CONTENTS

7 Jean Valentine: A Symposium

Maggie Anderson 11 "September 1963": Jean Valentine as Political Poet

Forrest Gander 15 "'Autumn Day': A View with Some Room

Kathy Fagan 19 "Strange Quiet": Jean Valentine's "'Autumn Day"

Camille Norton 22 On "'Love and Work': Freud Dying"

Michael Waters 28 "Snow Landscape, in a Glass Globe": Jean Valentine's Elegy for Elizabeth Bishop

Beckian Fritz Goldberg 33 On "High School Boyfriend"

Carl Phillips 38 Reading Jean Valentine: "About Love" as One Example

C. D. Wright 45 "The Power Table": World-Light in This-World Company

Brenda Hillman 47 "Listening": The Swerve

* * *

Mary Ann Samyn 51 A Short Essay on the Work of Jean Valentine

Jean Valentine 52 For Her,

53 The Harrowing

54 The Look

Isabel Galbraith 55 Grass Widow

Kary Wayson 56 Love Is Not a Word
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Poem Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lenore Mayhew</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Lines for John Cage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Kanning</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Darkroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Eimers</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Bird Nests Over the Gates to Terezin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>White-Throated Sparrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Gambito</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Toro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Immigration I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dore Kiesselbach</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>First Hike After Your Mother's Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin Malone</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Hush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Hutton</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>For Tracy Cernan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Montgolfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72</td>
<td>The Long Season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Phillips</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Captivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Kristiansen</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Yonder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nance Van Winckel</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>When He Snaps His Fingers, Stopped in the Midst of Going On</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Crow</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Implications of Color and Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Addicted to the Horizon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John F. Deane</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Bogart</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Something Else About the Evening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Jay Shippy</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Tapestries in the Gothic Room at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Zee (Pronounced Sze)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Hicok</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>ROTC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>86</td>
<td>The Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles M. Israel, Jr.</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Two Lu-shihs for Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gretchen Primack</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>Patient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Colors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Carol Potter  92  Sticky Fingers
93  I Would Be Smoking
Philip Metres  94  The Familiar Pictures of Dis
David Hernandez  97  Fooling the Buffalo
Shira Dentz  98  Ringed Like a Tree
John Morgan  99  The Battle of Austerlitz
Gabriella Klein  100  Tip
101  As the Interval Between
Kevin Simmonds  102  Another Untitled from Japan
103  While in Northern Japan
Susan Terris  104  Goldfish: A Diptych
Elizabeth Winder  106  Weekend Notes to Adele X —
   A Play in Five Acts
Paula Bohince  107  Acrostic: Queen Anne’s Lace
Betsy Sholl  108  Rough Cradle
Bruce Beasley  110  The Corpse Flower
114  Contributors
JEAN VALENTINE

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM
Forty years ago, Jean Valentine's first book, *Dream Barker*, was published in the Yale Younger Poets series; a year ago, her ninth, *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems*, won the National Book Award. Midway between these two well-deserved honors came a ten-year silence that was followed by *Home.Deep.Blue: New and Selected Poems*. Since that fifth book, Valentine has steadily been collecting what may be the most diverse group of admirers enjoyed by any contemporary American poet. Increasingly spare, Valentine's poems are carefully read by poets whose own work is expansive; inarguably difficult, they are loved by those who value clarity as well as those whose work has been described as elliptical. This symposium reflects that diversity, as well the span of a career that, as the new poems published here suggest, shows no signs of slowing down, let alone evolving into another silence.

One reason for this unusually inclusive audience may be that confluence is a central strategy of Valentine's poems themselves. No poet has examined so fully the landscape of dream, but it's the space where dream meets waking life that her poems so hauntingly inhabit. Few contemporary poets have approached the spiritual as boldly as she has in recent books, but spirit finds its home in body, the metaphysical in the physical. Other poets who've explored the unconscious have made the self their pivotal subject, but Valentine's inward excursions have attuned her eye and ear more keenly to the larger and often troubled world around her. Most of the essays in this symposium explore convergences such as these.

But what probably best explains the attraction of Valentine's poems is the reward they offer the reader who finds in their spareness a cue to slow down, to pay attention. If the poems at first seem elliptical, difficult, resistant, or if to the impatient they seem merely slight, they ultimately yield, and continue to yield — not meaning, exactly, but a more essential wisdom of mind, heart, body. Behind these poems is a great deal of courage: to explore the disturbing revelations of the psyche within, to confront
the violent manifestations of the culture without, and out of all of this to make a music in which every word, every note counts. As a poem in her latest book says:

A bone standing up  
she worked for words  
word by word  
up Mt. Fear till  
she got to her name: it was  
“She Sang.”

We invite our readers to listen to nine poets as they listen carefully to the essential singing of Jean Valentine’s poems.
SEPTEMBER 1963

We’ve been at home four years, in a kind of peace,
A kind of kingdom: brushing our yellow hair
At the tower’s small window,
Playing hop-scotch on the grass.

With twenty other Gullivers
I hover at the door,
Watch you shy through this riddle of primary colors,
The howling razzle-dazzle of your peers.

Tears, stay with me, stay with me, tears.
Dearest, go: this is what
School is, what the world is.
Have I sewed my hands to yours?

Five minutes later in the eye of God
You and Kate and Jeremy are dancing.

Glad, derelict, I find a park bench, read
White tears on a white ground,
White world going on, white hand in hand,
World without end.
Maggie Anderson

"WHAT THE WORLD IS":
JEAN VALENTINE AS POLITICAL POET

The core vocabulary of Jean Valentine’s poetry has always been oneiric and elegiac, and her central imaginative landscapes of dreams and loss. Because of this, her poetry has not often been characterized as “political,” that is, pertaining to issues of the collective public world. In Valentine’s most recent work, however — the poems in The Cradle of the Real Life and the new poems in Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965-2003 — political subject matter is often quite overt. Poems on homelessness and on the AIDS pandemic; post-September 11 poems; poems on the death of Matthew Shepard and those addressed to a man in prison, all foreground public events. “I am trying to move into an other, into others, to move out of the private self into an imagination of history, into the public world,” Jean Valentine told Richard Jackson in an interview in 1983. Clearly, Valentine herself sees a shift over time in her poetic preoccupations. Yet, as I have been reading through the collected poems over the last several months, I find that even in Dream Barker, Valentine’s first book, which won the Yale Younger Poets prize in 1965, public events quite often abruptly enter the primarily domestic world (husband, wife, children) of the poems and transform it dramatically. One poem in particular seems to me indicative of the public and historical contexts of Valentine’s early work.

In “September 1963,” from Dream Barker, the speaker is a mother taking her child to the first day of school. With trepidation, she leaves the child among the “riddle of primary colors, / The howling razzle-dazzle of your peers,” breaking apart the quiet domestic world of the first stanza of the poem and of the child’s first “four years” when they lived “at home”:

... in a kind of peace,
A kind of kingdom: brushing our yellow hair
At the tower’s small window,
Playing hop-scotch on the grass.
The mother’s parting words to the child are encouraging, yet ominous: "Dearest, go: this is what / School is, what the world is. / Have I sewed my hands to yours?" Quickly enough, the child is dancing and playing with the others, but the dangers of the world beyond the domestic are palpable now, in the public world where the mother has little or no power to protect.

In fact, the public world is present from the title of the poem with the evidence of a date in history. 1963 was the year of what was then the largest human rights demonstration ever — the August March on Washington, where Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his "I have a dream..." speech. In September of that year, four Black school girls died in the racially motivated bombing of a Birmingham Alabama church. The mother in Valentine’s poem leaves her (white) child at school and, finding some rare time alone, sits down with a newspaper:

Glad, derelict, I find a park bench, read
White tears on a white ground.

In a complicated moment of leisure and shock, the mother is "glad," but also "derelict," a word whose multiple definitions include: released from ownership by another, out-of-work, and neglectful of duty or obligation. The mother has not paid attention to the larger terrors — to the murders alluded to in the newspaper's bold type. Her own private tears at separation from her child now become "white tears on a white ground" in the relentless "white world going on." In a very public imaginative gesture, she suddenly sees not only her child, but all the children for whom we adults are responsible. She hears them in the heavy military march beat of "Birmingham. Birmingham. Birmingham." She experiences not only the ephemeral, safe world of the childhood tower ending, but the relentless historical "world without end."

In the contributor’s note to her poems included in the anthology, Things Shaped in Passing: More "Poets for Life" Writing from the AIDS Pandemic, Jean Valentine writes, "Knowing people with AIDS and their partners and families and friends has
brought me closer to the campfire." Here, Valentine references public grief by way of a domestic image. In her image of the warm light that draws us together, I think of Gaston Bachelard’s images of the house in *The Poetics of Space*: the evening lamp on the family table. The world of the small table offers some measure of comfort as long as it lasts, Valentine’s poems suggest. But both the range and depth of her collected work demonstrate how clearly she has always understood the pervasiveness of the public world in which we all participate and suffer and for which we all bear responsibility.
“AUTUMN DAY”

Who has no house now will not build him one . . .
Will waken, read, and write long letters . . .
— Rilke, “Autumn Day”

The house in the air is rising, not settling between any trees. Its line may have come here by machine, wirephoto, they soften to dots in the rain.

What draws you on so hard?
You would like to think about resting a minute on the mobbed walk or the electrocardiograph table to ask about the house there — dark, stone, floating out over the edge of the buildings, someone, something, it may be, inside — but you can’t stop here: the dangerous air, the crowds, the lights, the hardening Indian Summer . . .

strange quiet,
with time for work, your evenings, you will write long letters this winter, you have your friends, and the names of friends of friends.
In 1974, just graduated from high school, I received, as a present from a neighbor, my first collection of Rilke's poems in translation. Also, Jean Valentine published Ordinary Things, and in it a poem titled "'Autumn Day'" that begins, after a nod to Rilke's poem "Autumn Day," with a sentence about a house.

Ordinary things, an autumn day, a house. And later Valentine's poem mentions crowds, lights, Indian Summer, friends. Could the domestic be inscribed any more resolutely?

Indeed it could. Per usual in Jean Valentine's poems, the given is way weirder than it seems. In Valentine's poems, the ordinary floats like a bright fishing bob over unfathomed dark currents. The domestic scenario in "'Autumn Day'" takes place at the edge of a silent but treacherous undertow. In fact, the aforementioned house is at once precariously "in the air" and it is "rising." The air itself is "dangerous." And the poem's protagonist, you,

... would like to think
about resting
a minute on the mobbed walk or
the electrocardiograph table

as if those two locales — a walk where she is oppressed by the mob and an ekg table where her health is called into question — were likely places to take a breather.

The poem ends with a reference to its prefatory lines from Rilke. Whereas Rilke writes "Who has no house now will not build him one... / Will waken, read, and write long letters...," Valentine finishes with this stanza:

strange quiet,
with time for work, your evenings, you will write long letters
this winter, you have your friends,
and the names of friends of friends.
It's the *strange quiet* of the poem that I love — all cork-insulated image and meditation — and the undertow that pulls me beneath the familiar if upended domestic references. Apart from the ambiguity of the central image — is the house floating in a newspaper image? Has it been lifted by a tornado in Wizard of Oz fashion? — there are irresolvable tensions that twitch across the middle of the poem before they are simply abandoned for the promise of winter, letters, and the thought of expanding circles of friends.

Among those tensions:

1. Something that "draws you on so hard" is pulled toward the thought of resting.
2. The location of the speaker is tugged between outside (the mobbed walk) and inside (the ekg table) and between the anxiety of Indian Summer's light and the refuge of evenings in a winter to come.
3. The solid (stone house) has been drawn up into the ephemeral (air).
4. And the weather itself is hardening even as the lines of the house are softening.

The ellipsis following "Indian Summer" lets the boiling pressure of that stanza drizzle away into an empty margin. And the poem resolves itself in a final stanza that seems less like an afterthought to the earlier tumult than a complete adjustment of vision. It's the bathetic resolution of that last stanza — emphasized by the five soft f's in "friends...of friends of friends" — that I love. The way Valentine allows the poem to drift from the very moorings she constructed into a backwater silence.

It would be facile, I think, to say that "'Autumn Day'" is a poem about the house of language, the house that has been upended (by the war in Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers, Watergate, et al.) though it has something worthwhile inside it. To say that the speaker is drawn on so hard that she cannot stop because she is propelled by her own exigency, her life rocked between the expe-
rience of numerous others and the solitary experience of her own mortality. Or to say, after Austin, that all language is performative and that one response to inner turmoil is to direct language/letters toward others. To say that friendship is the primary virtue. Though all of this may be true too, the poem, marvelously, makes its meanings larger and more mysterious and does so in what Robert Baker calls (speaking of Mallarmé) "the quiet nocturnal tone." There is a voice in this poem, as in many of Jean Valentine's poems, that is as close as anyone else has come to inscribing the voice I hear in my head, my own intimate, *sotto voce* interlocutor.
In her 2002 interview with Kate Greenstreet, Jean Valentine discusses being drawn early — at the age of eight or nine — to writing: "I knew it was going to save me.... It was...the thing of having an imaginary friend.... I really needed to talk to somebody.... So I started writing." It's a familiar story among writers, but for Valentine it seems that original impulse — to connect with an imagined other through silent talk and covert listening — has become the very focus of a life's work, providing that work its prayerful qualities, its dream-like strategies, and its global reach. The impulse also likely provided Valentine herself with her abiding interest in spirituality, dreams, and translation: I really needed to talk to somebody so I started...praying, dreaming, translating. In her third volume, *Ordinary Things* from 1974, she does all three.

"'Autumn Day,'" the second poem in the collection, is titled after Rilke's famous poem and takes its epigraph from that poem's third and final stanza. Rilke's poem was written in late September of 1902, a time when he was a somewhat itinerant young poet, the frequent guest of wealthy friends. Valentine's "'Autumn Day'" also references Carl Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, specifically one of several "visions" Jung experienced after a heart attack in 1944, in which he saw "in space a tremendous dark block of stone, like a meteorite...about the size of my house, or even bigger.... I had the certainty that I was about to enter an illuminated room and would meet there all those people to whom I belong."

Jean Valentine was nearing forty when completing the poems of *Ordinary Things*; in poems both typically intimate and resistant — they read like personal letters from which entire passages have escaped — Valentine concentrates on the "ordinary" elements of a poet's life: friendships and family, correspondences (of all sorts), sleep (restorative and permanent), and evocations of one's own and others' experiences. In "'Autumn Day,'" Valentine begins with Jung's vision of the hovering stone, though here it is a house, a dwelling place, like the fortress atop the floating rock
in Magritte’s 1959 painting “Castle in the Pyrenees.” It is Rilke’s unbuilt house, of course — and Bishop’s monument and Dorothy’s farmhouse circling in a tornadic cloud above Kansas — “its lines,” at first questionable, mechanical, “softened to dots in the rain.” Beautifully then, if bafflingly, the gentle resolution of this first quatrain is followed by the question, “What draws you on so hard?” Given the long sentence that follows this question and eventually completes the poem, we understand the second person “you” to be Rilke touring, Jung recuperating, the poet herself at this middle-way juncture in her writing life (though we hear, don’t we, the coming season addressed, if just for a moment, and the imaginary house itself, and ourselves?).

The yin-yang of hard and soft, here and there, in the poem prevents us from settling into what might at first appear to be the idyllic solitude the poem’s final lines offer. And the poem’s parade of seasons — summer, fall, winter — like the series of friends and letters at poem’s end, remind us of the ways we unspool our time while waiting for something to happen before we die. In a later poem, “The Under Voice” from The River at Wolf, Valentine explores similar territory from a more mature perspective: the “streaming up out of the sidewalk the homeless women and men” become something “more like light than like people, blue neon, / blue the most fugitive of all colors.” Then a vision of “our bodies” becomes “our whiteness.” In the final stanza, the under voice addresses the blue, the stars, all who are born, give birth, and will die, and ends: “Everyone else may leave you, I will never leave you, fugitive.”

In both poems, point of view shifts evolve so rapidly that logical sense-making is foiled. Dream-sense is the currency of these poems, with their authorial omniscience, urgent agency, and whispering second-person addresses. On the periphery of this intimate collective consciousness as it engages in its private modes of address — the writing of a poem or letter, a promise of eternal faithfulness — there also exist mysterious crowds unknown to our speaker(s). Whether these be a chorus of voices waiting their turn to speak or static threatening to interrupt or relieve the “strange quiet,” the essential if silent exchange between
“I” and “you,” they are certainly consistent figures in the “everynight life” — Valentine’s play on the phrase everyday life — of her elusive poems.

As much as Valentine’s “‘Autumn Day’” owes to Rilke (and Jung), there is now a host of younger poets indebted to Valentine herself. Not, strictly speaking, experimental, Valentine might best be understood as one of many American poets of her generation who were influenced by a growing interest in internationalism and the work of a previous generation of non-English speaking poets, some of whom they translated — Valentine continues to translate Mandelstam and, in Ordinary Things, Dutch poet Huub Oosterhuis. Poets such as James Wright, Robert Bly, Philip Levine, Mark Strand, Charles Simic, and others of Valentine’s generation introduced symbolist, surrealist, and folkloric traditions to American poetry throughout the 1960s and ’70s that were subsequently absorbed by American poets coming of age at century’s end. Some of that strain has developed into the contemporary avant-garde, some into the absurdist and ironic work of narrative poets such as Heather McHugh, J. Allyn Rosser, and Maureen Seaton. But another strain thrives that remains, like Valentine, more invested in the quietly contemplative, fragmentary, sometimes ecstatic, quasi-epistolary poem that Valentine has practiced for an entire career, reinvigorating in the process (with a feminist power-booster) a lyrical tradition for newer poets such as Beckian Fritz Goldberg, Larissa Szporluk, Lee Upton, and Terese Svoboda. Like Dickinson a century before her, Valentine is a poet of great emotion and wild spirit, who has grown a common diaristic and therapeutic impulse into a subversive, demanding, and generative art.
"LOVE AND WORK": FREUD DYING

—London, September 1939

He could watch his soul, a line drawing, almost a cartoon, rise up, out of his mouth, past the footpaths up a steep, concentric mountain, to enter another city: a vast, black and white city, at the top of space, precisely edged in blue and red and gold leaf. September. A gray, light absence of God.

All his books were there, in his room; and the rugs over the sofas, and the small Egyptian statues, the Greek heads. Men and women with sad, lively eyes came and asked to study with him. Friends and colleagues were there, "both of the past & of the present."

But the first hour, resting for a minute, from his walk, on a bench in a green square near his house, he fell asleep. He dreamed he was walking, deep in the ocean; he was both male and female. The dome of the world fitted perfectly over the ocean floor. The slow currents filled his mind with a reasoning peacefulness he thought he must remember. High clouds of sunlight moved through the water.

No one here was marked off, by coloring or sex or money. Still, as they walked slowly by him, their faces held some questioning, calm sorrow. The dream was like a voice, the singsong rhythms of a voice he had known a long time, but without words, an old story. He wondered if someone had told it to him.

He woke up: he wanted to touch someone; to listen, again, to the consolation of that voice. Familiar voices waited around him in his room. One spoke his name, a strange sounding word, now. Most he wanted, to go back to his dream, where there were no Jews, no saving needed, and no fame of accomplishment to save them.

No, it must be that he didn't know anything yet, about that strange, slow place, its darknesses; he had to go back and listen; walk there and think:
I would like to think about Jean Valentine's poem about Freud in terms of the moveable walls that surround it. These are the walls that Valentine herself has set discretely in the space of both the poem and the book in which it appears, *The Messenger* (1979). They mark what for me might be the most salient characteristic of Valentine's poetics, her ability to move effortlessly between the concrete and the ephemeral and between narrative and lyric intensities. No poem exists in a vacuum, especially superb poems, such as this one, that satisfy us on their own merits. They are attached, like tissue, to a poet's attempt to clarify her material. And they are attached to the world that makes that attempt intelligible. The moveable wall floats along the place of attachment like a wing bone. It seems to indicate how the poem might connect to another poem or to another problem of thought or world. And in that connection, we encounter the density of the poem in a new way. The poems in *The Messenger* speak to one another or seem to overhear one another. Reading this book is like resting in an echo chamber in which certain motifs appear as part of a composition in time. At the moment when we encounter Freud inside the sequence called "Solitudes," we are aware that Freud's preoccupation with "voices" takes place within the structure of a long meditation on the human voice and the experience of listening to the messenger whom we cannot describe in ordinary religious terms.

*The Messenger* enacts the process of poetics as a form of attention, not only to the voices of one's friends but to the voices of the dead, who, like Freud, seem to speak and listen to us in our loneliness. They too are lonely, we discover. Valentine quotes Emily Dickinson's letter to Higginson: "You were not aware that you saved my Life" ("February 9th"). She quotes Huub Oosterhuis: "People pray to each other. The way I say 'you' to someone else, / respectfully, intimately, desperately. The way someone says / 'you' to me, hopefully, expectantly, intensely..." ("Sanctuary"). The "you" of this passage reminds me of Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the human Other as the "altrui," the Other who can never be fully
possessed or fully known, the Other who may be all we ever glimpse of the Divine. To truly approach the Other, one must empty oneself of "Self" as the-subject-who-knows, says Levinas, in his critique of philosophical method ("Is Ontology Fundamental?").

For Valentine, listening is a form of kinship with humanity. It is also a work of solitude and of prayer. In "Sanctuary," she writes:

Here...well, wanting solitude; and talk; friendship —
The uses of solitude. To imagine; to hear.
Learning braille. To imagine other solitudes.
But they will not be mine;
to wait, in the quiet; not to scatter the voices —

Imagining, hearing, reading the braille of reality through the body, needing the presence of others who have dwelled in solitude, needing to speak with them, to find one's common ground in a culture seared by violence, loss, and catastrophic history — these then are the terms of this book and of the poem about Freud's death. These are also the terms of love and work for the poet — and for the psychoanalyst, who listened for many years to what poets and others had to teach him about the human voice, its terrors, silences, and obsessive refrains.

Valentine imagines Freud not as a "you" but as a "he," as someone who cannot be completely known or followed even within the context of his famous life. We know quite a lot about him. As he watches his soul rise up out of his mouth, we might recall that he suffered acutely from mouth cancer, a cancer so fetid that his own dog recoiled from him. He anticipated that when the pain grew too strong, his physician Max Schur would help him die by administering a high dose of morphine. "The time had come, he knew and acted," writes Peter Gay. "The old stoic kept control of his life to the end" (Gay 651). But the work of the stoic, who can control nothing, remains the subject of Valentine's poem, a poem in which solitude, voice, and friendship cycle through the dream of Freud's passage.
Freud, as Valentine imagines him in the most profound solitude of his life, is attached to two planes of existence, to life and to death, Eros and Thanatos, the great antagonists of Freud's philosophy. Attached this way, he is almost winged, like Valentine's Messenger figure. He is most certainly going somewhere, entering "another city: a vast, black and white city, at the top of space...." His concentric climb recalls Dante, who in *The Inferno* descended into the tiered circles of bodily suffering to observe the entrapment of Christian history — the hell, in other words, of political enemies and other sinners. Unlike him, Freud climbs up, up into the domed city of the mind, a city of oceanic, equable, feminine peacefulness, a peacefulness in which words detach from received significations, in which the old story must be revisited or rethought: "The dream was like a voice, the singsong rhythms of a voice he had known a long time ... an old story. He wondered if someone had told it to him." God the Father is nowhere in sight. Neither is the totemic Father of Judaic law, the Father of rationalism, language, and thought.

And so this is also a poem about slippage, about what it means to lose one's footing when one's identity is founded in thought. For Freud, work was thinking in its most sublime sense; he was an analyst, an eminent thinker. Mercury, the winged messenger to whom H.D. refers in her *Tribute to Freud*, is the god of thought who governs how we think and the speed with which we think. It would not be going too far to assert that for Freud love and work were part of the same fabric as thinking itself, a passion, a motive force of the rational life. The person he loved most, his daughter Anna, worked as his right hand, a filial as well as a professional amanuensis. If love and work do not promise us happiness, said Freud, they are as close as we come to it. Freud's work had to do with listening to "voices," the voices of analysands, colleagues, friends. He listened as acutely as a poet to the meaning of the myth or the dream. Now we are in Freud's dream, which is his dying, the Bardo space in which one reconnoiters the old parameters of the self as they shift into new meanings: "no one here was marked off, by coloring or sex or money"; "there were no Jews, no saving needed." As he slips into the place
of unknowing in the poem’s last stanza, he enters not the irra-
tional (which he had studied for so many years), but the meta-ra-
tional, what Stevens called "the palm at the end of the mind, /
Beyond the last thought": "No, it must be that he didn’t know
anything yet, about that strange slow place, its darknesses; he
had to go back and listen; walk there and think:"

What poignancy there is in that final colon following
"think." Here is closure without closure, the gap in the place of
what cannot be represented, the self that is no longer thinking it-
self and thus is no longer present in language. Silence. "A gray,
light absence of God." The last thought of the subject is that he
must think. Freud, the rationalist — for who else but a rationalist
would attempt to name the Unconscious — confronts the "dark-
nesses," determined to think them through. How like us he is in
his belief that thought can save us. But, of course, rationalism
never recovered from the second world war’s intellectual projects
of annihilation, its Manhattan Project and Final Solution. Here is
history as moveable wall, occluded now from Freud’s conscious-
ness: the full scale of the Holocaust, the death of his four sisters
at Thereseinstadt and at Auschwitz (which he would not live to
know about). In Civilization and Its Discontents (1929), Freud fore-
saw war without end, a civilization that would produce the atom
bomb, the death camps, and, arguably, the pattern of global ag-
gression that continues into the present moment. Freud, dying in
London in 1939, seems to be framed by history as the end of ra-
tionalism, as do we. He died in exile on September 23, a little
more than a year after escaping from Vienna at the very last pos-
sible moment, and just three weeks after the Germans marched
into Poland. We hang onto these facts as a way of coming to em-
pathize with his humanity; we know enough about Freud to be
able to follow him here to the threshold before the colon that ends
the poem. Then he passes from our grasp.

It is this slippage that I love most about the poem, the way
Freud moves into "the mystery" on the other side of his story. We
may be framed by history but we are never possessed by it. To
suffer, to be a body in pain, is to escape history’s purview and to
enter poetry’s domain, or what a theologian and poet like Oost-
erhuis might call the domain of the soul. As Emmanuel Levinas wrote, "Even when we murder someone, he escapes us forever." We listen at so many moveable walls, trying to find the pattern by which we might console ourselves for being mortal. But to listen, to really listen as Valentine does here, one must be willing to let go of all that materialism promises us in terms of possession, absolute knowledge of the Other and of ourselves. Yes, it must be that we don't know anything yet.

In Memoriam Gayle Wheeler

WORKS CITED

SNOW LANDSCAPE, IN A GLASS GLOBE

in memory of Elizabeth Bishop

A thumb’s-length landscape: Snow, on a hill in China. I turn the glass ball over in my hand, and watch the snow blow around the Chinese woman, calm at her work, carrying her heavy yoke uphill, towards the distant house. Looking out through the thick glass ball she would see the lines of my hand, unearthly winter trees, unmoving, behind the snow...

No more elders. The Boston snow grays and softens the streets where you were... Trees older than you, alive.

The snow is over and the sky is light. Pale, pale blue distance... Is there an east? A west? A river? There, can we live right?

I look back in through the glass. You, in China, I can talk to you. The snow has settled; but it’s cold there, where you are.

What are you carrying? For the sake of what? through such hard wind and light.

— And you look out to me, and you say, “Only the same as everyone; your breath, your words, move with mine, under and over this glass; we who were born and lived on the living earth.”
"THROUGH SUCH HARD WIND AND LIGHT":
JEAN VALENTINE’S ELEGY FOR ELIZABETH BISHOP

In the year following Elizabeth Bishop’s death, Jean Valentine praised her as a poet who is “both simple and endlessly resonant with meaning” (Poetry Miscellany, 1980). Her elegy for Bishop, “Snow Landscape, in a Glass Globe,” included in the section of new poems in Home.Deep.Blue: New and Selected Poems (1988), is anticipated by her earlier elegy for her grandmother, Frances Valentine (1880-1959), “To Salter’s Point,” included in her first volume, Dream Barker and other poems (1965): “Maybe our mortal calling / Is, after all, to fall / Regarded by some most tender care....” This coupling of seriousness of purpose (“mortal calling”) with trust in the beneficence of an unnamed witness (“Regarded by some most tender care”) — either the traditional God aware of “The barest sparrow feather’s falling” or the poet herself who must “imagine Heaven” when the world cannot — occurs again, two decades later, as another death compels the “Looking” that might lead to consolation. Also, the pentimento of these lines suggests another reading, “our moral calling / Is, after all, to fail,” reminding us not only of the futility of engagement but also of the limits of empathy. What the poet offers is a way of seeing, then a way of seeing again: “And the thing itself not the thing itself, / But a metaphor,” she insists in “Sex.” Richard Jackson has noted that “the process itself is the subject, not the fact of the finished poem.... The poem is always emerging.”

Valentine’s sparse vocabulary, as well as her use of language, its constant doubling, function always as an extension of her (re)vision. God, light, angels, hands, sleep, friends, summer, dreams, and even white, the cancellation of colors, all contribute in their repetitions to the dreamscapes of her poems, while bits of dialogue, those human voices that wake us, often intrude. In “Silence: A Dream of Governments,” she writes: “Then, day / keeps beginning again: the same / stubborn pulse against the throat, / the same / listening for a human voice — .” Jackson has remarked that her poems seem to be “based upon fragments, shifts in perspective, traces, frayings... a world of deferrals, disconti-
nuities, differences, gaps.” Marc Chenetier, writing in *Beyond Suspi
cion* about another master of limited vocabulary, Raymond Carver, notes that “his short stories are the site of absences, hollow presentations, kingdoms of ellipsis,” and “tend to be organized around an initial hole, an absence of explicit cause, an ambiguous, undeveloped fact.” These “territories of the indefinite” also situate Jean Valentine’s poems, and afford them the simplicity and resonance she so values in Bishop’s oeuvre. Bishop’s characteristic restraint and decorum translate, in Valentine’s work, into what Chenetier calls “the art of the unsaid.”

The elegy for Bishop clings to a narrative thread, as if the poet in her desire to praise is afraid of losing her way, of being too easily distracted by light and language. Like the smile of “that blind child on the train” in “Night,” her poems seem always “a little to one side of straight ahead,” but “Snow Landscape, in a Glass Globe” attempts to strike a balance between eyesight and vision, and its signature repetitions call attention to its making, its process of *becoming*, as well as the struggle, always, to labor in the knowledge that completion remains impossible.

The glass ball encompassing its landscape allows the poet both her precise measurement (“thumb’s-length”) and telescopic view (“Snow, on a hill / in China”). Her concern here is with the act of seeing, from without and within, and the back and forth — “I... / watch,” “Looking out... / she would see,” “I look back in,” “And you look out” — echoes the swirls of snow falling around the miniature figure. The repetitions throughout the poem’s thirty lines (of “snow,” “hill,” “China,” “glass,” “ball,” “over,” “hand,” “pale,” and “light,” as well as several personal pronouns) reinforce this whirlwind effect. The various rhymes in the opening stanza (snow/blow, hill/ball, work/yoke/thick, and house/glass, for example) cue the ear for the chiming that occurs throughout, and allow the language its foreground so that the affirmative progressions (“alive/live/lived/living” and “unnearthly/breath/earth”) underscore the text. Finally, the poem’s six questions, in their yearning to establish a moral landscape and to accept the self-discipline of artistic responsibility, enable the
narrator to assume her burden of grief just as the Chinese woman
and the dead poet carry their "heavy yoke" and continue their
journey "through such hard wind / and light."

The poem begins by establishing a connection between the
narrator, who watches the woman "at her work," and the woman
in the snow globe who, if she were "Looking out," "would see the
lines of my hand." Since the poem's dedication announces its
function as elegy, it would be hard not to read Bishop into this
stanza, and "her work" references her poems, just as "the lines of
my hand" suggest the elegy itself in the process of creation, the
lines of poetry put down on the page. Nothing in the description
of the woman — no mention of her dress, for example — or the
landscape indicates that the setting is China. Is the yoke on the
woman's shoulders enough to pinpoint the country? If not, then
why does the narrator claim China as the globe's setting? More
important here, however, is the "snow" that makes the outer
landscape in which the poet resides seem "unearthly," its trees
"unmoving" — this outer landscape corresponding not only to
the snow globe's cold scene, but also to the emotional territories
of the narrator who is searching for language that might express
her grief.

The next stanza reinforces the burgeoning sense of commu¬
nity as the snow falls both inside the globe and outside on the
Boston streets. "No more elders" seems a sigh of resignation. As
the trees disappear in snow, so "the lines" of poetry begin to fade,
as suggested by the ellipses in the first three stanzas, due, in part,
to the sense of loss triggered by the death of Bishop, one of the
"elders," gone now like Frances Valentine and other, spiritual
foremothers. Her absence is palpable ("where you were"), yet the
trees, though veiled, remain, "alive."

In the third stanza the snow has stopped, and the narrator
imagines an extended landscape, both inside the globe and be¬
yond the grave. Her questions ("Is there an east? A west? A
river?") recall the titles of several of Bishop's books, North &
South, Questions of Travel, and Geography III, as well as Bishop's
famous villanelle about loss, "One Art," in which she loses and
misses, among other objects, "two rivers." The stanza's final
question, with its italicized "There," means to rouse belief in a place where we can "live right," and strengthens the narrator’s resolve not to allow her lines to dissipate.

She again turns her attention to the globe in her hand, addressing "You," now both the glass ball’s figurine and the dead poet: "You, / in China, I can talk to you." It’s obvious now that China, in its "distance" and foreignness, functions as a metaphor for death: "it’s cold / there, where you are." Again, in its simplicity, "there" assumes resonance, becoming the solitude in which the creative process flourishes, the territory Bishop inhabited and now continues to inhabit, not only through her death but through the "living" body of her work.

The narrator knows the answers to the questions ("What are you carrying? / For the sake of what?") posed in the final stanza. The "heavy yoke" is the burden of artistic purpose, a "mortal calling" and moral responsibility to take part in a community that provides "most tender care" as well as a vocabulary, "breath, / ...words," that helps us to endure. The anonymous Chinese woman and the late American poet beckon the narrator by triggering the creative process, then receive her, "through such hard wind / and light," into that community of the dead and the living "under and over this glass," this globe, a community not only of those "who were born / and lived on the living earth," but also of those "who were born[e]" — lifted — by words, by poetry.
HIGH SCHOOL BOYFRIEND

You were willing to like me, and I did something,
and blew it,
and your liking me would have saved me,
and my liking you would have saved you,

that was the circle I was walking around,
pushing a bar that moved a wheel
down in the dark, holding my breath,
naked in a long hard army coat of you,
hating my feet, hating my path . . .

Today my tongue is a fish's tongue,
kissing my friend's light breastbone, his chestnut down;
full of tears, full of light, half both,
nowhere near my old home: no one anywhere
is so wrong.
Jean Valentine stole my boyfriend. Chances are if you were ever in high school and a girl, she stole yours too. This is what gifted poets do, they articulate our experiences with such accuracy that we catch our breath with the shock of recognition. How could she? I was sixteen, he was seventeen, and though we both suffered an attraction to each other, our “relationship” was botched by our bad timing, by terminal insecurities and missteps. It never really got off the ground before it was over, neither of us knowing what we’d done wrong. And that’s part of it too, love at an age when one is still struggling with her own identity, and that struggle gets all confused with him.

Some twenty years later I first read:

You were willing to like me, and I did something, and blew it, and your liking me would have saved me, and my liking you would have saved you,

that was the circle I was walking around...

and I was back in high school. “You were willing to like me” (my italics) is the language of the adolescent girl who is not convinced she deserves to be liked, that she is someone another would find attractive or worthy. It suggests that the speaker is not that popular girl, the one all the boys like, but that this girl is a little different, an outsider. She does not know how to respond. “I did something / and blew it.” She doesn’t know exactly what it was that made him lose interest, but she is sure something she did was responsible, she “blew it,” in the contemporary vernacular. Valentine draws an intriguing portrait of a girl who, on the one hand, feels she didn’t do or say anything to cause him to like her — it was only his benevolence — and, on the other hand, is sure she caused whatever it was that stopped him from liking her. This is only the beginning of the “circle” full of conditionals: “willing to” and then “would have,” as the third and fourth lines
parallel one another, only reversing the pronouns: "...your liking me would have saved me, / and my liking you would have saved you." Somehow, both boy and girl are unable to move forward, both needing to be "saved." But saved from what?

For the speaker, the notion that the boyfriend’s affection would save her emphasizes her desperation. It is not merely rescue from loneliness she desires, but validation — and a validation that comes from outside the self. She also recognizes that he, too, is trapped in that adolescent darkness. Together, perhaps, they could have escaped. Instead, she walks in a circle, "pushing a bar that moved a wheel / down in the dark," an image that evokes an animal pushing the bar that operates a millstone. It is drudgery, and the animal is drafted into performing this labor without choice or sense of purpose much as the girl here simply finds herself walking this circle, pushing the bar without conscious choice, without knowing why. The wheel turns "down in the dark," as if she’s a part of some mechanism she can’t wholly see.

All the while, though, she is holding her breath. Love, or "liking," has been swallowed up by fear. The continuous effort of pushing, of the relentless circle, mounts through the continuation of the sentence which pushes on through these first two stanzas, a steady march: "naked in a long hard army coat of you." It’s another image of conscription, much like the earlier image of an animal pushing the bar that turns the millstone. The girl is trudging this path like a soldier under orders, involuntary but feeling she has no choice. The image also evokes a familiar high-school convention, the girl wearing the boy’s jacket; whether a letter-jacket or another uniform, it is a subtly insidious form of an identity subsumed. The coat, "long" and "hard," is an ill fit. "Hating my feet, hating my path" echoes the rhythm of "holding my breath," the "hard" army coat along with the huffing consonance of the "h" and "th." The metrical beat heightens the tension, alternating the iambic and trochaic foot except for the trochaic march of "naked in a long hard army coat of you."

The first long circular sentence made up of clauses ends nowhere, there is merely an ellipsis. The second sentence opens the third stanza with "Today." This word immediately shifts time
and perspective. After the long interim, the experience of love contrasts sharply with the earlier darkness and self-doubt of the high school girl. “My tongue is a fish’s tongue...“ the speaker declares, an image of lightness, and tenderness, that celebrates the transforming power of connection. It also locates us in the intimate spaces of the natural world. Do fish have tongues? Yes. But it is not a familiar image and prompts the reader to imagine that subtlest part of life immersed in water, “full of tears, full of light, half both.” The state of love is no longer mechanical and hard — it is fluid.

This liquid or underwater space where love is illuminated, akin to what Gaston Bachelard in The Poetics of Space calls “intimate immensity,” resonates throughout Valentine’s work. “First Love,” the opening poem in her first volume, Dream Barker, is a celebration of this space: “How deep we met in the sea, my love, / My double, my Siamese heart, my whiskey, / Fish-belly, glue-eyed prince....” She returns to this image again in “Seeing You” from The River at Wolf: “I dove down my mental lake, fear and love: / first fear then under it love.” This immersion, a baptism of sorts, is accompanied by a sense of liberation. “My tongue is a fish’s tongue” is new identity claimed, not imposed like the army jacket. And, in this first physical intimacy of the poem, the speaker “kissing my friend’s light breastbone” is focused on loving rather than being loved.

No longer a millstone turning underground, love is that room under the water itself where boundaries have dissolved: “nowhere near my old home: no one anywhere,” reads the penultimate line, and then “...is so wrong” — yet why do we hear “right” also in this? A. D. Snodgrass in “Tact and the Poet’s Force” calls the way the poet manipulates our expectation “tact in style,” allowing us to hear what is not said. We are culturally trained to think of love as finding “Mr. Right,” that someone who is inevitable, tuned to our every desire. We are not always, especially we women, trained to recognize that love has as much to do with our sense of self as it does with our need for the Other. The poem’s “wrong” abandons all the old definitions.
A few years later, my high school boyfriend married one of
my best friends from those days. By then, I only saw how good
they were for each other and had long since left off mourning the
confused and awkward course of first love. And many years later
when I read “High School Boyfriend” there was a surprising
pleasure in the poem that recognized love is in many ways a re-
response to ourselves, and cannot conform to our expectations or to
our being “saved.” So I lost a boyfriend and gained a new rela-
tionship, lifelong, with the work of a wise thief, Jean Valentine.
ABOUT LOVE

1
No when you went to her
(oh when she told me so) then I turned to
her her her her: emptiness:

black hollows falling over alone
under the white running water

2
"Light as milk in a child's cup,
I will hold you, at my lips
I will feed you," said the soft black pelican
about love, the mother, God the pelican,
the mother, stem of all our tenderness.

3
Ribbon of the
silver path of the milky
light on the water, how
you follow yourself across my mouth,
across my hair;

beads of water,
bright tall necklace of light, how you
thread yourself through me, through
my lips, their silk
stem.
Like any work that is original, Valentine’s defies easy deconstruction — she cares deeply for meaning, yes, but the poems do not give themselves immediately over to interpretation; and in their general brevity, they can risk seeming insubstantial to the reader who insists on reading quickly and who hopes in that quick reading to “get” the poem. In this way, of course, they have much in common with, say, the T’ang dynasty poets, whose work — like Valentine’s — relies heavily on imagery and on its ability to resonate in several directions at one time. To read such a poem with appreciation is itself a kind of religious experience: one works one’s way toward illumination and acquires it by ultimately abandoning — past a certain point — the need to have concretized proof of what remains unseen. Giving our empirical selves up at last, we make a leap of faith.

I say “at last,” because it requires work to get to a point where we can, in fact, stop asking questions. To stay with the notion of religious experience, in every religion that I know of, there’s a period of initiation, of learning how to prepare to receive illumination. I sometimes think of it as a form of orientation, as the postulant sorts out how to understand the self’s position relative to the physical world first, and then to the metaphysical world. One learns how to recognize a possible sign or clue, then comes to see that there are any number of interpretations available for it, and then — and here lies the key — more than accepting, one actually embraces the gradually apparent fact that there will never be a single “correct” answer for questions metaphysical — just an immeasurable answerlessness to which belief, for the initiate, can be a saving counterweight: belief attained via spiritual exercise.

To read any Valentine poem, for me, is a form of spiritual exercise. This isn’t to say that the poems are always spiritual, though I would argue that the majority of Valentine’s work is getting at how something like the sacred is constantly at intersection with the most secular contexts, if only we could see it. “About
Love" all but enacts that moment of intersection, and the transformational results of it. The poem’s first section gives us the barest narrative, though we are in medias res:

...when you went to her
(oh when she told me so) then I turned...  (italics mine)

Something happened, and then something else happened in response: there’s the narrative arc of part 1. We don’t get to know anything more specific than that, and yet it has always seemed to me that betrayal is the context: betrayal of the speaker by the beloved/trusted you, and a second betrayal of the you by the she who tells the speaker of the betrayal. The speaker’s response to the act of the you having gone to a third party seems one of disorientation — a turning, but to an emptiness that confounds by not being an emptiness exactly. The colon at the end of line 3 suggests that this is an emptiness that contains “black hollows falling over alone / under the white running water.” Clearly, the speaker has been taken by surprise, and the initial response to what has surprised, here, is the “No” with which the poem opens, a refusal that is echoed in the “her her her her” of line 3, that stutter at once of shock, refusal to accept — how acceptance or understanding of a situation often comes in staccato-like steps, especially when what we are being asked to accept or understand seems unbearable. But within what seem to be two stanzas about betrayal and its initially disorienting effects, Valentine makes sure that we don’t assume anything too easily. What, for example, is the meaning of “turned to” in line 2? Is this directional? Or is transformation what’s meant, i.e., the speaker turned into the she? What of the first colon in line 3? Is it the colon of equation, telling us that to be “her” is to be an “emptiness”? Or is emptiness simply the response one feels in response to her? Finally, while I suggest that the colon after “emptiness” is one of equation, telling us that the emptiness in fact contains “black hollows,” etc., couldn’t the colon simply be directing us to the emptiness that is the white space between the stanzas? Valentine’s
poem invites us to consider all of these possibilities, and refuses to direct us to any single one of them in particular.

And yet, there is direction of a very sly sort. Part 1 ends in a non-resolution of natural imagery, “black hollows” followed by “white running water.” This sequence, from black to white, is reversed immediately in part 2. It opens with the white of milk (and of light, if “Light” refers not to weight but to the absence of darkness — again, the ambivalence seems deliberate), a white that is followed by the black of the pelican at line 8. A chiasmus of imagery. Or put another way, the imagery of part 1 is reversed; part 1’s context was that of disorientation, disbelief, crisis; the reversed imagery signals a reversal at the level of situation in this poem. Part 2 is the section in which crisis is met with rescue from crisis, as the black pelican comes offering the nourishment of love itself, the particular love associated with charity in the Christian virtues: the pelican was commonly depicted as the attribute of the theological virtue Charity in Christian art. Such art also used the pelican as a symbol of the Crucifixion, with the bird in paintings piercing its breast and feeding its blood to its hungry young, analogous to the suffering of Christ to provide redemptive grace for the sins of humankind. Valentine wants us to have these connotations in mind, hence the sequence from love to mother to God the pelican, and back to mother, in lines 9-10.

The poem begins to have a straightforward-enough arc, then, from betrayal to crisis to the love that has the power to allay crisis. As in part 1, though, Valentine makes sure that mystery never entirely gets penetrated. What has happened, for example, to bring about the situation of part 2? Suddenly, a black pelican appears, but from where, and how? And the pelican here is not “God the pelican,” since this pelican is speaking about “God the pelican” as a separate entity (I am reading “love, the mother, God the pelican, / the mother, stem of all our tenderness” as a series of appositions, as the punctuation would dictate). This pelican comes as a messenger of God the pelican, rather like the archangel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary with his famous message. And incidentally, there are no black pelicans in nature,
that I know of — only white and brown. It's hard not to want to read more into the fact, then, that this pelican is black, and that blackness is, in Christian art, more often associated with evil than with God — one would expect this pelican to be white.

Part of Valentine's point here is that we rarely get what we expect, that life is not so easily solvable for X, never mind that it is our instinct to want solution. "About Love," in its first two sections alone, suggests that solution may be possible at times, but that it may well come from unexpected, unchartable places, without explanation, in the manner of miracles — of which love is perhaps the most important. Once it finds us, says Valentine, we are utterly transformed; the barrier between the world and ourselves falls away, as it were. We become a part of the mysterious gift that is the world around us, it enters us, we enter it even as we contain it. This state of one-ness is beautifully portrayed in part 3, which is a double invocation of sorts, first to the light on the water, and then to the water itself; each of the two stanzas opens with the invocation, and concludes with a statement of praise for what the light and water respectively do. Which is to say that part 3 functions very much as a psalm of praise does, invoking God, and then praising God for a particular good that's been granted.

Stability, the recognition of having found it — this is what lies behind part 3, if we look at the level of structure, and not for direct statement (rather the way the chiastic imagery was its own statement earlier in the poem). Just looking at stanzas, we can see that part 1 consists of two unequal stanzas, a tercet and a couplet. Part 2 brings the five lines together into a single stanza. But whereas parts 1 and 2 were each five lines long, part 3 contains ten lines, not only divided into equal stanzas of five lines each, but also arranged so that they form a sort of visual chiasmus, each stanza beginning with a short line that then expands at the middle, only to contract at the fifth line. Just at the level of what the stanzas look like, then, there is something like balance, and this is the final step in a process that began with fracture, followed by consolidation; after that, so argues the structure of part 3, the self can divide into its parts again, but with balance, each
part the match of the other. It’s decidedly reminiscent of the work that structure and lineation do in George Herbert’s “Easter Wings,” another poem that concerns the passage from crisis to redemption, via love.

As I mentioned, the result is a one-ness, one that proves difficult to see exactly — or, more accurately, it keeps changing each time we look at it. Look how quickly the transformations occur in this section’s first stanza, as we’re shown first a ribbon, only to learn that this is a ribbon of a path (not the fabric kind of ribbon), but the path is associated with milk (bringing us back to the milk of part 2), though it turns out that milk is being used here as a way to describe the light on the water — a decidedly protean sequence of images. And what is happening in this stanza is that the light is spilling over the speaker, “across my mouth, / across my hair.” But look at Valentine’s phrase for it: not “you spill,” but “you follow yourself,” a phrase that brings to mind Heraclitus’s river, the notion of endless flux, one thing endlessly passing away as another enters it; I think also of Augustine’s concept of time, a present that includes anticipation and memory, but no future or past. But we are speaking ‘merely’ of light here, yes? Light, but cast through the imagery now of water, and now of time. Meanwhile, there’s the water itself, the addressee of the final stanza, but no sooner are we given “beads of water,” than we are told that the water can also be understood as a “bright tall necklace of light.” The light that was separate from the water only a stanza ago — something on the water, but not of it — has now fused with the water, it would seem, even as the speaker has reached a psychic (and perhaps spiritual) fusion of the self that was fractured earlier. That is one of the transformations that occur in part 3. Another is the transformation of the ornamental necklace (what ordinarily should rest on the speaker as the light rested on the water a stanza ago) into thread, or at least it takes on the properties of thread — or so it seems, until we realize that this thread is not the usual passive kind, going wherever the needle takes it. Rather, as the speaker says of the necklace, “you / thread yourself through me, through / my lips,” an image I find resonant at a number of levels. The speaker is being stitched, into
wholeness presumably, as one stitches a wound back together. But it's the mouth that's being stitched here, conjuring the idea that the speaker is being stitched into silence — but what kind of silence? The silence of no longer needing to speak or ask questions, or the silence of no longer being permitted to do so? Is this contentment, resignation, or a censorship to which the speaker abandons the self finally — which is another way, I would suggest, of describing a leap of faith: we censor our own questions, and decide on silence as a manifestation of belief. This behavior is also consistent, of course, with despair...

Which is to say that "About Love" refuses to deliver a predictable, easily resolved narrative about the redeeming nature of love in the face of betrayal. That is one way to read the poem, yes. But Valentine knows that love is not that straightforward, nor is it ever uncomplicated, whether we are speaking of human love or divine love. Part three can be read as a psalm-like moment of praise, as I suggested. But it also seems to address the fact that there is a cost to love, and that the test of love is our belief in it, our faith in it, despite what we know it must cost us, or can — whether it be the loss of pride and trust when we are betrayed, or the secular sacrifice that the mother makes for the child, or the more sacred one alluded to in the poem, the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption of humankind. In "About Love," Valentine works with the honesty that has always characterized her work. By honest, I mean that she addresses the complexity and irresolvability of those questions that are finally among the most important ones for human beings: What is love? What is trust? Does divinity exist? How do we begin to believe? And in what? And why? Her poems manage at once to be unshakeable enactments of this questing-through-questioning, and to deliver answers that are the only fair ones to give, namely, answers that raise even more questions. The goal, I think, is to come to an understanding of how it is human nature to want to know — but knowledge is perhaps a lesser thing than belief-on-faith. What Valentine persuades me of is that we can speak all we want about love; but that ultimately it's by believing in love — not by explaining it — that love may save us.
THE POWER TABLE

You, lying across the wide bed, vertical,
I, horizontal,

you, I, in a green field two green paths
flowered with xxxx’s and xxxx’s

you, I, lined inside
with pre-historic quarrels

old black cuts
in a wooden kitchen table

the table where you sit down with your older brothers
the table where things get settled once & for all

the cow’s hip shaved down to the brand
her body divided into zones

Yes I am standing in the doorway
yes my softness & my hardness are filled with a secret light,

but I want world-light
and this-world company.
A Jean Valentine poem is a somewhat private experience. It tenders a for-your-eyes-only sense of message. She does not need to raise her voice; she knows if you face her words you can hear them. She is a self-described listener, hears herself intensely, and has earned the appointment. This does not mean anger is not in supply, not evident at the very table where you have been gathered. Not poised moreover to sharpen itself on the dull arguments of habit. If there is control in anger’s expression, it is earned, and exercised with a signature of essential detail, “old black cuts / in a wooden kitchen table.”

In the writing one can see a speaker who holds her tongue until she cannot, until she must speak, and then speaks with everything at stake, because everything matters. Hers is the voice in the doorway that does not give way, does not give in to the hostilities and wounds of the past. It is the voice that halts the racket, at least for now. It is the voice to which even the brutish and besotted must surrender, shut up and listen, if only this one time.

There is no obvious circle in Valentine’s writing. She has named Adrienne Rich and Jane Cooper as her fellow travelers. She has named Lowell, Berryman, Bishop. But this reader sees more of Niedecker and Oppen than the identifying marks of her friends and teachers. And that is admittedly a projection of a perceived fierceness disguised as reticence, a solidity disguised as stillness, and vice versa. Valentine carries her words in her arm bones. She carries “the journey of our lives.”

“Prayer,” she has said, “comes naturally [to her].” But so does a quiet insistence that stems from long consideration. She takes the fracture-line of everyone’s contention and wills it to mend. Fear comes naturally too, and the poems speak often of its shapes and ward against their ultimate victory. It is not consolation the poems offer, but courage, a little human courage. Maybe this is how the light gets in. And the world is better for its company.
LISTENING

For Fanny Howe

My whole life I was swimming listening
beside the daylight world like a dolphin beside a boat

— no, swallowed up, young, like Jonah,
sitting like Jonah in the red room
behind that curving smile from the other side

but kept, not spat out,
kept, for love,

not for anything I did, or had,
I had nothing but our inside-
outside smile-skin...
my paper and pen...

but I was made for this: listening:
“Lightness wouldn’t last if it wasn’t used up on the lyre.”
Brenda Hillman

THE SWERVE

Lucretius writes that the swerve is what keeps atoms from bumping into each other. Just as they are about to make a mistake and strike other atoms, the atoms deliberately swerve. Lucretius is not speaking metaphorically; this is a proposal for how matter keeps itself going, though of course, it resembles imagination.

He writes:

Another fact I wish to have you know:
When the atoms are carried straight down through the void
By their own weight, at an utterly random time
And at a random point in space, they swerve a little,
Only enough to call it a tilt in motion.
For if atoms did not tend to lean, they would
Plummet like raindrops through the depths of space...
So Nature never could have made a thing.¹

This is rather like the end of Jean Valentine’s poems; a bit of sound that is allergic to logic finds a swerve of avoidance that makes reality possible.

When the poem comes from a dream, but the proposition is that the language of waking is inflected with dream-event, Valentine ends her poem in the presence of what seems like a dream trace. This produces a mysterious yield, and a sea into which she casts her net again.

Mostly I have thought about this double style of ending in her book of origins, Growing Darkness, Growing Light. “Listening” is the last poem from that collection.

The retrieval of the last line here starts with the watery nature of the twin “ing” suffixes of the past participles in the first line. Something will be doubled into something not like itself: swimming and listening, dolphin swimmers and humans. In a characteristic Valentinian plain style, the poem proposes gradual

deductive shifts from the general to the specifics of the case: things move from a small known thing into what they do not know. This is, as Lucretius suggests, in the nature of things.

The precognitive but overview condition is dolphin-like, but she has a different fish in mind: the name Jonah is repeated and swallowed in the next stanza; the short stanza, being short, is itself spit out, though the two *kept* contradict this disjection. The "I" makes a biblical and epic journey in seven lines; the trope patiently works through its contradictions as the Jonah's fish/life image gives way to a little rhyme, like a smile, before the "I" encourages attention to something not found anywhere in the poem at all: a gnomic statement that is like an ancient funereal identity riddle.

Who says this? Surely not the Jonah-like "I" who has been tossed about from room to a skin-turned-parchment; the statement comes from an other not previously produced by the poem; it insists synesthetically that light is dependent on lyric, and that it will only last if it is used up by song. Lyre can't help its pun. This poem's final swerve provides an unexpected last insight, which doesn't follow in any logical, or even in any metaphorical, sense.

In other poems in this collection, a speaker is homesick and brings a sense of estrangement into the last lines; in the poem "Homesick," someone navigates the un navigable: "and I float in it / salt and breath and light / hawk and salmon and I...." Here, she ends on an I/eye pun, and an ellipsis which makes a flotsam in the imaginative space of the poem.

In "Rain," a poem in which there is an address to the water-and-light-snakes produced by rain, the sense is that the other half of the terms of the metaphor is missing because the snakes don't "mean" anything; they just appear. The second half of this poem reads:

Snake where do you come from?
who leave your grass path
and follow me wordless
into our glass
water and light house,
earth wet on your mouth,
you the ground of my underground.

No snakey-comma in the line about the snake. The swerve of the last line, the paradox offered to the void. The titles of Valentine’s poems don’t make any promises. In this last line, the poem changes its own terms; the snake has become metaphoric and invisible until the end, and then whatever “snakeness” is turns into a completely different substance, in which the ground had a substratum of becoming.

This is the swerve of matter and thought which makes sure one thing doesn’t bump into another, and blame it.
Jean Valentine: *zing!*

Jean Valentine: send me that postcard twice.

Jean Valentine: I licked the stamp myself.

Jean Valentine: not your father's Oldsmobile, butter pecan, or dodge.

Jean Valentine: please adopt me.

*Why are we in this life, Jean Valentine?*
Jean Valentine

FOR HER,

for the tense mare and her rider
with her harness and blade
with her eyes and hooves straight ahead

with her unit rising perfect
out of the father-ground — "ready" —

For her,

once a foal For her,
born, like many a foal, born with a
wet-black line of hair down her spine —
THE HARROWING

The worn hands
spines feet

Even he
whose blank hand I held on to
for dear life

phantom-limb

*

On your sidewalk
walking past your café

The piano was being tuned, hard,
trying it, one note at a time

trying, walking outside of time
— was that the night — & space

*

Blessed are they
who break off from separateness

Theirs is wild
heaven.
Pain took me, but not woke me — no, years later, your look woke me: each shade & light:

So to love then I came, the first beach grasses.
Isabel Galbraith

GRASS WIDOW

"— ORIGIN C16 (denoting an unmarried woman with a child): from GRASS + WIDOW, perh. from the idea of a couple having lain in the grass instead of in bed."

We never thought to use a bed.
You snapped me down
Like a tarp. I stayed
Long after you left, the ground

Still rising to meet me, there,
At the hill’s foot. No one
Told me about calenture,
Sailor’s delusion,

The sea a green plain
Through fever and sweat.
In this way I explain
How grass can be lost

At sea, and I a widow. Now
I’m careful which bed I choose
To weed. No one told me of meadow
Lark or meadow rue.
LOVE IS NOT A WORD

A dove is not a bird.
— Dionisio D. Martinez

My love is not a list
though the light
does list and my
lips look licked.

Dove is not a word, but love
is a lisper.

Sweet La
my Dee Da, my daughter’s
an idea:

I could break her bready body
from the sweaty blankets of the bed.
I could hold her head.

I would comb her hair.

The telephone is not an ear
but the last time I tried, I could hear
your fear: the egg

in the air. You’re the bird,
I’m the bear. And the night
comes on like a memory
of amnesia:

What we did have.
Where we did go.
What we do.
LINES FOR JOHN CAGE

Quarry ledges rimmed by April snow.
"Listen," you said, and there it was
an immense chordal hum
every car, every truck, every bus
holding its own tone forte
on Highway 20, but a pleasant
pianissimo behind the oaks.
"Look," you said,
and shook away the snow
from certain striated ferns
here now and in the paleolithic.
ABSENCE

In the cold
in the half-dark
the roof slates of the church

are blue green
like tarnish on scissors

should I go in
or stay here

with the wild grasses
with the old mosses

eating away the names
on these ruined slabs?

to go in
to stay
to meditate

everything seems inappropriate

I see that color
has followed the light

the wild asparagus is grey
the lupine, the ash.
The developer whistles up storm clouds
in the corners of the photograph,
picks out herringbone on a jacket sleeve,
ushers in the ever-deepening night,
leaves the paper slick as a newborn’s head.
The stop bath resists, ceases, arrests,
prepares for the fixer, that chemical undertaker,
which fastens light and shadow irrevocably to the emulsion.
Death and preservation come into the picture,
as in the phrase The Fix Is In.
Fixer marks clothing, trays, and tongs
with indelible, bruise-colored stains,
but stop bath enters the skin.
If you spill it on your hand
you can taste it instantly
at the back of your throat.
Nancy Eimers

BIRD NESTS OVER THE GATES TO TEREZÍN
summer, 2002

Nest chambers globular, of mud-pellets.
Carried in the mouths

from a shared puddle. Gulp, engulf, a long drink.

Swallows?

Like the contents and structure of some sixty boxes by Joseph Cornell.

A debt is owed to

hinges, latches, metal handles
on each side,

watch-hands, mirror fragments,

marbles, cork balls, shell and bone fragments, crumpled tulle,

doll’s forearm, loose red sand.

Gold and blue child’s head
attached to a wooden block. Hereafter

let all resemblance hide
between the present and the absent.

Let like or as be
inexplicit memory.

It's not a sky, it's a room.
Nest lined with feathers, sometimes the feathers curl up around the eggs.

One daily inch, 900-1200 mud pellets in a finished nest.

Mud-dark. *Dark in there* says a two-year-old son of friends back home when a toy train disappears in its tunnel back home, says it every time, and every time is right.

Torn paper, working music box, dried leaf fronds, wood block, sawdust:

children slept in some of those buildings, woke in others.

An orchestra played The Bumble Bee in the "park" for the "visitors," 1943.

Quotation marks around child are no longer extant.

Zdenka Eismannova, she was not a child when she painted "Early Evening in Bunk Beds,"

women sitting on their bunks, staring into space, an in-between,
privacy

now a group emotion, and hazy at that.

Oh nests, you pockets of space. But there are birds inside you.

Birds keep flying out of you, unswallow themselves,

network, criss-cross, dash — speed —

dart, hurtle, dazzle, flash — ostentation —

joy back in and out again, absence and presence current, topical, now at this sorrow.
WHITE-THROATED SPARROW

Made by trees
tonight, under the care of invisibility, I am trying
to ask my heart, oh why so knotted up? I hear
that it is late and Canada is sweet and still
so many days away, though it silvers
now and then in marshgrass and the leaves.
Darkening present, it is so beautiful
to be out walking
past blackbirds sailing to nowhere on their stalks,
silver thread of a song
about to be pulled through the eye
of a needle if only I stay out here
until it’s dark enough.
I'm looking for the good robin of everlasting sewing.

Easy as a bed to bed.

And his words are mints.

My shock in the ghost of the guest of my boyfriend.

First there is the Father.

He would not like me to tell you about him.

He is punching holes right now. Saying petit, petit, petit.

Garbled — he can seem like a balloon. Such a skin. A kingfisher.

We are afraid to touch him.

Like too many nights of touching ourselves.

He might plan to take us on a picnic.

We must be ready. We must be hungry.

I finished my blue necklace.

She tries to convince him because he was here on earth.

Dad quits his job for the umpteenth time.

I'm wicked lonely.

We are in a department store.
I buy him a blue bracelet because it is right there.

And I would wear it.

I buy it hoping he bought me something for Christmas.

This is never true of course.

We talk about religion. Of beautiful things in trees.

He wears an engagement ring.

I am shivery, full of V-8.

He drinks too much and cheats all the time.

All of whom he left behind in the Bible belt are singing Yes, yes, yes.

We put our hands over our face, our neck.

We are overcome saying “No, no, no. I can’t. I can’t.”
IMMIGRATION I

My heart eats cake, veronica cake that hates yoga
And lets me be crazy in the goldbar city.
So what if I don’t love you.
My problems don’t even happen to me.

But to three girls grandstanding by the Potomac.
Respectively: your mother, her mother and her mother.
Three bitches in front of a trashcan.
Desirous of psychotherapy and a split lip courtesy of me.
Because I didn’t ask to be born here.
Didn’t ask to learn the language.
And don’t know how to save you.

Am I frightening you?
I’m frightening you.

Good and good and good and good.
FIRST HIKE AFTER YOUR MOTHER’S DEATH

We cross a God-broad field
toward trees, wildflowers
phosphorescing like plankton
in the wake of a great ship,
sign the ranger’s check-in
manifest with a pencil
on a string, exchange
breadth for canopy
sunshafts walk through
on long legs when branches
take the wind. Prints
we make in thawing earth
begin to close behind us
before we’re out of sight.
The path goes stony, wet
and single file; I watch
you mill your arms to keep
the year’s first gnats away,
turn to follow thin squirrels
dashing through new green.
When we pause for juice
and olives amid the fierce
territoriality of butterflies,
you tell me motion unifies
a wind and is its memory,
then move far enough
ahead that you could turn
and see me in the sudden
light as who she wanted
you to settle for, courteous
with prospects, her choice
not yours. This is where
you disappear into your
new life, but stop and wait
where snowmelt lifts
a sound into the leaves.
I lie & say there are no ghosts
when sleep's stalled current draws him
near our bed, hair magnetized, shock
on blanket & pajamas in the too-dry air.
I could pat him, turn him toward the door,
but he has handfuls of language spilling —
owl, moon, hoot — & just then a train
loans its lonely sound to the fences
of our neighborhood. And that sound
like sand is everywhere. We've tried to show him
the world straight up, from carrots pulled
to the crow at the peak of the roof. He loves
winter banana apples for their pocked
rocky looks, twirled stems, & steelhead
when they barge upstream, teeming,
glitter-coated. He doesn't know
what comes next. He opened cabinets,
a kitchen drawer, found ghost — & shook
the word loose, shook it till he held it.
No, I say, but he has it & it's his.

New windows. New floors over old.
Walls punched in, sockets moved
wires hidden underground. Finished
twice, three times — isn't the house ours now,
nothing before we hung the beaded lamp,
woodcuts, the mirror in its copper frame?
Our present fresh as paint. For years
I inhabited someone else's space.
I've had enough: of lowered voices: bells
rung: all that held & holds us
down. I want to float. So when our son
comes in afraid, I shoulder him to bed,
drop in the shell of his listening ear

Horses have hands, houses have footprints.
Wind sings. Night falls like rain
& leaves.
At night, in bed, when I am not asleep, and listening, I hear my children down the hall, my son’s soft snores. My daughter sucks her fingers as she shifts in sleep. Nothing must be done then, nothing needs attending. The moon shines through the window. A kitchen light burns forgotten down the block, or is not forgotten and someone is alone in the dark, and the rest of us will never know, as we know so little of the lives around us. Before us, in this very room, the heart broke reading the letter. The telephone rang and rang then stopped. The last astronaut to walk on the moon left his daughter’s initials in the dust knowing they would remain there longer than he could imagine. I don’t know who she is now, if she’s ordinary, how she’s changed.
So here I am, not yet immune to the marvelousness of the world, such that some mornings, up before dawn, I believe I can hold everything, all of it, right here.

He stayed after the animals were crated and the balloon folded back into its sack, not wanting the day to end. Eventually he went home, because he had to. Full of glory and residuals, no doubt. Although in fact we have only Louis XVI's accounts of it: how bored he was, how he disliked the smoke — oh, every day is wonderful and bland when you're the king.
THE LONG SEASON

In the evenings, after we’ve put the kids to sleep, my husband and I go to our room, close the door and stand next to each other, companionably folding the laundry. The kids’ small socks and shirts fall from the sheets we untangle from the basket. This is not the love I imagined, but it’s who I want to be. Though I wonder sometimes. Like everyone. It took Peary eighteen years to reach the Pole, and some think he stopped thirty miles too soon. One morning a friend stood at his door and watched a deer charge past his house in Ann Arbor. Its hooves on pavement, a hard sound. Where could it have come from? Leaving the city, heading for the hills at the edge of town. A mild Tuesday, breaking into green. There. Not there.
I.

In the book of the body that is yours — where it’s never as late as I had thought it was, though I routinely fail, forget still not to call it my own —

in the book of my body that is finally yours only, the wind picks up, the clouds of everything that I’ve been wrong about in this life pass singly overhead as if for review, their cast shadows meanwhile, with the unstable camaraderie of exiles from the start united solely in their desire, for now, to be anywhere else, little more than that,

pass also...

Oh, sometimes it is as if desire itself had been given form, and acreage, and I’d been left for lost there. Amazement grips me, I grip it back, the book shuts slowly: Who shuts it? You?

II.

Memory, awareness. Expectation. A light rain falls... That there are three of us in the room isn’t clear at first, though it is always the three of us, naked, strangers who nevertheless belong together, but so briefly, I’ve no sooner assigned names to what happens here, the names detach, reassign themselves: this one, and now this one...

It makes little difference, any more than vision does, in a room this dark. It’s not by vision I tell apart the two of them, but how the one smells like something checked coming gradually unchecked, neither rage exactly, nor triumph
mixed with it, but not unlike that; to the other a touch that brings everything back: the promises in their not-yet-broken state, the brokenness after; the distilled sorrow, inside that —

*  

— How delicately, as if with care, the dark holds the nakedness that is the three of us, turning each to each, unappeasable, in constellation...
YONDER

One deserts the realm of the here and now to transfer one's activity into the realm of the yonder, where total affirmation is possible.
— Paul Klee

One letter in their alphabet resembles a leaning ladder,

the symbol for an aspirate
only the accustomed mouth

can pronounce.

By itself
it's the word for life

and home and askew.
It's the initial letter

for only one other word,
the one for something like craft

or calling or discipline,
its meaning informed

by the story of the homebuilder
who was the first to learn

that the accident of the actual
can either be handled

or sidestepped:

at the end of each day
he would lift his ladder

away from an eave
and leave it propped

against air.
WHEN HE SNAPS HIS FINGERS,

she’ll no longer be aloft
on a thermal. She’ll wake
and quit burning. Still be
arousesable. Still wear pink anklets
and chew Chiclets. From here on
she’ll nail the joke and not
crack herself up trying.

She’ll be home or able
to go home. She’ll no longer
get the sudden swells or shakes.
She’ll let whoever’s calling
leave a message.

What wakes her should leave
no mark. No echo. She’ll soon rise
and walk through the cold
pre-dawn rooms, sifting among
tchotchkes, thinking all of it, all of it’s
been worth it ... even these hours
on a stool bent over a bowl,
culling mealy walnuts
from moldy blue hulls.
STOPPED IN THE MIDST OF GOING ON

Reduced to hide. To stretched sneer and glass eye. The claws are, the beak is, the wings were legend. Lightning bolts.

Hung up near a shelf of ancient arrows, you soar into fake flight over a dioramaed smoke-lodge. The background’s songbirds mean to bore you into infinity. Once you helped yourself to their wee wagging hearts.

Oh loathsome thing you never were you are, and well lit too in the beastly now.
Mary Crow

IMPLICATIONS OF COLOR AND SPACE

That isn’t what happened, for we kept climbing up, rammed earth and stones stuccoed and white-washed, but the gates stayed closed while we kept on wearing our bodies, not thinking what we’d do if they came unbuttoned after standing for days without sleep, after beatings, accusations about our secret code.

How much does the state weigh? The courts of justice? The machines and the factories — how much, all of it? And don’t tell me you don’t know, take a day to think it over, then tell me how much.

We thought how we would answer such questions as we went on mounting the hill into the white city.

Song surrounded us: small birds in small cages above us on the balconies, water in the tinkling gutter, bicker of magpies, broom rasping the cobblestones: I did it. But blue escaped the morning glory climbing beside us, from cobalt doors, washed over potted plants and steps up, and suddenly the past swept on to somewhere else.
ADDICTED TO THE HORIZON

At the bend of the river a waterbird lifts a leg.
All the distances fall silent — did they turn the river off?
A blue sky unfurls the first notes of paradise.

Daybreak startles with the thud of a punted boat.
I know the jungle has been cut over and the river dirtied,
I can see the ugly slashes where the corrugated roofs rust.

Fish hiss under our boat as I study the dark down there.
Soon: light above will be astounding, heat a hammer.
Water stretches away shining and I want to follow

to the sea where everything slows — clouds, breath —
as in a movie’s freeze-frame, wake of beginnings —
this missing ourselves, this present already gliding on.
MARKET

The day was drawky, with a drawling mist coming chill across the marshlands; the church of Ireland stood, damp and dumpy, crows squabbling on its crenulated stump; cattle,

that had summered in a clover field, have been herded through plosh and muck into a lorry, have dropped their dung of terror on slat and road. Big heavily-skulled heads, bellowing, stretch up

over the concrete wall for one clear glimpse of the brown fields; and what of unredeemed suffering? what of faithfulness? Spring they were calling out of frustrated love

for their calves, how they stood in fields, innocent and willing, uneasy in weighted flesh like great-aunts whose trembling long-boned hands fumble for something in old unstitching bags.
SOMETHING ELSE ABOUT THE EVENING

What I remember about the sculpture
garden that night is not the Rodin,
but the taste of the cable fence surrounding it,
the metal cord like someone else's voice
in my mouth — sweet and somehow distant.
I think nearby a woman I loved
must have been touching another man,
for I was alternately crying and singing
and could tell I was close to something beautiful
that wanted no part of me but needed me
to keep it happening in a darkened room
overlooking the street.
I had to hold their bodies up there
the way nighttime holds the color of grass
to keep them...
from what?
They were like the elm leaves above my head,
the way we breathed for each other,
and where I was, there were people about
to lie down like deer in the ferns
or leave the prints of their bodies curled
in the doorways of churches.
Who wrote a boom with the same name. Is there a bar? Let’s hang our carpet like art! Who do they think they are?

Off the wall? With hounds and birds like pterodactyls — what did dogs stand for? When they found fossils they thought they were flying dragons, right? Or ogres, yes? And see how she presses two fingers against her chest — that’s a sign of her affiliations. Who wrote a boom with the same name? When a villein croaked, a goat was given to his lord. Never forget, while the mice were away the cat could play. Dude eats but brown rice until he’s skunked so then he steals Snickers from my fridge. I don’t see what’s so Bauhaus about here — playing bridge?

Look in the courtyard — the roadies are setting up drums. Let’s book for seats. I wrote a boom with the same name.
ZEE (PRONOUNCED SZE)

Zee hangs around the Tate waiting for people to die or annunciate — six of one, baker’s dozen of the other.

There are still people who go to museums to see just one painting, hung out to dry, in a small side room.

After lunch in the atrium — a goat cheese plate with Pinot Grigio — Zee finds paramedics pumping her old man for the information. You wouldn’t want his choppers. His face is substrate white, his gray ponytail sways to the resuscitation like a ragged gloriole.

A wall label says: *Painted just before the artist suffered a crippling stroke at dusk while contemplating the moon.*

The medics mold his fingers to sign: *As light as frost.*

Zee is asked to photograph a couple from Toledo as they pose alongside her airborne messenger.

When the annulus in the slight anteroom is at last depeopled, Zee sets up shop and starts to mobilize.

In Ohio, a couple fires slides at the midnight sky. In Ohio, F-16 fighters are scrambled, as light as frost.
A bugle wakes the sky as boys hold hands over their hearts and aim their eyes at a flag giving wind the only stars it will ever touch.

When they twirl their wooden rifles, I see twelve planes trying to take off made of human flesh and haircuts.

My new envelopes taste of peppermint. I will write and ask their mothers to send the blankeys their sons went to bed with and held soft to their faces. They will find in their attics the photo albums and baby shoes which are the beginning of pacifism.

On weekends, the cadets wear clothes like the rest of us wear and drink too much with the rest of us and scream from the back of moving cars like everyone I know is screaming and the Museum of Fire is burning down and when they march on Monday, I think we’re being attacked by leather shoes and hangovers.

The Museum of Ashes opens next week.

In their fatigues, the practice generals look like shrubbery moving around campus and I’ve painted my face over my face so hiding is what I do naturally.

When one of the cadets turns out not to be alive anymore in Iraq because of how rude bullets are, they lower the flag half way and speak of avenging blood, a name is chiseled into stone, which is how the stone is moving to the other side of town, piece by piece by name.
Little shadows live inside the names.
I’ve been trying to think of something more intimate
than the grave, possibly getting in there with the body
or carrying it around on my shoulders and stinking
of a perfume I like to call “What’s Our Hurry?”
THE CODE

Beautiful doorway. Blonde wood carved into an arch of angels, flowers, vines. The door itself also wood and cut, incised to hold a stained-glass window, sunset scene, one tree on the horizon and the moon, rising. A doorway that makes you want to enter heaven or the food co-op, even if you’re not nutty-crunchy, that makes you believe we have art up our sleeves, that beauty will show up anywhere, any time it pleases.

She was in the beautiful doorway. This is where I’d like an interlude — the history of the plastic tab, a little dancing among the puppies — but I’ll get to it: bat, teeth, Lebanese, a student, six years in the States, broken nose, jaw, fractured skull, two guys, red paint, blouse ripped open, nine eleven sprayed across her chest.

She lived. Five surgeries. The guys weren’t found. Letters in the paper, the categories: how terrible; how terrible but 911; why are they here; God works in mysterious ways. She lived, I see her on campus, her head hangs to the left, she is smaller than her shadow, the guys weren’t found, I could be one of them. You, me, how was swinging the bat like the playground, was it, was it like fourth grade softball, high school, the big game, I have questions.

Or the phenomenology of the itch. That would be a pleasant interlude, a way of not thinking about this code I hear everyday — 911, emergency, the Towers, the sky is falling.
the sky is falling. What purpose
does the itch serve, how did it evolve,
do mosquitos itch, how would a tree
scratch its back, what is the body
asking us to do, can we protect ourselves
from ourselves?

I step over her blood when I buy my coffee, Breakfast Blend,
seven ninety-five a pound. After weeks, the cloud
of her blood doesn’t move, or only moves
through what it’s compared to: a hand
curled in sleep; to sleep itself, the shape of the mind
in its cave. Probably
I have some of her blood on my shoes, likely
I’ve breathed molecules of her, have touched my wife
with the molecules of this other woman
on my fingertips, is this
infidelity, I have questions, I hear the code, I am asking,
is all, is the bat an interlude, is it who we are,
when did the question mark become a sin, is her blood
a seed, will something grow from this spot,
I am trying to crack the code, I am asking, is all,
how beautiful can this doorway be, now
that it’s a mouth, now that it has an appetite, and what
is being eaten, and are we full?
Dreaming is the stacking of weather.  
Lightning cracks the yolk under the eggshell sky.  
The sun wrinkles the air around the house.  
It crimps the edge of our faces.

When the wind comes in, fingers of rain  
Follow it across summer. On the projectionist’s  
Make-up table: a layer-cake of movie cans,  
Buster Keaton’s fingers, splicing reel to reel.

Tonight at the Cineplex, The Itinerant.  
We watch a pilgrim to Jokhang Temple  
Squat beside the lake of Yaundrok-Tso.  
She washes her hands and touches her forehead.

The green wind leaves a brocade on the turquoise water.  
Cumulus clouds try to roll over the Himalayas.  
They can’t unhinge themselves from the snow-ridges.  
She eats them, fruit from the palm of Buddha.
PATIENT

“They had been jammed into their bodies without knowing why.”
— Anne Sexton

My bones are in one hospital room, soft tissue another. I don’t mind the blood; I like to see it on this side of my skin for a change. My sack of skin packed with red and brown organs, like clown parts stuffed into a duffel. Sometimes I sponge down my skin suit until it is clean, with nothing from the inside soaking through.

I don’t mind the passage of time; it means I can enjoy hindsight. Thoughts are elastic: A picnic at the botanic gardens: Starched petals, starchy pistils, floury moths, all here to perform, little do they know.

I’ve probably been more alone, but I can’t think when. I can’t think why someone would create a child.
COLORS

I Fuschia

Bloated, unwieldy,
fat velvet

fibers to rub a cheek
then grind a smoke out in.

A Colette heroine
on heroin. Unspellable.

Plump lampshades.
My heart

when you cock
your head at me.

II Chartreuse

A squint. A pint of over-frozen.
Contracted glands. A squirt.

Nineteen eighty five: Esprit,
Forenza, Ciao, Mia,

L'Oreal, Samantha’s dollar polish.
Silk wound around a redhead’s

white waist. We’re drunk on it;
you, me, and the redhead.
III  Puce

Four letters bound together
with straw, the color of wound,

sets of consonant-vowel quitting in pain
after two.

The color of the thought
of teeth against your teeth. I chewed

on that word until I had to stop —
Whose gift to language was this?

IV  Ecru

Everything has been washed out of me.
I'm coarse and the ground is coarser.

What is left? No berries, but plenty
of tough wide crisp

stalks. Circle here, aliens! Take the field!
The jaw goes slack. Lips dry

among the stalks. Nothing left
to talk about.
When brother pushed mother  
into the oven he stuck to her dress. He mistook  
her for the witch because he was using his stick  
fingers. He got the story wrong though the moment  
was right. He was using his stick fingers and  
his bad eyes. He had forgotten his reading glasses.  
He had eaten part of the house and he had sugar  
sickness. We’ve all had sugar sickness.  
You put your hand in the bag of marshmallows  
and you eat one white puff after another.  
You can’t stop. You start to tremble then.  
Your fingers are sticky and you can’t control  
what they do. Your lips are like glue.  
You forgot how sweet sweet could be. What  
sweet could make you do. Bees follow your breath  
around the yard and it makes you crazy.  
You don’t know if you should run or  
stand still. They want to dip into your mouth.  
They land on your lips buzzing.  
And there you are, suddenly panicked  
all those wings on your teeth.  
And there she is, bending over the stove.  
That house with its candy corners.  
Its sticky roof. That syrup dripping off  
the table. We’ve all read the story.  
We all know what to do when push comes to shove.
I WOULD BE SMOKING

Bright moon in the desert, and that one bird singing in the dark. Cars at the bottom of the hill. First the stop light. Music somewhere, someone dancing in a room. Someone breathing into someone else’s arms someplace in the city, a woman turning in her bed. And the snails that climb out of the blue flowers at night are crawling across the sidewalk. When I come outside, I see them there with their heads out of their shells and the long trail of slow wet behind them. I came outside and stood in the moonlight. We had quarreled and she was sleeping in the bed. Both of us disappointed, but one sleeping if you could call what she was doing, sleeping. What love does to us sometimes if this is love. What we said to each other. How it picks us up out of the bed and makes us walk outside while the other sleeps. One is always asleep and one awake it seems. And outside on the patio, I would smoke a cigarette if I were to smoke. I would smoke it inside out, the lit end inside the mouth to keep the smoking secret. Unless of course the cheeks light up the way children put flashlights in the mouth to show the veins in their cheeks. You make the whole mouth a giant pink balloon in the dark. If we were children. If I was still smoking.
Philip Metres

THE FAMILIAR PICTURES OF DIS

1.

-traction: crushed cars ditches of roads broken pavement dis-

mantled stone walls loose cables & clouds of dust and dirt an envelope returning
to sender: no one by that name still living & so the dead letter returns
every night the neighbors hiding in houses heard sounds of smashing they could not see
what the soldiers hurled through the windows of the Ministry of Culture

after all something needs to be broken to correspond an objective cor-

-relative & sorrow is a house no one would visit unless it visits upon one
past midnight the sound of barking:
a soldier had attached a speaker to a tape

dlons joined a neighborhood chorus of de-

tence we will not sleep together
gather
stones to live in the basin of some ancient

ocean: the stones rise & break
ache the surface of the earth this is the holy

riddled with the stones: in the Ministry
tree
they took everything or took stones
to everything: computers cameras photocopiers ears
chimeras scanners hard disks smashed or scat

tered there is a sentence stamped out out
the broadcast antenna broken a sentence
3.

written over our bodies each of us owns a few letters this unread sentence

} without the bodies proximate we refuse & in the department for encouragement

} of children’s art the soldiers soiled the walls with gouache & all the children’s paintings

} smeared with urine & shit they did their business on the floors in the flowerpots in drawers in handbags

} in water bottles they did their business in the photocopier in sayings & symbols scrawled on walls refuse & return

} to sender someone had forgotten his dog tags you can read his name in the papers

} but not his whole name & the sentence remains unread the address unreadable return to sender

(thanks to a news account by Amira Hass)
FOOLING THE BUFFALO

A buffalo could outrun a lion, could outlast a horse. Take a bullet in his shaggy head, a buffalo could, and still roam the prairie. Make the world rumble with his brothers, jump as one jumped over a low wall to escape the auction. Down an alley and headbutt open a door, this buffalo could, and stand majestic in a dressing room, to gaze at the buffalo gazing at the buffalo standing before a mirror. Could grunt, could adore his reflection, this mammoth beast, coffee-brown and goateed. Indians would hunt for buffalo with a bow, the strings made from the muscle of buffalo. Or they hurried a herd toward a cliff, a wooly waterfall that tumbled and bellowed. Or ice, they coaxed the animal toward ice to skid and stumble, easy target that bristled with arrows. Duped toward death, the buffalo bled on the valley floor, across the frozen lake. Fooled toward love, the buffalo licked the mirror, haloed in lights. Could snort, could low, and be buffaloed.
Shira Dentz

RINGED LIKE A TREE

A black bird big as a fire escape,

Heights jamming *never* on the shrine of my calm river spring

Wind pets leaves
Just nab fragments:
Someone else’s skeleton trees,
the tendril of a sweet potato

Shoes bang up steps, shrubs flap

*the Principle of Replication is basic to many disciplines*

A bug moves in fresh soil
mute as an orange

We lived inside a fruit, pit silence.
No-mother’s wing blown through like a flute

The air could be happy if it were lifting something.
THE BATTLE OF AUSTERLITZ

Wakened by a dissonant drop
drip, worked in the bathroom late,
adjusting the ball to give the rusty tank
its proper level, then
because the blanket was too thin,

he pulled on a pair of socks
and read about African termites
in their mounds, and then
about the Battle of Austerlitz,
a novelist's account, turned out

the light and fell into a slumber.
At nine the doorbell rang,
he rushed downstairs. One of the
weekly students with her mom,
each with a violin,

but his teacher-wife was gone...
shopping, he guessed, annoyed.
Dialed her cell phone number.
She answered the second ring
and when he heard

her smiling at his voice
his fierce heart melted,
but she murmured, "Dear,
you need to come and get me,"
her weak voice sinking at

the end. And dizzy with sense of
creeping age, of something
gone spectacularly wrong, groans
of the dying, woke up
to this rainy winter's day.
I acknowledge the dishwasher his further mopping.
The knives I've dropped.
The restaurant we work in once
was a bank and before that it was a restaurant

and before that a bank. We store sugars in the vault and gold
butter foil is sticking to the floor. The tallest man at the bar
leans into me. *I hope you closer have into me a good closer, even closer*

*night.* Across the street they're mopping and two doors down
there's mopping too. From the alley is a topographic rhythm

of horn players in succession. I run my hands over every table
with a rag. Maybe someday this will be a bank again

when the waitresses are ghosts and deeds
have been turned over. I imagine money as a sign of good exchange.

It's late, you've been deserted,
I say to the man dissolving sugar into coffee.
I'm from a big family, he assures me,

I like to be alone. Sometimes I can see in a stranger's eyes
all there is to know. This love of loneliness. Ask me

what state I was born in.
I am waiting on you, my cause celebre, can I bring you a spoon?
AS THE INTERVAL BETWEEN

That which you believe. That which you believe in.
That I followed you
into the operating room or no, that I left you

at the elevator doors. That I set you down on the operating table,
nine bodies over you, praying

with knives. That I saw, no, sawed
and tweezed the tiny valves. You were a game hen

splayed with arms, no, wings,
tied taut. The wishing skin across your chest. I pulled the first bone.
That you did not feel a thing.
I can tell by your face that you're looking for bass.
— Samantha Raheem Thornhill

Bass insinuating itself
from a souped-up Honda.
Two Japanese dudes heavy
in their front-seat recline.
Surprised to see me,
you giggle like the girls
you've just become
and bob tanned faces
like doorknockers.
I answer with a smile and something
in flawless Japanese.
I'm the black sensei —
that hip hop folk singer standing
in the shelter of a bass line
six thousand miles from home.
Japanese girls torment me.
With chirpy, unfortunate English,

They ask,
*From America?*

*Hip hop very like.*
My body is news of their arrival.

They’ve landed in America, they’re sure,
Because the static across my body has cleared

And I’m blacker than they’d imagined.
I hardly look at them.

Other black men run
into the tendrils of their gardens.

They don’t see Medusa’s helmet there,
Tossed and eaten through.
GOLDFISH: A DIPTYCH

--- Science has proven the goldfish has a memory of a second and a half.

1. Tale of the Goldfish

Look, there's a castle,
submerged so its world magnifies
in water hazed with algae,
but I see willow, sun, a dragonfly.

Look, a castle —
rays of sunlight through its doorway,
a mermaid on a rock
amid roots and burnished shells.

Look, there's a castle,
and I angle through the door, out the window,
everything static,
yet behind I sense a shadow.

Look —
its distorted world is pooling,
until I see a rock with no mermaid,
sense jaws of darkness.

Look, there's...
2. A Man Is a Goldfish with Legs

Look, there’s a castle, where Circe turns seamen to swimming pigs while the universe expands, so watch out for solar glare.

Look, there’s...
and at its hearth, a clockwise flame, but below continents of ice, stress lines.

Look, a castle —
and a pearl at my throat to keep me alive, yet if there’s heat lightning, Venus will wink at daybreak.

Look —
how Circe takes up the pearl, and Venus, in morning sun, floats fire and ice, and may her lightning give you pause.

Some days — it’s less than a second.
Elizabeth Winder

WEEKEND NOTES TO ADELE X — A PLAY IN FIVE ACTS

1. Browned Butter
July, a bedroom. The scent of my sister rubbing cocoa butter into her legs. Something is released from the secret varnish of rosewood.

2. Portrait of a Tanned Spoon with Vodka Tonic
Wintered midnight lit by your jawbone — mineral bright white. Drinking sherry under your warm shade makes me a small golden pet in the dark corners of your snow-room. I don’t mean to say I am a pet but I do smoke, and sleep in the light of milk and smudge. Warm neck in lime. Adorable tanned spoon, something invisible is rubbing you with coarse seasalt. Dark rum and August cling to your nape. That I could have you or at least one more ankle bracelet —

3. When the Custard Dish Spoke to Me She Said

nestle me in ice or else.

4. Covenance — In the Task of Establishing a World Apart
Chilled bare arms propped on a bar. X likes to brush her shoulder against her jaw, becoming skin and skin. She thinks catching a cold tastes sweet, she will certainly fail her midterm. Turning the pages of a book called Constructing a Wall Between the Pleasantly Erotic and Pornographic she reads “when you look at him, do not wet your lips, only think of wetting them.” Tender staircase down to the Mezzanine. This is called taste.

5. Our Little That Little
My Cinder you certainly need lemons, tempering. But longings? Dusk and plum. X wakes to find her lover has gone to others. Smiling like a nun waiting for her Imagined, she —
Quietly tatted, silent, they edge the snowball bush — unlit, without judgment. Theirs is a vision I’ve always wanted: eiderdown-colored, stained as lace in a cupboard, emblems of a softer life.
Neglected, they lean neck and neck with each other. Audit of sixty years: one tablecloth, one draft card, one confession... No one else to do it: emptying his house of its sorry nests, cubbyholes filled with flannel and moth-eaten deer heads. *Entropy and decay*, he said. *A house is a kind of bondage.*
Strangled, the weeds have no one to kill them. Difficult to leave them alive, these last witnesses to his last days, who act blameless, cowering beneath brambles, who cannot tell me a fraction of what happened. Who did this? You ears, you idiot eyes that cannot close.
We’d yank at the pull rope, watching rainbows ooze, 
till the drizzle and sputter took hold. No wake 
the sign read, so we’d ease through the sleepy channel. 
But when the river opened, we revved that old Evinrude, 

aimed straight for the biggest swells, salt spray, 
engine noise, wave slap driving out all talk. 
School talk, shop talk, radio and God talk, our mother — 
was measure up the only thing they could say?

The shore was a green shaggy blur soaking up noise, 
light on the water brilloed our eyes. When we hit the inlet 
we’d idle back so fast our own wake almost swamped us, 
sinking us down into water’s rough cradle.

Now my sister’s voice 
over the phone — no news, it’s just that rocking we want, 
all meaning sea-blasted out.

All meaning on the courthouse steps, after weeks 
of jury duty, weeks of accusations, defenses, pleas, 
is fly drone, a measureless swarm. I saw the talk 
drain from a bed of lilies, heard alibis, angles and odds, 
all the old frauds, turn into syrupy sludge, 
run-down battery voice with its futile cough and sob.

In the grocery, I watched a woman roll her eyes 
and cluck over tabloid headlines, then tell her friend
she couldn’t imagine abusing a child. If I had words then, I would have said, *you didn’t try very hard.*

I would have followed her to her flag-decked car, instead of going home to sit in my kitchen in the same nightgown for days, staring at the same book open to the same incomprehensible page:

3

Just Jonah lulled by the lilt and list rocking his hammock in the hold. Jonah when the waves rose, when the pitch and roll worsened. Asleep in the closet when the cargo was cast out, back turned to God, the eye of the storm. Jonah in the ship spinning over its own sinking, crying, *toss me out,* tumbling down, seaweed at his throat. Jonah in the belly, the baleen, ambergris, bone and gore.

In Nineva he cried the length of the town, his voice a wild breach and fluke slap of God. Housewives and merchants, judges, crooks, the broken, the bitter dropped to their knees, splashed ashes over their heads. They didn’t talk, they wailed. And the invisible calamitous wave swelling above them — withdrew just as it had curled, ready to crash. *Measuring up? Hadn’t they measured down,* their reach into the wrack of their own drowning?

After which I called my sister, to bring back the sound when the engine’s cut and the water’s soft lapping is sweet all over all over again.
THE CORPSE FLOWER

— Hothouse
stink of inflorescence

as the purple, nine-foot-
tall spathe unfurls to waft

its fetors of fish-rot,
horse-corpse, burnt cabbage, charred

shit — spirals of thousands
of male & female bud-
tips, aquagreen. Spadix
thigh-thick, & the spathe-frill’s
devil’s-tongue lick — its sheathe
exposing the cone: bruise-
maroon interior’s
pattern of spattered blood.

*

Thermogenesis: stalk
fever-soused to the touch

oozes hot oils & puffs
their stenches from its spike

& skirt, its uncurled shroud,
tuber surging by six

inches a day. Amor-
phophallus Titanum:
amorphous, labial-folded & engorging —

*  

Its half-mile heat-odor call to dung beetles & flies & sweat bees' swarm. Duped scavengers, death-smell-drawn, refecundate its stalk, pollen gummed all over their furred feet. Ascending already-withering spathe: summoned, like me, by the deceiver's rancid aphrodisiac air, its swollen & velvet wet inside...

*  

— Carcass

scent in a ravishment of petal: official flower, once, of the Bronx... The botanist who found
its simultaneous
rankness & seven-year-
rare bloom, in Sumatra,
was named *Odoardo*

* 

Odor of dead tongues left
to canker in the sun:

*bhel-*: to bloom, to swell. Whose
derivatives refer

(bole, bowl, boulder, balloon,
boulevard, phallus, balls)

to many round objects
& thus to tumescent

*masculinity*

* 

— & the virgins
collapsed at Kew Gardens

having beheld its slow
erect pulsations, blow

of arousal & rot

* 

— Thanatos-
ic, venereal, its
rut done, it droops into pollinization, corm

retracting its vulval quicken & upflush: corpse-

flourish, infloration of words: bleed, swell, amorpho-,

*blow* — raised calix’s three-day bloom, propagated

by decoyed swarms of death-hungerers (flush, flor-
id, flourish, flower, spurt) — to point us to this mess

of overteeming sur-
vival, luxuriant

deviance...
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FIELD POETRY PRIZE

The editors of FIELD have awarded the 2005 FIELD Poetry Prize to Jean Gallagher of New York City for her manuscript entitled Stubborn. She will receive a prize of $1000, and her book will be published in the spring of 2006 by Oberlin College Press.

"In Stubborn, Jean Gallagher teaches us new ways of seeing — medieval paintings, for instance — and new ways of thinking; about the infinite, about holiness and terror and vision and loss. She does this with a kind of casual precision, a musical and imaginative daring that is both breathtaking and yet somehow matter-of-fact. As if taking the tops of our heads off or throwing open sudden doorways to timelessness were the most natural activity in the world. Her command of her art is breathtaking, and readers will not want to put down this book once they have started to encounter it. It shines with power and crackles with excitement."

— David Young

Information about the 2006 FIELD Poetry Prize will be announced in the spring.