertow at work in the way two languages flow together, especially if one is actively engaged with both at the same time. One can sometimes "go under" in the one while managing to float in the other. At this juncture it's once again tempting to read the text as we have it more literally: hospitalized, probably undergoing shock treatments, the speaker is hallucinating, running light and dark memories together, even as he has moments of great clarity and knows deep down what ails him.

The concluding quatrain is a fitting, if even more mysterious, ending for any final version of the poem, maintaining as it does the obliqueness of the whole, while synthesizing the thesis-antithesis elements to the build-up. Slipped into the contraction "wars" ("war es") in diction that is now more colloquial (even "Halbkleines" is readily understandable, though pure Celan), the pronominal subject, "es" (it) poses the final question: WHAT was? WHAT was nothing but "halfsmallness"? All we're told is that whatever "it" was managed one last paradoxical feat. Not only did it not go so far away that it couldn't return; it came back close again, frighteningly so, for having gone off just far enough so that it could return. As for "halfsmallness," the very word seems at odds with itself. One senses that, as in the physical universe of matter, reduction in size leads to a rise of pressure within.

In "The Meridian," Celan's address on the occasion of receiving the Büchner Prize in 1960, he said memorably: "The poem is lonely. It is lonely and underway.... The poem wants to go to another, it needs the 'other.'" An echo of Buber? But Celan also goes on to say that the poem promotes confusion and despair "going into the most narrow narrowness."⁴ We are at such a confine in this fragment.

Celan, who seemed to live from word to word at times, was, we believe, quite purposeful about using the word "meridian" just once in all his work, as did Shakespeare:

I have touch'd the highest point of all my greatness;
And, from that full meridian of my glory,
I haste now to my setting; I shall fall
Like a bright exhalation in the evening,
And no man see me more.

(Wolsey, in Henry VIII)

Celan fed on Shakespeare as much as any of his favored writers. Not only would the scientific slant of "meridian" have appealed, but the figurative aspect as well: "The special character of circumstances in a setting not altogether congenial or comfortable; the special circumstances of a person, as distinct from others," the dictionary reminds. Like all of Celan, the Büchner address is searing, alluding among other dark moments to the so-called "Final Solution" — so despicable and intentionally deceiving a term that one cannot distance oneself enough from it — which was drawn up by the Nazis at the infamous Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, a date driven into millions of souls.
NEGATIVE

In a brown-gray sky
a cloud even more brown-gray
with a black circle of the sun.

To the left, that is to say, to the right,
the white branch of a cherry tree with black flowers.

Light shadows on your dark face.
You sat at the table
and put your ashen hands down.

You make the impression of a ghost
who tries to summon up the living.

(Because I still count among them,
I should appear to him and tap out:
goodnight, which is to say good morning,
a goodbye that also is a welcome,
and not skimp on giving him questions to any answer,
so long as they concern life,
which is to say the storm before silence.)
THE THREE STRANDEST WORDS

Whenever I say the word Future,
the first syllable is already heading towards the past.

Whenever I say the word Silence,
I destroy it.

Whenever I say the word Nothing,
I create something that does not fall inside any nothingness.

translated by Maja Jablonska and Rick Hilles
EVE WITH THE LID ON

We can cheap it back that far.
By now the coast is clear.
With a bad night’s sleep behind us
The rest stop fades away.
Still things happen all the time:
Vapor trails in tatters,
Plastic rain forest creatures
Rallying on the dashboard.
A shoebox decimated by winter reposes
In an open field:
Inside: a mitten, a broken tooth
Worth an almost extinct
Two-dollar bill:
An expedition to the interior
Of the interior. The shadow range
Had claimed another party.
A secret agent in short pants
Rattled ice; the pets had
A little caged-in area where
They could get acquainted.
Mr. Goat, with flat goat looks,
A jaunty underbite,
I make of this cap a gift.
I make of this map a legend:
No one will know you, spy lad,
And that’s the way to travel.
LANE OF BLUE MIST

I ventured over to the exit ramp
And pitched rocks into a drainage ditch,
Tired of looking safe for a ride.
A red wing unfolded on the pavement.
Oxbow, sluicegate. Farmhands
Took me in, fed me. On the plate was
Drawn a peasant woman pushing a cart
Loaded with corn. A little dog yapped
Between her steps. Red August dust.
A pack of ravens dallied in the hemlocks.
Rake clatter, wind grip, rail path, trestle.
I miss the comet tailing above
The Industrial Park. Lights that fell
Over the graveyard were never explained,
Thank goodness. A packet's unmoored
Though no current carries it off.
ICE

Dogs barking on the ice. One high, one low.
I am baking a pie to feed my children when I am gone. A big pie.
A long absence, planned or unplanned.

My husband says: Is there a room to store it?
I say: We'll store it on the ice. Where? Out on the lake — frozen world behind our house.

Dogs barking on the ice. One sharp, one deep. Both sad, if dogs can be sad.
One crying, the other cursing god.

What does a 46 year old woman need with such a life?
A long absence, planned or unplanned.

Can I reach the lake before the dogs see me?
The ice either a mirror or a wall where the soul divides.
The soul always divides. This side pie, the other long life.
A journey, planned or unplanned.

I am baking a pie to feed my children. When a dog barks inside you, expect tearing, expect blood.

Dogs barking on the ice.
Tim Ross

THE WIRING

1.

This sizzle in my back
speakers wreathes me
in hisses, my car
a translucent cage
of veins, a jellyfish
or the inside of a storm cloud,
or one of those layered
plastic maps of the body:
the long writhing
miles of cordage, charged
espaliers, or the real thing,
the twine-ball
of sinew I once saw,
the shunted father-heart
we watched like family
TV, looped replay
of the blockage shoved
through, small reaching
splits like winter
shoots, cracks in ice —.

2.

There’s the city plan
and the city driven
into. There are star
charts and there is outer
space. Mostly there’s
noise with a little
music coming up from
underneath: Keith Richards’
riffs on Sympathy
for the Devil, whatever’s
in the spine contorting
the face, the world
composed in jolts
which link the kids who split
down the alley in currents
of locust-noise, low haze
strung over streets
like solder smoke, low sun
singeing grass as if arced
through each frayed blade-tip.
OPENINGS

Like the first three notes
first three crows, then
a swirl, the flock descends
on the field behind the restaurant
where the line cook waits
for his shift, his head
a dark hollow, a slow roar
moving through it. The dull eyes
of the hostess encompass him
and he sits in the vacuum of them,
leans forward, tries
to blow smoke rings — and yes
he is in love with her
and no she doesn’t
know it — and she stares
at the slow smoke-knots falling
from his mouth. The streetlights
pop on, flicker, sizzle like
kitchens. The freeway
picks up speed until the town’s
lurching forward catches
on its ragged lip, and for
a moment they follow the
smoke’s unravel and clear
rise but this is not that,
this is waiting, enduring,
the crows taking root
in the field, absences
in an absence, bent grass
and behind it: leaf-rattle, a shiver
or a yawn from which
the slow freeze knowledge
of winter approaches.
A preacher in St Giles Street
gestured at a passing cloud
and shouted, it was an angel
whose sword hung over Petty France,
a miracle of the plague.

I saw nothing,
just a dazzling blank
darkening to the West,
and the black robe swivelled
and pointed at me.

As he had imagined
God’s judgment in the sky
he read derision on my face,
though I was trembling,
sensing for the first time
the grip of a panic
that would soon be familiar.

The crowd among us —
laborers with mortgaged tools,
cashiered sergeants, servants on notice —
turned on me in cold rage
as if I had defiled
the purity of their suffering
and I averted my eyes
and left with my collar up,
jogging with a stroller’s bearing
down the empty streets of Bishopsgate
where a little smoke drifted
from the doors of those houses
the gravediggers refused to enter.
CAPE ANNE

We walked just shy of the surf arguing how we would live after the ceremony, and once

I stepped on the perfect skull of a kestrel, seeing it clearly as I destroyed it:

red algae like maps of itself crumbled under our bare feet: we kept coming back

to that wavering foam barrier (like a fragile swerving horizon or the line between man and woman)

though we loved to wander in the suck and glint of receding breakers

safe from the other’s voice; we were wounding each other so we might marry

and sometimes glanced together complicit at a mothwing sail luffing to windward.

A trawler hauling seines vanished over the sea rim, funnel first, then riprap wake.

So we decided on the child’s two names and the lighthouse flashed

withheld as a bead of blood — each step we retraced glittered with the tide.
Is that the house of the ocean?
Is that the idea, blue, wedged inside it?

When I cross into that abstraction
from which the painter himself has not returned,
will I land on an airstrip like the one there on the left
where another color has landed?

Between me and the painting
a woman in green stops,
hers pregnancy outlined
by her dress pressed
against a blue stroller.
The baby in it coos
at waves of triangles and rectangles
weave boxes of vision
through which cliffs emerge,
like perception.

A mountain of sea shifts closer to me
on plates of darker squareness.

These borders keep nothing away from me,
there’s nothing here I can’t become.
O.K. Kandinsky arranges the neurons into temporarily breathing humhums. The glint is right now being so that the eyebrow of earth sharp dance with pretty chasm that ski. If you try to exit before the ski is done, the house-thing in there houses your eye awhile while a eye your houses there in thing-house the exit to try to if. Kandinsky sure CanDoSky. Belly why yes he can. O.K. Keep it hanging. Now here is hisstory.

Once he had a horse too like I do and everybody got on it and they all turned blue. Then there were just four of them and nobody was riding only blue and wanting money. So since the horse was free to go he came on over here and as you’ll see sometime soon he has been doing a little painting of his own. Which the woman doesn’t like. A primitive says she. But she should know about outsider now being pretty funky her self some her — well. Well, anyway, today we CanDoSky. Tomorrow we might be where we cannot do sky and so today were is here and loving Candosky. We are allowing our wholentire rouged smear thing coming out of our heart to dosky. You think it matters if it has a heart? What heart is is candosky. First you get rid extra else in some other paintings then you can just dosky. Me I have some stairs above the attic. Candosky friend Clay he put some ladders and some climbing up blocks in his. But you don’t have to have. See, you can justdosky. Heart is the whole colorshape of Can. Universe is Do. Sky you pick your own. Now, O.K., you can turn other lights.

Remember old distance man we saw dying in his brain first? Well he died. Doing almost all sky all time deep in there toward the end. And old woman who kept loving him was doing least halfsky. But now must say it is her belly turn soon so soon so I and some other big book will be back.
TOUR NUMBER TWO

Shh every. Shhh. Well the horse is kinda shy about his Boy-Horse picture. Yes no yes no yes no. Will not let us see. Says like, if else sees, he will not ever be again. But lovie horse, I said. Say moi!

Not even moi.


So I am cancel no wing. Of early horsewerks. Forget you hear. Uh huh. There’s no to-die-for-fetlock, no infinite nose slope, and no how boy goes down. No which wind is mane which tooth which hair. Forget. Is not. Just isn’t. Never. No. Just don’t.
HORSE BETWEEN TOURS

Well the horse he has stopped making anymore pictures. Where, I want to say, is your medium your stretch? He looks a way. You don't want in glint gridsky? He looks a way. Did boy fall off your eye? He looks a way. Well come you any way next tour? He looks a way. Get yr own inspire card to check out full books of horse? Horse, he looks a way. You modeling me some goodside? He looks. He looks a way.

Now what did we do we doctor we? Dabbed a little yellow on his tailbrush.
TOUR NUMBER THREE

Well back come! Hah! Well, today, we, are, doing, OneSadFace. Made of Klee. When you don’t lift the pencil that is what you get this guy is OneSadFace. Even if he had not lifted for eye/eye/moth it still would be the same, said, sad, still, kley.

Is how. Something er is er in their you juster know so you make grid and when the klay is dry you sift it through the grid. And whoah! Three hooks, one longloop line, but nopole noarm no, so OneSadFace. Next time fishing you should try to fish for something. Me, I’m thinking horsey so I make horsehook horseshape and whoah!

But Klee reely need idee. So bad. So he sees thees idee see:

Grid Grid Grid What What What
Grid Grid Grid Grid Grid Grid
Cridd Gild Gild Grid Grid Grid
Grab Grid Grid Grab Grid Grid
Grid Ridd Grid OhCr aprahbdid

(oh thank you thank you oh it was nothing no was it)

It is very happy inthegrid when you don’t cook for something. “not sea not sea not sea” see? Happy-in-the-grid. Me I am full grid. Updown rightleft house-stuffed. Mantle lintel mullion ocean up down up down happy-in-the-grid. Shingle, shinglehair, squarehair, ah! Happy in the grid. Even when OneSadFace, even when LostAllWay, you have you can have your happy-in-the-grid.

What?

You think we should not show old dying belly distance woman this Onesadface? You think it’s HisFace? HerFace? You think you happy picture need for happy-in-the-grid?
THE EYE OF THE CY-CLONE

...the problem
with "escapist" literature is that it offers no escape,
narratively reinforcing our captivity.
— Charles Bernstein, A Poetics

Close up:
a clapboard shed on a hill.
Fallow to the horizon.
Stub ends of cornstalks,
wild grasses,
a gravel road,
a tire.

The lens spirals up, above, and out of focus

Your life
in rewind.
Look at you:
backpedaling to infancy,
you lurch back into the womb —
you are a blastula,
a zygote,
You are the plums in the icebox.

Things happen.
You become aware of your fingernails
your eyelids
a cavity in the back of your mouth.
You are the subject.
You live your role.

In Antrim County,
a chapel the size of an outhouse and in the distance,
a lake.
Tonight all the leaves are paper spoons in a windy broth. Last week they made a darker sky below the sky.

The houses have swallowed their colors, and each car moves in the blind sack of its sound like the slipping of water.

Flowing means falling very slowly — the river passing under the tracks, the tracks then buried beneath the road.

When a knocking came in the night, I rose violently toward my reflection hovering beneath this world. And then

the fluorescent kitchen in the window like a page I was reading — a face coming into focus behind it:

my neighbor locked out of his own party, looking for a phone. I gave him a beer and the lit pad of numbers through which he disappeared; I found I was alone with the voices that bloomed as he opened the door. It’s time to slip my body beneath the covers, let it fall down the increments of shale, let the wind consume every spoon.
My voice unhinging itself from light,
my voice landing in its cradle —.
How terrifying a payphone is

hanging at the end of its cord.
Which is not to be confused with sleep —
sleep gives the body back its mouth.
He can’t be her father, this man
on the davenport she watches
after a full-day shift on the sales floor,
the pinched smile, small talk stale
as the filterless he sucked down
with a vanilla milkshake
during his lone, half-hour break.
The fingers that can mediate the difference
between gabardine and houndstooth
roll the cuff of his slacks up
until what’s exposed
above the pile of loose, garterless sock
is pale, almost translucent,
the curly hair, once lush,
chafed cleaner than his chin
after a straight razor.
Then the sock pulled off, slowly,
like an adder disgorging its dinner,
a blue-veined baby her father cradles
between his palms and rubs
joint by joint, manipulating
the appendage’s twenty-six names
until he reaches the clinch
of anklebone,
eyes shut, sweet Jesus whistling
through his nostril hair,
as if he could unwork the rusted bolt,
unleash his big sorry dogs,
let them scamper about for a while
on the crud-colored wall-to-wall
and recall what freedom’s like, fenceless,
forget the receipt,
all the beer you can drink.
You’re not appealing to anything, there on all fours in the snow, melt coming through at the knees. Casual study grown intense, then forensic, you face the unexpected evidence at last: notes of green mixed into gold and mold: what lives lives sick, in keeping with its time and place. Windrustle unloading histories of wordlessness, you imagine the respiration of a pheasant you flushed by accident returning to normal in a stand of threadbare hardwoods twenty yards away. Twenty years after your stepdad called you too feeble to get laid in Tijuana with a $100 bill in your pocket, standing with a woman money won’t buy, your breath can come naturally too.
STEPFATHER

In sleep, I find you
drinking the expensive whisky
I inherited when cancer
ate you alive.
When you open your eyes
I see straight
into flames
behind you.
You taught me to build fires,
to use an ax
in the woodpile behind the house.
I practiced chopping
off your arms
at the shoulders.
How delicate
the kindling.
How sharp
the blade.
You never fucked me
but you wanted to
and that fucked me
up. Now, the intimacy
of an accusation
brings us together.
You tell me
I’m achieving
adulthood as required
by myth. You’re
dead right.
MY MOTHER IS TWO BIRDS, ONE FALLING

My mother is two birds
that meet in full flight:
a brief black that flowers against the window.
The sound is like a wet cloth
thrown against the tin walls of a fever.
In its wake, I have a handkerchief or a dishtowel,
surrounding like petals a bird’s body.
I carry it in, and it is like memory,
picked up dazed but breathing,
and like a love that finally strikes home,
one wish in the hand, one eye yellow as sweat.
When my mother pulls tight to speak, it is as someone
who, on the way to something else, stops
at her reflection, and when she speaks,
it is like an ode spoken
when the temperature drops to the bottom:
breathe is something unbelievable.
She is not wingless but like the light tracks
of the gulls crossing in the early morning on the beach
that the water does in, a line that will end
as stubbornly as the one in which you watch a bird falling
after seeing itself appear,
suddenly, in air. Which is to say,
like a fever, and not
all at once.
MY NOVEL, NAPTHA

The country that was a novel,
set on the fango-banks
of a silver colored river,
is a river called La Plata.
A novel about unemployed creeps
cutting the roads to the exterior
is a country where Goodyears smolder
and the riot police are touchy.
A country is a novel
if it was once the world’s granary
or a pink-house junta of musical chairs
to eliminate the drunkest generals.
The country that was a novel
will have a celebrated president
under palace arrest for brokering
arms-franchises in clandestine basins.
His only son will be killed
in a helicopter suspicion.
His wife will publicly
hold him solely responsible.
The country that was a novel
will rear splendor in the South,
and tsetse starvation in the North.
The East will become a ghost grass
for the renowned livestock
in the mirror of the driving-wind West.
In the country that was a novel,
the soccerdogs will chant fight songs
by heart, or what’s left after club-dues.
The novel will make fish-food
of red-fringe students and infiltrate
the mothers of the disappeared
with a baby-faced angel of death
in the Navy, rank of lieutenant.
The country’s memory will become
the raw material for gasoline.
The country will be called Argentina,
and the novel, *Naptha*.
SCORPIO IN RETROGRADE

You’ll find yourself
in the Chinatown rain,
crying on the phone
to your brutal father.

You’ll find yourself
on a Mobius express
deciphering scratchiti.

You’ll protagonistize
nickel-and-dime,
stoppering rodent holes
with mortar-mix
and tufts of steel wool.

You’ll find yourself
a swami of *laburo*
to the 5th Ave. crankheads,
parolees with brick certificates,
hawking broken amps
and vats of *coco frio*.

You’ll slice your palm,
almost lob off the thumb,
and be Medicaid-ineligible.

You’ll get slaved-out to
a yeshiva in Washington Heights
where you ixnay Palestine debates
and grow your goatee
because it makes you look *Dominicano*. 
You’ll fraternize a red-headed painter who lives by the Gowanus and sells you headache-weed and harangues your land-line.

You’ll very much like one of his paintings, the one, I think, he calls, “Four Seconds of Spilt Milk.”
Sylva Fischerová

NEAR THE BOTTOM

But behind the end, near the bottom,
a longing to be like everyone else:
walking around your own house
as if around the mist,
planting a tree,
and misunderstanding the prophets.
I also wanted
to eat oysters with lemon
somewhere in Montmartre,
I also wanted calm and money,
and the bright colors of stones underwater.
Those bright colors underwater!
EGGS, NEWSPAPER, AND COFFEE

Eggs, newspaper, and coffee
are the first lie of the world,
saying that it’s
in order.

What order, while the whoredoms
of Jezebel, your mother,
and her witchcrafts are many?
said Jehu to King Horam
and shot him
between his shoulders.

What order, when every morning
the ark’s built up,
and the animals outrun
one another,
wheldle money, bribe Noah:
Brother, let me in!
Noah’s taken in,
the ark rocks on pity, on grief,
a swift stream, the Okeanos of weeping,
spits it into the pan of eggs
in the middle of the morning.
How the animals shout! How fried they are!
Buy! Buy the news from the ark!
they squeak from the pan,
and above them, implacable as Jehu, an angel cries:
What order?
The news of your heart’s
black as night,
ugly as a Medusa!

On the waves of a compassionate coffee,
Noah sails the ship on
past shop shutters slowly lifting up,
around mumbling flowers
opening and closing their
shining petals,
breathing out pity
which papers
the world

translated by Sylva Fischerová, with Stuart Friebert
SEX LIBRIS

Where’s language’s little pointy bra?
Where’s its waterfally bustier?

Imagination’s crinoline, swish
of woosh? Who’ll give one pence

for a mildewed thong? Fiction’s hint:
fling yourself into something

foolish. New Material razz-
mattazzing with the ruddy body

of syntax. Emma B. says:
“the best amusement in the city

with a varied menu.” (“Cheap
and sassy”) (“We like the waiters”)

Shall I coax the dog of sadness back?
Here boy, it’s OK if you bite.

Words, I thought we were wedded for¬
ever, rolling around on the shaggy

study rug. You’ve locked me out...
I hear books inside, righting themselves.
Beckian Fritz Goldberg

RED MONSOON

The lipstick, a lowdown slinking hound of a red, the lie of *I was at home alone*, a low slung hip-swing of red, a full velvet-vulvaed red hibiscus in the dewlight, and sudden as blood. With its soft point and its flat cheek, the lipstick pressed into the bow of her upper lip and followed it to the corner like a smooth dance dip. She liked the red coming on to her. Then the kiss of her upper and lower lips to each other and the brief puff of their parting. Oh, to draw on an eye like this, or a nipple. Or another flesh. To glow like perfect alibi. To sex the simple black dress. Red hugging the curve, and the lips in their eloquent waxing, the woman-bird knows the power of a wound this fresh and just for the occasion.
GLOW-IN-THE-DARK GECKO

He nearly burns from the lightbulb where I make him gather light. Along his belly is a little seam of the plastic mold he came from, full of strontium aluminate. He is light green and bendable. At night in the windowsill he is the extraterrestrial—signaling out? peering in? The glow could go either way.

That somewhere there is an entire factory devoted to keeping its eye out for a possible shortage of phosphorescent geckos.

I like to imagine that factory in Mexico, run by an old man with a long toenail that had begun to curl as it extended as far as a tongue.

I like to visit Tuesday nights when they run the tests.

Tonight I inspect the tail with its rubbery perfect taper. Which I picked up first from the floor of a bar some nights ago as if it were a dollar someone had lost and I wasn’t asking what a simple gumball machine gecko like him was doing in a dump like this.

I like to think of children sticking lit matches to the grass clippings in suburban alleys.

As Lao Tso said to Li Tsu: Sometimes quirk is all.
Ellen Doré Watson

FUNNY RIB(CAGE)

There's no way not to say this. His father did "x" and didn't do "y." His mother was a creamy influence, but then she went and died. All grown up, he was still a smudge of a boy, no way to be a locomotive. He cut the lace off the apron and put it on. He woke up married and took it off. He traded the wife for a free-love painter but they were doused in the 70s; it didn't last. When the next wife arrived, she thought she'd found the true ark. What wonderful tremors they made — but since she opened the gate, how could she know he'd never be the type to scale the walls? A barrage of good years that they were lucky to survive, then much clutching when a baby didn't come, then came and uncame. When their wonder finally landed, she was an ovation he thought he'd never stop hearing — but then he hadn't counted on getting shorter. Hadn't he hauled his share? Why should he say jump? Feel like a barnacle?

Why shouldn't he tire of being a good listener when no one noticed he'd gone mute? There's no way to say this.

His second wife did "a" and didn't do "b." His daughter was a creamy influence but she would go and grow up.

Two too many mirrors. He had to take his funny ribcage — the one he'd given her to remember him by — elsewhere —
LINES FROM THE CHALKBOX

Reprise of leaf slap & leaf drip.
Such is summer. Don't say the end
is a bright light. Don't say it is a mist
like a halo over the earth.
It's just another afternoon shower,
the sky remodeling itself.

*  

Maybe the clouds are joists and space
is an attic. Or do you prefer to think in adobe
this time of year? Mud,
wood — all's runoff,
that's all, silt.

*  

Cedar knotty & lavender,
mullein in full swell —
I'm centered
by the edge of things:
shark's fin of granite, the tassels on its lichen,
all the splotches & unmown sides.
Who knows
if there's an amen

like the vines, who knows
about the little economies. It's here
I cling to, the milky cosmos

of clover. Here, catching the deliveries
when they come. They come.

*
Butterfly in the slag

of the cement truck's chute.

Cinderblocks, a tarp
sun-bleached & stained, some drone
on the radio. Look,

the siding's up. It's cloudy.
But even the heart
is passive solar. Consider the stud-ends
beneath the chopsaw,

so many quarters,
so many sixteenths.

*

The day is of two minds —
rain & sun. Or maybe all afternoons are schizo. Ask the tick, the
fatty keeping watch

on the dog's forehead —

it might take its meal according to thunder,
as if vibrations tripped its switch,
the way certain movies give the rain
another layer of falling. Beneath

the butterfly's path even.
There it comes, here it goes.

*

Light in hashmarks, shadows in them, too.
Quiet summer morning.

The birds are quiet. The trees are quiet.

I've been binge praying, but I've been quiet.
And suddenly I know there's a proper amount
of wickedness in the world,

and it, too, though often loud,
is quiet.
First quarter moon, Jupiter
    a little to the left
and down, storms on it
    large enough to devour earth.
Meanwhile, in the rafters, a carpenter bee,
fuzzy star, chews its way into spruce.
Its hum is an orbit. It’s orbital, I mean.
Now Puccini
    on the jambox
reinvents nymphhood, and the electrician,
tattoo of an anchor halfway
out the sleeve of his polo shirt,
rolls his eyes.

Dervishes off the chopsaw,
mud dauber in the backfill
that’s vermilion & damp with last night’s rain.

Plumb this, snap a line.
Put a brace on the gable end. Yes,
a universe of particle board,
bored particles.
    Stellar dust.
David Dodd Lee

NORTH OF VIRGINIA

Who is sick and who but I could possibly be unfamiliar with this dark

Do not sit alone without at least something to read

Look at the pills falling outside

It must be your brain
Trying to talk to itself

*

I can't remember what night that summer

Just a vague sensation more or less about a four foot space
Of dark behind the garage

And the growing cold

*

Fresh snow
The next afternoon

Voices heard around the corner just after dinner

A few feathers, all they own

But a bird can survive anything
THE VIEW

I love the view
of these mountains
but can’t see the mountains
behind these mountains.
I want to see the world
behind these mountains.
I want to see it all
the way back to me, see it all
in front and behind me.
I love the view
but it blocks the view.
I am a mountain
in my own way.
I must step out of my way.
I’ve had lovelier seasons.  
The one with silver bracelets,  
when I ran in the mountains.  
The one with the singing baby.  

The season I typed inventories  
of car parts for dealerships — sweating  
the numbers, mocking myself as I churned  
eighty words a minute  
in a windowless room, muzak as  
smooth as the receptionist’s  
voice, smoke drifting up to the fluorescence.  
*Manifold, alternator, differential,*  
modular units stacked in places  
I’d never go.  

I lived for five o’clock.  
First bar to last call through the rings of Detroit.  
Screeching backward off the highway ramp —  
*It’s not illegal if you don’t get caught! —* my friend  
howling, my friend from the typing pool.  

Were we smart girls passing through  
dumb jobs, or pinned  
by lassitude to our metal chairs?  
Were we the quick brown fox,  
or the lazy dog?  
Trapped ‘til the senior typist  
hooded her machine.  
What I learned about work filled an ashtray.
ASH TO ASH

After we claimed the forest it began to disappear.
The trees named *ash* couldn’t bear a life edged by asphalt.
All those vines, they mean a tree is dying. In rough wind, after days of rain
soften their roots, the trees creak.
One lies down on the driveway, one rests against a phone pole.
The others lean, sway, crack — and suffer men in orange coats with terrible tools.

Now we see neighbors. We’re just another balding house.
We sit inside and burn our yard.
After they'd starved themselves, drinking air, their own salt, came to love the burning thigh, the stitch in the gut, no one was surprised to find him shrink at will at weigh-in,

a last breath blown out, eyes relaxing the arm of the scale, their hanging tree, until the searching finger could not find the weight to break his love of zero.
NEW YORK

He steps down from the wall where he’s been dead for ten years, brown brick wall of a warehouse high above street ball games and alley thefts, a mother calling, a daughter shouting back, wall where they play the movie of him playing son at a kitchen nook, the dad fighting over something dumb, the husband swimming slow on top of her, his breath at her neck, his tongue at a nipple. He steps down to the last elm left in town. He won’t stop the thugs from baring their knives. He steps through belief and onto the angled road, danger a rule the others made for him, this dizziness a spell death would not permit.
His uncle learned to pan while setting sky on fire, while keeping the Rockies jagged, the lake smooth and blue. Now they could fly by boat to Angel Point, frozen and splashed by every wake, to the place where salmon waited to die for them, to shimmy up a colored line fed back to its reel, then dance on an airy deck. Better to hope for Flathead to give without end than to wish they all still lived, fish or family, swimming beyond their jittery frames. Better to thrash a little, knowing orange air can kill, then fling down to dark at the first jerk of the rod, the impatient, godly rip of the jaw.
Elizabeth Bradfield

THE THIRD REICH CLAIMS NEU SCHWABENLAND—1939

I.

Ice is not land, so how to claim it? How to mark it owned
without thatched roofs, artifacts from conquered tribes, quaint
yeomen tilling non-native crops on the annexed shore?
The planes Passat and Boreas were catapulted
from the chill deck of the Schwabenland
into the frigid, uncharted air
to fly across the ice (one-fifth
of the continent) and photograph it (11,000 pictures),
to drop their aluminum darts
tattooed with a crooked cross
every twenty miles into what they saw
as if they could fix it, as if
they could pin it fast
and point to it as theirs
here here
anchorages rich with whale oil,
space on the map of the world
now called Neu Schwabenland.

II.

On the shelf: skull of a fox, abalone shell,
bundle of porcupine quills — my mnemonics
of travel, of what I have discovered.
I buy star BD -03 5750 online
and name it Incognita. There’s a certificate
that comes in the mail, a mythology, a map.
Is this dog mine? She has begun,
some nights, to growl, low and defiant,
when I move her from the couch, hers.
If my lover leaves me, what will become
of our photographs and stories,
who will keep the dog?
I claim the lips of Barb Burzynski
that night in the woods on Vashon before
I knew that she was married.

III.

Ice is not land. Is restless. And what was claimed
has moved, is inching toward sea,
has maybe broken off,
calved from the frozen edge, and now trails
its dust and shit and egg shards and abandoned fuel tins,
trails what stories it held,
through the ocean’s haloclines
and thermoclines, its pelagic and benthic layers,
scattering them across its sea floor.
Maybe by now one of the marked aluminum darts
tall as an emperor penguin and
dropped dropped dropped
let loose in calculated transects then
stumbled over, perched on, nested under, scoured
by wind, maybe scoured of its markings,
thin and pocked, maybe it is settling
beneath miles of water, is crumpling,
declarative not of claim, but of time.
MR. WILSON'S SPECIMENS

Quickly, he learned the art of flensing, peeling back the strange skins of the swimming birds that streaked beneath the Terra Nova's prow, learned
a rhythm of slice and pause timed to the ship's lurch, bright flash of metal in his chill hand conducted by wave and ice against the hull.

And so the skins piled up — became his plenty as onions dwindled in the barrels and flour sacks sagged from full and the taste of his own mouth became foreign to him.

Black and white pelts, feathered, sleek, unqualified by grey. His diary of the journey. His best calendar of the gathering days — a little moldy, a little cramped in their salted boxes, but, once home, exotic, strange, and redolent of all he found he could not say.
William Winfield Wright

MUSÉE DE TON VISAGE

after the Chagall exhibit I’m almost sure we’ll climb onto the roof and call that florist who delivers anywhere

four still lifes and we’re off to our favorite restaurant three Maillols and I need to sleep in your arms

if you stare at a Matisse for two minutes without blinking and then look immediately into a Gauguin

a woman with blue hair and a green dress will smoke cigarettes and eat papaya

the same with the Seurat and some of the abstract expressionists

if you can catch the elevator Christmas lights will bloom on all the Jackson Pollacks

I follow you around even at the risk of having to drum my fingers through all the complaints about your profile

I want to say “hold still” in the sculpture garden “look up at the skylight” to raise your perfect chin

and when I do wander off to the Sisleys or Cassatts you come up behind me at the Rothko

and whisper “I’ll be the orange if you’ll be the yellow” taking my hand as we leave the building

smiling as the guard looks at you and says to me “where do you think you’re going?”
Meredith Cole

DAISIES

Meredith and her ex-boyfriend walked all the way to Uwajima. You have never been to Japan, you don’t know how far that is, and how the sky was dull orange with white clouds. Meredith said she was unhappy and that the fortune-teller read her death in the cards. The ex-boyfriend asked how that could be true and Meredith tried to express how the sadness was huge, as huge as the Board of Education building in Uwajima. She said she was sad even when looking at a daisy and then the ex-boyfriend knew. For some time he carried her, you who have never been to Japan don’t know how far that is, and the little daisies winked closed for the night, the squid boats lit up the dark bay with their green lights, and sometimes a car pulled over and the person inside asked if they needed a ride, and Meredith leaned against her ex-boyfriend’s back and he answered, No, no, we’re alright, politely, very politely, as people will in rural Japan.
I'd wheeled Mother where Faith Hour was slated to begin after the chaplain got there

wiping first her chin because a spoon in her hand was an inexact tool.

Then I was set to leave. Where are you going Mother asked. I'm going home.

Take me with you she said and laughed a kind of wreck. The woman to her left

said take me with you too then the six or seven of them all took the sentence on

like hail taking on a garbage can. Take me with you haw haw haw. Take me with you laugh laugh laugh.

Like a headache made of starlings. I can't I said I have a wife and dog. A dog haw haw haw haw.

A wife laugh laugh laugh. Take me with you take me with you. Haw haw laugh laugh laugh.

I zippered my coat closed with a ferocity that shut them up. Unbalanced silence in the room. Mom
knocked it over saying you should go. Saying I’ve been where you’re going.

Anyway go walk your dog.
COMES TO

She neared completion in the bed.

My wife and I at bedside found things to say —
   mice in a cabinet find
the little left.

Supper trays were passed out down the hall.

Her chest just slightly rose and fell
   like a plywood sheet
someone lately dropped in place
then that breathing slipped below the wall clock’s pick pick.

A nurse came in and listened and said there’s still some sound.
Said to us talk to her she’s on her way
then left the room.
I leaned in against an ear and gave her her good grades.

At last she said I’ve passed but we were in an altogether different class and could not hear a word.

Imagine that a rock becomes complete.
I was back to help clean out her room when an old man misaligned in his wheelchair shouted *Young man come here* from a corner of the lounge.

No staff visible and again *Young man come here*. I went and stood in front of him like we were in the military. *Young man I have a question.* I said yes?

*Was that man I saw a while ago over there my mother?* I’ve rarely felt as certain as I did then. I said no. He said again *I want to know if that man I saw a little while ago was my mother.* No panic in his voice just level curiosity. I said no again like a visiting academic. *Are you certain?* I’m certain I said and he said *Okay. I just wanted to know.*

*Thank you young man.* I went back to her last room and thought what if I’d said *I’m your mother do you love me?*
Angela Ball

SOMETHING IS MESSING UP THE ROSES

Says Gabriel García Márquez. Also
Deranging the vases and tangling the tables.
This is why most major cities
Have a Museum of Sex
But the exhibits never rotate
And no one has ever explained the great fog
Of nineteen fifty-two. Why, inexplicably,
Our neighbor has carted off all his belongings
Except for some loose twigs; why,
Though they are health conscious,
Our aging equestrians must settle for
The gentlest of mounts; why soon
They are reduced to taking advice
And energetic medicines.

No one is messing up the manor
This morning. The yearlings are at grass.
Roses make roses, and someone sweeps
The petals into bags for a wedding.
There is order like that of an ancient
Woolworth’s with tiers of bright candy
In front and its city of parakeets at the back
Next to the unobtrusive
Two-way mirror, where the young, acne-scarred
Manager keeps watch
On his own disorder
Of impossible women.
At Dad's graveside service,
I looked around for my mother and sister
s' graves, not realizing that by our presence
We covered them up.

Somewhere, a two-year-old
Is discovering the sexual fantasy
That will rule her always; a man lets his friend
Sell him a car with a cracked block.

My ex thought every house should have one wall
Given over to ivy. The phone began to ring
And ring, announcing his lover's voice, her words
Framing his. My job was to train the ivy.

I'm driving home — recognize the blue car —
Out-of-state plates — in the next lane. Blue car man
With blue eyes doesn't know
How I feel. "Watch me," I want to say.
"I'm leaving."

My dog's good at playing dead,
She keeps her one visible eye
From shining too much. Then she jumps up
And I hand her the bone.
NIGHT KITCHEN IN TWO VOICES

Scrich-srich says shovel to snow, goddamn neighbor
When the Columbia disassembled herself in the sky
Over insomnia and almond tea you’re troubled
Only a kids’ jarful of worms survived
What do you grudge this man
How like a god: whatever circles Earth on fire
Faint cry of your mornings and evenings
Disaster a mood, a mink-black ocean
Say, like the neighbor’s dog
Sweeps cold through the front door
Pain keeps coming home when you least expect it
Who can know their thoughts, hear past that whistle
Turning you inward, the chambered ear listening
As the left hook of Texas sails by
Here, Shadow, c’mon boy. Come on.
EIGHTEEN

Don’t prate to us of love
As the promissory
Kingdom when we are
Stones thrown through windows,
Barbed arrows V’d in flight,
Green darkness risen from grassblades,
Flat on our backs all summer.
One Cessna, one thought
Circling; heat-hazed the city’s distant
Generators hum. We say no
Harm intended, glass
Shivers to be
Broken. Who cares if light
Waves made us? Atriums, our bodies
Cannot speak, remember
Nothing.
Last week's flood took out
the blue railroad bridge north of here.
Watered two schools. I pictured
the darkened smudge nudging its way
into classrooms, first graders
at their desks the first week
of school forming their letters.
The curious humps of n's and m's.
Yellow coats in motorboats
hovering outside the windows
waving to them hello. Hello,
the children think. It's nothing
strange to them. The odd behavior
of adults. Something new every day
for the kids. Nothing to be alarmed about.
What a world, they mutter to themselves.
Smell of yellow paper and dark pencil.
Mountains of m's on their pages.
Water trickling under the door.
Really, there's nothing strange about it.
This flood at their feet.
That man in the red checked shirt
and blue hat jumping up and down
in his boat waving his arms.
Who knows what he wants?
DUTIFUL

It has a plan. Easy in a way. Goes where it says it will go. Does what it says it will do. Grief. Doesn’t disguise itself as joy. The dead go and don’t come back. Don’t call and want to start over again. They burn the buildings. Scorch the ground.

There’s a certain purity to it. Loves only itself. Has its rules. Its particular duties. You grow fonder of them finally.

The body goes into the ground. Is ash. Is done with itself. You know where they are because you put them there. You kissed the cold forehead. Stoked the disheveled eyebrows. The bruised arms. I carried my father’s clothes cross town so he could be dressed one last time. Pressed my face to his jacket. Found a toothpick in the side pocket.

There’s only one suit finally. One pair of shoes. You get the last word if there’s anything to be said for that.
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Your brushing by is a wind
and they hear a call/their name.
—My favorite lines from the
spring issue.

Regards,

Ellen

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