RALEIGH
THE GOLD MEDAL MOTOR-CYCLE

"Takes Everything in its Stride—"
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FORAYS INTO LIFE SAVING

A sparrow got into the house
or the house got around a sparrow.
It was easier to take the house
off the sparrow than the sparrow
out of the house. The sparrow
is back where it belongs
and I no longer have a house
for an ostrich to get inside,
if that was ever going to happen.
I would have waited my whole life
to find out, patiently, in a chair
suited to waiting for an ostrich.
A chair with sufficient padding,
with armrests because arms
get tired too, everything
gets tired, even steel.
There was all this steel
in my house trying to get out,
knives and nails,
it’s just not as dramatic
as sparrows trying to get out
or rhinos especially
are noticeable in the den.
I can’t even feel
what I’m trying to get out of,
but every day, I thrash the wings
I don’t have against the window
I can’t see in the belief
there’s a sky out there
that won’t let me down.
And think of the poor stars
trapped in their orbits, pointed at
by children with jelly
on their fingers, the night smudged
by our looking upon it
as a system of meaning
when it’s a system
for burning hydrogen
and making planets
where sentience may or may not
grow a tail.
SCHOOL DAYS

There was this girl
at tightrope walking school
afraid of heights.
She wanted to be a lion tamer
but generations of her family
had worked the wire, even the dogs.
In our discussions by the quarry, I contended
you can’t tame lions,
you can only make them afraid of chairs
and whips. This, however,
wasn’t her vision: the lions
would ascend their pedestals, roar when asked,
open their mouths for her head
and eat her in the end. The New Circus,
she called it, and fell the next day,
the day after that, the day after that.
When they took her leotard away,
she circled the tent, touching the canvas
with her open palms. We were young.
I couldn’t afford a lion
so bought her a kitty, kissed her
on the cheek where the net
had left its mark. Sometimes
when I’m up there, waiting to step
into nothing, I think of the rocks
we threw over the fence into the quarry
that we never heard land.
They’re still going, she’s still going,
the lions are still at it,
I’m twelve, lifting her shirt
as she lifts mine, our chests
almost identical
confusions, I’m about to do
what I don’t know how to do
every second of my life.
SONG

The seamstress' boy watches his mother make another shirt for hire. His father gone, she looks most familiar now with pins in her mouth. She wrinkles up her face to get the sleeve straight, wears the wrinkles all around the house. Alone with it one morning he learned the Singer's strength, pressed the pedal, tried to stop the belt, the wheel, could not. He would have tried to stop his father too but didn't want to know he lacked the strength. A silver guard is there to keep the sewer from the sewn. A pocket must be placed above the heart.
I learn in the alley without all the rules. 
There's room to plant a foot beside the road. 
Good days, I paint corners with junk, 
my winding up and letting go 
a mash of TV righties plus 
whatever else it takes to find 
the flattened beer box plate. 
Not even for my mother 
did he bend a knee but here 
who metes out punishment 
calls them as they are. The things 
he doesn't teach he doesn't know.
Jesse Lee Kercheval

LETTER IN AN ENVELOPE

taped behind the mirror
of an old dresser whose drawers
smell like baby powder

one hundred words & only one hundred

still the ink is everywhere,
brimming blue bowl,
so there is no room to feel lonely

two citizens of a world
you will never see

you die, not the Grand Canyon or the Tour Eiffel
you die

love
you dropped it —

now find that penny
at the bottom of the lake
INSTANCES OF GENEROSITY

The bats echolocate
in a frenzy of leaving,
sound bouncing
off bat belly, bat wing,
knowing themselves in space
by their propinquity,
knowing space by the shudder
of their own voices reiterated.

At the intersection, a woman
holding a sign, “Anything helps.”

We’re used to letting go,
not having our sounds
recoil, as if tethered
to our vocal chords,
used to our singularity.
Not unlike stars
constellating
and if eclipsed by one,
brilliant still to another.
Not unlike
the man who makes of his worry
a ball
so that he may throw it
out the window, far into the night,
where his children are waiting.
wheel the stroller past orchids bromeliads that gorgeous scent not camellia not rose the boy running ahead dragging behind not white cyclamen the baby asleep gardenia that’s the one never where she wants him to be

reading the common names in the Cactus House keeps him near Devil’s Backbone Tiger Jaws green bodies holding water like a promise to themselves All are succulents areola sprouting long-necked flowers spines but not all cacti the boy

a bird flying out of her reach Mother of Hundreds Hens and Chicks a rock dry and hot enough for shedding skin she reaches down takes the baby’s blanket because she must reach down inside and take whatever she finds
came, lay eyes, a thousand eyes,  
on me for a moment, then  
went away, after exchanging two of them  
for mine, with those I look at  
flowering stalks of lilies, rose bushes,  
old, still fragrant mock orange, a line remembered,  
While lily and rose still color your cheeks we call  
to the garden, acacia pianist of the breeze
listens to blood beat in the ear
tick of the clock of innermost corners
mole works corridors, sparrow
scurries along naked branches
of narrow cypress
not knowing
how the cloak warms the earth,
how it surrounds or moves
small stones, how in a more generous place
the mother suckles her newborns,
each tiny blind mole sniffing,
for the warmth of her snout,
of her teat,
no matter how late the petals, how
the curly leaf of the oak becomes fabric
for the cloak, how much bone
from ram or crow or feathers
fill that space, fall to be covered
by another autumn, a new cut
of people, mulch, mantle, motherhood
from
where, Persephone, looking at it,
contemplating it
in the heart, feeling how blood
pulses through the ear.
We are two Etruscan giants or two clay figures, the focus on the close-up angle of our legs, the sweet taste of skin. From a distance or nearby, with unseeing eyes — who are you? entrusting light to vertigo.
As in that stela.

Not wanting anything but to say come with me now, from far, yet near, the brush of your fingers upon touching these same things with mine.

translated by Catherine Hammond
Frannie Lindsay

SIXTY

When my foremothers’ bureaus
have cluttered themselves

with the outsized brooches
that clawed the hearts of sweaters

long since given away,
when my hair cannot keep

from telling its raspy testament
to the whole of the winter air,

when starlight has come to know
for all its dime’s worth of weightlessness

that it can do nothing,
and not even quiet is simple,

then let me lift the sack cloth
from every mirror and draw close

and take pity on each of
my neck’s old erogenous furrows,

then, merely because
the dutiful, matronly sun has come back,

let me fling wide the door
on the boisterous garden of death.
Philip Metres

from ALONG THE SHRAPNEL EDGE OF MAPS

1.

To lift my arms as if in praise / when they strap it on beneath my shirt, to feel the ice-cold shell / against my chest, its promised

hatching into blood-heat. To imagine myself already dead, yet buoy in the wash / of capillaries pulsing like web,
every strand tensile, agleam. To tread the streets now paved over my father's house, & to be held / up at the checkpoint between my village & what's left / of our groves of lemon & olive — razor-wired & identity card. To believe that
	his will stanch his wound, this mad algebra dividing all numbers back to one, the columns on each side

of the equal sign equal again, if I can walk into a stranger's café & in a sudden illumination, / join shard to skin, flesh
to flesh, we will wake / from a nightmare, unhooked from the wall like a clock / that needs to be wound again.

2.

First, the sudden deaf as in a dream, people & their mouths open & moving not sounding out. Plaster & glass dress.

Frame of the face frozen in. & you running. In place. This was your store, your plate / glass, your café, turned in -side out. What is tumble & shard. You see your mouth before you hear it, all of the wax of the explosion now unplugged
& bleeding. Smoke the mouth of the door. Everything now shaken, the salt of plaster & blood-shivers of sliver no time to make any of this anything but the rubble of the human. & where is she, the one I loved, who served everyone —

That is not her leg. Bloodslick & shatter. Is there nothing, no clock alarming us out of this dream? I’m standing in someone else’s brain. Flesh of. My place, not my flesh. My love, I have no mouth to kiss your chosen face.

3.

My job was to disappear. To follow orders in another hard tongue, & hold my own. My job: to clear the tables of the leavings, to harvest the crumbs, to shoot the plates with so much scalding water I could see my unshaven face in them. To plumb the overflowing toilet, that constant fountain of other people’s shit, I had to breathe through my mouth, & curse. I couldn’t help myself to what others could not eat — it was not my own, it lingered against their mouths, who cursed the wealth of my slowness, or did not hear their call, or heard their hidden distaste. So when he sat down, his eyes darting, I knew this was my chance to choose my fate, to end my disappearance —
4.

It's because I wanted it to happen. Longed & waited. Let there be flash & flood, I said, let there be black

& acrid / choking lungs. I said, yes, send rivulets of blood, plaster in the scalp, democratic,

& dark hovering over the surfaces of everything. Let there be klieg lights & sudden cameramen & lens

& cordons policing the scene, the secular expanse of a café now sacred by blood. & let us sing

this memorial to the lost, this blessed loneliness — let there be blood to remind our people who we are

& what we have suffered at the gloves of our oppressor, those long & desolate years, our lips probing a font from a rock. To remember that this is nothing if not war, & in this tide of blood we all get what we want.

5.

In the other room I heard you asking your mother: “am I a Palestinian?” When she answered: “yes,”

a heavy silence fell on the whole house. It was as if something hanging over our heads had fallen, its noise exploding, then — silence. Afterwards, I heard you crying. I could not move. There was something bigger

being born in the other room. As if a blessed scalpel was cutting your chest & putting there the heart
that belongs to you. I was unable to move, to see what was happening. A distant homeland born again: hills, plains, olive groves, the dead, torn flags, all cutting their way into a future of flesh & blood. Man is born suddenly — a word, in a moment, begins a new throb. One scene can hurl him down from the ceiling of childhood onto the rugged road.
Dixon J. Jones

REPATRIARCH

It was the evening I dug my daughter’s cat from its grave.

~

It was the evening police surrounded the yellow house on the corner for three hours.

~

It was the evening I returned and returned and returned to my daughter’s vacant house, and the last time left with its number, and a lawnmower.

~

It was the May evening of scattered showers and quilted indigo ribs languishing westward to incandescence, our weathered light stroking the threshold, a final carload — her household compliantly compressed in small hand-held hours, crowding back without design.

~

It was the evening so clearly divined in the early first January of three: Sunday predawn beige-bright ER’s railed bed where she clenched her spasm of irrevocable error and froze
open — the future melting
in diazepam, desperation,
affinity, the relentless bower.

Sublimated by noon.
By five, she was married.

~

it was the evening
i drove back and
back and back
to duty's
house a
precious
worth
devotion
parcel
missing
missing
missing

~

It was the evening three police cars
stopped a minivan — its every door open —
in the left turn lane on the road
west from the storied world.

It was the evening I carried back
the fey-bright child, the vows,
the months, the lawns,
longing absences,
some documents,

her cat
Friday, after lunch, we tried heading north.

We turned the car loose to pursue its shadow, like a raindrop crawling the wrong way.

Our filament of road draped from the treeline brow of one bald dome to the next, through taiga,
moraine, seven thousand years of huddled trunks, out to the sea ice and the unreadable wilderness.

Enormous laboriously seething clouds towered up white to deny the sun across all the river drainages;

they couldn't manage it, though; what were they thinking? They were just visiting from the other wilderness,

where our parents left us, where Jesus withdrew, where the bear mauls and the lines are always drawn.

Both lanes empty most of the way. At each silent vista the limestone talus horizon miraculously rose again, despite the unfinished maps, and the irrelevant stories, and the buckshot signs, and two dewlapped souls who saw us for what we were.

But we turned back only seventy-eight miles out, where the long asphalt syllable finally stammered its coda:

runt spruce, tundra sedge, graveled floes, braided distance, a few caverns and crevasses of cyan sky.
Rebecca Hazelton

[THIS HEART THAT BROKE SO LONG]

The hound leaps down from the moon. You are the hare, heaving your ropy muscles across the forest floor. Indolent once in your lovely white, lazing under swags of offerings, blossoms, fruit. Now running hurly-burly tumult and scrabbling back paws, eating only in furtive bolts and the whites always showing. You were a girl, but no more;

remembrance makes the rabbit rabbit faster to the hound that courses the track. The meat tastes sweet as gumdrops. The girl you were had a little dog she fed from her plate when able. That dog is old now, probably dead.

This one needs a collar. This one has been bred to jet sheen, frictionless alacrity.

Running though its pads tear, though its lungs burst

O the hound loves the hare. Loves the hare’s kerning path and how its feet scrabble for purchase, emdashing across the page. That’s you, the white space stretching further and further, arcing over rivers, over paragraphs and epistles, desperately lunging for a safe margin, a burrow to comma into, or a tunnel bracketed. The hound loves the girl not the hare but the hare will do and you girl it faster and your hair streams uninterrupted.
So this is the happy I’ve heard so much about.
Under the streetlights the children hear their names called, and dissolve to separate doors.

Home is where they break you in, and here is that Jack airing his house of the exponential,
rolling rat and cat bodies to the curb.

Evening falls drunken, the porches burn their solitary lamps to guide the husbands to their rest.

*Happy to be here and wish you —*

end the sentence before
I cry a tributary. I’ll just watch the starlings nip from tree to tree en masse, shadow cuttings like a brain’s synapses — oak, then pine — October

eating away at my warmth, my sweater frays to thread, then fiber. In film, a dissolve leaves

some memory before winter arrives —

Oh I’m leaving bits that the wind takes wide,
from branch to branch
the black birds snap,
half flying, half falling.
Entire cities might light to ruin, in countries my tongue can’t parse —
I am just this woman,
nodding. Sweet dreams
dogs, cats, rats, all.
As you are you are
this melon, fig, sometimes
a nectarine or cask or scone,
a thousand squashes,
salt water that softens
stones, scours the coffee press
for morning
and also cream we add to cups.
My breadfruit on an ivory dish,
my fox with all her silvers,
go find our hideout in the woods
and tell that secret arboretum
what we’ll do.
I don’t much know so say
these corny things, can say a sudden
word and fantasize consumption
like you like,
like cloth beneath the meal,
each cut without a bone
for throats, the wheat that won’t
run out, and table talk we spare
for silence in the candle-flavored air.
A lizard circled the marble lip of the wellhead.
In the wind, a shutter banged, disturbed the sparrow flock,
Which lifted like a sail, only to settle again on cobbles.

The other noon sounds? A horse turning a millstone.
Rust inching up a drainpipe. The slippage of sand
Down an anthill. The dog whimpering in a dream.

Bees shuttled between the hive and the garden.
On a cross of branches tied with baling wire,
An old man hung a ragged wool overcoat.

As he weeded, he instructed the scarecrow
On the doctrine and conundrum of free will.
When a crow landed on the scarecrow’s shoulder,

The scarecrow, who had listened well, knew
If he chose, he could shrug and shoo the crow.
If he chose. And could shrug. And could move his lips.
AS OF YET

Call it paradise, this enclosure of trees.
No graves yet. No seasons. Time itself

As of yet uncreated. Nothing as of yet
Handmade. No stone knife. No bone needle.

No spear point. Call it paradise
Where a flint has yet to spark or deadfall

Flare beneath lightning, flare, then
Smother in a downpour, the char

Slick black beneath a first rainbow.
He has yet to slaughter or tame the wolf,

To don the wolf-mask. As of yet, her body
Has not opened into birth, pain, and burden.

Beyond the enclosure of trees, a scattering
Of rocks they must still name and knap into tools:

*Chert, agate, chalcedony,* and for miles —
Quick quenched lava — *obsidian.*
Michael Dickman

RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD: UNTITLED

Is the light supposed to do that?

I put on one scary mask after another, then I hung them in the trees where they shined like giant floating jellyfish

Milk-filled condoms

Your mother’s face

My brother is hanging from the branches

Hanging or swimming

Our t-shirts absolutely blaze

This is why we think God is white

I am shaken in the trees

I am smeared

*

In one wilderness my brother wears a plastic bag over his head and leaps from the barn door

In another there’s nothing but leaves and needles

Light burns the water off the tips of ferns

It looks like a seizure

Sometimes we sit just inside the barn door with no heads at all and hold each other
That's the best time
No heads at all
My arms around him
His arms
Around me

* 

The children are trees
My brother waves from the branches with both hands
A seizure in the solid green air
Relentless resurrection
First I put on the mask that looks like my brother then I put on the other mask that looks like my brother
My older monster
The light is puking pure white onto the ground
It can't help it
First it cuts off your hand
Then it cuts off your arm at the elbow
LOTS OF SWEARING AT THE FAIRGROUNDS

The stable hands and cart drivers.

The trotters, rosettes on their bridles.

Their carts, small bites
From a buckboard.

The track a wreath of dust
Tacked to the earth.

At the fairgrounds even children
Were full of curses, scrawled across mornings.

What was denied: open pasture,
The perfection of a stallion covering a mare.
Surveyors arrived first
With their chains and tripods:

"The towns will be well served
By their rivers." Floods swept in

Engineers, who laced the channels
Straight, restrung the bridges.

The little towns
Have squandered their sidewalks,

Torn apart their dime stores:
Brassieres strong-armed to parts unknown,

Batons twirled beyond our atmosphere
To the planet of majorettes.

The little towns captain limestone oceans.
They voyage in place, guided through dark waves
By the sails of their names.
I go on little dates. Men want little fucks. What’s my problem? Is there an injury? Am I from the 19th century? Faster than men, drugs, trucks. I ride my bike: Leg swing, hard sit, glare and joy, wind. I want To be loved like this. Skinny tires like hard-hit Rock songs kiss the road, whisper what peels us. How afternoon opens to bike, to want. I have to go fast so I can know slow. I go on these dates. Dinners, boats, sweet cars. I like fish. I like men. I like wine bars. But I go like love — see me gust by? You know. This evening, I rode on wind on roads alone. Just like alive rides on wise: far from home.
The miles between us were a hairshirt that only my sweet ally time could untie, fumbling over each complicated knot as that slow bus, mortality, leaned and rumbled, bound too far for us to run.

Down into your hamlet’s depot lot, and every pain eased off. You were big and strong, you’d lift me and whirl me like milkweed silk into the wilds of tomorrow, where our young clamored, demanding to be real.
A GOING

Leave us something
we’d be sad if you leave

leave us, for example,
if you’d like
your last photo by the door

our summer trip together

that scent of pine
your words or your tobacco?

And don’t go
alone
and whole
like a sword.
THE DEAD IN THE GARDEN

Don’t open the window
don’t wake up
I beg you don’t wake up...
they were dancing on the garden grass
as if they were the garden’s motive
or its contemplation
and they were screaming there

beneath the light
their dust was coming apart

it had rained at night
all night

translated by Fady Joudah
Amaranth Borsuk

HISTORY OF SONG

I often felt as if I were a nightshirt
full of wrens, a standing-out thing,
ready to tear the skin from my body
and completely reveal myself.

This is two thoughts at once. The first:
my mother refuses to tell me I am pretty
because she believes in my mind.
And the second: I am allowed to continue
my lessons even though a pack of wolves
has been seen in the forest. I sometimes imagine
my music calls them to me, long dark sound:
a saw that has ground its teeth to a razor’s
fineness.

These are words I did not understand
when I learned them, a combination tone.

Yes, there is a third set of tracks
that crosses here: my body is present, my heart
already flown. Soon I become someone else,
which is just like becoming no one.
VOIR DIRE

I’d like to make a statement:
I’m scar tissue, seams

for every action at home and abroad,
an implant for each event.

I’m intimate with cotton — chin
and forehead, false fronts, staples —

the next scheme was to tuck
my knees. I was the minority

whip; I’m well-versed in submission.
My body’s immaterial. Exhibit A:

my botched dentition. Because I
was nearsighted, I made a handy
ditch bank blade — they dragged
my face across the furrows. Someone

said the law has not been dead, it needs
to be awakened. I’m saying I’ve got

information. I was close enough
to smell rubble on my page. Whereas,

I’m saying, whereas without music
we still understand the measure,

whereas pressure to a skull produces
monsters, whereas treble, trouble,
scrapple, whereas filings, whereas firmament, whereas my flaws reflect

like sequins, whereas my body’s
a caveat, a calculus of incisions, I was

a very important person. Please,
I’d like to make a statement.
Bruce Beasley

EXTREMOPHILIC MAGNIFICAT

Awe...was an awful Mother, but I liked him better than none.
— Emily Dickinson

(I)

Pompeii Worm

— Alvinella pompejana, discovered 1980

This near-boiling geyser-gush through the Earth’s crust blasted water acidic as vinegar on Galapagos’ sebed, this

papery tube the extremophile Pompeii worm drills to make its habitation in a black-smoker hydrotherm rift-zone chimney

with its tentacles of scarlet head-gills in cold seeps fifty degrees and its tail at the tube-mouth six inches away in a hundred-degree-more-torrid spew through the slab waving the feathers of a gray

shawl made wholly out of symbiotic bacteria into and out of the magma — Theo-phobe,
what can you
do
with these creatures, these
living filaments that fur the worm’s back and feed
off sugared mucus it oozes

and repay their host by denitrifying,
sulfur-eating, detoxifying
the sulfide jets so pressured by the mile-deep sea they can’t break into boil?

(II)

Bone-eating Snotflower

— Osedax mucifloris, discovered 2002

Lord, Theos, down here they call those monstrous bodies hopeful whose
genetic spasms of deformation
amount to a saltation,
a leap into a wholly new species

Evolution’s random hyperevolved variation
I call it theurgy “God-work”
like thy
eye-

less, mouth-less, ungutted bone-devourers
in their sheaths
of mucus on whale-fall carcasses
translucent tubes’ red plumage

of hemoglobin with bone-embedded
egg-sac and root-tendrils plundering the whale skulls’ fats and oils.
There on the abyssal plain the larvae that unhatch themselves onto a sunk whale skeleton grow immediately female and hollow out the marrow

their three-inch pink stalk boring in to colonize the carcass’ eye/socket bone. But the ones that implant themselves on a female snot-flower’s body instead stay as they are microscopic male and paedomorphic left-over scarps of their yolk-sac the only nourishment they ever get ...

A hundred subvisible males lie sheathed inside one female (“The most dramatic sexual dimorphism in the animal kingdom”)

They stay larval always and brimming with sperm Flesh of the flesh of her who is bone to the sperm

whale’s sucked-dry bone ...

(III)

Annunciation to Mary, and Her Hymn of Praise the Magnificat
— Luke 1

Hail, bulged ovisac and dwarf male mucofloris, paper tube from boil to chill,
the Lord is with thee too, in involuntary sanctifying at the vent site, and toxin-purifying eurytheotic me, like

a symbiont feathered along my spine like your green bone-roots suckling on marrow-fat ...
Our bodies — bacterial-fuzzed and toxin-eating, scald-loving, tentacles over a hundred thousand eggs surrounded by a swarm of third-of-a-millimeter males — do magnify the Lord whether or not we want them to ...

To enter the ribbed and Gothic chambers of whale skeleton and take root there, or to wash between extremes, poison and cure ... Theophobe, are you me are we rhyme-sounds, do we rhyme with these creatures I don’t want to know. The universe is the answer, a particle physicist said, but damned if we know the question ...

Should we keep all these things in the depths as if we’d never spoken of them, or call ourselves hopeful
monsters like these, unfathom
all they say as they wave
pink gill-plumes over
their gray and brain-shaped ovaries?
Aimée Sands

GANGLE AND BOOT

What a plain man you are, plain like a hand-cranked sifter, its worn red knob and the futility of trying, oh plain like applesauce, strained

and sweet, the tang of the stubborn pulp after pressing, you know, the pattern you make with tin cookie cutters, the flaps of dough you leave hanging. I’m like that too, the marrying of the scorned and lonely self, the lid of the bread bin drawer that squeaks

when you slide it back, no one uses that now, but I can smell the crumbs from those old, stale years, rescue inconceivable,

the raisin maid dark in her red box where your shame lies, and mine; This is a kind of rescue, isn’t it:

the dog-brown honesty in your eyes, your common threads, that plaid flannel shirt, the stray hairs above your first button.
WHEEL AND TURN AND STARTLE

I have caught you unguarded in the midst of a glass of milk

I am still searching you for the codes

of skin and armhair kneecap and hollow

the way the blankets are folded and keep their thumbs

I want underneath you I want your remains I want

babble and shock and steam and hair rising I want

milk and habit your long-inhabited body

and the blank side of your face

I want the scarecrow shamble of you

your untellable the shift of your sentences in midair
PRAYER

All through September, that one loud cricket kept me up — perched,

it seemed, just behind my pillow, on the back porch, chirping like a smoke detector out of reach, out of batteries. Now he’s gone, the window closed, and, a few good nights’ sleeps

later, the pipes have started up their steamy midnight conversations with the radiators,

the room filling with heat the way it’s meant to, the walls thundering and clanking

the way they, too, should be. Waking me, though, at two a.m., again at five, with their foreign consonants. It will be like this for months? It will be like this: the sleeplessness of want, the sleeplessness of have. No monk beating my shoulders with a stick, shouting, Wake up! Wake up! Only these startled mornings — angling the light, checking the time. And then kicking off the answer, falling again toward the question.
Marjorie Saiser

I AM DONE RAISING A SON

Wool does not burn in a flame,
not burn but char.

Changed, not consumed,
I bore down in a brown haze
and pushed him out into the doctor’s gloved hand

polished his baby shoes
snapped the snaps of his shirts fed him
carrots rice red jello breaded cutlets bought him a kite
watched him fly it above the park
said happy birthday drove him to class when he was sick
on testing day I did that. Wool does not burn but char.

The beluga circles in her tank at the zoo,
a great tank and very pretty, but a tank,
and in it she circles.

Her hand — for it is a hand —
palms water.

I held his hand a thousand times,
heard him cry,
opened my eyes in the dark.

Ghost-white beluga in the water.
Bones of a hand
wave toward what lies beyond the glass.
It’s funny how an object can become a person, or the person an object, and both you fill up with all sorts of things, which are important for some reason.

Like my deceased father’s old suitcase — I’m his son, but what I knew about him was locked inside a hall closet. It’s funny how an object can become a person.

I’d take the key from the handle and ask permission before opening the locks. “Is that okay?” I’d call out loud. That was important for some reason.

Of course, no one answered, and I figured if anyone had a right to look, I did. Everything about him was all in there. It’s funny how an object can become the person.

I’d stare at the tiny handwriting in his V-mail — in one, there was a photograph of him posing with his rifle (his name on back; that was important for some reason) — and I’d also wonder about who took the picture: the sun was behind him, and, of course, you couldn’t see him at all, just his shadow, so the shadow had become the person. I don’t know why, but that was important for some reason.
MEMORIAL SONNET

This is for the bruised eye, the swollen lip,
the blue panties torn at the elastic,
the bra cup hanging out of the laundry basket
and the yellowing half-slip

almost as yellowed as the girdle.
This is for the intentional cosmic
silence that watched like Sputnik
overhead and heard her yell.

This is for his psychiatric hospital visits
and her court-appointed lawyer;
this is for the restraining order
whenever he ignored it.

This is for my mother cowering in a corner.
This is for my father who came home from war.
INSOMNIA

Too much of anything
and my apartment feels

like a panic room,
a box that traps

August in Chicago.
Sniffly and squinting,

nose pressed
against the pillow

if I slept at all.
The sirens outside

my bedroom window
whistling seedy songs.

Everything happens
more slowly, of course —

that’s why porches
are built, so you

can light a cigarette,
rock back and forth,

feel some chill from
a long time ago

and not talk about it.
These are pagan
memories, songs
you shouldn’t sing

cluttered at the back
of your tongue.

My cadences
roiling and sticky,

the alarm clock
wedged on the sill.
Carol Potter

AUCTION

I have confused my mother with some acres. I have confused my mother with a field of corn. My mother herself has become confused.

It is common knowledge. Time to sell but just what is being sold?

She was quiet. She was mum. She was mother. She worked. She sold herself.

Her teeth are bad now. She has a bad heart. The little battery in her chest keeps her going. She refused the hearing aid. She confused it with a fork.

She has forgotten the dentist appointment. She forgot the dog and the dog ran down the street after her. *One more time*, the dog pound people said,

*And the dog stays here.* The dog bites people when they try to move her too fast.

Not much you could get for that dog. And the kitchen table funky.

Her sons walk through the kitchen with their boots on. She makes good ice tea but she has forgotten her dinner in the back of the fridge. There it is, last week's uneaten meat. Tuesday's vegetables.
Emmanuel Moses

from PRELUDES AND FUGUES CYCLE II

PRELUDE 3

I will sing in bird language
or like the organs of Dresden
there was an old woman who still remembered them
beneath the syringas of exile
(and now she sleeps in a sad suburban cemetery)
a linden used to shade her grave that I'm told was cut down
words of smoke will emerge from my mouth
when I sing in the tongue of the bird of paradise!
They'll have called me guilty, a vagabond
till I raise my song toward the evening's blue clouds
how strong the wind is at nightfall
it unfurls flags of smoke between the gallows-posts
each one was the tree of knowledge
lit by a guilty sun
I will sing between brick walls
dragging my vagabond feet from hut to hut
each rag drying in the wind will be a shroud for me
we drank down great mouthfuls of gall!
There were days when the wind exulted
even the sun was guilty —
o vagabonds huddled in ditches in vacant lots
o sleepers in eternity's hot morning
two by two the shadows withdraw toward the bend in the road
the world's marvels will have to step aside
with the streaming light
FUGUE 3

Here rose a bravely woven song
— the assassin’s whistling in back alleys —
bread that was delivered gnawed by rats
or at any rate spotted with mold
o unscrupulous bakers of dismal years!
Mothers you kept your little girls close by your skirts
— the ogres whistling in back alleys —
mornings were pale and hard as bone
life rotted in foul-smelling kitchens
no one drank wine in leafy bowers
at most a beer or two between factory walls
we lived in city centers under the purr of machines
sirens ripped the morning fog
sometimes we thought we were on the road to the sun!
Men and women had exchanged their roles
they drowned the wound as best they could
sailors left on the dock sang with peasants beneath the earth
they died beside the factory
without sacraments
curing those who cursed them and kicked them aside
now we can see the oblivion where an insane chimney burgeons
what became of the songs and wisps of smoke?
Which god spared the last tree in the world?

translated by Marilyn Hacker
RECURRING DREAM

Cranbrook is entirely different but it is still Cranbrook. The walk to the boathouse has been fenced off for a while, just like in life. Mad geese root in the muck: you used to make people laugh!

Some art just doesn’t age well, and then there is entropy itself. Then a tiny door in the sure world makes you a hermit, and everyone hates a hermit.

At the end of the war it became another glacier scrape, full of serviceberry and mallow and cold ivies who blister the skin; and under this a thousand mammoths and their ordinary stories, and the pull of one moon, still.

The dream begins a scene in a distant movie of how I meet myself, hello, hello. The camera is shaking because someone behind it is laughing.
And along came the grail with two neutral angels. Landscape crusted with thunder: it wasn’t ready.

A black animal at pond’s edge gathered the rustlings — waves came, but not the kind you would think.

That was the primitive mistake. Which is still spinning off the sleeve-tug of the present, and the future’s gaping hope,

and what spinning means. Also: finger bones. Also tiny wings. Also cat feet, birth moms, dead guns, make ups, left outs.

I saw angels embarrassed by the swamp. Blushed at each other, like animals, blushed at the weird trills, the rot on the wind.
I was an invisible man
muttering the conspiracies to sleep
in smoke-stained monotone
when you couldn’t,

wireless unwinding the distance
between Nevada
and a first-time caller
through the thick, cordoned hours.

My words echoed slightly
as if dusting their own shadows
for evidence.

It felt beautiful to be faceless,
my station’s giant red letters
beaming meaningless acronyms
through the deserted airspace.

I interviewed spoonbenders
and farmers who’d seen holes so deep
they’d bring your dogs back to life.

Our border expanded at night.

Coast to coast,
a congress of small lit rooms
knit an earthly constellation
inside the darkness.
I was ghostmaster,  
whiskers barbered  
to poster lightning  

as my spook-show rolled  
The Fantastic Congress of Horrors  
through a thousand  
nickel-house midnights.  

Black River or Mercy Hat  
held themselves against the emptiness  
whispered upon rural maps  

as if my route were recreating  
the travelogue  
of some frightened pilgrims  
who tried to settle their own shadows.  

In the morning  
I checked my body for memories  
but found only stage makeup,  
a smudged gloaming.  

On the dash, wax fangs melted  
to blank fingerprints  
as sunlight shot detectives  
through the trailer slats.
WINDOW WASHER

One hand slops suds on, one
hustles them down like a blind.
Brusque noon glare, filtered thus,
loosens and glows. For five or
six minutes he owns the place,
dismal coffee bar, and us, its
huddled underemployed. A blade,
black line against the topmost glass,

begins, slices off the outer lather,
flings it away, works inward,
corrals the frothy middle, and carves,
with quick cuts, the stuff down,
not looking for anything, beneath
or inside. Homes to the last,
cleans its edges, grooms it for
the end, then shaves it off

and flings it away. Which is
splendid, and merciless. And all
in the wrist. Then, he looks at us.
We makers of filth, we splashers
and spitters. We sitters and watchers.
Who like to see him work.
Who love it when he leaves
and gives it back: our grim hideout,
half spoiled by clarity.
NOTHING TERRIBLY BIBLICAL ABOUT IT

And lo, three feet of snake, cool as your neck in May, 
got stuck slipping its flame in a fussy mesh laid to slow

a weak hill’s crumbling — and managed, mad resolve,

to squeeze itself, all wagging tongue, through ten or twelve
squares like calendar days that cinched its hide till it swelled.

That’s all. Except a couple naked humans always

sweeten the pot, and there we were, dazed ourselves
from hours of splitting yours from mine, with all the novels

and towels, music and knives still to divvy. So, we tossed

low drawers for tools, something with teeth to cut
the phony stuff that choked a real thing. Sure we conferred,

but you were the one, as always, who did it, while I

squirmed at your knack for stomaching the task, clipping right up
to the beautiful head, with its tight unpromising mouth,

and you fixed it, as always, so I could lift it with a stick

and set it — I knew not what made flesh, such a berth did I give
its moral heat — in friendlier country. Sighs all around.

Back to the business at hand. Naming the unnamed

tasks: checkbooks and keys, things to be cleaned,
the perfect day and the perfect time

for my men and your men to come with their dollies and trucks.
Darkling fugitive, what do you hope to find
trolling the kitchen at 3:37 a.m. —
a little R & R in the spice rack,
the Northwest Passage of saucer and cup?
I make three empty grabs at your chirps
before landing you in the cage
of my sleepy hand. Should I return you
to my son’s tarantula inn, or grant
early Sabbath amnesty? You thrum
like hunger, like old epics buried
in a pawned violin. No, more like a man
in pajamas opening a door in the dark,
using a cricket as compass, hoping to take
harbor in some wilder throat already singing.
WHEN I REACHED INTO THE STOMACH OF A FISTULATED DAIRY COW: SIXTH GRADE FIELD TRIP TO SONNY’S DAIRY BARN

Clover and oats, a tangle of bile-singed timothy hay — what Sonny said we’d feel. Gloves kissed to our elbows. Ferment of the winter cow field. I feel a whole bitten pasture as it broke down inside her — blue barn sweet with the atomic shudder of barley. I reach past that weave of hot forage to the fuchsia grove, where after a future lover and I drop acid, he’ll wind my neck and nipples in the fringy mimosas’ burlesque feathers. I reach back and further through fields to the French Canadian with a musket wound blown through his left side: the stomach wound that gaped like hibiscus, wouldn’t heal, even as he married a white-haired girl from Lake Michigan’s coast,
fathered two girls. I touch her cheek, where a platinum strand splits her eye from her lip, which opens and shuts and opens. I watch her feed him plum halves on a string so she can pull the desiccated fruit from his side’s portal to know how matter moves through his body. Now the cow’s gut contracts and holds my forearm. I’d scream except for the throb of her back’s heat, the peat moss below that pillows our composite shadow: cow with a girl grafted-on as after radical experiments. No, it’s when I grew a whole heaving beast for a palm, my wrist which holds a Holstein’s pulse, pull like a wound where inside the hay breaks its weave, where the shredded mimosa won’t shut.
GHOSTS

They are like doors you suspect
behind you, or something extra dark
in a corner of the darkness
when you’re up late by a window
wondering how much time each
moment might contain, or if
your hands aren’t more like wings
in denial.
Tinnitus may be their language, a kind
of laughter-laced ringing, the sea’s
voice in a shell: every time you listen
there it is, so
close, a freezing thin
longing in every grey room of a house
deep in what you might imagine
is that ancient wood where the giant
wanders his giant sadness
and the wicked witch weeps for children
who will never bother her again.
Where when you open the door
there’s a wall or an empty field
listening hard, as though it knew you.
JUNG DOUBTS

It may not be possible to go deeper, beyond or beneath anything but birds and their little thoughts boxed among the leaves. Perhaps we’re stuck in the bruise of broad day with its donkey cart clang and silence like a choir of gestures or an aerial view of school girls spilling from a school. Perhaps we will open the inner door and find no stairs or an immense frozen stone pointing at its old friend the moon of our echo going round and round with little trays of sweets remembered and given casually in the service of regret. And though the deep rooms knock and sometimes sing we can’t help thinking what if our minds aren’t really anything? What if no one’s there, dear lady who lifts her arms up to our own, dear contused old man whose tears run in the blackened street we climb, convinced the beloved is behind us and our lives before us in a shadow of the shadow of the light?
What do we need to be told? Do we need to be told, for instance, to seize the day? Do we need to be reminded, as Arthur Sze reminds us, that "each hour teems"? If we do, it’s not for lack of having been told before. This affirmation is not only a commonplace, but perhaps the commonplace, of this historical moment. The assumption of teeming is implicit in many of the discourses that swirl around us, in the lexicons of networked computing, globalization, business “synergy,” biodiversity, mixed feelings, polymorphous perversion, and consumer choice. Surely this is a partial list, but then again, every list, in a teeming age, is now inexhaustible. Is it not a feature of our moment in history that each hour teems with accounts of its teeming?

Arthur Sze, in his ninth collection of poems, contributes to this self-conscious multiplicity, affirming it not merely as the quality of a zeitgeist, but as a basic condition of human experience. The title sequence of *The Ginkgo Light* states this outright:

THE GINKGO LIGHT

A downy woodpecker drills into a utility pole. While you cut stems, arrange tulips in a vase, I catch a down-bow on the A string, beginning of “Song of the Wind.” We savor black beans with cilantro and rice, pinot noir; as light slants through the kitchen window, spring is candlelight at our fingertips. Ice crunches in river breakup: someone shovels snow in a driveway, collapses, and hospitalized, catches staph infection; out of airplane wreckage, a woman identifies the ring on the charred corpse of her spouse; a travel writer whose wife is in hospice gazes at a lunar eclipse, the orange moon
at one-millionth of its normal brightness.  
A 1300-year-old lotus seed germinates; a ginkgo  
issues fan-shaped leaves; each hour teems.

The eye of this sensibility notices not just a woodpecker, but a woodpecker drilling into a utility pole. Nature and culture converge; just as the woodpecker has learned to forage or nest in utility poles, the utility pole fixes the poet’s attention because of the woodpecker. The poem, the sequence, and indeed the book itself develop a searching and mobile poetic method out of such convergences. Nothing happens without something incongruous happening at the same time. While the woodpecker pecks wood, the utility pole serves its human utility. While someone cuts flowers, someone else plays the Suzuki standard, “The song of the wind,” on a violin. While ice breaks up in a river, heralding spring, someone else, shoveling snow, collapses, is hospitalized, contracts staph, while elsewhere, a woman’s spouse perishes in an air crash, and a man’s wife lies on her deathbed. Each event hangs in uncertain relation to the other, even while it is perfectly natural, say, for a woodpecker to choose a utility pole to drill, or for someone to contract staph in the hospital. Thus disaster weaves itself, quite naturally, into the fabric of domestic, bourgeois life. While for a reader accustomed to keeping his categories distinct, the blackness of the beans and of the pinot noir grape vibrate uneasily against that of the darkness of charred corpse and obscured moon, the scene Sze frames is one in which each of these phenomena has its place. If, then, each hour teems for Sze, it does so not with Hopkins’s plenum of natural beauty, wherein “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” but with events that both sustain and oppose human life. This is a world that unsettles comfort, and the mind that perceives each of these events is haunted by an uneasy imagination, an imagination both lured toward and suspicious of contentment and complacency.

Each one of the vignettes indicated in this poem could be worked up — perhaps have been and presently are being worked up — into complete poems in their own right. Such poems com-
prise the familiar fare of a common American poetic strategy or algorithm: take one moment of vivid observation and add one measure of enriched sensibility to produce one moment of poetic epiphany. Even if such moments are deeply felt, they are also deeply constrained by the simplicity of the conceptual ambition. What strikes the reader about Sze's poetry is the frequency with which such moments risk, but in fact ultimately resist, assimilation into these familiar schema. A reader satisfied by the reminder that "each hour teems" may not readily notice that such a statement, for Sze, is the beginning rather than the end of a problem. If the challenge of the poet were merely to remind, and the challenge of the reader merely to assent, then Arthur Sze, secure in the knowledge that numberless poets have taken up this task, could easily withdraw from poetry in favor of other pastimes mentioned in the book, gardening perhaps, the collection of mushrooms, or the savoring of virtuous legumes. Such activities, however, overlay and imperfectly conceal an intense anxiety beneath the surface of all Sze's poems. This anxiety animates the poems at their deepest level, demanding unappeasably how one might live, love, think, and write with so much happening all at once, in a world where contemplation, awareness, mindfulness and care, are all under such constant attack.

To respond to this demand, Sze takes a deceptive approach. Despite the rhetoric of teeming, a manifest sameness pervades the work. The poems can appear to be the occasional manifestation or registrations of a sensibility, rather than distinct series of fully realized and differentiated formal accomplishments. Rather than establish its own microclimate or local government or pursue its own idiosyncratic ambitions, each poem records the impressions of a sensibility that remains equably consistent throughout the book. In search of a remembered line, the reader will encounter few indicators to help him distinguish between one poem and another. This effect, however, represents less a limitation of accomplishment than a focusing of technique.

The poems are resolutely committed to the specifics of daily life, and require a commitment not only to the particularity of experience, but to the implacably smooth surface of the ordinary
and the everyday. This ordinariness flowing in and around experiences of beauty and the sublime is one of the qualities that the ginkgo tree itself, named throughout the book, expresses. The ginkgo for Sze represents a tree of Jurassic antiquity, but one also a part of daily life, the distinctive fan-shaped silhouette of its leaves to be found both in ancient fossils and on modern sidewalks. (The ginkgo tree has proved itself to be amazingly resistant to urban pollution.) It is an organism both exceptional and unexceptional at once. As Sze writes in “Chrysalis”:

An imprint of ginkgo leaf — fan-shaped, slightly thickened, slightly wavy on broad edge, two-lobed, with forking parallel veins but no midvein — in a slab of coal is momentary beauty, while ginkgoes along a street dropping gold leaves are mindless beauty of the quotidian.

Yeats concludes his “Among School Children” with the image of a chestnut, a “great rooted blossomer,” which stands for venerable age and efflorescent vitality united in one great living presence. For Yeats the tree is a model for the particular, individual life; the poem lays out the terms for a new self-conception, in which a person in late age can also be both blossoming and deeply rooted. Sze elects a greatly expanded frame of reference, where the life in question is not the life of the individual, but rather that of the species, the genus, or the web of life itself.

As demonstrated by Yeats, the familiar lyric response to the *carpe diem* imperative is an individual resolve, because the individual life is so fleeting. Although Sze’s poems often make note of the individual perspective, frequently narrate impressions in the first person, and liberally furnish his readers with news of his wife, garden, daughter or city, this autobiographical perspective is another instance of a deceptive resemblance between Sze’s and other, less ambitious projects. The task at hand is not to delineate for the
reader the passions and reflections of a single subjectivity. While Sze’s poems might appear at first to reproduce the dilute washes of a familiar American neo-romanticism, they do not frame for one individual sensibility examples of how to live or thrive. For Sze, living is something that happens, and a life is composed of happenings, not momentous happenings but mere ones, hence the emphasis on what is noticed serendipitously, upon the accident or diagnosis that alters a life without warning. For Sze, however, such happenings occur in a historical context of longest imaginable duration, a context that provides a nearly endless temporal depth of field. Unlike Yeats’s chestnut, the ginkgo is not a model for how Sze himself can be both anciently rooted and recurrently fruitful. Instead, it represents a force of vitality that underwrites life in its least particular — and therefore most enduring — forms.

Emphasizing this vast temporal depth of field, one of the key poems of the book, entitled “The Double Helix,” invokes not the life of single organisms but the relative immortality of DNA. The double helix of the DNA molecule cascades down through the millennia (not entirely unlike Yeats’s mystically whirling gyres, the spiral staircase of history’s recurring ages). The helix, upon which is inscribed our unique genetic particularity, is also the sign of our individual insignificance, the fact that a genome can live on for millennia but a person cannot.

Although the passions that torrent through our bodies will one day vanish like smoke —

these words spiral the helix of living into smoke —
we embrace, rivet, inflame to mortal beauty,

to yellow-gold bursting through cottonwoods,

to morels sprouting through charred ground.
And as sky darkens, absorbs magpie next,

green water tank, canales, pear quince, slatted wood fence, we tilt back and forth: though

73
the time we breathe is millennia when clocked
by a vibrating ray of cesium atoms, seconds
when measured by Comet Hyakutake — the tide
rushes over orange-tipped nudibranchs; silt
plunges underwater into a submarine canyon —
we observe snow on a flagstone path dissolve.

On the one hand the twining embrace of the double helix is
the entwined embrace of the poet and his interlocutor. (Sze’s interlocutor is always simultaneously one other person, his wife for instance, but also all other people, the reader included.) On the other, it stands for the embrace between human time and geological or astronomical time. While intersubjectivity always serves to unsettle certainty and conviction, by itself it is not the only basis for skepticism in Sze’s sensibility. The twined helical strands that make up “the time we breathe” are the twined strands of unimaginably different temporalities.

From the point of view of the rapid oscillation of a beam of cesium atoms (to which atomic clocks are calibrated) we live for millennia. From the immeasurably lazier orbit of a comet, our span of years is the briefest instant. (Comet Hyakutake’s recent pass through the solar system slowed it from a brisk 17,000-year orbit to one of 100,000 years.) The sight of the snowflakes melting is an occasion for particular notice, the registration of how something happens to happen in nature, but what moves Sze the most is the vertiginous contrast between the transient flake and the millennial solidity of the flagstone, even though the flagstone is, like snow, merely another sedimentation of crystals. We live, the vanishing snow informs us, somewhere between the ephemeral and the permanent. This middle zone, however, is one of vital change and unfolding. In the poem melted snow metamorphoses into the tide washing over the bright-hued nudibranch mollusk and next into the stream plunging like Alph, Coleridge’s sacred river, into sunless underground caverns. This plunging stream, so
vital and alive, is laden with the silt which will in turn settle into sedimentary rock, become yet more flagstone.

The objection to all of this of course is that a cesium atom or the comet Hyakutake do not, properly speaking, have a point of view, from which we might appear older than dirt or younger than mayflies. However stunned or frazzled by human life, one could not repair to an atom or a comet to recover lost perspective or equanimity. To imagine human life from such perspectives (one might gripe) trades on the easy far-out trippyness of such thought experiments. But such caviling would be misplaced with Sze, precisely because such imaginative experiments take their place in the teeming multiplicity of experience, reminding us that (at least in French) experience and experiment are indistinguishable concepts, a part of the process through which we make sense of the world.

The key word at the conclusion of “The Double Helix” then is “observe,” in “we observe snow on a flagstone path dissolve.” In such a word inheres the lapidary coolness that braces Sze’s work, giving it an astringency wholly uninterested in a “Whoa, dude!” or “Gee whiz, Mr. Science!” response. Acts of observation establish the moral center of these poems, because every act of observation tempers epiphany with a chastening awareness of context. Auden deployed a similar moral intelligence when he pointed out that whenever an Icarus falls from the sky, somewhere else “dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.” Such a morality is one constantly striving to pass beyond moral sentimentality. Moral sentimentality would have us urging the dogs to lament a cataclysm they don’t care about, or vilifying the torturer’s horse on account of its evil owner. By contrast, Sze’s poetry constantly erodes the foundations upon which such easy judgments are based.

There are moments in Sze’s poetry when the lens seems to have been surreptitiously Vaselined and the microphone swaddled in gauze, as when “a black man / near a fountain raises saxophone to his lips / and showers the street with shimmering gold.” Immediately following this cascade, the strobe of an am-
bulance appears in the distance, but its severe memento mori is helpless to squeegee all that sprayed gilt from the saxophonist’s blues or hose those, ahem, golden showers from the sidewalk. The poem “In the Rose Light,” however, states outright that sanity depends at times on filtering the light of awareness, and that the pitiless lamp of observation must, at times, be actively prevented from affixing its beam:

no red-tailed hawk, no crows,
no geese, no raccoon tracks
by the door; when a magpie flaps across the road,
disappears beyond the window frame, I ponder frames —
glasses, doorjamb, beehive,
a moment of stillness — trace
an intimate geography:
son in Albany donating a cell phone so that someone he will never meet may call 911; clusters of wild irises in the field; daughter glimpsed through the doorway, arms raised, in a ballerina pose, then, in five minutes, asleep; though the pink and orange bougainvilleas are not yet budding, I incandesce to our firelight, to the ten years we have entwined each other.

In order to live, to dwell, with ourselves and with others, we need to frame the view, suppress rather than disavow the fact that an act of charity presumes disaster, that the catalogue of local fauna is also an itemization of predator, scavenger, and prey. Perhaps we must forgive ourselves for warming ourselves at a private hearth, for allowing its firelight to bathe everything in gold,
for ignoring that a decade spent together is also a decade closer to parting. So if Sze suggests that we should spend at least some of our time cultivating our own gardens, savoring domestic pleasures, he also urges us to ponder frames as well, as arid as such a meditation may sound. Perhaps this is an undertaking that Sze’s poems insist upon because they seem to present themselves without frames. The tense is almost always present, the rhetoric improvisatory, creating a sense of weightless spontaneity. Poetry does not require hanging in salons or on gallery walls; it compels no deliberation with respect to matting, filigree, or gold leaf. After all, we are accustomed to poetry appearing in the air before us, welcome or not, published in slender unassuming volumes, printed in lean reviews, or intoned to sparsely occupied folding chairs and bestsellers on management upstairs in the Barnes and Noble. Surely our art is superior because it foregoes splashier ambitions! This, of course, is fantastically wrong. All poetry, even poetry as loosely structured as Sze’s, has, as it were, its frame built right in. Sze asks us to ponder frames because they are everywhere. They are everywhere, and they are constantly changing. The frame in Sze’s poetry keeps breaking open, the focus of the image keeps shifting to the edge or the background, or the image itself grows dark as the attention zeroes in on an overheard snippet of song, or the call of a bird. Around such intrusions of the unexpected, the poems continually reframe themselves, adjust their point of view, assimilate new forms of understanding.

Stevens in “The Man on the Dump,” his great poem of the impermanence and vanity of all human striving, remarks that our “days pass like papers from a press.” There is a joy in this assertion for Stevens, and the satisfaction attendant upon a salubrious reduction of expectations. Days do not go by as might a procession of gods (as Emerson suggested in his short lyric “Days”), but like the production of a machine, a newspaper press unspooling the journalism of the quotidian. Perhaps these papers engage our attention for a span, but the machine keeps spitting them into the past, onto the dump, onto the “great heap of images” upon which our culture is founded. A similar suspicion of the Eventful, the
Historical, the Permanently Transformative, marks Sze's work, but the passage of time for Sze is not the gray blur of undifferentiated day-to-dayness flowing from the press. The fresh page of the day is for Sze always a fresh start, a new opportunity to look, to reconceptualize, to renew understanding. The mind of the artist hovers over it like a kingfisher poised over a pond, or perhaps the lifted brush of the calligrapher, to employ another familiar figure from his poems.

It is to this latter art, calligraphy, that the poems bear the closest resemblance. If it is easy to see in these poems a sameness, the sameness is the same that an uninstructed western eye might see in the orderly squadrons of characters on a Chinese scroll. Calligraphy, however, was considered for millennia in China to be the paragon of the arts. In no Western art is there the same tension between the rustic and the refined, the traditional and the improvisational, between the communicative and the expressively gestural. A calligraphic character is made up of familiar strokes, each in its sequence, each with its accustomed name — silkworm head, hook, slice, goose tail — and in a similar way Sze's poems hew strictly to the dictates of rigorously developed method. The artist purchases the clarity of the text in gestures of self-effacement, and its vitality with a uniquely negotiated expression of impersonal élan. It is in such an art, Sze writes in his poem "Didyma," that a point of exhaustion can become a point of renewal:

[...] Renewal is not possible to a calligrapher who simultaneously draws characters with a brush in each hand; it occurs when the tip of a brush slips yet swerves into flame . . .

In the western tradition since Plato, writing has been viewed skeptically as a restriction or limitation of the mind or soul. As Paul of Tarusus said, the letter kills. The composition of the calligrapher's ink, not unlike that of the stream plunging into dark, is part water and part soot, and so contains a tint of extinction.
But for Sze, the calligrapher’s brush stroke is, at least potentially, a site of vital refreshment. Such refreshment derives not from bravura display (drawing characters with a brush in each hand) but through an encounter with the unforeseen and unrepeatable, the slip of the stroke that causes the sooty emulsion of completed experience to “swerve into flame.” It is such a felicity that Sze’s poems seek and frequently achieve, an encounter with the unexpected or errant flaring into sudden illumination.

DeSales Harrison
MARTEN OR HARE: THE FUTURE IN THE PAST


I would say that for twenty-five years Linda Bierds has been publishing poems about people from all reaches of history who share one thing: they pay exquisite attention to their lives and allow us readers to inhabit those lives for the space of a page or two. I would say that — except that after spending time with this splendid book, the preposition "about" seems puny and inaccurate. For if we are able to inhabit the mind of a Zuni potter, a seventeenth-century Dutch anatomist, Tolstoy, a close friend of Henry James, a child aboard a Conestoga wagon, astronaut Neil Armstrong — if we are taken up completely, convincingly, into the minds and senses, concerns and joys and complications of people we may or may not have heard of, but have certainly never met, it is only because Bierds has inhabited them first herself.

This feat obviously requires considerable research on each of her subjects' times and circumstances. That groundwork, however, is invisible — invisible in the sense that as I read I spend no time noticing what a fine job the poet did collecting material. Instead I whole-heartedly enter the life opening before me and am completely absorbed in living it. As I read I do a better job of living in the present than I do in much of my life — except it's not my present! Such is the gift of literature.

If it were only a matter of researched knowledge, Bierds might write excellent biographies. What she does (and with impressive consistency) is (re)create people in moments of interwoven action and contemplation in such a way that they are extraordinarily real — complex, fascinating, totally human.

Much of the poems' content is fictional, of course, invented to be congruent with the research but nevertheless imaginary. So realistic is the effect, however, that in describing the poems I mention the research first. But surely the greater accomplishment is the flight of imagination encapsulated in each poem. At times, as I read, I feel as if the top of my head is being taken off, in Emily Dickinson's words.
The poem I’ll use to take a closer look at Bierds’ craftsmanship is one of the 15 new poems in this generous New and Selected, the one that gave me the strongest top-of-the-head sensation. Here is “Thoughts toward the First Christmas Lecture,” which carries the subtitle “Michael Faraday, 1860”:

A skin of ice on the inner panes
and Faraday there at the window, his candle flame
burning a peephole. Already morning has warmed
the eaves, the hedgerows thickened by snow.
Children, he thinks, penless, his words underscored
by a tendril of smoke, I speak to you as a child myself,
amazed by the candle’s phenomena: wax and light
and uplifting air, the little cup they form together,
the shallow pool that shivers there. Over
an empty hummock, parallel tracks of a sleigh soften,
and between the tracks, a horse’s widening hoofprints.
Something has scurried across that journey — marten
or hare — bisecting the sleigh tracks. Consider
that grand circularity, light to fuel to light.
And mystery: a flame that never bites the host
but fattens from it nonetheless. Perhaps there were
two horses, stepping in tandem down the hummock,
one set of hoofprints absorbing the other. Children,
we are drawn here to be philosophers, to ask always,
What is the cause? And so you question,
How do flame and fuel meet? And so I say,
By mutual attraction. By the bonding of things
undissolved in each other. Unlikely, of course, still
were their gaits equal and the reins crossed
their shoulders simultaneously. . . . Let us turn
to an illustration. Tip your towel to a basin of water,
or better — better! — trouble your mother for a fresh prawn,
then place it tail first in a tumbler, plump head
cupped over the rim. Children, water will climb
through the creature — as fuel climbs a wick! —
by mutual attraction. Already morning
has warmed the eaves, the icicles transparent now, sloughing their waxy frost — and soon to be prisms, blinding, as the sun arcs into view. And what of the flame, you ask me, its shadow so solid on the classroom wall? How can it be both substance and light? Perhaps there were two horses, stepping in tandem down the white expanse — soon to be blinding. . .

Children, I must leave you for now with this:
Never is flame of a single body, but a multitude of successions, so rapid the eye unites them as one.
Something has scurried across the sleigh tracks — marten or hare — its jittery flight bisecting the hummock, this way — or that — its slim path both absence and shape, a low-slung whip of smoke.

Some of the connective tissue in this poem (and in numerous others in Flight) is based on repetition, which we so often narrowly associate with the requirements of form (end-words in sestinas, lines in villanelles, refrains) but which is a vastly flexible device that free-verse poets use probably as frequently as formalists.

"Already morning has warmed the eaves" appears twice — early, in line 3, and in line 31, three-quarters of the way though the poem, as if it were starting over. In each case the line is followed by images of the wintry scene outside Faraday’s window. The "tendril of smoke" underlining Faraday’s words in line 6 is echoed by "a low-slung whip of smoke" in the last line, where it is in apposition with the "slim path" of animal tracks. The two smoke images connect his words to the physical world — this in a poem that explains candle and flame as "the bonding of things / undissolved in each other."

These and other repetitions contribute to the way the poem plays with time. Four of the lecture sections open with the word "children"; in the first of these (line 6), Faraday includes himself: "Children, . . . I speak to you as a child myself." We see the child in him as he imagines both sides of the question-and-answer session and as he displays child-like excitement about the candle’s
phenomena of “wax and light / and uplifting air.” Another mo-
ment of enthusiasm comes when he revises the “climbing water”
experiment and exclaims “or better — better! — .” Whether a
phrase or a word, the repetitions pull two things together across
their separation by minutes (smoke) or decades (Faraday in 1860,
at 68/Faraday as child).

At the same time that Faraday is thinking about the upcom-
ing lecture, he is quite carefully recording the physical phenome-
na outside his window and speculating about them. He examines
tracks of a sleigh and of the horse(s) that pulled it; he notices the
tracks of a small animal that have crossed the others’. He alter-
mates between the incipient lecture (the future) and the tracks in
the snow (the mutable present, melting before us). Five lines of a
nineteenth-century explanation of how a candle burns separate
“Perhaps there were / two horses, stepping in tandem” from
“Unlikely, of course, still / were their gaits equal. . . .” The bifur-
cated structure’s movements from one subject to the other are
themselves a kind of repetition.

Beyond the convincing voice, memorable imagery, and deft-
ly-managed repetition, there’s another dimension here, one that
I’ve not seen elsewhere. Once familiar with the poem, I see evi-
dence of it throughout; on first reading, however, I was well into
the second half when it dawned on me that there was something
at large in the poem that I now think of as a ghost of the future.

Bear with me for a paragraph. The well-known revolution in
science of the early twentieth century opened a new kind of
physics, that of the sub-atomic world, and brought to popular
culture phrases like “uncertainty principle” and “observer ef-
fect.” Suddenly matter was not acting the way it we expected it
to, the way it did at the macro level: we couldn’t say for certain
where these tiny objects were, or whether they were particles, or
waves, or something else.

The question that Faraday urges the children to “ask al-
ways, / What is the cause?,” is a Newtonian question. The new
question, the quantum question, literally materializes here in
what first appear to be incidental observations of the tracks of
sleigh, horse(s), and small “jittery” animal. (“Jittery,” that mar-
velous word, has among its meanings the small, rapid variations in the period or amplitude of a wave-form.)

Two phrases stirred my association with quantum phenomena: the pedagogical candle as "both substance and light" (line 36) and animal tracks as "both absence and shape" (line 44). The first neatly translates to quantum (packet or particle) and wave, while the second suggests the discovery that statements about the positions of subatomic particles must be made in terms of probability rather than certainty. The question of whether something is there or not has gotten considerably more complicated.

Likewise the uncertainty mentioned twice, "marten or hare" (lines 12-13 and 43), as well as that in the penultimate line, where the track of whichever animal bisects the hummock "this way — or that — . . . ."

With these connections made, it wasn’t long before the sleigh tracks reminded me of the two-slit experiment (from which Richard Feynman said all of quantum mechanics could be inferred). When only one photon is shot at a barrier with two slits in it, the interference pattern on the wall behind the barrier looks the same as it does when many photons are shot. This is clear evidence that something like a wave passed simultaneously through both slits and set up an interference pattern with itself! How did one "something" become two? And here is Michael Faraday considering (twice) the "unlikely" possibility that "perhaps there were two horses, stepping in tandem" (lines 16-17 and 36-37).

It is not a random future that haunts the poem. Faraday’s work with electromagnetism was rewritten mathematically by Maxwell, whose famous equations simplified and unified what had been seen as separate phenomena of light, magnetism, and electricity — a necessary step toward the concept of quanta. One source states that quantum physics essentially began with Faraday and then traces it from him through Kirchoff and Boltzmann to Planck, Einstein, Bohr, and Pauli.

In the poem, Faraday cannot of course recognize that his observations are metaphor for a kind of physics not known in his time. His habit of close observation, however, is the essence of
scientific work, as valuable today as ever. The historic Faraday has been praised for teaching "undirected observation" and for the experiments he designed for children to foster it, which are still used today. So while the objects he observes in the poem were lost in snowmelt 150 years ago, the poem reconstructs a way of seeing that is a heady treat for the reader. "Thoughts toward the First Christmas Lecture" is a superb poem. It is also a scientist's notebook.

I've read many poems, persona and otherwise, that are filled with memories, even latent ones, of the past. As I've mentioned, I can't recall another that shines with the light of the future. This is not the commonly used foreshadowing that suggests the fate that will overtake someone by the end of a poem or story. This poem radiates knowledge available only in the distant future; it knows, a century and a half beyond its time, the course of a discipline, one that will play an increasingly important role in our civilization. Bierds echoes the new physics in the old, turning time upside down.

Upside-down time brings to mind one last concept in modern physics, "entanglement," which is also called "non-local correlation." The world is no longer described as composed of solid, elementary particles, the "atoms" the Greeks taught us to see for thousands of years. We now see it as a network of entities that are energy, not things, and that are interconnected in a dynamic web such that two entities respond together even though they appear to be separated; this occurs in the four-dimensional system that is space-time. Does that not support the appearance of quantum mysteries in this poem?

Perhaps. But I will not insist, having already skated to the risky edge of my limited understanding of physics. I will say only that it is a great pleasure to read Flight — surely a rare handbook of adventure.

Pamela Alexander
Exploration of the universe, sometimes based on scientific knowledge, has often been of interest to American women poets. Whether ecstatically “leaning against the — Sun” or dropping through layers of consciousness and hitting “a World, at every plunge,” Emily Dickinson projected her persona as well as her imagery onto the cosmos, sometimes with theological or scientific overlay, sometimes not. Dickinson’s century and the one before also had their share of women astronomers, as noted and utilized by more recent poets: Adrienne Rich has written memorably about Caroline Herschel, and Carole Simmons Oles has a complete collection based on the life of Nantucket astronomer Maria Mitchell (Night Watches, 2002).

It’s therefore no surprise to find two recent women poets using astronomy to give metaphorical and structural cohesion to their collections, but it’s nonetheless a delightful surprise. Though the books take different risks and reflect different emotional imperatives, both poets use the cosmos as a canvas for defining and extending the self.

In her second book, Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon uses her name as a primary connection to the stars — specifically to the RR Lyrae, a class of “variable stars” discovered in the sixteenth century, but most significantly charted by the deaf eighteenth-century astronomer John Goodricke. Astronomy pervades the book, in both factual and metaphorical reference, accompanied by physics and mathematics; the latter gives the book its title, which (including the brackets) defines a mathematical series that is complete except for its ends. Here is “RR Lyrae: Sign,” one of several poems addressed to Goodricke:

Past breath: External: Past gesture: A field—:
the empty space— pressed up between the ends
of fingers and my face— that I extend
out into openness— a thing I build
against silence— Dear John:— This letter penned
in air a self— : in space— a name I find
in your hand— : You:— a listener— a child—
and more than two hundred twenty years— deaf
and dead:— You don’t know me from Eve— and yet—
you write me down— : A field— : it stretches out
before us— black— and infinite— and starred
as myth— ]Dear Phillis[— It does not contain
its ends:— but signs:— the way a name expands:— :
I want to say this poem with— my hands.

Astronomy, physics and mathematics join forces in the first four
lines to create an emotional tension between limitation ("pressed
up between the ends") and the expansiveness that the poem both
describes and creates. Moving across both space and time, Van
Clief-Stefanon touches on several of her book’s motifs, including
myth (often "starred," as here, in the constellations) and race
(sometimes suggested, as here, by the blackness of space). "John"
morphs into and incorporates, in an "open interval" reference,
the (also eighteenth-century) black poet Phillis Wheatley, giving
this contemporary black poet a kind of composite muse. As it
often does in the poem ("penned" suggests closure as well as
writing, for instance), language compresses here: "signs" func-
tions as both noun and verb, with multiple meanings, and the
"field" of the poem’s first line "stretches out . . . the way a name"
(both the poet’s and that of John/Phillis) "expands" — only to
reach beyond language itself in a stunningly quiet final line that
both embodies (in the hands) and creates (through an absent syl-
lable and stress in the pentameter) the silence the poet had been
building the poem "against."

"Sign" is one of six "RR Lyrae" poems interspersed through-
out the book, and one of several that address "Dear John." Two
poems are based on Romare Bearden’s Reclining Nude, two are
initiated and titled by the science-museum exhibit "Body Worlds
2," and several take mythology as title and starting point, includ-
ing two entitled "Penelope." Thus there are, beyond mathematics
and astronomy, a great many strands for the poet to weave and
the reader to unravel. The weaving happens within as well as
among poems, as in the poem just discussed, and is a source of
pleasure and involvement that often lasts through multiple re-
readings of individual poems.

Aware of the risks of such denseness, Van Clief-Stefanon
uses a number of strategies to open up her poems, including
white space and, as she notes in “Black Hole,” form. The poem,
which uses “Poetry exists” as epigraph, reads:

my darkness is not hell
but darkness darkness

is naked and original
is not darkness but

density
and every meaning of in

is before description
compression

is word quark pion
meson atom

is fitting the self into
flesh and aura

a star collapses from
within

itself there exists here
no escape

from slow curvature
winking delay
Another poem that creates the process it describes, “Black Hole” achieves density through its conflation of scientific and poetic language, as well as a compressed syntax that allows, among other things, for words (darkness, density, etc.) to function as both subjects and predicate nominatives. Against compression is “form,” in this case the short-lined couplets that allow for a great deal of white space.

“Form” of course has a more limited poetic meaning, which is also relevant here. All of the “RR Lyrae” poems are sonnets, variously and sometimes loosely rhymed, and the book also includes a sestina, two blues poems, and a “bop” (a form recently invented by Afaa Michael Weaver) that wonderfully conflates a prison in Auburn, New York, where the poet seems to be teaching, with the fact that Harriet Tubman lived in that city (“Oh, Harriet, the stars / throw down shanks — : teach the sonnet’s a cell — : now try to escape — ”). The free-verse poems are themselves various. Many, like “Black Hole,” are written in short-lined couplets that use white space to great advantage, but there are also fatter stanzas, often with longer lines. Language is often extremely compressed, as in (appropriately) “Black Hole,” though it can be almost conversational, too, as in “M(n)eme,” which begins with a child “who believes / he passed through a black hole / when he was born” and moves at a somewhat leisurely pace through a trip to Africa, the planets and our mnemonics for them (“my very educated mother”), the poet’s actual mother, and her own childhood. Punctuation — including the inverted brackets and the dashes followed by colons — expand the poet’s repertoire and facilitate fragmentation, as in the “RR Lyrae” poem above. But while the punctuated fragments may seem experimental, there’s surely a great deal of Emily Dickinson behind the dashes and resultant rhythms. In form as in substance, Van Clief-Stefanon weaves together seemingly divergent strands of poetic practice.
The ultimate result of all this mingling and merging is emotional richness. A submerged personal narrative of a failed marriage surfaces occasionally, and provides one layer of the book’s complex trajectory, with the poet ending up, after a sky dive described in “Tandem,” “unbuckled” from a man, on her “own shaking legs.” A move from south to north, to Ithaca, New York, is also mentioned from time to time, and is surely one source of the “Penelope” poems, one of which references the poet’s race. But most of the poems are narratively elliptical, filling in what for another poet might have been autobiography with expansive projections that are themselves a kind of counter to the implicit narrative of loss. Desire is most explicitly referenced in “The Buffet Dream,” in which the poet sees herself at seventeen hoping “to swallow / all, at least— : every drop zone I can find— : a black girl on the river Hunger: // as free as that”; but desire counters loss throughout the book, often in the sheer physicality of the poems. Satisfaction of desire is of course another matter, abiding most memorably here in the richness of the poems themselves. That Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon is a poet whose relative youth invites possibility makes the title and significance of Open Interval seem emotionally appropriate on the deepest level. What is perhaps most remarkable about the collection is the extent to which she allows the reader to share that sense of possibility, both emotionally and aesthetically.

In her fourth book, Sharon Bryan, who has been publishing poems for some time, explores precisely the ends that an “Open interval” would exclude, using astronomy, among other resources, to take her as far as she can go in both directions. Here is the first poem in the book, “Big Band Theory”:

It all began with music, with that much desire to be

in motion, waves of longing with Nothing to pass through,
the pulsing you feel before you hear it. The darkness couldn’t
keep still, it began to sway, then there were little flashes
of light, glints of brass over the rumbling percussion,
the reeds began to weep and sing, and suddenly the horns
tore bigger holes in the darkness — we could finally see
where the music was coming from: ordinary men in bow ties and black jackets. But by then we had already danced most of the night away.

Playful and conversational, this poem, like all of Bryan’s, is easier to follow than most of Van Clief-Stefanon’s. But the poem is more emotionally resonant and difficult than its jokey title suggests. In the beginning, the musical metaphor gives us a deeply physical way of experiencing the universe’s almost-impossible-to-imagine beginning. But by the time “we” appear in the seventh stanza, it’s not quite clear whether big band is describing big bang, or whether the non-verbal musical experience is being enjoyed for its own sake: this is one of those metaphors in which it’s ultimately impossible to distinguish tenor from vehicle. Dancing “the night away” of course works on both levels — and it will soon become clear that music is working against other kinds of night, too.

As the first of the book’s four sections continues, Bryan mingles a scientific view of the origin of the universe and its movement toward human life with accounts that playfully reference
the Biblical creation story. In the process, she moves us toward the central emotional tension of the book. In “Charming Quarks,” she posits “the human brain / with its big bright eyes” against the universe, “ninety-nine / percent dark — not exactly / a marriage made in heaven”; in “Stardust,” she says: “I can’t take it in, all this // meaninglessness on the one hand, / and on the other our desperately / meaningful lives.” In this exploration of origins, Bryan also addresses and foregrounds language — not usually, as in Van Clief-Stefanon’s book, in dense lines, but rather in longer riffs, including the whole of the very funny poem “Bass Bass,” which begins: “Stringed fish thub / thub thubbing its way // downstream or wave- / grained instrument.”

If Bryan’s style is much more leisurely than Van Clief-Stefanon’s, her book is, as this account of its first section suggests, more easily and traditionally structured as well. The concern with language and music are central to the second section, while the third picks up the implications of the first poem’s “darkness” and focuses, through elegy and speculation, on the subject of death. Both the risk and the pleasure of this book lie partly in the poet’s willingness to delve deeply into a number of “big questions,” including evil, which is addressed in the second section’s “Bad Days.” But Bryan’s contemplation of mortality seems to me especially gutsy. It’s not a young person’s discourse, but it’s not morbid, either: “I hope there’s a way // to love this life to distraction / without hating it for going on / without me,” she says in “Die Happy,” acknowledging that “some part of me / still wants to take the world / with me when I go.”

That the “desire” with which the universe begins in the first poem continues as the poet looks toward her own end is important: like Van Clief-Stefanon’s book, Bryan’s is filled with physicality, both of the world and of the self that experiences it. The longest poem of the book, “Eau de Vie,” reprises the “Stardust” that ends the first section, explicitly referencing the song this time (the book lives up to the promise of the first poem by referencing music throughout — as Van Clief-Stefanon’s does, to a lesser extent). But it also takes us back to the beginning, to “Nothing. // Something, but all alike. No-thing,” and thence to the
"first kinds of life / that could die," and finally to us, whose pleasures include raspberries, the framboise distilled from them, and the "pure tones" of music that drop "from the stars."

The long narrative poem that encompasses these pleasures would seem to take us back to the difficulty of death, but Bryan isn’t through. The last poem, "At Last," begins with "a reason / not to want to live // forever: the stars / are winking out," and ends by asking who would "want to stay on" under an unpunctuated sky, just a few faint grains of light, not enough to make anything of, nothing to wish on, hitch our wagons to, nothing to lift us out of ourselves, no pinpricks of hope in our black box, no reason to stay, no place to go.

To arrive at this "reason" for accepting mortality, Bryan has of course had to take us far beyond the present, to the end of the universe itself — a temporal extension that ultimately takes her beyond time itself. For Van Clief-Stefanon, the stars allow an almost opposite projection, into a density that allows breathtakingly numerous strands to coalesce in single poems.

The language that conveys these different aesthetic projects is appropriately different too, as we have seen. But for both poets language is the foregrounded vehicle, the wagon that allows them to reach the stars and what they represent. Or perhaps the reverse is also true: stars are the shining vehicles that transport the music.

Martha Collins
The tongue gets all the attention from poets. It makes sense: who could blame them their praise of that glorious muscle, the spur and namesake of language? Of course, the tongue is not all. There is also the lip, which, in Kathy Fagan’s new collection of poems, is the source of both the lover’s kiss and the child’s sass, a boundary and an opening to sex and speech. The lip is one of many edges, on the brink of which these poems take place.

One of those edges is, appropriately, linguistic. In “Commedia Per Musica,” the first poem in the book, Fagan writes: “The gist of opera buffa is its Neapolitan jaunt from the hilltop to the vernacular,” and the diction of Lip jaunts similarly from high to low, from page to page. Fagan is a poet who can begin one poem “Here lie the mawkish petty officers of cruelty” and another “So which mammalian fuck-up list produced / the platypus,” while referring to opera buffa in between. The form, tone, and printed appearance of the poems in Lip (as in Fagan’s previous collections) are similarly various.

Fagan is not content to write the same poem book after book; nor, within the covers of this single volume, do those heralded unities of tone and subject matter seem much concern to her. It has become a commonplace of contemporary poetry that books of poems have tended recently more toward a serial or sequential quality. In such books, even as each poem serves its own essential ends, some poems seem less essential than others, as if the volume’s speaker were clearing her throat in between arias.

To read a collection spoken by so many compelling voices and idioms is a refreshing change from even the successful sequences currently being published. Indeed, these poems demonstrate Fagan’s remarkable range as a poetic stylist. Compare “‘No cakes for us...,” with its figure-ground of line and space —

...Every fold

Of curtain
Darned and huddled in.

We had

Every shoe

And skirt hem

Reeked

Of gas the footlights

Burned.

— to the faux-interview format of "'Note. This Angel, who is now become a Devil...'":

ELIJAH: No doors on the valleys. No doors on the skies. Cave mouths: open.

INTERVIEWER: In fact, you were a cave dweller yourself for many years...

ELIJAH: Because a world is all entrance for the young and happy animal. That is what I was, and gamin fast. Even the resistance of wind and of the river pleased me then. I started kind-hearted, not knowing one future from the next. YWHA had other plans.

Yet such variety is in fact double-edged. There is a decided difference between feeling unmoored by a collection of poems and feeling adrift. And while Fagan steers *Lip* toward the former, more pleasant estrangement, there are moments in the book when one craves a firmer tack. Such moments occur most often when Fagan's language becomes too clever by half; her "postmodern" Penelope, for instance, declaims:

...Not that I own a TV.

But in a way, I am TV.

All stance & no (sub)stance.

Nothing to feel & everything to comment on.
Jack Paar, Jack Kennedy, Michael Jackson, Jack Off, a box of boredom with a toy surprise „„, ~:=) Which returns me, always, to poetry.

What delight comes from the linguistic play here is lost by the time one reaches the punctuating, hieroglyphic emoticon. A postmodern Penelope may have nothing to feel and everything to comment on, but if one gets so lost in the lyrical playfulness that feeling for her is forgotten, one loses interest in comment, too. Even if this Penelope returns to poetry, her poetry may have been lost on us.

These weaker moments are thankfully few in Lip. More numerous and more remarkable are poems that use figures and language from myth to limn the edges of religious experience. In “God helps those...,” a disembodied St. Joan remarks, with an eerie resignation, “Some say at the end my heart didn’t burn. / People like their stories whole. / The truth I am not given to know.” In “What she could do, Medea did...,” Fagan’s Medea says:

When I cut
my blade was hardly red —
so little blood was in him.
Less spill than suck,
his wound worked like a mouth,
and mouth and wound alike drank
what I fed him,
my husband’s father,
eyes fluttering like an infant’s...

The image of the infant’s fluttering eyes presages with haunting clarity the grim realization of the Medea myth, to which the poem returns in its closing lines. When Fagan writes lines like this, I almost wish for more such poems, even against the variety I have already praised.
These are the poems in *Lip* to which I have already returned, and which I will continue to reread. Fagan’s poems, at their best, present voices in which the edge of experience is given form, passing over lip and tongue, into varieties of prayer.

*Dave Lucas*
I don’t know if there is really any such thing as the poetry of old age. Probably not. Some poets are lucky, like Stevens and Yeats, to continue being productive in their late years and even sometimes to improve on early or middle work. Others, like Wordsworth, just drone on, and we learn to ignore their late poems. That there is something unique or distinctive about a poem produced by a 75- or 80-year-old is one of those assertions that most likely won’t bear close inspection. The imagination, after all, can produce aged wisdom while speaking through youth, and may display youthful vigor while inhabiting an oldster. It won’t accept limits or categories.

That said, it’s intriguing to read a couple of older poets side by side, speculating on how they got to where they are and what they are up to at present. There are certainly some features of aging – diminishing sense perception, layer upon layer of memory, rueful awareness of mortality – that might be expected to show up more regularly in such work. And there may also be a kind of freedom – from possessions and commitments that tie us down, from relationships that have dissolved through time and loss, from sensual preoccupations and ego-driven behaviors – a freedom that gives the “elderly” poet a new lease on creativity and poem-making. Remember Yeats’ beggar-hermit who, “giddy with his hundredth year, / Sang unnoticed like a bird”? Both “sang” and “unnoticed” are key aspects of that insight, while “like a bird” is something any and all of us aspire to, a naturalness of expression that links us to “great creating Nature.”

Here is the opening poem of Jack Gilbert’s new book, *The Dance Most of All*:

**EVERYWHERE AND FOREVER**

It pleases him that the villa is on a mountain flayed bare by the great sun. All around
are a thousand stone walls in ruin. He likes knowing the house was built by the king’s telegrapher. "To write at a distance." He keeps the gate closed with a massive hasp and chain. The weeds inside are breast-high around the overgrown rosebushes and two plum trees. Beyond that, broad stairs rise to a handsome terrace and the fine house with its tall windows. He has excavated most of the courtyard in back. It’s there they spent their perfect days under a diseased grape arbor and the flowering jasmine. There is a faint sound of water from the pool over by the pomegranate tree with its exaggerated fruit. The basin is no longer choked by the leaves accumulated in the twelve years of vacancy. He has come to the right place at the right time. The blue Aegean is far down, and the slow ships far out. Doves fly without meaning overhead. He and the Japanese lady go out the back gate and up the stream stone by stone, bushes on each side heavy with moths. They come out under big plane trees. There is a dirt path from there to a nunnery. She says goodbye and he starts down to the village at the bottom where he will get their food for a week. The sky is vast overhead. Neither of them knows she is dying. He thinks of their eleven years together. Realizes they used up all that particular time everywhere in the cosmos, and forever.

We may or may not know enough about Gilbert to know how autobiographical this is, but we recognize, in any case, that it is deliberately distanced. Imagine it with "I" and "we" instead of "he" and "they" and you see the difference immediately. The poem wants to be, and in my view succeeds in being, both present and past at once. One verb, "spent," in line 12 with "perfect" and "diseased," takes us out of the present tense and the casual immediacy of the description. When we get to "He
thinks," in the next-to-last line, we are ready to see how "used up" the memory is, how present to the protagonist even in its aching and irreparable absence.

I like the combination of leisure and economy in this poem. The adjectives feel casual and unforced, and there is no straining toward the figurative or toward cosmic significance. When details surprise us slightly, like the bushes "heavy with moths," or the "exaggerated fruit" of the pomegranate tree, it is mostly a matter of adjusting promptly to their rightness. When the poem refuses to pursue predictable signifiers, as in "Doves fly without meaning overhead," we rejoice in its confidence about particulars. Gilbert almost has to fight off the extra meanings that crowd in around the villa, the landscape, the doomed and happy couple. Only at the end does he allow himself the grand gesture that echoes the title and reminds us, one final time, of the paradox of time: it is most meaningful when it most betrays us, truly eternal when it is clearly ephemeral. That may be an old man's insight, but it is not restricted to old age. Young readers will, I suspect, take to this poem too.

Here is the poem that follows, the second one in the collection:

PAINTING ON PLATO'S WALL

The shadows behind people walking in the bright piazza are not merely gaps in the sunlight. Just as goodness is not the absence of badness. Goodness is a triumph. And so it is with love. Love is not the part we are born with that flowers a little and then wanes as we grow up. We cobble love together from this and those of our machinery until there is suddenly an apparition that never existed before. There it is, unaccountable. The woman and our desire are somehow turned into
brandy by Athena’s tiny owl filling
the darkness around an old villa
on the mountain with its plaintive
mewing. As a man might be
turned into someone else while
living kind of happy up there
with the lady’s gentle dying.

The poet is more willing to be aphoristic here, juggling generalizations about good and bad, love and loss, while whisking us in and out of Plato's cave and across the bright piazza. The mention of the villa and the dying lady connect this to the previous poem, with all its tangible particularities, and by doing so perhaps affords the brisker treatment. The middle of this poem seems less assured to me ("machinery"? really?), but when the owl appears I feel both orientated and at home. Of course it can be Athena's owl, among other things: a way of talking gently about wisdom and change, the growth of love and then, alas, its loss. Gilbert's long perspective, afforded mainly by his years, gives him a kind of offhand but magisterial tone (e.g. "kind of happy up there"), a tone we learn to trust and with which we readily affiliate. It's like sitting in the sun, up on that mountain, having occasional bursts of conversation that seem unrelated or unpredictable but that are ultimately, and deeply, connected.

Having shown how the first two poems act in concord, I must go on to cite the third poem, titled somewhat mysteriously:

ALYOSHA

The sound of women hidden
among the lemon trees. A sweetness
that can live with the mind, a family
that does not wear away. He will let
twenty lives pass and choose the twenty-first. He longs to live married to
slowness. He lives now with the lambs
the minute they are being born,
lives with their perfection as they
blunder around right away in pure innocence. He watches them go up the mountain each morning with the twelve-year-old nearly child. Living with his faith as he watches them eaten at Easter to celebrate Christ. He is not innocent. He knows the shepherdess will be given to the awful man who lives at the farm closest to him. He blesses all of it as he mourns and the white doves soar silently in the perfect blue sky.

The “he” of this poem may be identified as a kind of Alyosha Karamazov so that we won’t be tempted to connect him too closely with the “he” of the first poem and the “kind of happy” man in the second, despite the rhyming effect of the life lived, apparently, on the Aegean mountain. The problematic relation to time is reiterated here, in the marriage to slowness and the instant of birth for the lambs. With it, there’s the question of innocence and experience, clarified perhaps by the glancing connection to Dostoievsky and his character.

I truly enjoy the way this poem both does and doesn’t connect with the two that precede it, and I have cited it to remind myself, and my readers, that we owe it to a good book of poems to follow the sequence as the poet has designed it, letting one poem give rise to the next one in ways we may find illuminating. If you agree, the rest of Jack Gilbert’s book awaits your pleasurable discoveries. Some of the poems will be longer, some will be very short; all will have this plain and unadorned manner, in touch with the classics and mythology but never insistent about their significance or their music. I had not really known Gilbert’s work before; this has been a pleasurable encounter.

* 

Philip Levine’s new collection brings us the latest installment in a long and distinguished career, celebrated in these pages
as recently as last fall. This twentieth collection, *News of the World*, is aptly titled. Levine has always been inspired to bring us the news, and what varied news it has been! This book is no exception: there’s a sureness of manner and, often, a lightness of touch that testify to the poet’s long experience of making good poems.

Here’s one that caught my eye:

**BEFORE THE WAR**

Seeing his mother coming home
he kneels behind a parked car,
one hand over his mouth to still
his breathing. She passes, climbs
the stairs, and again the street is his.
We’re in an American city, Toledo,
sometime in the last century, though
it could be Buffalo or Flint,
the places are the same except
for the names. At eight or nine,
even at eleven, kids are the same,
without an identity, without a soul,
things with bad teeth and bad clothes.
We could give them names, we could
name the mother Gertrude and give her
a small office job typing bills of lading
eight hours a day, five and a half
days a week. We could give her
dreams of marriage to the boss
who’s already married, but we
don’t because she loathes him.
It’s her son, Sol, she loves,
the one still hiding with one knee
down on the concrete drawing
the day’s last heat. He’s got feelings.
Young as he is, he can feel heat,
cold, pain, just as a dog would
and like a dog he’ll answer
to his name. Go ahead, call him, “Hey, Solly, Solly boy, come here!” He doesn’t bark, he doesn’t sit, he doesn’t beg or extend one paw in a gesture of submission. He accepts his whole name, even as a kid he stands and faces us, just as eleven years from now he’ll stand and face his death flaming toward him on a bridgehead at Remagen while Gertrude goes on typing mechanically into the falling winter night.

I am very moved by the end of this poem. And I marvel at how I arrived at my emotion. The poet asked me to collaborate on the design of the poem, to recognize the opening moment as both unique and typical. A boy of eleven or so kneels down to hide from his mother as she comes home, and then stands up to face us, we who have studied and created him, as he will also stand up and face his death in World War II.

The poem’s speaker (we’ll call him Levine) is very casual in his assembling and handling of young Sol. He says that kids lack souls, but then later he says they have feelings. But he withdraws to mere sensation as he makes Sol into a dog, almost. We may draw back in protest. We are meant to, I think. Sol’s age is a matter of our choice, as are his city and even his name. The immediacy of his circumstances, the day’s heat still in the sidewalk, is precisely as important as the things about him that are generic. By leaving the facts so open, making an anecdote that is both opaque and transparent, Levine somehow allows us to be inside history, and outside, beyond it, at the same time.

The death at the end is agonizing because it is an individual death, Sol’s, and it is also all deaths of all young men in wars that take them away from their mothers. The mother, unaware of the moment, continues her typing of the stupid bills of lading while we sorrow silently to think of the news that will eventually reach her.
I think what’s dazzling about Levine’s current work is his confidence that he can jeopardize the consistency or integrity of his art by exposing its workings in this way. He has always had a playful side, has always been ready to help us suspect the value of artifice, and has always undermined any grandiosity that we might be tempted to attach to his poetry. That is a great part of what we value about him.

That was this book’s fourth poem. Here’s another, from the book’s third section, which are all prose poems:

FIXING THE FOOT: ON RHYTHM

For Lejan Kwint

Yesterday I heard a Dutch doctor talking to a small girl who had cut her foot, not seriously, & was very frightened by the sight of her own blood. “Nay! Nay!” he said over & over. I could hear him quite distinctly through the wall that separated us, & his voice was strong & calm, he spoke very slowly & seemed never to stop speaking; almost as though he were chanting, never too loud or too soft. Her voice, which had been explosive and shrill at first, gradually softened until I could no longer make it out as he went on talking &; I suppose, working. Then a silence, & he said, “Ah” & some words I could not understand. I imagined him stepping spryly back to survey his work. And then another voice, silent before, the girl’s father, thanking him, & then the girl thanking him, now in a child’s voice. A door opening & closing. And it was over.

The choice of prose for this anecdote helps highlight the rhythms of the experience. The prose movement is of a piece with the circumstances, where the speaker, overhearing and not knowing the language, must intuit the circumstances from the rhythms of the speech rather than its content. The deprivation – he is unable to see the doctor, child, or parent – is what makes his imagination lively and attentive. Having less to go on, he understands more,
and he must remind us from time to time of his speculative position — "I imagined him stepping spryly back" — just as we were made to cooperate with the creative process in the previous poem. It's a lovely moment, handled with a sureness of touch that testifies not only to Levine's deep human sympathies but to his expertise in poem-making.

*

I began by refusing to generalize about poetry and old age, but I see that my pair of poets have shown me some interesting features that their late work shares. For one thing, there's the combination of the relaxed and the brisk, what I called leisure and economy in Gilbert. The poems seem casually put together and at the same time tightly inevitable. It's a feature we might find in younger poets, of course, but it seems here to be associated with the habits of making that have shaped these poets' manners over the years.

I also found myself, quite frequently, in the neighborhood of paradox. Not just the relaxed/firm poetic designs, but a tone that manages to be both close-up and rather distanced. The handling of subject that is clearly quite passionate while also feeling detached. Put it another way: there's an enlarging of emotional force that somehow also preserves a distance from emotion. In the case of Levine I mentioned the ability to be both inside and outside of history at the same time. The memory poems in both collections have this dual sense as well.

These instances of contradictory possibilities, held in tension and producing central insights, are of course always present in the best poems. But it looks as though old guys like Gilbert and Levine demonstrate an exceptional ability to handle them with ease and consistency. We can rejoice in their continuing productivity and integrity.

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The editors of FIELD are pleased to announce the fourteenth annual FIELD Poetry Prize competition. The contest is open to all poets, whether or not they have previously published a book. Unpublished poetry manuscripts between 50 and 80 pages in length will be considered. All manuscripts will be read by the editors of the Press, David Young and David Walker. Oberlin College Press publishes the winning book in the FIELD Poetry Series and awards the author one thousand dollars.

Manuscripts must be postmarked during May 2010. The contest reading fee is $25 and includes one year’s subscription to FIELD. Please make checks payable to Oberlin College Press.

Manuscripts will not be returned. Include a self-addressed, stamped postcard if you wish to be notified that your manuscript has been received at our office.

The winner will be announced on our website in summer 2010.

Send manuscript and reading fee to:

FIELD Poetry Prize
Oberlin College Press
50 N. Professor Street
Oberlin, OH 44074

Please note: Persons interested in submitting manuscripts for the FIELD Translation Series should contact the Oberlin College Press office for guidelines.

Oberlin College Press supports the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses’ Contest Code of Ethics, and in an effort to make our contest selection process as ethical as possible, close friends, relatives, and those whose manuscripts have been shaped in any way by the contest judges are ineligible to enter our contest.
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