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THE BUSY DAYS OF MY NIGHTS

Sometimes it’s the zombie
or near zombie movie, like the one from Monday night
in which inbred mutant Appalachian cannibals
terrorized and tenderized six people in West Virginia
and it was obvious who’d be alive and pretty
at the end but not how the dead would become dead
and yummy. Then I leaned over my guitar
the color of dust and fingerprints, hours
of touching the same sounds and listening
with my stomach, I played softly
not to wake the sofa, with the whispers of my hands
while the thirty-nine windows of my life
took their black photos of the night. Next I walked
in the field behind our house, it’s on a mountain,
everything’s on a mountain here, grass
tall enough to look at eye to eye, grass
in a slight wind was a field of mothers
telling their babies to hush, I sat up high
where we think the sinkhole was and thought
of writers struggling with the inbred
mutant Appalachian cannibal dialogue,
should it be uuuuugggh or mmmmmgh,
I found the Pleiades and remembered the ladybug
walking across “At the Fishhouses,” open on my desk,
a tiny orange pebble with six
upside-down canes for legs, it wobbled
over “Cold dark deep” as if considering and opened
its suitcase back and took out its top-secret wings,
flew seven inches above the ocean of the poem
and landed on “burn,” and the gold sun
remembered me, came back a degree closer to winter
over the potato-shaped mountain and if I never
sleep again, I won’t think of my eyes as bloodshot
so much as full.
TEAM EFFORT

Everyone at the same time if everyone at the same time looked up from coffee looked up from crotch looked up if everyone at night at dawn at lunch looked up at the black at the blue morsel sky at the congress of clouds of stars looked up from needle from packets of buzzing from the wedding of dollars if everyone in Queens in Wembley if everyone in my head if everyone looked up from electroshock from drift if everyone threw back the appetite of the eyes threw back the village of the head the persistence of the skull if everyone thought I am the vanishing point I am the frontal lobe of wind if everyone stood and raised their wings and tuned their orchestra if the census stood the tens of stood the billions of stood the Earth would move the circle would move the spinning would move if everyone at the same time opened their mouth let the wolf of their uvula go the rivers would stare at us again would return to our faces the expressions they carried away to the ocean to bury in the ocean to save in case we ever came back.
Everyone waiting reading the coverless magazines
reading brochures on Alzheimer’s & bone-loss two kinds
of forgetting

I call my father don’t tell him where I am he says
they think his heart now maybe his kidneys now
maybe doctors what do they know stay away
from doctors son yes dad

The woman across from me yawns pushes her hands
up her face pulls the skin back her hands
are wings she’s thirty years younger for a second
a moment of plastic surgery when her face sags home
it’s a scrotum

The man beside me is held together by liver spots
he coughs I hold my breath

Two doctors come out sit in our laps kiss our mouths
lick our teeth our eyes stroke our heads purr
two doctors in white coats of feathers wearing piles
of snow two doctors speaking Spanish and Hebrew and rap
speaking tongues two doctors with six knees apiece
with accordions in their voice boxes two doctors burning
glowing two doctors made of lava tell us we will die
but not today we will die but not forever and then
and o they give us suckers I’d like orange please life
is sweet
Three years, still dead
but alive inside me:
in a dream, talking to him
on the phone, spooning
soup from his bones.
Andrea Hollander Budy

NATURAL CAUSES

The track was hidden by a line of junipers. All afternoon children played in the gazebo. The sound of a train surprised me. I sorted, packed, labeled cartons. Children played. Now and then a train muffled their laughter. I packed, swept. Sunlight shifted across floor boards, climbed stacks of cartons, entered my father's bed with its folded clothes, piles of books. Trains shuttled by, light squinted through trees, voices diminished, left. Night arrived. I tried to sleep. Thanked the trains for their thunder, the children, in their own beds, for their concentrated play. Trees for trying to hide the track, the track for leading away.
Angela Ball

SINGLES

Sleep’s a jukebox in a defunct drive-in. Someone Punches 68 and I dream suitcases. 89, The dark-haired woman smiles, unties

A sheaf of billet doux. Daydreaming, I’m director, star, projectionist, Audience, popcorn,

Curtain. I am the green-yellow dust Rising in the spring, straps of light At rest on your

Pale sheets. Cars just for show, Wheel-less, propped on concrete blocks The sweet and wavy color of distance.
BOATHOUSE

The day I remembered my zig-zag shirt
But failed to find it.

The day my therapist asked, Do you like
The idea of other people thinking
About you? Yes, I answered,
Because it's frightening. Like directions
Bristling at crossroads, where someone may be buried.

The day I heard masculine laughter
From behind a door, and the cinnamon stick
In my tea began its unwrapping.

The day the evening became melancholy
And my brain became a boathouse—the oars
Unlocked, the boat remembering the arms
Of its favorite drawbridge.

And I kept thinking, only thinking
Of falling for someone,
Of getting dressed all over again
In thin cobwebs and the shyest dust.
Helen Cho

DAY AT THE BEACH

"The fish are free,"
he cried, as he ran with a bucket.
The sea has left us today.
A manta ray flops on the sand.

He cried as he ran with a bucket,
picking up starfish and pomfret.
A manta ray flops on the sand.
His mother calls him to come back.

Picking up starfish and pomfret
he does not hear the hissing.
His mother calls him to come back
as the mist turns his hair white.

He does not hear the hissing.
A turtle must be helped to its feet.
The mist turns his hair white,
blurring the beach early this morning.

A turtle must be helped to its feet.
Roar like a fighter jet comes from the West,
blurring the beach early this morning.
There is no more horizon.

Roar like a fighter jet comes from the West,
picking up towels, boats, a cricket team.
There is no more horizon.
He thinks he sees his mother.

Picking up towels, boats, a cricket team,
bulldozer man wears a surgical mask.
He thinks he sees his mother
for the third time today.
Bulldozer man wears a surgical mask.  
The end of the world smells like this.  
For the third time today, 
he wishes the sea had taken him.

The end of the world smells like this.  
A boy with a bucket hangs from a tree.  
He wishes the sea had taken him.  
Only the fish are free.
Sidney Wade

GRAND DISASTER Y

moored by fine
tethers to certain death

a hornet fizzes
on the windowsill

a spider flies
to its side
to securely bind
this abundant harvest

the hornet in shrill
thrall to agony drills

a hole in God’s
provident breast

pocket
in the sublime
cold light
of this tiny

constellation
the bald pulp

of the hornet’s diminishing
hum feeds growing eyes

and hungry sockets
the figure is clean

a small
black aster

hung among
the stars
EMBER

what form is this?
this is my hardsong:

fire calls to fire
death to death

and what, then, is left?
ashes and children

an old body unsettling
a new one in the dark

how does it weather?
in brilliant grays

and the medium?
distemper on burnt paper

and how does it end?
in hard-strung dream

red and reddening
VAPORIZER

A charm,
a dream of protection.
Gurgles hold the night light’s glow.

A stream of clouds
mist the branching tubes.

Water, in fog, a tub, plug to
wire in the wall saying

Okay, it’s okay all night.

School, a door closing
he opens:
haze of playground French,
the five names for different kinds of marbles,
games, bullies he wandered among
while I was staring at the sea.

Shut off,
not my past,
nothing I could do—

I keep making up
all the world he lived.

His new name, intricate drawings of aliens,
long tunnel of lunch
(Mais il ne mange rien monsieur)—
school hours shadows
that smother my days.
Burnt-out hills:
char and velvety ash
   along the dropped limbs,
magpies, new gullies.

A dry time clears the ground.

He was standing where the road split,
arms spread, a small x
straddling the crack.
That bird call a slash, then,
on the edge of things.

He was standing,
   behind him
the green blue of ocean, the white blue of sky.

The house of childhood sold,
or razed—
not lost but
   softened, distended:
diaphanous linked chambers springing from
a lightshaft or a varnish smell,
the way a floorboard aches,
a scrap of wallpaper
   tunnels the heart.
A film of
"events"—
tiny collisions, tracks of light
in the bubble chamber—you’d scan
for hours (smell of formica, rock headsets,
eyes going furry near four AM).

This celluloid memory now
your memory, coursing
chemical fissures in the brain.

Matter split like time,
    thinner and thinner parings—
Anything that happens is too fast to see

* 

There the sky kept reeling as she ran—
wisps, then puffy clumps,
then rain—
    the park spread low
beneath the blanketing.

Who could have worn
that purple coat
cartwheeling in the grass?
It grows
    as I look at it,
puts on pillowy layers.

Now the coat wears memory,
warms a ghost.
Wind off the world’s top,
whipped clouds, wet hedgerows:
Girton, that one year
twenty years away.

He learned to walk, she started school,
read, slowly,
    the first book *Red*.

Moss edging the garden wall,
little flags on the clothesline.
They salted the snow salted the lamb for the black banquet
placed a goblet on the roof for the moon’s obol
locked up the water and the child who splashed the walls with their cries

They wrapped her in a sheet as rough as the salt marshes of poor seas
carried her on their shoulders with dregs of coffee and the cardamon favored by angels
they gathered her

They crossed a desert two steppes three dunes and a valley so narrow they almost overturned her
then buried her backwards there where the earth’s pulse stops
under the inconsolable carob tree
with the red washing-basin
and the cat’s white meowing

They made her fly as high as a flock of goats from Mesopotamia
higher than bats
they forgot her
"THEY SAID THAT THE COFFIN"

They said that the coffin was narrow
the house bent over
no one had swept the doorway
worried snow had turned to ice
the milk in the pitcher was disgruntled

Someone had fed the people in the next town whom no one knew
brought down the child who clutched the ladder
kept the baby tooth in a handkerchief

It's not on a day like this that one tidies up the barn
the straw can wait
not the dug-up earth
“HONEY-COLOR OF THE COFFIN”

Honey-color of the coffin under the walnut tree
the nails go into it like silk
the air is fraternal for the blackbird
not for the child and the sun seated in the branches' crotch
seen from that height
the dead woman has a benevolent air
her hands were restless yesterday when in a convulsion of tidying
she gathered the marbles
folded the wet laundry
took a hammer out of the toolbox
placed it on the groove in the middle of the table
then told the child to take the night for a walk at midnight

translated by Marilyn Hacker
What I remember most of death was how we kept trying to build something. What was it? What I remember most about death were the extensive travels—the stairways through levels and degrees of shade—when in fact we went nowhere. What I remember most about death was the continual desire to love in the gaining darkness, which is like a train crossing a bridge of feathers. What I remember most about death was how each day spread a tablecloth of light over nothing, and how we would eat there, gazing into the darkness, gorging ourselves without hands.
Christopher Howell

AFTER THE AFTERLIFE

Swallows dip by the blue template of a nameless window.
Bits of St. Brigid’s roses begin their dream of her

intimately beyond dust, another sort of blossom

tending itself and looking up as a bride descends an iron stair

thinking, “hammered silk, what could be

more beautiful?”
Charles says something about the love of death, that thing

in us that gathers behind a door.

Please me and let me go, I think
I think.
Reach me a wing to solve that house where old stars burn

and beckon and call out

that they knew Jesus long ago, that he was a form of wonder.
Reach me a hand or a silver rope

for my return.
There were seven crows inside her
gibbering and flapping, emitting
the occasional squawk, much more
like a suddenly discovered moon
than a language.
Sometimes she hopped around
because of this.

At sunset we would find her on the roof
looking for the rest of her clan
or for that Nebraska corresponding
to a crow’s curious need for endlessness.

Come down, we said. Or,
keep still. We can help you to realize
the longed for objective world; even a body, perhaps
clothed in the rectitude of that amazed glare
of those who have somehow returned
to themselves.

We said much the same daily
while the waters rose and dark wings
discovered her shoulder blades
and beaks darted from her mirror black eyes.
It was all too much for us, her transformation,
her beauty

becoming kiss by kiss a strange wind
or seven strange movements
among and beyond the trees we thought were ours
but would not count.
RAIN SANCTORUM

In a high corner a face of rain turns
as if, after the years of pink drought
and the sheep flying unnaturally, uncountably,
over sleep's fences
in search of the drowsy soul, the world
wanted it again.

And near the door the door imagines
itself
and the left-handed brass latch laughs
like a fried component
of something uselessly wakeful on a shelf
in a room in another world
brilliant with old men
walking by the brilliant sea.

What now?

The face of rain offers its pale eyes,
the room is more and more sleepily
shivered in secret lace
which it slowly unbuttons.

What now?
Sylva Fischerova

THE SWING IN THE MIDDLE OF CHAOS

Sometimes, the dead come. Kinder than the demons,
they repeat they love us,
scramble a watery goulash,
instant and distant moments.
They say I won’t
go over the edge, the border where
an unfinished world lives, turning to stone
moment by moment.
Where road is a statue of road,
made of dreams, mustard and tears.
From which pour the cottages of categories,
the short circuit of metaphor, eyes like compasses
in the tunnel leading to the void,
words!

A child rocks in the swing
in the middle of chaos.
Chaos is white, vermilliony gold,
blue like a room with a cradle
in the middle,
room left by a dead man.
A child rocks in the swing and keeps
her eyes open. After a while, she’ll go up
to the kitchen
for a snack.

In the kitchen, there’s bread and butter
with mustard.
Where childhood lives.
It’s not me. Someone else
used to go to the fridge
to taste the caviar. Childhood: caterpillar and butterfly,
connected by information—
and it’s detail, the Monarch of
      Memory’s Empire:
it’s the detail that hurts.
Mother, //not you, but// we
come upon the dead,
turning to stone every moment, changed into
statues of mustard, otherwise
we can’t live.
WHERE?

Far away in the heavens there was a cloud churned out of white beard and sugar budding, a cloud-fever, cloud-quinine, oh that fever under the northern sky, men in fur coats, women in fur coats, almost without any questions, keep silent

under

the warm surface of grief that swims in the soup, the soup gets cold,
a frozen soup in the white beard, who’s a killer and who’s not? A grief not leveled by a churchyard, not limed by grave diggers, soup-grief, impossible to ask

over

which sky the sun’s a child’s blue, to smoke about childhood, Samuel from the next class, a ballet’s hierarchy of heavens, an opera’s hierarchy of colors, an appletree flowering green with white leaves, don’t ask under which sky people don’t die, thrown away

behind

the cup with colored glaze the conscience rests, men go out hunting, MEAT! MEAT!—insidious houses fall under the ground, there are no returns, men, we’ll free an old story of birth, woman and blood, under the northern sky men with their frozen beards don’t kill women alienated by the children, there are laws, for God’s sake what laws, everything’s

within, within.

translated by the author and Stuart Friebert
Jennifer Barber

250 WOODEN MATCHES

I close my door
and strike one on the strip

that excites the flame,

a blue-yellow hood
raised from the red

knob of a head

against the lightless November day. My hand,

shaking: that’s ok,

just a mood, a frame
of mind to get through,

a fingerprint despair

wants to make on me.
I light another—

my stalwart, my friend,

vigilant quick
companion of low soul.
A TOAST ON LABOR DAY

Let's not go away
to mourn summer's end—
we can mourn right here.

We'll find the reddest tree
and the ripest
acorns that have lost
their brown tweed berets.

No choice but to see
which squirrel
guessing wrong

slipped from a high wire,
leaving its body on the curb.

No one but us
to raise an empty acorn cap,
a tiny drinking cup.
LE PETIT HAMEAU DE LA REINE

At Versailles, in this toy hamlet,
Marie Antoinette,
Queen of France—
dughter of a queen,
granddaughter of a queen,
mother of daughters
who would die princesses—
played at being milkmaid.

In the same petit hameau
my daughter Magdalena plays at being Queen—
her mother a professor
who wants to be a poet,
her grandmother a teacher
who wanted to be a doctor,
her great-grandmother a wife
who wanted to be loved—
Why do humans have such unhappy aspirations?

Around us, sheep decorate the long meadows of the hamlet—sheep
whose mothers were sheep,
whose grandmothers were sheep—
back into the wooly mists of time. Sheep who wish for nothing else, ewes and lambs who, unhurried, crop the grass.
She won't let me touch the lambs, the eighteen
she hauled here over the snapping gravel
in her pitch green truck,
at two in the morning,
not bleating, their cheek wool spiked
with spittle; their shut-mouthed smiles;
the scuffed nun shoes of their hooves.
The black one who lies on his side
in the hay and the shit.
The two who butt
under the thinnest ewe's shorn rump,
and clamp their suede lips tight
on one distended tit, to fight
and feed. The jerking thumbs of their tails.
No lifting them up in thick towels, each
to its own nippled bottle. The fence
pierces the pelt of the moss
and keeps me away from her lambs:
their dense, vacant faces, their tired breath
on the weave of the wire cut into
my hands. No lifting them.
This morning
the Normans Kill ran muddy,
two ducks
followed toward the river,
thin clouds
brushed the Heldeberg escarpment,
my mother's
small wooden boat turned away.
Follow the road past fire pit and catalpa, past the tires semi-circled on end. Step, gently, over the barbed wire’s border, over the pasture’s hoof-beaten sand, over its hills of fire ants and saw-edged grasses, and you will find settled there like a half-buried bucket or a work-wearied man, a school bus, the one they used to carry colored kids from biscuit to book and back again, its sides weathered and yellow, the windows latched by dust, *Lamar County Training School* writ clear as letters in a basal reader.

Pushed, the door divides like a saltine. The driver’s seat sits erect and shoulders back. Driverless, it can’t be accused or asked *why* or *how long* or *when* but waits like a juror’s chair before the sightless windshield. In the silence: the echo of tires on a rutted road, the whine of a school bus suddenly stopped, the bird-singing of children, and lunch pails bang, bang, banging against metal rails. Gears, steering, brake, the wounded gash that held the keys, mirrors rear and side, the radio tuned to wasp and crow and the hum of flies, and down the long aisle on either side, over the rectangled seats, under their thick green slabs and sprung coils, spilling along aisle and floor: a corn flood. Yellow corn on red-and-white cobs smelling of chickens, and the chicken-shit stink of chicken yards, and rain-wet chickens with inky feathers and reptilian feet.
Still it is not the smell that suffocates
but the cast-iron heat, not the chickeny stench
but the burdened air, the dust of dust and corn dust,
the dust of cracked kernels and desiccated silk,
the drifts of unsweepable dust. And the corn standing
waist high and higher sprawls yellow, yellow,
yellow. And the failing sun slants through silted
windows, kindling the motes until everything is molten
and motion, and the corn feels like bones in your hands,
bicuspid and molars mortared to a rough rod.
The corn feels like a burning brand
or a baton held up for unknown victory.

In a year, the roadsides of Anniston will wait,
broken teeth plucked from bloodied mouths,
mobs hundreds strong. Passengers beaten.
Metal pipes beating, beating, and buses set afire.
Then other buses set afire, and other fires.
The world burns in so many places.
Black smoke rising, rising.

You lift an ear of corn, twisting the kernels
until they burst free, and for a moment,
you think this must be hope: small,
brittle-hard, and plain as this, a searless flame,
a fodder set aside in a yellow school bus.
But in the next moment, you know that it is not.
Turning again to take the steps, you feel the kernels
beneath your heel, a yellow grist filled with dust
and ground by every step into grit and cooling ash.
EXODUS

Between edges and overhangs
in the Alps or Apennines,
chasing reflections,
I follow another path.
The sleep between two boulders
of an exhausted man,
the pass between teeth
and the slackening tongue
clinging to stubborn walls.
I cross blacker than a cloak
and wider than a hat
plastered with the pinks
of the lengthening villages
of women who hold ladders
in the morning
so the rivermen
can climb up on the roofs.
WITHOUT A COMPASS

According to Darwin, I should be extinct.
According to Malthus, never even born.
According to Lombroso, in any case, I will end badly.
And not to mention Marx, I, petit bourgeois,
to escape, then, need to escape
from the front, to the back, or from the side.
(It was that way for everyone in the forties.) Still,
personal uncertainties remain.
Am I to the east of my wound
or to the south of my death?

translated by Ann Snodgrass
Glenn Sheldon

APPLES

Radio report: a red truck involved in an accident on Garret Road. No names yet.

You went shopping in a red truck. We bought it as a joke: here is your apple.

The police assure me that there are many red trucks in our county. I’ve driven past apple orchards without ever counting them. Red firetrucks rush by. My blood burns and I cool it down by jumping into my black car. I pass you rushing home. I make a U-turn and you are weeping in the driveway: an accident. No one could have survived it. Fate won’t be seen driving now.

I bring in the groceries. I carry bags and bags of apples. They spill, but you help me wash each one.
No land promised, no handouts.
No silly bars of manhandled cocktails,
the Tom Collins sleight-of-hand, the Rob Roy
knuckle-chuckle.

Empty streets
laid out end to end to end. Men
to be mended.

People gather here
as dust. It isn’t long before the world,
fevered and near-glass,
curls up in their dune.

Another young boy
scatters across the sand.
Each of us now
will live a little less.
Teresa Cader

COUNTERPOINT

1.

I wish I could jazz forth a trumpet from my pocket,  
A sax from my belly, a clarinet from my larynx.  
My music lessons short-circuited in the third grade.  
Beware the child who speaks without words, who sidles  
Up to a piano as if it were human and plays for days  
In a shroud of harmonic occlusion, neither naïve, nor aware  
Her inner life is a shrine the jealous will invade.

2.

Ah, she's in there walloping Mozart again, mastering  
The art of practice. At least Beethoven couldn't have heard  
Himself parodied. Gifted fingers and ear unite to outsmart  
The score. The money, the time, the nagging and bickering—

Then I hear it, the long Chopin cadenza like the flourish  
And pitch of a cardinal darting from our driveway at dusk.

3.

Word-free is my anchorless boat, spinning lopsided  
Down a river studded with dragonflies. In a staccato  
Run to the sea, the river erases what I thought was thought.
1. Locating Myself

Most Sundays: I’m a sinner, vodka waterfall diver, biographer of shadows.

I tell of the East Coast where extra-thin condoms are sold 24 hours a day and where *West Side Story* is a documentary.

Mountains chase me when I sleep alone.

2. The Odds

These are stirred-bee years when God is a bad neighbor.

One’s enemies build ugly statues.

My lover blasts rock & roll to drown out robot choirs and I yell out, “We’re Israel’s 13th Tribe.”

Are our bodies the opposites of prophecy?

Buildings with stone beehives make me feel stings to come.

3. Tired of Our Names

The whitening room, nearest cloud
with light bulbs for ghosts,
any bomb
on its best behavior,
the unwrapped
condom trail in the bed snow
and
no disappointment with
your flowers
as sea foam
far from any sea,
transparency with
all its windows opened

4. Far West of Eden

After rowing in sunset’s flimsy caskets,
I give up the compass.

If possession is 9/10\textsuperscript{th} of the law,
is exorcism 1/10\textsuperscript{th}?

I prefer frontiers’ frontal nudity.

I’ve studied this:
there are dimensions in which
I may be in a parallel Utah

with you, many you’s, all of you.

In one of them, if only one,
you read Sunday comic strips aloud while I hear you,
here you.
Franz Wright

WHY DO YOU ASK

I breathed on the window and made my initial.

It's true, and then there was the dream
of being present
at my parents' wedding.

That's right: I breathed
on a little black fly-
husk there on the sill
and it came back to life,
why?

My body is lying in bed
all this time,
I know that.

I can see.

You say it's been there for a while?
You have no idea.
ANTIBODIES (FOR ADELE)

First Day.

And there was a bilirubin.  
Protean creature, already

the first war of your blood, 
antibodies and dying cells.

Let there be light then, isolette 
and velcro restraints—

intensive but mother-close 
milk and honey of the body.

Already you labor 
to throw off the yoke,

the blindfold strapped to protect 
your alien eyes

from a light that you just might 
disarm your blood.

Second.

Rolling squalls 
subsided, you recede

into the shell of yourself, 
away from the rat’s nest

of wires taped and suctioned 
to a fetal body not yet
yours, never ours. Already
the thick thirst to pray:

to say come back
to your body, so curled

into itself, as if you’ve
moved to higher ground.

Unsuture those closed lids.
Bring back your storms.

Third.

Heat-greedy, sun-bather,
we take you home

in a glowing blanket
trailing a hose tail

plugged into a box that hums
like a slide projector—

space child so soon
from the cord, you’ve grown

another. Dark-starved,
drunk insomniacs,

our days turned inside-
out, we wide-eyed

crowd around, luxuriate
in your ultraviolet night.
Fourth.

They prick your heel
each day, suck the blood

like poison from a snakebite.
The snake’s already inside.

They will read the blood
drawn from you, each daily poke

probing the undiscovered
wormholes of our body,

hidden like a language
we didn’t know we understood.

The nurse regrets your silence
on the matter—*the blood*

*comes faster when you cry,*
she says, readying the gouge.

Fifth.

In an elevator descending
I find myself rocking to sleep

a Tupperware of roasted potatoes
on a bed of rosemary

cradled to my chest.
My little potato, you’ve taught

me never to stop moving.
You swim in my arms,
sea anemone, perpetual motion machine of the limbs,

your muscles twitching on marionette strings of your own desire, surf through the breakers of pure air.

Sixth.

Eden was the bed we daily made away from the dirt and ache of work, labored to make the salty sap of the day sweet between us. Today, the gate of fatigue grows like a sudden tree, and we know it’s too late—too early?—and this daughter, this lovely one slithers in honey-stung skin, applies herself to the apple of the breast, her tongue coaxing your nipple.
MILKING THE LION

In a pomegranate room near the Atlantic he serves Raki brought from Turkey.

"Drink it straight," he says. They do, like swallowing clear squares of coal.

Twenty years black and burning, Chang's served it to quondam lovers under a sooty licorice sky; acres of tomatoes; crinkled in the liquor cabinet alongside cigarettes, matches, folded brown bags and clean dishtowels;

on the highway—at 65 mph, his hand in her heart, a blind man and a snake (every hiss translates). How do magnets reproduce? For two bucks, the illusion of choice: a dog with onions, relish, ketchup, mustard, not counting inflation. Opportunity knocked back straight up. He's a man of the oughts, licking himself home with two kids, an automatic washing machine,
a bottle from abroad. "Try it with water," he says, his purple eyes pacing hers
above tumbler across table around his wife who just stepped out. The lucid brandy now blue lactate opaque with fascination, an unshakably thin unanswered question.
ANOTHER “NOCTURNE”

Yahweh, what a storm!
Thunder rumbled in my pillows

and lightning singed the Persian rug,
the one I love, with the two goats fucking,

and the lightning said,
Who the hell are you to have

a favorite thing—
a rug, no less—

or to claim two pillows?
Your poems suck!

When you’ve earned a little
beauty, and comforted someone,

then we’ll talk.
I was wearing sleep pants

 striped in blue, light blue, and white,
the team colors of my dreams,

and when I stood on the bed
and hollered Holy shit!

I must have looked like someone
in a folktale, one-half a man

and one-half a striped, upholstered tree.
I guess that’s what the lightning meant:
my fear is more
than I have learned to say.

But what a way to tell me so,
to make me wait

all day, through the show and all
the same commercials, for another storm.
FAIT ACCOMPLI

Silence repeats itself. She can read anything into the silence. And yet she trusts it, a dear friend, a tree to lean her head against, hands touching the bark.

There are laws. There have been raptors, dinosaurs. It is not the world she would have made. Death to gazelles. Death to the lions eating the gazelles. She has no faith in death, that exotic stripper. Even potatoes have eyes, have roots. She has lived with them beneath the soil, knows how the dirt clings. Painted woman, painted bride in the city of brotherly love. Spilled seed taking her breath away. The pause because someone may be watching. The bowing and scraping. Dust under the rug. Nothing is too personal for words. We have all bombed Dresden.
Stephanie Taylor

THE READING

Bat braked against the window-screen and stayed there, body balled like a black fistful of hair.

It hissed and spread indecently, its frail bone graphs tuning to the frequencies of history and turning its tiny degrees.

The underside of its wings were strings, taut and pink with feeling. They pressed against the screen,

and my pink hand, and read the world by touch. The touch of a thousand hairs.

No direction, no true frequency, just a fist of hair, a stranger stuck to screens of words, a stranger’s body opening.
Kathy Fagan

“NO CAKES FOR US”

“No cakes for us. No watering cans. No doting mamans or coloned ambassadors. We were less than les rats at l’Opera. But we danced....”

—Anonymous

It was a small stage.

Every board.

We knew

There were

Marks and shadows of

Marks on

Wood warped thin and pale, like

Us. Every fold

Of curtain

We had

Darned and huddled in.

Every shoe

And skirt hem

Reeked

Of gas the footlights

Burned. In clouds

Of sweat and tulle

Backstage, we passed

The lampblack, lard,

The tin of java

Rice, a single rabbit’s foot we’d

Filed the claws down

On. When a girl was ill

We suckered up our
Spit for her onto a Scrap of crimson
Ribbon, rouged her cheeks, Stained
Her lips, imparted Expression where none was before.

It was then I saw it best: Doll. Whore. Clown. Corpse.
The perdition
We were threatened with.

They couldn’t scare me with Perdition.

I’d brought back Souvenirs
From there I gave away.

My palms hold The scorched smell of them Still.

I prayed only Once.
And when I prayed Bitterness fled

In a black cloak From my heart.
Without it, what did I have.

It’s autumn in The Second Act.
Toward clouds hung, literally, in
  The night sky,
Giselle ascends from
  The tomb’s trap door,
Right foot first.  
  Because the left hind foot is last
To leave the earth
  We cut it off
And call it lucky.
  Powder clings expertly
To each tine of fur;
  We cross our faces
With the weight that once passed fleet
  Across the faces of our dead,
And up
  From Hades,
Warmly flicked a flea upon a
  Chill and moonlit
Field. The stage lights caused
  Our paste
To shine at times as if
  Real moons
Shone in the true jewels of
  Breathing
Princesses. I have it
  In a book
That clouds be formed
  Of dust and water,
Gems of Dust and fire.

But greater than these elements is Air,

Which looks Like nothing,

And feeds these three As I have been

Fed.
In a rare interview with the *Southwest Review* in 1982, W. S. Merwin reluctantly agreed to reveal the one enduring and indispensable ritual that he repeats daily in the hopes of preserving his writerly independence: "I try to be just intolerable every morning," the mild-mannered poet admitted, "so that people will leave me alone" ("Possibilities" 167). And when questioned about any sensory processes he goes through while tuning his instruments, Merwin offered only the most essential of them: "Well, I shut the door" ("Possibilities" 167).

Of course even the most cranky, dour ascetic must open the door to come out into the world sometimes. And in this subtle gesture—the darkened vault of the imagination closing itself inward and opening again to the light—is contained the spirit of Merwin's accomplished artistic career. It is what Joyce's Stephen Dedalus ponders while strolling blindly along Sandymount Strand: the ancient mystic pulse, the systole and diastole of the mind tightening and loosening its grip not only on the world of appearances but on its own fleeting and elusive self. Now, more than a decade after the begrudgingly lean 1988 selected volume, Merwin's new *Migration: New and Selected Poems* gives us the chance to experience the modulations of this hypnotic rhythm over the course of his prolific fifty-year career as one of the most acclaimed poets, essayists, and translators of the later twentieth century.

In the opening sections of this beautifully bound volume, we re-discover *A Mask for Janus* (1952), *The Dancing Bears* (1956), *Green with Beasts* (1956), and *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960)—the early books with those vast horizons and ample pentameter lines that allowed the literary apprentice to find a way through the myths of his modernist precursors and into his own singular style. Here his most persistent *personae* and emotional themes begin to come to the fore: the guilt of the wanderer, the rage of the prophet, the care and scrutiny of the spiritual surgeon. Before long we encounter with renewed surprise the celebrated middle volumes, which include the sparse,
disturbingly misanthropic The Lice (1967) and the equally abstemious, Pulitzer Prize-winning The Carrier of Ladders (1970), where Merwin contracts the focus of his dark vision and renounces the assurance of conventional narrative and meter. It is midway through this first dramatic shift in his sensibility (which proves to be one of many) that we encounter "Finally," a brilliant and woefully overlooked lyric from The Moving Target (1963):

My dread, my ignorance, my
Self, it is time. Your imminence
Prowls the palms of my hands like sweat.
Do not now, if I rise to welcome you,
Make off like roads into the deep night.
The dogs are dead at last, the locks toothless,
The habits out of reach.
I will not be false to you tonight.

Come, no longer unthinkable. Let us share
Understanding like a family name. Bring
Integrity as a gift, something
Which I had lost, which you found on the way.
I will lay it beside us, the old knife,
While we reach our conclusions.

Come. As a man who hears a sound at the gate
Opens the window and puts out the light
The better to see out into the dark,
Look, I put it out. (88)

Even with its unfortunate abstractions (those big words like "Understanding" and "Integrity" are symptomatic of his desire for "things to be as near absolute as possible" ["Portrait" 13]), this poem snaps the quintessential moment of Merwin's career in a single frame. The expectant and repeated apostrophic call; the anxious vigil wavering between dread and desire; and the daring invitation of the final stanza, where a simile worthy of the Inferno itself (or perhaps the Purgatorio, which Merwin translated only five years ago) snuffs out the last
comforting flame of recognition. At the end of "Finally" we are left, as in so many of Merwin’s masterpieces, peering in two directions from deep within an unlit tunnel: backward with guilt and regret toward those parts of ourselves that we have lost or betrayed, and forward with trembling and anticipation toward the self that is always yet to come.

This is Merwin’s true Muse, not merely the daemon of absence or of silence, as some would claim, but the watchful spirit that he calls “this owl in the heart” (103), sleepless with regret and anticipation. “I hear them,” another of his speakers claims, as the myriad wraith-like selves (emblems of both guilt and possibility) “come up behind me and go on ahead of me”:

—oh small
Deaf disappearance in the dusk, in which of their shoes
Will I find myself tomorrow? (87)

The startling suddenness and clarity of these tropes is characteristic of Merwin’s early work, whose most prominent forebears are the Yeats of Responsibilities and the Stevens of Auroras of Autumn. It is these crystalline, bas-relief forms that we enjoy in “Low Fields and Light” and “The Drunk in the Furnace” as well, two of his most widely known and frequently anthologized lyrics.

As if the sleek, sparing beauty and expectant vigils in The Moving Target had not gone far enough, Merwin descended into even more deliberate verbal discipline and thematic austerity three years later in The Lice, the volume of absence and elegy for which he has become best known. W. B. Yeats, another twentieth-century master of stylistic rebirth and creation ex nihilo, once claimed that “when one looks into the darkness, there is always something there” (Letters, Vol. II: 60). For the Merwin of these middle volumes, though, the darkness opens onto only more darkness, onto the void and ruin at the center of it all, where his narrators lie writhing in the sackcloth of inwit and “wrapped in a bed of ashes” (133). These poems register the waste and shambles of war on one level (unlike his poetic formalism, Merwin’s political rancor seldom plays the recluse), but alongside their even darker counterparts in The Carrier of Ladders and
Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment (1973), they are also the transcripts of a mind that has closed the door on itself and its nightmare world, that has sworn to survive on the bread of its own memories, silences, and frustrated desires. "Pain is in this dark room," one poem announces. And another narrator is even more desperately aware of his own psychological prison:

I am the old room across from the synagogue
a dead chief hangs in the wallpaper

... I am the old room across from the stone star
the moon is climbing in gauze
the street is empty

... I am the old room across from the night
the long scream is about to blossom (173)

With their relentless self-scrutiny, severely restricted lexicon, and apocalyptic plangency (titles like "For a Coming Extinction" and "For the Anniversary of My Death" are not uncommon), Merwin's three middle volumes have provoked nearly as much first-rate argument and second-rate imitation as Lowell's Life Studies or Berryman's Dream Songs. Despite his new spartan aesthetic and linguistic fasting, however—and even despite his claims to be "as far from myself as ever" (132)—Merwin is still close on the heels of that elusive spirit whom he had invited into a darkened room ten years before:

THE SEARCH

When I look for you everything falls silent
a crowd seeing a ghost
it is true

yet I keep on trying to come toward you
looking for you
roads have been paved but many paths have gone
footprint by footprint
that led home to you
when roads already led nowhere

still I go on hoping
as I look for you
one heart walking in long dry grass
on a hill

around me birds vanish into the air
shadows flow into the ground

before me stones begin to go out like candles
guiding me (212)

In poems like this one, which refuses even the aesthetic relief of linguistic variety, Merwin forces himself to keep a tenuous balance between the conversational and the clichéd. One might suggest that phrases like “everything falls silent” and “I go on hoping” tumble laggardly into the latter category. There is no verbal jolt, no metrical parallelism, and yet that penultimate line—with its unexpected simile recalling the earlier brief candle that presided over the mind’s solitary vigil in “Finally”—seems to rescue the whole, to lend the lyric a gestalt that is more provocative than any of its parts and equally as elusive as the very spirit whom its speaker breathlessly follows. It waves me forth again, Merwin seems to cry from the ramparts of his modern Elsinore: Go on, I’ll follow thee.

For many readers, these volumes are the bedrock of all of Merwin’s work, the rag-and-bone shop from which the ladders of his subsequent work make their feeble, unfortunate escape. And therein lies the problem for our appreciation of Merwin’s oeuvre and of so much contemporary American poetry as well. We are irresistibly drawn to the negative movement, the dark cataphatic gesture (as the mystics used to say) that undermines and cancels what the image-making mind had conjured. Our taste is for the fragments and interrupted silences of The Waste Land, not the purgatorial sweetness and song of the Four Quartets, for the heroic tragedy of the poet who would rather surrender everything than place his shaken faith once

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again in the illusions of myth, hope, or sincerity. Admittedly, Merwin’s occasional warnings of ecological or nuclear apocalypse do not help to lighten the matter. But if we linger long enough (which, for a poet who has produced roughly one book every three years for half a century, is not that long), we are bound to hear the hinge creaking yet again, to watch the restless, light-headed imagination muster its slow return to the waking world. “Well, in the limited time left,” Merwin said to himself during this second period of transition, “why not pay attention to the other people and to animals and to what’s there?” (“Possibilities” 171).

We can sense the tentative, owl-like stirrings of this redirected energy in *The Compass Flower* (1977), especially in the brief poem that lends the new selected volume its title:

**MIGRATION**

Prayers of many summers come  
to roost on a moment  
until it sinks under them  
and they resume their journey  
flyng by night  
with the sound  
of blood rushing in an ear

Merwin borrows the trope in the last two lines from his contemporary and close friend, Ted Hughes, who was undergoing a similar rejuvenation in the late '70s, from the crass wit and revulsion of the *Crow* poems to the vulnerability and openness of *Moortown*. Over the next two decades, Merwin followed a similar path, experimenting with more solid imagery and long, metrical lines in the aptly named *Opening the Hand* (1983), where “Strawberries” first appears, his widely anthologized lyric that features sensuous imagery and strong medial caesuras. In later volumes he returns to less anguished autobiography and to the sparse ethereality of “The Sound of Light” and “Coming to the Morning,” in which genesis and creation once again prevail amid the least promising of conditions: “the world is made / from a single star / and our ears / are formed of the sea as we listen”
And in 1996 he steps (if only for a moment, before it sinks beneath him once again) squarely into the full light and verbal majesty of *The Vixen*, where poems like the long "Fox Sleep" show us a poet we had barely known, reveling in minute detail, linguistic density, and chains of Whitmanesque accumulation, but still abiding by his keen sense for the lost and forgotten:

There are the yellow beads of the stonecrops and the twisted flags of dried irises knuckled into the hollows of moss and rubbly limestone on the waves of the low wall the ivy has climbed along them where the weasel ran the light has kindled to gold the late leaves of the cherry tree...

and there beyond the valley above the rim of the wall the line of mountains I recognize like a line of writing that has come back when I thought it was forgotten (364)

This is Merwin the maker, rebuilding piece by piece the cities of the imagination that his earlier skepticism had razed and ransacked. Thus his allusions to the ode *To Autumn* in this volume are altogether fitting, his "long field tawny with stubble" in the poem "Gate" unmistakably recalling those famous "stubble plains" that brought to Keats's mind the painful process of rebirth and transformation on the far side of the autumn harvest (365). In fact many of the poems in *The Vixen* have a Romantic air of sympathy and simplicity about them. Sometimes we find the narrator still lingering "in a dark house talking to the shadows about love" (377). But more often, in place of the scathing interiority and inhuman ruins of *The Lice*, for instance, we find rare encounters between two real people, talking about their fears and frustrations, and as they do at the conclusion of "The Present," cherishing the unexpected bounty of a late harvest:

late one day that summer she appeared at the wall carrying a brown paper bag wet at the bottom the mirabelles she whispered but she would not come in we sat on the wall and opened the bag look she said
how you can see through them and each of us held up
a small golden plum filled with the summer evening. (373)

This is a rare moment for Merwin, one which does not endure into later volumes and which literary history will likely overlook in its search for his unique yet paraphrasable voice and vision. But here it stands nonetheless, with enough imaginative breadth to accommodate both the pain of loss and old age and the joy of an unforeseen plentitude and blessing. And it is as emotionally compelling as any of his earlier work.

Any poet who has won as many awards as Merwin has—topping the long list are the Pulitzer, the Bollingen, the Ruth Lilly, and the Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets—is bound to take a few shots, and in his case they are not entirely unmerited. The usual criticisms about his restricted emotional range are unfortunately borne out in this new volume, in which the cumulative weight of grief, regret, and nostalgia overpowers the rare moments of release and acceptance, like the translucent weightlessness we've seen in "The Present." Like so many of his modernist precursors (the twenty-two-year-old Eliot “with a bald spot in the middle of my hair” in *Prufrock*, the twenty-four-year-old “bent, and bald, and blind” Yeats in *The Wanderings of Oisin* [Complete Poems and Plays 4; Variorum 2]), Merwin affected old age long before he was old enough to really feel its burden, and many of these early pieces do not withstand comparison with the genuine grief and mourning of the more recent ones. When it comes to his many experiments with form and structure, he is not immune from the temptation to chop prosy sentences into jagged lines and label them, as his contemporaries from the Black Mountain school tried to, products of “organic” form. As his early volumes would demonstrate if he had chosen to include more than just a meager sampling from them (only one long piece from *A Mask for Janus* and two from *The Dancing Bears*), Merwin is an expert in the trade of meter and prosody. But he is also a bold experimenter, and everyone knows what unfortunate fate awaits the majority of experiments, poetic or otherwise.

Merwin also has a penchant for experimenting with symbolic talismans, deliberately simple nouns like “stone,” “hand,” “eye,”
“shoe,” or “star” that aim to lend a metonymic air of mystery and opacity to poems with an otherwise limited scope. In small doses, the experiment is successful. But when the volumes are collected side by side, this symbolic currency loses its gleam and begins to feel more like a verbal tick, especially in the middle books from the late ’60s and early ’70s, where one cannot help but wish that so many scattered “shoes” would eventually start ambling of their own accord toward a more promising trope. For instance, there is “the wide wall of shoes” (180); “there are no shoes” (171); “my shoes are almost dead” (118); “there’s light in my shoes” (108); and alas, “my shoes / minute larvae” (176).

Despite these shortcomings, though, the impressive collection and several new poems in Migration justify Merwin’s privileged place as one of the most influential, distinctive, and prolific living poets writing in English. Something resolute and utterly self-possessed endures through his many stylistic changes, whether he’s warning us to “stay indoors and make no signals”—or calling us out into the open alongside his lifelong Muse, where “the owl sails out to see whose / turn it is tonight to be changed” (512; 502).

Anthony Cuda

WORKS CITED


SOPHOCLES AND THE POETS


Sophocles, Electra, translated by Anne Carson, with Introduction and Notes by Michael Shaw (Oxford, 2001)


Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, translated by Eamon Grennan and Rachel Kitzinger (Oxford, 2005)

The impulse for this essay began when I read a review by Gary Wills (“Red Thebes, Blue Thebes,” New York Times Book Review, Dec. 5, 2004) of Seamus Heaney’s new version of the Antigone. Seizing on a comment in the translator’s afterword about the relation between George W. Bush and Creon, Wills vented considerable indignation at the oversimplified readings of this play in the twentieth century, in which various dictators have been aligned with Creon while Antigone has emerged as the heroine who dares to resist a totalitarian regime. The play Sophocles wrote, he argued, is not nearly so clear-cut.

All right, I remember thinking at the time, but what about the translation? Heaney is after all an excellent poet and a conscientious translator, as witness his Beowulf. Early in his career he did a Sophocles translation—The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles’ Philoctetes (1961)—and this new version of the Antigone, called The Burial at Thebes, was commissioned for the centenary of the Abbey Theater and first performed in April, 2004. Was there nothing else to say about it except that its translator’s reference to contemporary politics could be somewhat facile or misleading?

A little investigation convinced me that Wills had indeed missed the point. For one thing, Heaney was quite aware of the complexity Wills bashed him for supposedly overlooking. After mentioning Bush and his either/or attitude toward support of his Iraq policy, Heaney went on to introduce a more complicated account of the tragedy’s conflict:
Creon, of course, has a point, and a responsibility. His tragedy, as the Chorus and others repeatedly point out, has to do with his overbearing rather than his basic position. In fact, the tragedy as a whole arises from the passion and extremity of the two main protagonists. Modern audiences are more sympathetic to Antigone’s defiant embrace of the law of the gods, her instinctive affirmation of what we might now call a human right against the law-and-order requirements of the state, but in the dramatic balance that Sophocles achieves, Creon’s sufferings weigh heavily and evenly in the scales. (76, italics mine)

Wills had to ignore this in order to launch his tirade. In his discussion of the play he cites some choral passages that praise Antigone more firmly than the original text seems to warrant, but he is clearly searching for examples to bolster his prejudgment. He says, for instance, that “the misgivings of the chorus . . . should not be flattened out into pure praise” right after quoting a passage in which they say to Antigone, “You were headstrong and self-willed / And now you suffer for it.” Pure praise? I scarcely think so. Toward the end of his review Wills does admit that Heaney’s version of the play has brilliant language and inventive moments. But by that time the damage has been done. Most readers will have concluded that the Heaney translation is too distorted to be worth bothering with.

For my own part, at the time I was getting ready to sit in on a Sophocles seminar taught by a colleague, Tom Van Nortwick, and I knew that would give me a chance not merely to reread the plays I knew and admired, along with the ones I didn’t know, but to follow Sophocles’ chronology, as far as we can conjecture it, and see how he developed, in his time and place, as a playwright of enormous poetic skill and remarkable experimentation. Along the way I would be able to compare various translations and see especially what the poets have done with Sophocles recently. I’ve always felt, for example, that Yeats’s version of the Oedipus at Colonus was undervalued, by classicists and theater directors alike. To my mind, a poet of Yeats’s caliber may have the best chance to bring us the unique
language and intense characterization of this remarkable artist, one who might otherwise be lost to all except those who can read and study him in the original or who happen to catch that rare thing, a good production.

So here is some of what Wills missed in not reading The Burial at Thebes more carefully. Heaney’s strategy for the dialogue, for example, was to develop a three-stress line based on an eighteenth-century Celtic lament (as well, perhaps, as on some of Yeats’s brilliant handling of three-beat lines in poems like “The Fisherman” and “Easter, 1916”). His version opens with Antigone saying:

Ismene, quick, come here!
What’s to become of us?
Why are we always the ones?

There’s nothing, sister, nothing
Zeus hasn’t put us through
Just because we are who we are—
The daughters of Oedipus.
And because we are his daughters
We took what came, Ismene,
In public and in private,
Hurt and humiliation—
But this I cannot take.

The urgency and anger of that is just right for an arresting opening. Antigone’s abrupt, uncompromising character is established immediately. One has only to compare the more standard sort of version we get, even from as able a translator as Robert Fagles:

My own flesh and blood—dear sister, dear Ismene,
How many griefs our father Oedipus handed down!
Do you know one, I ask you, one grief
That Zeus will not perfect for the two of us
While we still live and breathe? There’s nothing,
No pain—our lives are pain—no private shame,
No public disgrace, nothing I haven’t seen
In your griefs and mine. And now this . . .


A good actor could no doubt work up the Fagles into something powerful and respectable. But the Heaney version hands it to you on the page and all you have to do is run with it. He shows us that poetry and theater still work well together, despite all that has been said and done to disconnect them.

The other place a poet translating Sophocles needs to shine, of course, is in the choral odes. Their deliberate poetry is hard to capture and sustain, but it should be obvious that every trick a poet has at his or her command can be useful in rendering them. Here is the opening of the most famous one from the *Antigone*, first in Fagles’ version:

> Numberless wonders
terrible wonders walk the world but none the match for man—
that great wonder crossing the heaving gray sea,
driven on by the blasts of winter
on through breakers crashing left and right,
holds his steady course
and the oldest of the gods he wears away—
the Earth, the immortal, the inexhaustible—
as his plows go back and forth, year in year out
with the breed of stallions turning up the furrows.

(Fagles, 76)

A literal version of this strophe, based on the transliteration in the introduction to William C. Scott’s *Musical Design in Sophoclean Theater* (UPNE, 1996, xiv), runs like this:

> Many are the wonders, none
is more wonderful than what is man.
This it is that crosses the sea
with the south winds storming
and the waves swelling
breaking around him in roaring surf.
He it is again who wears away
the Earth, oldest of gods, immortal unwearied,
as the plough winds across her from year to year
when he works her with the breed that comes from horses.

What Heaney does, as he explains in his afterword, is employ a version of the four-beat alliterated Old English line he got to know so well from working on *Beowulf*:

> Among the many wonders of the world
> Where is the equal of this creature, man?
> First he was shivering on the shore in skins,
> Or paddling a dug-out, terrified of drowning.
> Then he took up oars, put tackle on a mast
> And steered himself by the stars through gales.

> Once upon a time from womb of earth
> The gods were born and he bowed down
> To worship them. He worked the land,
> Stubbed the forests and harnessed stallions.
> His furrows cropped, he feasted his eyes
> On hay and herds as far as the horizon. (24)

You can quarrel, I suppose with the occasional embroidering of Sophoclean imagery that takes place here and there in the passage (and in Fagles too), but there’s no doubt about the purposeful mastery of this verse. It recaptures, to my mind, what the choruses must have felt like to their original audiences: thrilling poetic interludes, deepened with irony. And the invoking of our own language’s Old English tradition increases the resonance that Heaney is working toward; it feels both archaic and oddly fresh, suitably measured and dignified, and it leaves room for the poet to work his particular magic with diction and image.
The other three translations I want to look at all belong to a series founded by William Arrowsmith and now continued under the general editorship of Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro. Its laudable purpose is to bring poets and scholars together in collaboration. In the case of Anne Carson and Carl Phillips the general editors found poets who were also classicists and could, in effect, collaborate with themselves. In the case of Eamon Grennan and Rachel Kitzinger they selected a husband and wife team, poet and classicist. Another Sophocles translation in this series, not considered here, is a collaboration between Herbert Golder and Richard Pevear, published in 1999, of the Ajax. There may be others in the works.

We have every right to expect wonderful things from Anne Carson, given her innovative scholarship and her distinctive, unpredictable poetry. In fact, however, I have to report that her Electra is something of a mixed bag, less clearly and fully articulated, to my mind, than Heaney’s version of the Antigone. We should grant Carson her eccentricities, however, and we should take into account this play’s particular difficulties. When that’s done, Carson emerges as a fascinating reader and renderer of one of Sophocles’ strangest plays. The Electra is, in the words of translator David Grene, “perhaps the best constructed and most unpleasant play that Sophocles wrote. The tightness and cogency of the plot go together with the absence of nobility and magnitude in the chief character in a way which never occurred again in the extant plays” (Sophocles II, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, Chicago, 1957, 124). Trying to decide how we should feel about Electra and her implacable drive for revenge will occupy interpreters and readers indefinitely; some of the play’s questions are probably unresolvable. Meanwhile, Carson’s decisions as a translator are of course also her interpretations. She chooses to highlight the anger and hysteria; her Electra is miserable, of course, but her anger emerges as the leading emotion, again and again.

One of Carson’s strangest translation choices is in fact a decision not to translate. She leaves the play’s notorious screaming and wailing just as it is in the original Greek, simply capitalizing it and
rendering it phonetically. Thus our first encounter with Electra, when she cries out from inside the palace, interrupting the plotting of Orestes and the Paedogogus, is usually rendered by something like Grene’s choice: ”Ah! Ah!” But in Carson’s text it is ”IO MOI MOI DYSTENOS.” As she explains in her foreword, Carson is fascinated by the way Electra creates “certain unpronounceable concatenations of hiatus like EE AIAI or EE IO which hold the voice and mouth open for the whole length of a measure of verse and are as painful to listen to as they are to say” (43). Presumably, then, the capitalized phonetic renderings of the translation are a note to readers (and performers) to undertake a “translation” of our own, to put some primal but metered screams into the text. It’s a risky choice for a translator to make, involving us so squarely in the problematics of the translation (and production) process, refusing in fact to render, but it’s a fascinating solution—or non-solution—and a first, so far as I know. Phillips and Grennan/ Kitzinger, by the way, do not follow her lead. They choose to use stage directions as a substitute for either the Greek screams or feeble English equivalents. This seems, on the whole, a better solution.

Let us grant Carson this particular eccentricity and turn to her handling of the rest of the text. Her attitude toward the main character turns out to be wonderfully complex. One way to get at it is to examine Electra’s final speech. Aegisthus is asking for a chance to say a final word before he is led off to be killed, and Electra will have none of it. Here is the speech in Grene’s very capable rendering:

Not one, not one word more,  
I beg you brother. Do not draw out the talking.  
When men are in the middle of trouble, when one  
is on the point of death, how can time matter?  
Kill him as quickly as you can. And killing  
throw him out to find such burial as suit him  
out of our sights. This is the only thing  
that can bring me redemption from  
all my past sufferings. (186)

We know this must have been shocking to the original audience, not least because of the proposed mistreatment of the corpse (which
makes for an interesting parallel and contrast to Antigone). Its brutality highlights Electra’s suffering and leaves us with an unforgettable impression of her single-mindedness. There is no room for anything but revenge in her mind or imagination.

Carson intensifies the speech, making some very persuasive choices:

No!
Don’t let him speak—
by the Gods! Brother—no speechmaking now!
When a human being is so steeped in evil as this one
what is gained by delaying his death?
Kill him at once.
Throw his corpse out
for scavengers to get.
Nothing less than this
can cut the knot of evils
inside me. (110)

If anyone thought a female translator would be tempted to attempt a gentler portrayal of Electra, this should dispel such notions. Her character here is both angrier and more resolute than Grene’s. And the poet in Carson is evident in the concrete power of “steeped in evil” and “cut the knot,” the latter phrase invoking the fates and the idea of cutting thread as a determination of fate and a termination of life. Carson’s lineation serves to emphasize the emotion, and the abruptness of the phrasing (which recalls Heaney’s Antigone), is fully persuasive. Carson is clearly more interested in Electra’s anger than her misery. And that’s a legitimate reading, empowered by highly capable translation.

Carson is less successful, to my mind, in her handling of the odes. Here her free verse, while it cultivates a sense of unpredictability, reflects her own limitations; she often does not know how to make a line emphatic and meaningful. There’s that sense of chopped-up prose that weak free verse can project. The play’s most famous speech, the phony but thrilling account of the chariot race, comes across as scattered and arbitrary in her lineation, as for example:
he lets out a cry that shivers his horses’ ears
and goes after him.
Neck and neck
they are racing,
first one, then
the other
nosing ahead,
easing ahead.

Now our unlucky boy had stood every course so far,
sailing right on in his upright car,
but at this point he lets the left rein go slack
with the horses turning,
he doesn’t notice,
hits the pillar and
smashes the axle box in two. (78)

This has some nice details and sound effects, but its movement feels arbitrary. The line breaks don’t intensify the sense consistently. As a poet Carson lacks the sense of craft that one finds in Heaney. As a reader of Sophocles, however, she is of course brilliant and always engrossing.

Carl Phillips, like Anne Carson, decided to work in free verse for his version of *Philoctetes*. As his preface indicates, he gave this very careful thought:

The most immediately obvious aspect of my translation will be the frequent and radical shifts in line length throughout. In part, I felt this would be a means of conveying the constant shifts in morality, in the notion of trust, and in emotional temper in the course of the play. I want the lines to reflect, as well, the wildness of the landscape in which they occur. . . . The risk here is of randomness and self-indulgence; to these, I can only counter with an assur-
ance to my readers that, in the course of many years of reading the play in the original and in the many translations that have appeared and continue to appear, I have worked hard on the nuances—emotional, psychological, and in terms of language—that resonate through the Philoctetes legend as Sophocles himself wanted it to be told; and I have then gauged my lines accordingly. (25)

He goes on to say that he intends an audible pause at the end of each line and a sharp stress at each line’s beginning. Clearly, a good deal of thought lies behind his versification.

The place to gauge success in the Philoctetes is not so much in the choruses, which have a relatively minor function in terms of lyric elaboration or commentary, as in the individual speeches. Often, as is the case in late Sophocles, they are intended to deceive. Neoptolemus at first lets Odysseus co-opt him for a plan to get hold of the bow of Herakles, which is Philoctetes’ sole valuable possession. He gives a false account of how he was cheated of his father Achilles’ armor, and Philoctetes, believing it, takes him as a friend and ally. But Philoctetes’ own accounts of his suffering, which are true, and the experience of witnessing his suffering, eventually move Neoptolemus to double-cross Odysseus and declare the truth. After that, it takes an intervention by Herakles, appearing as a deus ex machina, to persuade everybody to return to Troy and finish its conquest.

Here, for example, is the moment in which Philoctetes decides to entrust the bow to Neoptolemus. I cite it first in David Grene’s very serviceable version. Philoctetes has been screaming with pain and Neoptolemus has just offered to touch him:

Not that, above everything. But take this bow, as you asked to do just now, until the pain, the pain of my sickness that is now upon me, grows less. Keep the bow, guard it safely. Sleep comes upon me when the attack is waning. The pain will not end till then. But you must let me sleep quietly. If they should come in the time when I sleep,
by the gods I beg you do not give up my bow willingly or unwillingly to anyone. And let no one trick you out of it, lest you prove a murderer—your own or mine that kneeled to you. (225)

This is a sort of loose blank verse and, as with Fagles, it could no doubt be worked up into something fairly effective in performance. But we ought to be able to look to a poet’s version for something more intense in expression and thus with greater performance potential. Here is Carl Phillips handling the same set of lines:

Not at all—no! But take the bow you asked me for just now—and, until the present pain of the disease eases off, guard it, protect it. For sleep overtakes me, whenever this pain would leave—it cannot leave before then. So you must let me sleep in peace. And if those people show up in the meantime, I beg you: do not give the bow to anyone, willingly or unwillingly, lest you end up killing yourself and me, your suppliant. (65)

I believe that this “scoring” of the emotion, with its varying emphases, works in the way that Phillips intends, especially when read aloud with close attention to his line breaks. The sense is the same as in the Grene, but the expressiveness is heightened by the technique, especially the pace and diction.

Some of the most lyrical moments in this play stem from the fact that Philoctetes, like Prospero in a much later play and Robinson Crusoe in an even later novel, has developed a strange intimacy with the island on which he is marooned. He wants to leave it, but because it has been his only home and company for ten years, he knows it in a way that is both moving and unforgettable. His brief farewell, after
Herakles has tidied things up and ordered him on to Troy, is one of my own favorite moments in Sophocles. Here again is Grene:

Lemnos, I call upon you:
Farewell, cave that shared my watches,
nymphs of the meadow and the stream,
the deep male growl of the sea-lashed headland
where often, in my niche within the rock,
my head was wet with fine spray,
where many a time in answer to my crying
in the storm of my sorrow the Hermes mountain sent its echo!
Now springs and Lycian well, I am leaving you,
leaving you.
I had never hopes for this. (253-54)

This is very fine, I think, and one should note in passing that Grene is quite willing to vary line length in the interest of expressive power. It’s also interesting to note that Heaney, in his early go at Sophocles, rendered this one passage in prose. Fine prose, to be sure, but it is almost as though he wanted to duck the responsibility for full lyric expression, or to create a sharp contrast with the loose blank verse he had used everywhere else. I suspect he might do it differently now. Here’s what Phillips has done with it:

Very well then. In departing,
I shall call upon this island: farewell,
chamber that kept watch over me,

water-nymphs,

nymphs of the meadows,

the muscled crashing of sea against headland,
where often my head, though
inside the cave, was drenched by the south wind’s beating,
and often the mountain of Hermes sent
back to me in answer
my own voice
echoing,
groaning,
as I weathered the storm.

But now,
o streams and Lycian spring,
we take leave of you—I leave you
at last,

what I never expected. (97-98)

Grene is good, but I submit that this is even better. It’s simple and stark, like the Greek, and it is scored for the pauses and emphases that an actor can use to give it appropriate weight and spirit. Phillips has done his work thoughtfully and with a subtle but consistent regard for Sophocles’ dramaturgy. He resists temptations to embroider and rests his faith on two strong props: Sophocles’ stunning technique and Phillips’ own comparable care for clarity, integrity, and versification.

Anyone with an interest in Greek drama in general and Sophocles in particular is going to feel a special reverence for Oedipus at Colonus. It is, among other things, the playwright’s farewell: to life, to his birthplace Colonus, to Athens as a great power and example of democracy, to drama, and even to myth. Extraordinary in its length, lyricism, and intensity, it is a huge challenge to any reader, director, and translator. Lucky Eamon Grennan, then, to have a co-translator of great expertise in Rachel Kitzinger and an opportunity to bring this difficult text over into English. The Colonus is a daunting prospect in many ways, but what translator wouldn’t relish the chance to grapple with it?

A detailed survey of the Grennan/Kitzinger version is tempting, but I must be content here, as with the texts above, to examine a few
samples as a way of showing what this version accomplishes. Here, for example, is part of a speech by Oedipus to Theseus, who has just guaranteed Oedipus' safety and who finds himself unable to imagine at time when Athens and Thebes might be in conflict. I quote Fagles' version first:

Oh Theseus,
dear friend, only the gods can never age,
the gods can never die. All else in the world
almighty Time obliterates, crushes all
to nothing. The earth's strength wastes away,
the strength of a man's body wastes and dies—
faith dies, and bad faith comes to life,
and the same wind of friendship cannot blow forever,
holding steady and strong between two friends,
much less between two cities. (322)

A powerful expression of mutability, and Fagles handles it well, with strong rhythms and resonant imagery. Difficult to improve on, perhaps. Let us look at Grennan and Kitzinger:

Dearest son of Aegeus, none but the gods
escape old age and death; all else
time in its relentless flood sweeps away.
The strength of earth and of the body fades,
trust dies and distrust flourishes,
and the same spirit never endures
between friend and friend, city and city. (61)

Both passages are powerful, and some readers, seeing them matched, might actually prefer the Fagles, which, among other things, sounds a bit more Shakespearean. But the economy of the Grennan-Kitzinger, seven lines versus nine and a half, is a good deal closer to the spirit and style of Sophocles. The repetitions in the Fagles—all . . . all, the gods . . . the gods, can never . . . can never, strength . . . strength, wastes . . . wastes, faith . . . faith, dies . . . dies, between . . . between—along with rhetorical overlaps like obliterates/crushes and steady and strong,
act to dilute what Pound once called “the hard Sophoclean light,” an austerity of outlook that is deeply embodied in the style. Grennan, with Kitzinger’s encouragement, no doubt, is resisting the temptation to embroider and elaborate; he wants to make every word count and to replicate Sophocles’ remarkable economy of means and expression. It’s a close call, but the Grennan makes the Fagles feel just a little overblown.

That speech is followed quite soon by the famous chorus praising Colonus. Here is Fagles’ version of its first stanza:

Here, stranger,
here in the land where horses are a glory
you have reached the noblest home on earth
Colonus glistening, brilliant in the sun—
    where the nightingale sings on
her dying music rising clear,
hovering always, never leaving,
down the shadows deepening green
    she haunts the glades, the wine-dark ivy,
dense and dark the untrodden, sacred wood of god
rich with laurel and olives never touch by the sun
untouched by storms that blast from every quarter—
    where the Reveler Dionysus strides the earth forever
where the wild nymphs are dancing round him
    nymphs who nursed his life. (326)

One can never have too many versions of this, I think. I particularly admire Fagles’ first nine lines, which seem to me to combine rhythm and imagery very powerfully. The next few lines feel more tentative in movement, and then there is a strong recovery for the close. Without rhyming and without too much regularity in movement, Fagles has brought the choral ode to vivid life.

It should be noted that his interpretive touches are very much in the spirit of the play. The nightingale’s music is not “dying” in this chorus, but the bird’s association with death is a crucial part of what Sophocles is invoking throughout. Similarly, the products of the sacred wood are simply mentioned as “fruits” in the original, but by
specifying laurel and olives Fagles brings in Apollo and Athena, who are crucial to the play’s sense of place and divinity. The nymphs who dance with Dionysus are just ”divine nurses” in the text, but making them ”wild” is perfectly consistent with that god’s associations. Fagles expands the chorus, but in the interests of evoking the play’s spiritual meanings more fully for a modern audience, drawing out references the Greek audience would have understood instinctively.

Here is the Grennan/Kitzinger version of the same stanza. I preserve their choice of italics for the choruses:

Welcome stranger: in this country rich in horses you’ve come to the strongest dwellings in the world. Here is bright-shining white Colonus. Here the sweet-throated nightingale throngs with song glades the wind or sun won’t touch. The wine-flecked ivy grows in these thick untrodden groves of the god. Fruit trees are free here from frigid winter and here with his immortal nurses roams the roistering Dionysus. (64)

Again, we see elegant economy and understatement here, nine lines for what took Fagles fourteen and a half. The text hews closer to the Greek, and the English combines archaic effects (something of Heaney’s alliterative Old English line) with modern touches. Internal rhymes add to the sense of lyric formality and line-length varies pleasingly, as in the closing of the stanza with the rich and elongated phrase that makes one line of Fagles’ three. The adjective ”roistering” is typical of Grennan/Kitzinger’s ingenuity: delightful sound and a slightly antiquated flavor. The whole stanza is austere in the ways I’ve indicated, but it’s also great fun to speak aloud, or to chant, an action which summons, subtly and surprisingly, the spiritual associations that Fagles spells out literally.

Just a word in passing about Yeats. Grennan’s note “On the Translation” mentions his regard for Fagles and Fitzgerald, with a nod as well to Paul Roche. He adds: ”I decided not to consult the version by Yeats which is, if memory serves, too free to be useful, as well as, in terms of its rhetoric and its verse, too dominantly Yeatsian
to be anything but a fatal temptation to my own ear." That is a grace¬ful dodging and acknowledging of how large Yeats might have loomed for any poet approaching this text. The next sentence is perhaps less generous: "It is an enviable recreation—not in 'the English of Sophocles,' however, but in that, most decisively, of Yeats" (34). I think that's too dismissive. Here is Yeats' version of the stanza we've just been considering:

Come praise Colonus' horses, and come praise
The wine-dark of the wood's intricacies,
The nightingale that deafens daylight there,
If ever daylight visit where,
Unvisited by tempest or by sun,
Immortal ladies tread the ground
Dizzy with harmonious sound,
Semele's lad a gay companion.

That may feel a bit dated, but I would say that it is much more than Yeats' simply imposing his own style on Sophocles. It's a rich and careful response to the text, with ingenious solutions of its own. "Semele's lad" will strike most of us as mannered now, but the stanza is for the most part remarkably clear and faithful. By the time Yeats gets to the third stanza of this chorus—"Where the Great Mother, mourning for her daughter / And beauty-drunken by the water / Glittering among grey-leaved olive-trees"—he is at the absolute top of his form, and the whole ode, which he included, not casually, in his best volume, The Tower (1928), will reward study by anyone who is deeply interested in the Sophoclean text. It's pardonable for Grennan to want to ignore the "fatal temptation" of WBY's "enviable recreation," but misleading to suggest to other readers that they can safely ignore it. And there's no need to bury Yeats in order to praise Grennan and Kitzinger: what they have accomplished is quite splendid and miraculous in its own way. Indeed, while Carson and Phillips have given us splendid versions, it is the Irish poets, all in all, Yeats and Heaney and Grennan, who remind us of Ireland's strong tradition of studying and absorbing the classics and of the ways
in which its culture’s oral traditions continue to reinforce the accomplishments of its poets.

Translations, I tend to feel, are little enough appreciated in our current literary culture. Add to that that an unsympathetic reviewer can make any translator look foolish and you have a climate in which serious reviewing of translations tends to be rare, as witness our poster child, Gary Wills. But surely the accomplishments of Heaney, Carson, Phillips, and Grennan/Kitzinger deserve our praise and celebration, as do the deeply considered versions of scholar-translators like Fagles and Green. We ought, in light of that, to be encouraging all students of Greek tragedy who do not read the originals to consult as many versions as possible. Read Fagles next to Grennan/Kitzinger, with Yeats to hand as well, perhaps, and the subtlety and intensity of a play like Oedipus at Colonus will begin to emerge, almost magically, not only in their quite individual and laudable versions, but also among the differences in their choices of diction, rhythm, and syntax. You begin to hear the surge of the Aegean and to see the world as it was and is, in that hard Sophoclean light.

David Young
Arthur Sze, Quipu (Copper Canyon Press, 2005)

Arthur Sze’s life and work weave a variety of cultural influences into richly complicated, startlingly original patterns. A second-generation Chinese American who has lived in the desert Southwest and taught at the Institute for American Indian Arts for over twenty years, he fuses elements of Chinese, Japanese, Native American, and various Western experimental traditions into poetry that, like the glaze of the finest porcelain, has enormous depth and subtlety. His work presents experience in all its multiplicity, balancing order and disorder, action and stillness, presence and emptiness, without explicitly judging or prioritizing. As he says in his poem “Viewing Photographs of China”: “instead of insisting that / the world have an essence, we / juxtapose, as in a collage, / facts, ideas, images: / . . . and find, as in a sapphire, / a clear light, a clear emerging / view of the world.”

The art of juxtaposition is in fact central to Sze’s achievement. His first three books largely consist of short, focused lyrics influenced both by T’ang dynasty poems (two are called “Li Po” and “Wang Wei”) and by the “deep image” poems of Robert Bly and James Wright. Gradually, however, he became impatient with the limitations of the form, as he described in a 2004 interview with Eric Elshtain in Chicago Review: “In many ways, my early poems were like artifacts: I admired the traditional compression and clarity of classical Chinese poetry, and I liked poems that could be accomplished in, say, twenty to thirty lines. But I realized that these poems were too much like artifacts and that the mind was too much in control. I also wanted to bring more of the world into the poem, and I liked how . . . emotion shatters the well-made vessel and breaks it apart so that it can be transformed and made new. In many ways I was searching for ways to shatter my own conception of a poem, and my understanding of the world was also deepening. I was searching for a poem that could enact an imaginative balance between rigor and spontaneity.”

In the mid-1980s, Sze began to construct longer poems in multiple loosely-linked sections, to allow for more complex relations be-
between their images and ideas. A particular sequence might bring together, for example, images from entomology, quantum physics, philosophy, horticulture, and paleontology in quick succession. His comments on this strategy in the interview are instructive: "I believe the poetic sequence is the form of our time—mutable, capable of shifting voice as well as location, open to a variety of rhythms and structures. I have been drawn to the poetic sequence because it enables me to develop a complexity that intensifies as well as enlarges the scope and resonance of a poem. The word 'complexity' is etymologically derived from 'braiding together': I like to braid lyric, dramatic, and narrative elements and utilize them simultaneously. In writing a sequence—in contrast to a non-sequential short or long poem—I can make juxtaposition a more active structural principle. Because there are gaps—and here I think of the spaces as charged points of transformation—the point of focus can shift dramatically from one section to another. Within a single line, there can be juxtaposition between image and image; there can be juxtaposition between lines; and there can be juxtaposition between sections. When one section is juxtaposed to another section, a larger and deeper interaction takes place."

In *Quipu*, Sze's new volume, he continues to experiment with sequence and juxtaposition, producing even more complex effects than in his earlier work. The title is suggestive: a quipu is an Incan (and, as Sze points out, also ancient Chinese) device composed of knotted cords as a system for record-keeping and calculation. Many of the poems, particularly the longer sequences, are partly constructed as strings of discrete images, as if in a journal of experience attended to, recorded, and preserved; there seems an implicit valuing of the specific detail simply because consciousness has encountered it. The underlying principle is reminiscent of Ezra Pound's ideogrammic method (as derived from Ernest Fenellosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry"), which argued for building poems through the direct presentation of concrete particulars. For the imagist poet, Pound argued, "the natural object is always the adequate symbol."

But Sze's poetics are even more radical than Pound's, since (as the word "symbol" suggests) Pound uses the image as an expressive
device, whereas Sze is more rigorously presentational. He delights in the way details align in accidental conjunction, significant only in the instant in which it is perceived: "The hairbrush, soap, thermometer by the sink / form a moment’s figure that dissolves // as easily as an untied knot." Most of the poems in Quipu are not narrative or descriptive in any conventional sense; rather, they are composed of moments of rapt attention, building kinetic energy through hairpin turns and associations. This is a daring strategy, of course: a poetics grounded so fundamentally in things-in-themselves risks seeming merely arbitrary or trivial. What gives Sze’s work such distinction is the sheer intelligence of his perception, the capaciousness of his observation. The world of these poems is in nearly constant motion—metamorphosing, electric, propulsive—and at the same time, paradoxically, it is held together by a consciousness so engaged as to produce the effect of deep, almost trancelike meditation.

Pound’s ideogrammic method was based on Fenellosa’s notion (erroneous, as it turns out) that the Chinese written character is a visual representation of the thing it names, thus exemplifying an ideal equation between idea and language. Again and again in Quipu, Sze returns to this same question, puzzling out the relation between what we experience and how we name and record it. The volume’s first poem begins: "The myriad unfolds from a progression of strokes— / one, ice, corpse, hair, jade, tiger." The “strokes” here suggest calligraphy, individual brushstrokes incrementally laid down to build a pattern of meaning; similarly, the list of italicized words emphasizes the elemental quality of language stripped of grammar and syntax. Another poem, “Ox-Head Dot,” begins with what seems an assortment of disparate images, only to reveal that they are all “defects” in the technology of writing:

Ox-head dot, wasp waist, mouse tail,
bamboo section, water-caltrop, broken branch,
stork leg, a pole for carrying fuel:
these are the eight defects when a beginning calligrapher has no bone to a stroke.
The repeated emphasis on the exacting craft of calligraphy, on the word made material, underscores the provisional nature of communication, the gap between word and thing: "if only I had the words to make things that accord / in tone vibrate together" ("Oracle-Bone Script"). And yet, as the ending of "The Angle of Reflection Equals the Angle of Incidence" suggests, in moments of lucidity the gap can be bridged:

Hang glider, sludge,
pixel, rhinoceros horn, comb, columbarium,
wide-angle, spastic, Leica lens, pincushion—

these have no through-line except that all

things becoming and unbecoming become part of the floe. When I stare at a photograph

and count two hundred sixty-five hazelnuts, examine the irregular cracks in their shells,

I recognize fractures in turtle plastrons,
glimpse the divinatory nature of language. And as a lantern undulating on the surface

of a black pool is not the lantern itself, so these synapsed words are not the things themselves but, sizzling, point the way.

Given the fractured, sorrowing world with which much of this book contends, such moments of revelation and connection—however tentative—feel nearly ecstatic in their implications. Indeed, despite the intellectual rigor at the center of Quipu's construction, its effects are anything but arid. Sze's canvas is crowd-
ed with vivid detail and sensuous, often erotic, vitality. He has a naturalist’s eye, a traveller’s sense of adventure, a foodie’s palate, an ecologist’s appreciation for the rare and endangered. Pollution, death, and decay are ubiquitous in the world of these poems, but so equally is the possibility of regeneration, and it is the frank unsentimentality with which both poles are faced that gives Sze’s work its meticulous sense of poise. The deft juxtapositions allow him to pass instantaneously between the domestic and the cosmic, the personal and the dispassionate; the results are frequently both disorienting and genuinely visionary, as in this section from the title poem:

I close my eyes—fishhooks and nylon threads
against a black background, cuttlefish
from above against a black background,

blowfish up close against a black background.
The seconds are as hushed as the morning
after steady snowfall when the power is out,

the rooms cold. At one, a snow-heavy branch
snapped the power line; the loose end flailed
clusters of orange sparks. A woman swept

a walkway, missed a porch step, fell forward,
bruised her face, broke both elbows; yet
the body quickens in the precarious splendor

that it would not be better if things happened
to men just as they wish, that—moonglow,
sunrise—the day—scales of carp in frost on glass—

scalds and stuns. In 1,369 days, we’ve set
eagle to eagle feather and formed a nest
where—fishhook joy—the mind is new each day.
I find this deeply intuitive and unpredictable in its transitions, and it interacts with the other sections of the poem in even more complex ways, yet it feels characteristically precise, authentic, unforced. Arthur Sze’s distinctive sensibility is illuminating, and his new book extends his considerable range.

David Walker

D. Nurkse’s work is marked by a certain sober clarity that I have long admired. In *Burnt Island*, his eighth collection, he has devised three suites that stretch the reader’s imagination well beyond the unspoken, conventional limits of the territory poetry is allowed to address.

The poet approaches these limits slowly. The first few poems take on what might be the familiar territory of childhood, but it is handled with such originality that it doesn’t seem familiar. The speaker is a child already overtaken by the darkness of mortality and history, a child who plays with a dead sparrow he calls his friend. Here’s the “Shoes” section of the first poem, “My Father’s Closet”:

I shoved my hands in  
and taught them to walk:  
now stumble: now march  
against your will, left, right,  
to the Narva Front:

now dance:

and somewhere  
in that immense city  
where snow trembled  
in high lit windows,  
a footprint receded,  
rapid, urgent,  
indefeasible as a name.

The poems move quickly to an adult speaker and his experiences: the death of his mother, encounters with veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and involvement with a lover. These are memorable poems, capturing vignettes of the speaker’s life.
in sequences of carefully chosen images. Often the familiar is made effectively unfamiliar, fresh: scenes with the lover, for example, are satisfying in their refusal to be ordinary "love poems." Instead they reach for a more complex witnessing of the complexity of being with another person. That complexity engenders ambivalence: while there's love there's also withdrawal at times, a wish for self-containment. Thus a sentence that comprises one couplet of "A Walk in Giovanna's Park" reads: "Lovers have to rest from each other / but there's nowhere in the world."

And then the new rain falls, the rain of paper and ash that changed all our lives. The picture of a mother and child—its edges still hot—that falls on the speaker as he emerges from the subway signals the closing movement of this suite, comprised of half a dozen poems that are indelibly poignant but presented in a clear-eyed, unemotional tone. Such a style leaves the burden of emotion in the reader's hands. Meanwhile, the speaker has gone numb:

Huddled before the news,
we touch the screen—
our bombs rain on Kandahar—
we can't feel them:

The island has burned, and the dreadful consequences continue to fall. The "I" of the early child and later adult has modulated into a "we" of a city's population numb with disaster, besieged by fear.

Through most of the second suite, the "we" shrinks back to a couple. A child is born to them, and as the infant draws the couple inward, world events recede. "A radio was playing, as if there were still news." Now the only war in sight is the war against ants. While some of the poems take place outdoors, the tone is unmistakably domestic. Nature is not a refuge, and the sense of shelter even in the relationship is brief. This is no Eden, and soon the "we" of the relationship shows strain:
We walked endlessly
to exhaust ourselves
so we might rest from each other.

Toward the end of this second suite, the book turns a big corner into geologic time and a meta-human perspective. The "we" toward the end of the suite morphs dramatically, like a shape-shifting spirit in a Navajo story. In the poem "Origins of Desire," Nurkse inhabits an early Earth and watches cells going about their business of mating and mutation. The body is no longer a human one but something else, something "just visible on a net-veined leaf." And one section of the poem moves beyond the earth and describes the drama of a dying "red giant" star.

An idiosyncratic move, accomplished with finesse. Comfortable with the range of scale he writes about, from minute to astronomical, Nurkse employs the same reporter's eye here as he does in the poems near the end of the first suite, which were firmly grounded in the burning earth. The diction of the second suite's biological and astronomical adventures is not at all scientific, and that's a strength: it's a joy to see subjects that are rarely approached by poets described so accurately in such clear poetic language. About early microbes, for instance:

Light-nourished, light-poisoned,
we migrated into rock
or traded little damaged pieces
of self between each other,

enshrining separation inside us,
creating the blueprint
for an absolute stranger.

A human presence informs the suite, even when the "speakers" are microbes. Describing red giants, the poet describes the enormous explosion and then allows himself the comment that it occurred "before there was a mind to understand / the advantages of annihilation," a bit of dark editorializing that reflects back to the first suite's final poems and to the child at the beginning of the book.
And the very human marriage returns with all its implied difficulties. It too has morphed into a new version of itself that takes place partly in a “dim cabin” and partly in outer space. The calm presentation of this wild, science-fiction domesticity juxtaposed with more realistic moments (as when the couple lies in bed thinking of all the species going extinct with each of their breaths) can at times take on an understated wit. For example, the problem of identity in marriage, which has presented itself before in a few lines I have quoted, appears in a very different tone in “Marriage in a Rented House,” which begins:

The cat felt herself becoming
just like the dog:
she struggled with the urge
to slobber over bones,
fetch sticks, and turn
three times before a dream—

Finally the molecule of marriage splits into its constituent elements: we “went home in two directions.”

These two suites prepare us to read the third, which is an astonishing collection of poems written from the point of view of non-human entities large and small. From whales to diatoms, from glass worms to DNA, the voices here are convincingly and beautifully drawn. "Burnt Island is in no way a scientific book. But the second half reflects an outsider’s fascination with biological language and the horizons it opens,” Nurkse says in an endnote, in which he credits the “luminous mind” of Rachel Carson for insights essential to the third suite.

The poet’s fascination embraces all aspects of his subject creatures—their physiology, senses, and what and how they move, eat, and reproduce. And while he makes “no claim to understanding or factual accuracy,” he has clearly paid the kind of attention to Carson’s The Sea Around Us and The Edge of the Sea, along with more than
a dozen other books mentioned in his note, that creates palpable au-
thority. In fact, I'd argue with Nurkse about his disclaimer: an un-
derstanding not only of the individual creature in a particular poem but also of the way it fits into the biospheric system that supports us all is greatly evident here.

I think he has his facts straight, too; but the kind of imaginative projection that resembles out-of-body travel (or should I say inter-
body travel?) isn't something we are used to calling factual. At the very least it's fact-based. The ants "unbuilding" their cities "after many dynasties" and "erasing [their] complicated scents / so the earth smells just of rain"; the water-bears that "grop[e] [their] way / to the tip of a fern / over several weeks"; the jellyfish as a colony of selves, each tentacle having grown from a different egg; whales surfacing every nine minutes; or the simple observation that diatoms are "the wealth of the earth"—at every turn the poet moves with confidence. Project-
ing his imagination into unlikely hosts, he sees things with inhuman clarity. The ocean, for instance, is "full of thinking knives."

All of this sounds as if Nurkse were creating a kind of biology primer, with some astronomy and chemistry thrown in for good mea-
Sure. But the human element is essential here as well. It's just not in the foreground all the time, which makes its appearances all the more dramatic. When present, it partakes of the conundrum of all life, as in this passage, which begins the first section of "The Little Sea":

1 DNA

Before me, just rain,
lightning, heavy surf.

I came to the shallows
at Ilapse, in the Archeozoic,
like the odds against me.
A trillion to nil.

Out of carbon, sulfur,
nitrogen, and phosphorus,
I alone found the way to die—
Of course, it is not human DNA that speaks here, only the beginning of a process that eventually invents us. Once extant, we humans have spent a good portion of our time thinking about the subject of death, and those of us who are scientists have spent a good portion of their time thinking about the origins of life. Yet in nine short lines Nurkse puts those two concerns together in a context that takes us someplace we’ve never been before. This is a writer with a vision, not just a series of perceptions.

This vision is at once timeless and timely. With the kind of geologic timeframe active here, all the speakers of Burnt Island—from dog-handlers searching ruined buildings to veterans still embroiled in a war long over, from a new father to an old star, from finches to animals small enough to live among mosses—create a chorus of voices that represent the known universe. They require us to pay attention to the fact that we have our place in the natural order. Whatever our spiritual aspirations, we are nevertheless also part of a great web of being. “The same comet-tail sperm / in starfish, ginkgo, and human,” a tiny organism says in “Origins of Desire.”

Timeless and timely. This book was written in a time when its readers are likely to be comfortable, surrounded by ever more elaborate technological conveniences. It’s good to find a poet who takes us back to bedrock—at times literally, as in “The Granite Coast”:

We are like you
because we scrape these boulders
with sharp coiled tongues
which we unroll progressively
as our mouths wear out:
when you open us
you find the cliff inside us
though we are tiny as an eyelash...

Down to rock and up through the eons of organisms changing each other and what’s around them: literally and metaphorically, Burnt Island reminds us that we’re part of an ongoing experiment called planet Earth, and we’re interdependent with everything else aboard.  

Pamela Alexander
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Red granite, from the temple of Mut at Karnak

Height 2.9m, 18th Dynasty (c. 1390-1352 BC)

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