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MURIEL RUKEYSER

A FIELD SYMPOSIUM
“What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?” Muriel Rukeyser asked in her ground-breaking 1968 book *The Speed of Darkness*, and answered: “The world would split open.” And in the same book: “No more masks! No more mythologies!” Those lines were copied, memorized, and quoted by countless women writers coming into their own in the 1960s, and provided titles for two important anthologies of twentieth-century women poets published a few years later. And then there was the startling first line of the title poem: “Whoever despises the clitoris despises the penis.” Rukeyser was 55 when *The Speed of Darkness* was published; it ushered in an astonishingly innovative and productive period of late writing that included, before her death, two more full-length books and her first *Collected Poems*.

While Rukeyser is perhaps still best known as the bold and innovative feminist writer and political activist of this late period, during which she also opposed the Vietnam War and served as President of P.E.N. American Center, other aspects of her life and work are becoming better known. Three of the essays in this symposium focus on her early work, which was indeed early: born in 1913, Rukeyser won the Yale Younger Poets prize when she was only 21 and published her second book three years later. While struggling to find forms that would meet her high aesthetic standards and at the same time give voice to her social concerns (which, as in her later life, included activism as well as writing), Rukeyser developed techniques that speak strongly to the needs of many contemporary writers and readers. The term “documentary poetics” is, as far as we know, a recent one, but it applies to some of Rukeyser’s early work, including the remarkable “Book of the Dead.” The varied styles and sources that make up the separate sections of that nearly book-length poem—as well as the length itself—also anticipate recent trends in poetry. Most centrally, even as she continued to write gorgeously crafted and emotionally rich personal poems, Rukeyser kept finding ways to take poetry into the territory of social and political concerns, as pressing in our own time as they were in hers.
Rukeyser’s work was wide-ranging in genre as well as subject matter. During her lifetime, she published eleven full-length books of poems, three biographies, fiction, children’s books, translations, a musical, and the remarkable prose work *The Life of Poetry*, a book whose insights and depths continue to startle and inspire. No subject was off-limits: science was an important influence from her earliest work on, and her intelligence was relentlessly expansive. Alice Walker has referred to her “cosmic consciousness”; Jane Cooper, in the preface to the 1997 reissue of *The Life of Poetry*, wrote: “Reader, rarely will you encounter a mind or imagination of greater scope.”

If that scope can only be hinted at here, we hope that this symposium will lead the reader to explore more deeply the work of a poet for whom the work of the imagination was crucial and urgent. As she wrote in *The Life of Poetry*, “In this moment when we face horizons and conflicts wider than ever before, we . . . look again to the human wish, its faiths, the means by which the imagination leads us to surpass ourselves.”
from POEM OUT OF CHILDHOOD

Prinzip's year bore us: see us turning at breast
quietly while the air throbs over Sarajevo
after the mechanic laugh of that bullet.
How could they know what sinister knowledge finds
its way among our brains' wet palpitance,
what words would nudge and giggle at our spine,
what murders dance?
These horrors have approached the growing child;
now that the factory is sealed-up brick
the kids throw stones, smashing the windows,
membranes of uselessness in desolation.

We grew older quickly, watching the father shave
and the splatter of lather hardening on the glass,
playing in sandboxes to escape paralysis,
being victimized by fataller sly things.
"Oh, and you," he said, scraping his jaw, "what will you be?"
"Maybe: something: like: Joan: of: Arc..."
Allies Advance, we see,
Six Miles South to Soissons. And we beat the drums.
Watchsprings snap in the mind, uncoil, relax,
the leafy years all somber with foreign war.
How could we know what exposed guts resembled?

A wave, shocked to motion, babbles margins
from Asia to Far Rockaway spiralling
among clocks in its four-dimensional circles.
Disturbed by war we pedalled bicycles
breakneck down the decline, until the treads
conquered our speed and pulled our feet behind them,
and pulled our heads.
We never knew the war, standing so small
looking at eye-level toward the puttees, searching
the picture-books for sceptres, pennants for truth;
see Galahad unaided by puberty.
Ratat a drum upon the armistice,
Kodak As You Go : photo : they danced late,
and we were a generation of grim children
leaning over the bedroom sills, watching
the music and the shoulders and how the war was over,
laughing until the blow on the mouth broke night
wide out from cover.
The child’s curls blow in a forgotten wind,
immortal ivy trembles on the wall:
the sun has crystallized these scenes, and tall
shadows remember time cannot rescind.
Linda Gregerson

OUT OF CHILDHOOD

In *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser describes the “first public day” she remembers “out of childhood”: crowds of people filling the streets of New York, confetti and crying, kissing and noise. Which prompted young Muriel to take out her drum and beat it. The day was April 28, 1918. False Armistice Day. “The war was not yet over.”

Rukeyser was six months old when Gavrilo Prinzip shot the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo; she always considered herself to have been born under the sign of war. We are creatures of history, she believed; we take it in as we take in air and milk. She was fierce in her insistence that the world was one: a tsunami born in Asia moves across the waters to North America; a shooting in Sarajevo means slaughtered millions from the Caucasus to France; the dividends paid to pensioners by Union Carbide are just a little larger because miners in West Virginia have been allowed to die of silicosis. When I try to think what it means to write political poetry, the real, the necessary, the at-risk kind, I can think of no finer model than Rukeyser.

“See us turning at breast,” she writes in the very first poem of her very first book, and there is nothing of nostalgia about this. This poet’s thinking-through is always firmly embedded in the senses, but it is always a rigorous thinking-through. The “throbbing” over Sarajevo moves in to occupy the place where would have been the milky rhythms of a nursing child. The brain’s “wet palpitance” is ripe for the insinuations of “sinister knowledge.” No “membrane” of innocence separates the home front from the battlefront: the factories are boarded up; the kids throw stones. Polio lurks outside the sandbox.

This four-stanza passage is remarkable, I think, for the complexity of its balancing act. A flexible pentameter is repeatedly cut off at the knees in the seventh line of an eleven line stanza. The joyful alliterations of a child’s early lessons in reading harden into wartime headlines: Six Miles South to Soissons. The seductive unfoldings of image and phrase give way to intimations of in-the-wings or in-the-margins violence. A fugitive end rhyme (finds/spine, palpitance/dance, glass/paralysis) settles into something firmer (be/see, circles/bicycles, treads/heads, over/cover, wall/tall) and suggests a
system of sinister concordances that history's children cannot escape and time cannot "rescind."

The pivot at the center of stanza four is one of the most remarkable poetic turnings I know. The stanza has begun with the regressive rhythms of tin drum and advertising jingle, then modulated into something so tempered with disillusionment ("a generation of grim children") that the reader, or this reader in any case, comes to think she can trust the new, more comprehensive momentums ("the music and the shoulders and how the war was over") until these too come up against the shock of new violence: "the blow on the mouth broke night / wide out from cover." I don't know to what extent that blow on the mouth is meant to suggest a "merely" domestic cruelty and to what extent it is meant as a reference to the crushing revelation that news of the armistice had been mistaken: its ability to resonate on both the larger and the smaller scale is surely part of its power. In the ordinary way of thinking, night is something that provides cover. But here it is the ghastly, underlying reality that hides under cover of the ordinary and is always about to break out.

The child's curls and ivy on the wall, "immortal ivy." The opposition haunts me, as the sweet berries ripening on our "perishing earth" haunt me in "Sunday Morning." The child inhabits a world of deadly intimations. She is born not merely into death, as all that lives is born into mortality, but also into the surfeit of death that human beings impose on one another. Throughout the course of her poetic career, with passion and unflinching acuity, Rukeyser would document the infinite varieties this surfeit assumes: death-by-violence, death-by-poverty, death-by-indifference, death-by-greed. And precisely because she refuses to "edit out" the ghastliness and the systems that sustain it, she writes the most life-affirming poetry I know.
GAULEY BRIDGE

Camera at the crossing sees the city
a street of wooden walls and empty windows,
the doors shut handless in the empty street,
and the deserted Negro standing on the corner.

The little boy runs with his dog
up the street to the bridge over the river where
nine men are mending road for the government.
He blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street.

Railway tracks here and many panes of glass
tin under light, the grey shine of towns and forests:
in the commercial hotel (Switzerland of America)
the owner is keeping his books behind the public glass.

Post office window, a hive of private boxes,
the hand of the man who withdraws, the woman who reaches her hand
and the tall coughing man stamping an envelope.

The bus station and the great pale buses stopping for food;
April-glass-tinted, the yellow-aproned waitress;
coast-to-coast schedule on the plateglass window.

The man on the street and the camera eye:
he leaves the doctor’s office, slammed door, doom,
any town looks like this one-street town.

Glass, wood, and naked eye: the movie-house
closed for the afternoon frames posters streaked with rain,
adVERTISE “Racing Luck” and “Hitch-Hike Lady.”

Whistling, the train comes from a long way away,
slow, and the Negro watches it grow in the grey air,
the hotel man makes a note behind his potted palm.
Eyes of the tourist house, red-and-white filling station, the eyes of the Negro, looking down the track, hotel-man and hotel, cafeteria, camera.

And in the beerplace on the other sidewalk always one's harsh night eyes over the beerglass follow the waitress and the yellow apron.

The road flows over the bridge, Gamoca pointer at the underpass, opposite, Alloy, after a block of town.

What do you want—a cliff over a city? A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses? These people live here.
A. Van Jordan

THE ESTABLISHING SHOT OF
GAULEY BRIDGE AND MATEWAN

Although the “disaster” of the silica excavation of Hawk’s Nest Tunnel by Union Carbide in the late 1920s and early 1930s brought attention to the need for better work conditions for miners, a mere ten years before—and a little more than 100 miles southwest in Matewan, WV—the same issues had been raised and men died for the cause.

In 1987, John Sayles wrote and directed his film Matewan, which dramatized the massacre in Matewan that centered on resistance to organize coal miners. Muriel Rukeyser’s “Gauley Bridge,” which is a part of the larger sequence “The Book of the Dead,” appeared in 1938 in her book U.S. 1. “Gauley Bridge,” though about a different incident in another part of the state of West Virginia, could have easily served as an epigraph to Sayles’ film. I’d go further to say that in a historical context, though the Matewan Massacre precedes the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel disaster, this poem—which came before the film—does work epigraphically to set Sayles’s filmic rendering of this culture and landscape.

As a young woman in her early 20s, Muriel Rukeyser traveled to Gauley Bridge, WV, in 1936, about five years after the excavation, to see first hand the aftermath of this work. In her “documentary” style of interviewing, recording, and photographing her subjects, Rukeyser shaped this narrative with not only realism in its texture but also mythology in its reputation. To understand what a singular effort this was, one needs to understand the context. Here’s the establishing shot: at this time, and many years later, workers were threatened for even discussing the notion of organizing workers; the civil rights “era” would not gain traction for another 20 years, not until the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955; Martin Luther King, Jr. was nine years old when US 1 was published; scab workers could get killed for taking jobs, even while most of the country was desperate for work; the office of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) would not be established until 1971. Nonetheless, in 1936, this 23-year-old Jewish woman educated at Vassar and Columbia universities traveled to Gauley Bridge, WV, to talk to people about their experience.
Rukeyser’s mission was a classic one for a poet: She set out to chronicle the culture and history of a people. That being said, I’ve never liked the phrase I’ve often heard in reference to Rukeyser and her work: “She gave a voice to the voiceless.” I don’t really know why I hate this phrase, why I hate it so viscerally, but I think it’s because I think it undermines both the voice of its subject and the work of the poet. This isn’t pure journalism. I’ve worked in this field, and I don’t believe the reporter offers the same depth of emotional resonance that the poet must conjure. There may still be the need for accuracy, but the accuracy is more than factual: it’s emotional; it’s cultural.

In shaping a narrative of any kind, historical or dramatic, one often grounds the listener or reader or viewer in setting. Sometimes it’s merely an issue of location, but an artist will want more. The establishing of setting is tied to the establishing of tone. When we have the luxury of choosing a setting to place our fictional narrative, we want a space that will complement the tone of the story. We look for artifacts within the setting that will work associatively to set the tone. If we have the restriction of a historical narrative with actual locations we have both the artistic problem of being true to that setting, if we’re going for realism, and the luxury of not having to make stuff up. We know, for instance, that if we were to write about the Battle of Put-in-Bay in 1813, it has to be set on Lake Erie with British and American navy ships, etc, etc.

But we do have choices when it comes to point of view and not only what we include but also what we leave out. Rukeyser begins “Gauley Bridge” by aptly setting a voice of witness:

Camera at the crossing sees the city
a street of wooden walls and empty windows,
the doors shut handless in the empty street,
and the deserted Negro standing on the corner.

The little boy runs with his dog
up the street to the bridge over the river where
nine men are mending road for the government.
He blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street.
It’s striking to open, self-reflexively, with the “camera” as a point of entry. We know immediately that the poem will be “fixed on” this world. In film, the establishing shot is the space in which action will happen, this nearly always followed by a master shot so we’ll know the spatial orientation of the figures within this space. The first figure we get here is of “the deserted Negro,” who seems to stand in for the humanity of this space, “the empty street.” One might say that if he’s deserted, then so is this town. The setting is, after all, Gauley Bridge after the work of excavation is done.

This move begins a near fractal pattern within the poem. We’ll see a human figure, and then the figure will have an implied metonymic presence—or the reverse: The larger inanimate object will then be embodied in the figure. Check this out: We see “the empty street,” which implies a city deserted, and then we see “the deserted Negro.” Also, “the little boy runs with his dog / up the street” and later “he blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street.” Both figures, I’d say equally, become the space. In our American way of seeing, I’d have to assume that “the little boy” is a white boy, since race isn’t mentioned, and this is our American default for a human figure when race is absent. Sort of the way if someone were to say “doctor” in the 1950s, we’d assume it was a man. But what allows this poem to transcend the time in which it was written is that it offers in equal measure “the Negro” and later “the men” and “the little boy”—all equal parts of this space.

John Sayles, being the American independent filmmaker that he is—a grossly underrated one, in my opinion—opens with an atypical Hollywood establishing shot. The first image within the frame is a Carbide light helmet being lit by a coal worker’s hand. The acetylene gas in them would later be a part of the problem of working in a coal mine, so the tone is ominous, dark with the attempt to bring light. Once again, this coal worker is the setting; he is Matewan, WV. Later in the film, Chris Cooper’s character will ask for work at a boarding house, and the owner, played by Mary McDonnell, tells him there’s no work “unless you work for the company,” which is what the powers that be want the town to be, simply a company town. So the movie progresses as a fight for metonymy: Will the people or the company represent the town?
Sayles seems an apt partner for Rukeyser in this good fight. Both allow voices to cross cultural lines in their work, and they bring the proximity and discourse of crossing those lines to the fore. Here is where these incidents take on a timelessness in their rendering. We find that the locations of both of these situations, though proximate in time and location, carry a parlance used for other locations and times. The manner in which Rukeyser and Sayles render them also feels fresh today. The toggling between human figure and place is carried out much in the way we internalize point of view. That the points of view move between African American and White (mostly Irish and Italian) in equal measure offers a balance to these towns’ actual demographics. The presence of African Americans was greater than their numbers because they worked for the “company” in their respective towns: if you worked, you had a presence; you weren’t invisible. As Rukeyser makes clear in the last line of “Gauley Bridge”: “These people live here.” So both tonally and structurally—as Rukeyser develops the ordering of information in the poem, that is—it makes sense that “the Negro” has a presence without having to make a political statement about his presence; the politics are simply that he is there, having traveled from the south to Gauley Bridge to find work during the Depression. That travel is signaled by the presence of the train and the eye trained on it:

Whistling, the train comes from a long way away, 
slow, and the Negro watches it grow in the grey air, 
the hotel man makes a note behind his potted palm.

Eyes of the tourist house, red-and-white filling station, 
the eyes of the Negro, looking down the track, 
hotel-man and hotel, cafeteria, camera.

The point of view is dominated by “the Negro” who “watches” and “the eye of the Negro, looking down the track,” which conveys from whence he came and how he got there. Sayles brings the African American—or “Negro,” to be accurate to the time period—into Matewan by train, too. The first time we see James Earl Jones’ character, “Few Clothes” Johnson, in the film, he’s riding in the cargo car
with other Negro workers. Earlier, a few frames before, we’re introduced to Cooper’s character, Joe Kenehan, who will help start trouble and the union. Incidentally, we first see Joe Kenehan’s face obfuscated behind his local paper, *The Fayette Gazette*, which indicates that he is probably from Gauley Bridge, which is in Fayette County: Matewan is in Mingo County, and Kenehan is on the train. In Matewan, WV, a good number of the people who made up the town at that time came from outside. This was also the case in Gauley Bridge.

Sayles sets the first conflict in the film on the train tracks, as the train is stopped just outside of town, and a fight breaks out between the locals and the black workers getting off the train. Eventually, the blacks fight the whites off and re-board the train to head into town. The point of view of this incident is captured by focusing on the face of Cooper in reaction shots and then on James Earl Jones’ reaction, much like the camera eye of the Negro in “Gauley Bridge.” These realities are built similarly, through the point of view and experience of those living them.

In both pieces, race is not the center of the narrative, but local struggles around making a living and finding a way to live are. We witness that the struggle for a poor black and a poor white is similar, and, in most ways, in concert. Rukeyser achieves this in poetry in much the way that Sayles does in film. She establishes where we are tonally by focusing on the culture, people, and the artifacts of that location. Like a filmmaker, she sets the light, controls where the line of vision travels, populates the scene with associative props and patterns.

Whether filmmaker or poet, they both, figuratively, render culture through tone and setting; they shape culture from a deeper level of American consciousness—into the inner ear with voice, into the mind’s eye with image—where commonalities and dissonance mingle with resistance and acceptance and endlessly give rise to critique and creation. We need help. This takes us down the train tracks into the county of both psychology and emotion. It takes a filmmaker like Sayles and a poet like Rukeyser to make sense of all this lest it fall into history unmoored to a full reality. They first ground us and then they take us there for the experience.
He stood against the stove
facing the fire—
Little warmth, no words,
loud machines.

Voted relief,
wished money mailed,
quietly under the crashing:

"I wake up choking, and my wife
"rolls me over on my left side;
"then I'm asleep in the dream I always see:
"the tunnel choked
"the dark wall coughing dust.

"I have written a letter.
"Send it to the city,
"maybe to a paper
"if it's all right."

Dear Sir, my name is Mearl Blankenship.
I have Worked for the rhinehart & Dennis Co
Many days & many nights
& it was so dusty you couldn't hardly see the lights.
I helped nip steel for the drills
& helped lay the track in the tunnel
& done lots of drilling near the mouth of the tunnell
& when the shots went off the boss said
If you are going to work Venture back
& the boss was Mr. Andrews
& now he is dead and gone
But I am still here
a lingering along
He stood against the rock
facing the river
grey river grey face
the rock mottled behind him
like X-ray plate enlarged
diffuse and stony
his face against the stone.

J C Dunbar said that I was the very picture of health
when I went to Work at that tunnel.
I have lost eighteen lbs on that Rheinhart ground
and expecting to loose my life
& no settlement yet & I have sued the Co. twice
But when the lawyers got a settlement
they didn’t want to talk to me
But I didn’t know whether they were sleepy or not.
I am a Married Man and have a family. God
knows if they can do anything for me
it will be appreciated
if you can do anything for me
let me know soon
Picture Muriel Rukeyser in the 1930s, not long out of Vassar, Yale Younger Poet, daughter of a well-to-do owner of a concrete company in New York City, and reader of The New Masses, a newspaper put out by other young college-educated leftists. The New Masses published an exposé on an industrial disaster in West Virginia, telling how safety was sacrificed to profit in the driving of a gigantic tunnel through Gauley Mountain, a tunnel designed to divert, and massively speed up, waters of the New River, creating hydro-electrical power for a metallurgical plant downstream. Terrible working conditions led to cases of the lung disease acute silicosis on a wide scale. Now when the young Rukeyser went to write about it, she literally went to write about it, drove with her photographer friend Nancy Naumberg to Gauley Bridge, the town affected, and the literary result was Rukeyser's twenty-poem sequence The Book of the Dead.

One of the many smart things Rukeyser did in writing this epic was to manage the point of view so that the reader perceives the way in which a stranger gains knowledge of a situation, first from the outside, then, gradually, if permitted, from closer in. So the trip itself is charted, starting in New York, on through several poems and much history. Once arrived at the site, the author as traveler, as investigator, even as pilgrim, first sees the river from a high vantage point and first encounters the town as a set of exterior signs and marquees. What of the people? “These people live here” says the poet at the end of the fourth poem, in a reminder that is like a reprimand, almost a self-reprimand. But to my mind, the first truly remarkable portrait of a local person does not emerge until the seventh poem, “Mearl Blankenship.”

In retrospect, Mearl Blankenship, before the poet knew who he was, was figured earlier, in “Gauley Bridge,” as one of several seen from the outside, in public, at the post office: “the tall coughing man stamping an envelope.” Then in “Praise of the Committee,” listed by a kind of caption for a group picture, there he was by name: “Mearl Blankenship, the tall friendly man.” And now in the seventh poem the camera comes in for a close-up on him: “He stood against the
stove / facing the fire” at a meeting held in a machine shop of those who are trying to get redress. In terms of position, what is important is that Rukeyser has been admitted to an interior, not belonging to the local people—they are poor and own no space big enough for a meeting, but they feel enough at home at their workplace to gather there and plot strategy. And this young woman is privileged to be there too.

The introduction of Mearl Blankenship’s speech is a description of his voice: “quietly under the crashing” of the machines, and as soon as he is quoted, we recognize a kind of eloquence that sounds neither of the board rooms and congressional chambers represented elsewhere in the sequence, nor of the ”poetic” and anthem-like passages in the sequence that have not worn very well over time. Rather, this eloquence is one of a great simplicity:

“I wake up choking, and my wife
rolls me over on my left side;
then I’m asleep in the dream I always see:
the tunnel choked
the dark wall coughing dust.

It is as if the poem, which conspicuously presents the speech with quotation marks, is demonstrating that this man, not in spite of his modesty but because of the power of that modesty, does not need anyone to speak for him. Rather, that what he needs is for someone to frame his speech in a context where it will be heard. In his quiet, polite voice, he explains that he has written a letter, thinks of sending it “to the city, / maybe to a paper / if it’s all right.” Thus, Rukeyser shows the importance of the shift by which a voice is given a second, documentary existence, preserved by being recorded in writing.

At this point, Rukeyser then indents and proceeds to “print” the letter the way a newspaper prints a letter to the editor. She is simultaneously (1) representing a scene of Aggrieved Man Sends His Letter to the Paper, and (2) lending the space of the poem as if it were “the paper,” in essence “publishing” this letter, which begins:
Dear Sir, my name is Mearl Blankenship.
I have Worked for the rhinehart & Dennis Co
Many days & many nights
& it was so dusty you couldn’t hardly see the lights.
I helped nip steel for the drills
& helped lay the track in the tunnel
& done lots of drilling near the mouth of the tunnell
& when the shots went off the boss said
If you are going to work Venture back
& the boss was Mr. Andrews
& now he is dead and gone
But I am still here
a lingering along

This feels as if it has to be the actual letter. Part of the verisimilitude, and the huge expressiveness, comes from the Appalachian vernacular with its, at times, archaic ring: "Venture back" instead of go back, the syllable "a" before a verb: "a lingering along," or, later, old-fashioned capitalization for "Work" and "Worked" and "I am a Married Man," or, with common abbreviations and expressions like calling a work-site "ground": "I have lost eighteen lbs on that Rheinhart ground." Part of it comes from the color and expertise of technical terms of the trade: "nip steel for the drills" and "the boss." Part of it comes from the varied spelling: he writes both "tunnel" and "tunnell," both "rhinehart" and "Rheinhart" (actually Rinehart, but Mearl Blankenship has heard it said, not seen it written; the Rinehart and Dennis construction firm was the contractor on the job, and blamed by the workers, although Union Carbide was the owner, and a heartless one). Part of it comes from the lack of correct punctuation and from the non-standard grammar; the very fact that this man is uneducated somehow makes his eloquence all the more touching: I “done lots of drilling” and “you couldn’t hardly see” and especially “loose” where “lose” is intended. Part of it comes from the recitation of other people’s names, and from the compound constructions, especially when strong simple words are used: “Many days & many nights” or “dead and gone.” There is what seems a kind of “natural” poetry here, and Rukeyser does a superb job of setting the language using anaphora on “and” and its mark, the ampersand.
Next, mid-way in the letter and in the poem, many poets would have either continued to the end of the letter, giving it full coverage rather than ending on the plaint “a lingering along” or else moved on to something else entirely, but Rukeyser, seeing the effectiveness of supplying the rest of the letter, holds off doing so in order to complete the frame for the first half of the letter and simultaneously introduce the remainder of the letter while also echoing her own strategy, staging again “He stood....” She inserts a kind of evidentiary exhibit, in image like a quadruple-exposure photograph—in which the man’s face, the rock-face, the river, and a medical x-ray plate are all four superimposed on each other—having in common a gray color, a mottled texture, and a surface at once diffused and hard:

He stood against a rock  
      facing the river  
    grey face grey river  
      the rock mottled behind him  
   like X-ray plate enlarged  
      diffuse and stony  
      his face against the stone.

Then, moving from that picture, and commencing to play on “picture,” the poet returns to quoting the letter:

J C Dunbar said that I was the very picture of health  
when I went to Work at that tunnel.  
I have lost eighteen lbs on that Rheinhart ground  
and expecting to loose my life  
& no settlement yet & I have sued the Co. twice  
But when the lawyers got a settlement  
they didn’t want to talk to me  
But I didn’t know whether they were sleepy or not.  
I am a Married Man and have a family. God  
knows if they can do anything for me  
it will be appreciated  
if you can do anything for me  
let me know soon
"Mearl Blankenship" strongly exhibits the elements of a “found” poem, and for such poems, the poetic judgments and techniques needed involve recognizing what pieces of found language to preserve and providing for them the frames and the glosses. Here, those tasks are executed very well, but over and above that, the poem remains vivid and memorable because the poem’s techniques, and its ethics, both say that Mearl Blankenship can move the reader on his own behalf. Not only is “Mearl Blankenship” a great exemplar of representing a person, speaking for himself, writing for himself, it importantly provides for the sequence a sense that the poet has begun to be accepted by the people who live, not there, but here. For the first sustained occasion, they are letting her draw close, close enough, not only to hear, but to read, among the cacophony, this one, dying, soft-spoken man.
NIGHT FEEDING

Deeper than sleep but not so deep as death
I lay there dreaming and my magic head
remembered and forgot. On first cry I
remembered and forgot and did believe.
I knew love and I knew evil:
woke to the burning song and the tree burning blind,
despair of our days and the calm milk-giver who
knows sleep, knows growth, the sex of fire and grass,
renewal of all waters and the time of the stars
and the black snake with gold bones.

Black sleeps, gold burns; on second cry I woke
fully and gave to feed and fed on feeding.
Gold seed, green pain, my wizards in the earth
walked through the house, black in the morning dark.
Shadows grew in my veins, my bright belief,
my head of dreams deeper than night and sleep.
Voices of all black animals crying to drink,
cries of all birth arise, simple as we,
found in the leaves, in clouds and dark, in dream,
deep as this hour, ready again to sleep.
In her startling first book of poems Muriel Rukeyser famously wrote “breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry” and with that confidence in her calling she began a lifetime of ushering every kind of experience into her poetry. Not for Rukeyser “the souvenirs of boredom.” Was there anything that couldn’t be nourishment for her poems, anything she didn’t try to absorb? From miners dying of silicosis, to the Spanish Civil War, to the life of a scientist, all became personal and necessary to her vision of abundance and connection, to her oracular life force. Many of these explorations became long, sequenced, overflowing poems.

Just as necessary and just as far reaching are her short lyric poems. “Night Feeding” seems at first glance to be a turn toward the female domestic. I could say that such a turn was perilous for a woman writer, but for Rukeyser every turn or direction was met with disdain, though her range and ambition echoed Whitman.

But to call “Night Feeding” domestic would be to reduce it to its most basic level. In the barest hint of narrative the speaker of the poem is slowly wakened by her hungry baby. I love how she has to rise through levels of sleep, and I love both the accuracy and mystery of her description, “Deeper than sleep but not so deep as death.” The speaker’s “magic head” is dreaming dreams that she remembers and forgets, and into that state comes the first cry drawing the sleeper up a level in consciousness. Something about her human life of love and evil, something of suffering and “despair of our days” is pulling her out of the magic dream world.

Rukeyser is accurate again in writing “the calm milk-giver who / knows sleep, knows growth.” I say accurate because nursing mothers are calm, they have to be to nurse successfully. Biologically it’s a hormonal state, but of course it’s more than that and Rukeyser captures it simply and beautifully. The child’s second cry calls the mother fully out of her dreams, but if the early lines of the poem elicit thoughts of the fairytale, the middle of the poem—“the black snake with gold bones // Black sleeps, gold burns”—disorients us. Even as the mother “gave to feed and fed on feeding” she is in a strange and beautiful world that doesn’t quite make sense. “Gold seed, green
pain, my wizards in the earth / walked through the house, black in
the morning dark.” The color black is important here: a potent un¬
derworld coming to life as the mother nurses, shadows growing in
her veins. Slowly and believably out of “my head of dreams deeper
than night and sleep” we hear “Voices of all black animals crying to
drink / cries of all birth arise, simple as we.”

The poem is circular, we begin in sleep and end in sleep. This
matriarchal life cycle is centered on birth and growth without any
real acknowledgment of death other than the state of deep sleep. The
sounds of the poem keep the wheel turning and the reader is pulled
around the circle of the poem, and pulled deeper into the poem, by
the repetition of certain words and certain sounds. Her internal
rhymes, her use of the long ē as in sleep, carry us through the entire
poem: sleep, deep, sleeping, believe, evil, tree, sleep, sleeps, feed, feeding,
seed, green, belief, dreams, deeper, sleep, we, leaves, dream, deep, sleep. The
long ē is interrupted and awakened by the long ī of: cry, I, blind, fire,
cry, bright, night, crying, cries, arise.

But the dominant sounds change dramatically in the middle of
the poem, alerting us and awakening us fully into the life mystery.
Where the poem hinges, at the last line of the first stanza and the
first line of the second stanza, the open o’s of gold bones and woke, the
hard k’s of woke, black, snake, the b’s of black, burn, bones, initiate a
transformation. This isn’t a misty-eyed poem about the joys of nurs¬
ing. How Rukeyser avoids all that is part of her immense skill. But
it’s also her continual practice of reaching, her deep belief that she is
part of the greater fabric, she is one of the living among all the liv¬
ing, that allows for a freeing lack of self-consciousness. The nursing
mother not only feeds and is fed, but she comes out of the earth it¬
self, out of the black mystery that is the female life force and is con¬
nected to the “voices of all black animals crying to drink.” We are all
the same and we are all hungry. The black snake of the earth is lit
from within, it has gold bones that burn. This hidden life force, her
“wizards of the earth” are the nursing mother’s connection to all
those who nourish and are nourished. They walk in her house, and
the voices, all those voices, are “found in the leaves, in clouds and
dark, in dream,” they are everywhere around us, though we are
oblivious to them, asleep.
Much of the work of “Night Feeding” is accomplished through the vortex of sound—the music of the poem. Besides repetition and sound play, Rukeyser employs a traditional iambic pentameter. Her music is chantlike, the meter serving as an emotional undertow with pitch-altering variations. I especially like the way she breaks the pattern with the two shorter lines (lines 5 and 9) which cause us to pause and feel the absence of the missing feet. “I knew love and I knew evil” is part of the magical fairytale quality of the first few lines but also marks a change in the poem, a shift as the speaker begins to rise out of her deep sleep. And the chilling hinge line “and the black snake with gold bones” shifts the poem again in both tone and direction, preparing us to awaken out of the singular and personal toward the multitudinous and mythic.

Rukeyser identifies with the “voices of all black animals crying to drink” but does so with such lack of ego that the mother and child, that iconic and co-opted image, is submerged by a world that is pre-Edenic—no overlords or masters, no ideologies. A strange world, a strangely familiar world. Her poem asks what is the cry that will awaken us? What feeds us? Who will we feed?
ST. ROACH

For that I never knew you, I only learned to dread you,
for that I never touched you, they told me you are filth,
they showed me by every action to despise your kind;
for that I saw my people making war on you,
I could not tell you apart, one from another,
for that in childhood I lived in places clear of you,
for that all the people I knew met you by
  crushing you, stamping you to death, they poured boiling
  water on you, they flushed you down,
for that I could not tell one from another
only that you were dark, fast on your feet, and slender.
  Not like me.
For that I did not know your poems
And that I do not know any of your sayings
And that I cannot speak or read your language
And that I do not sing your songs
And that I do not teach our children
  to eat your food
  or know your poems
  or sing your songs
But that we say you are filting our food
But that we know you not at all.

Yesterday I looked at one of you for the first time.
You were lighter than the others in color, that was
  neither good nor bad.
I was really looking for the first time.
You seemed troubled and witty.

Today I touched one of you for the first time.
You were startled, you ran, you fled away
Fast as a dancer, light, strange and lovely to the touch.
I reach, I touch, I begin to know you.
Jan Heller Levi, Muriel Rukeyser’s biographer, notes that in Rukeyser’s journal from 1935 she writes “…I will rest my love on whom I love.” It was more than a statement of belief, it was a challenge, as it were, to the world, and to the world of writers and to herself most of all. She was, give or take, thirty years old when she wrote this, but she’s describing an ideal that had already possessed her for years and would continue, unwaveringly, to possess her for decades to come, to the end of her life.

Rukeyser published *The Gates* in 1976. It was her last book, before the *Collected* (1978), in her lifetime. The poems in that book are powerful; you can discern a self-conscious “final statement” not only between the lines but in the lines themselves, maybe a summary of sorts. And her absolutely radical, deeply disturbing, and profound poem “St. Roach” is there, among the others.

It is my experience that readers of that poem look at it as either a quaint exaggeration, a piece of (lovely) absurdity, or as a disgusting proposition; or as metaphor, “mere” metaphor, a figure for something else. Nor do I know what Rukeyser’s explanation or position was when she was brought to task, if she was, in interviews or at readings, whether she was straightforward or evasive and ironic. It is bizarre, extreme, eccentric, and shocking, “St Roach.” It—again—challenges the world, as it does the poet. Does she, could she, mean it literally that this “dreaded, filthy” insect was to be dignified and honored? Did the roach indeed have a “culture” that contained poems, language, and songs, perhaps even a religion or a memory—grief, even—as humans, perhaps also disgusting and filthy, did? Were we in the world of the Jains or the Christians? What would God, or his son, or grandson, have said? Did not the Jewish saints in the Rhine Valley admonish us to pay attention to the very least? Did they not also love insects? Did I not read a short story once about an exterminator getting rid of bees in a wall; and wasn’t that story so constructed that it reminded us of the Holocaust, the Shoah, that murder of bees? I remember now it was by Lynne Sharon Schwartz and it was called “Killing Bees.” Didn’t charity, love, kindness, justice and pity inevitably lead us to that poem, even if it had never been
fully realized before? And didn’t the poem say that you could not only not ignore, mistreat, or exclude slaves, Jews, women, Gypsies, homosexuals, cripples, Cambodians, Palestinians and Sudanese, but horses and mules too, and goats—and even the “lesser” things, whether they themselves were cruel and ungodly or not? Where do we end up?

The poem itself is simple statement. There is no confusion or ambiguity. The poet is clear, and unified. The poem knows neither confinement nor boundaries. It is one that will be perfectly translated—in any language. It means what it says. It is what it is. It is timeless. It is inexorable. It is perfect. And what rhetoric it has, and what rhetorical means it uses, is inevitable. It is neither modest nor immodest. Nor is it male or female. And it, and it alone, drags Muriel towards an extremity that no other poet (to my knowledge) has ever reached. And it is lovely to read and to say, nor do you ever grow tired of it. It was written by Muriel, but also by another hand.

One should look at the poem “Despisals” in the 1973 volume, Breaking Open, for an anticipatory poem. In that volume is another poem called “Gradus ad Parnassum.” It is a very sad poem, and it shows what Muriel would have been, were she not Muriel. And it shows how far she travelled and how alone she was and the risk she took. It’s about someone maybe in her high school class, or in her summer camp, Camp Walden. Maybe also living by the Hudson, and privileged, but without Muriel’s vision and dream, courage and passion. And was Muriel lighter in color than the others?

GRADUS AD PARNASSUM

Oh I know
If I’d practiced the piano
I’d never be so low
As I now am

Where’s Sylvia Beerman?
Married, rich and cool
In New Rochelle
She was nobody’s fool,
She didn’t write in verse
She hardly wrote at all
She rose she didn’t fall
She never gave a damn

But got up early
To practice Gradus
Ad Parnassum—she
Feels fine. I know.

Lucky? Unlucky? But for the grace of God?
ISLANDS

O for God’s sake
they are connected
underneath

They look at each other
across the glittering sea
some keep a low profile

Some are cliffs
The bathers think
islands are separate like them
I've always loved "Islands," Muriel Rukeyser's tiny, late lyric, which she published in 1976. I can think of only two other poems in her entire corpus that resemble this brief, Williams-esque gem. In general and across time, Rukeyser's poems tended to be fairly long, and she particularly favored the long form of the poetic sequence. Leafing through any of the several editions of her selected and collected poems, it's easy to see this. Despite differences in font size and page specs, each book is packed with longish, lengthily lineated poems that dominate the white space within which they're embedded. She loved the interplay of multisyllabic words, extravagant syntax, and specialized diction, imported from fields as removed from poetry as building science and vector analysis. She was profligate with adjectives, and enjoyed being reckless with predicates. More than anything else, perhaps, she was one of the most politically-engaged poets of her generation, and for decades, she welcomed her politics right into her poems.

It's a shock, then, reading chronologically through the work, to come across this tiny, well-lighted, exquisitely-constructed lyric aerie near the end of Rukeyser's final individual volume. Only nine lines, 33 words, and 46 syllables long, it could hardly be more different from the poems that made her famous. Where did it come from, and how does it connect—if, in fact, it does—with the preoccupations so obvious in her earlier work?

During the 1930s and on into the forties, Rukeyser was regarded as one of the most politically-engaged poets of the period that came to be known as the Red Decade. She affiliated herself with the literary wing of the Old Left, and published willingly under the aegis of revolutionary and proletarian literature. As a lyric poet, however, it wasn’t always a good fit for her literary imagination, which resisted being stuffed into the workaday, stripped-down forms of proletarian poems. The New Masses criticized her for not being “communicable” enough. But Harriet Monroe rejected some of the same poems with the blunt observation that the work was “propaganda—a kind of sermon—rather than poetry” (Library of Congress, HM to
MR 1/10/1934). Rukeyser was caught in the middle. Not “revolutionary” enough for the *New Masses*, but too “propagandistic” for *Poetry*, how was she to find a verse form to accommodate her pure love of poetry along with her leftwing politics? Both were passions, but could they coexist?

Over the many years that I have read, loved, and studied Rukeyser’s poems, I have come to regard her voluntary alignment with partisan leftwing politics of the thirties as something of a strategic and pragmatic move. The community that she gained from that decision empowered her, I suspect. Marxism’s vision of wholeness and equality allowed her to imagine a career as a poet and freelance intellectual for someone like her—a single female with no real literary connections until she joined the Movement. Even in those radical days, however, her politics, authentic as they were, could never destroy her poetry, and she refused to transform herself from a lyric poet into a political hack.

Although she continued her political engagement into World War II, the partisan nature of her poems began to fade away. In what I think of as her middle period, encompassing the volumes from *A Turning Wind* (1939) through *Waterlily Fire* (1962), overtly political content was barely present, and her output declined.

She pursued her earlier interests in cross-cultural mythologies by writing poems like “Ajanta.” By the 1950s, when she published a spotty, early selected poems, the politically partisan and prolific poet of her youth had given way to the absorbed mother and college professor. Her poetic output dropped dramatically. She raised her son, wrote children’s books, underwent Jungian analysis, and came to the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee for the leftism she had practiced so openly during the 1930s. Her years as a young writer had been noisy, partisan, and high-profile. Her middle period was not.

In the late 1960s, free of daily childrearing, she found herself responding to the political excitements of the era. Her energy was freed, and within the last eighteen years of her life, she used it to publish six books, to serve as the president of P.E.N., to travel to North Vietnam and Korea, and to take part in many anti-war events. In addition, she allowed herself to be discovered by the feminist movement of the 1970s as an elder stateswoman who had kept the faith.
In 1964, she suffered a stroke, and several years later, another. Although she had recovered from earlier illnesses easily, she had never taken good care of herself. I remember someone telling me that “Muriel thought a full meal was a pound of bacon and a bag of chocolate.” Now, in her fifties, recovery was prolonged and never complete. This experience, along with the struggle to regain speech after the stroke, introduced a new vulnerability into her poetry. Entering her last years, no longer physically vigorous, she must have relived the excitements of her youth from the stillpoint of her post-stroke life in New York. Surely, the activist furor that surrounded her couldn’t help but conjure the radical days of her youth when she first became a poet.

It was from this confluence of contrasts, perhaps, that “Islands” arose. It may be that the infusion of political excitement, emanating from the 1960s, came together with her increasing physical fragility to strip away the pure idealism that had always lived at the heart of Rukeyser’s poems. If it had been over-explained and preached in early poems, and cloaked in mythmaking in her middle period, it now manifested effortlessly, unselfconsciously. Her early desire to explicitly reveal, and the later need to conceal political beliefs had disappeared. By the final years of her life, Rukeyser’s convictions had acquired the resonant clarity of deep water, hard won by her prolonged encounters with the raucous literary conflicts of the twentieth century. After three decades, those engagements had softened the hard edges of her lifelong politics, introducing new malleability, fluidity. With its transparent diction and its barely present lines, “Islands” surfaces at the end of Rukeyser’s long life of poetry and politics like a lost continent arising from the depths. Obliquely and brilliantly, it conjures the lost worlds of Atlantis and Pangea.

It is remarkable to me how resonant I find this poem, how vividly its brief articulation reconnects me with the young, radical poet who believed, for awhile, that poetry was more powerful if pinned to ideology. If “Islands” situates us right in the center of 1960s social utopianism, it also casts us back to the 1930s, when she wrote “Theory of Flight,” her first important poem. Then, she had found it expedient to gird her poem with specific references to aeronautics to make obvious the metaphor, and pound home the point. By the time
of "Islands," however—though the central point about wholeness and connectivity is almost identical—the need for apparatus has disappeared. What remains is nine spare lines of barely-there poetry—a translucent blueprint of a complex and remarkable poet’s original imagination, reminding us, for God’s sake, that we are not separate, but in this together, connected underneath, no matter what.
RUMPLESTILTSKIN

From the earth I came, rain rumpled,
lichen skinned. On earth I grew old,
moss mouthed, and crooked limbed,
stubbled like scabbed trees.

But I could weave, I could turn stray
into found, feed straw to a wheel
and spin out money. I could sing,
I could goat-foot it through leaf muck

on tumbled rocks, as wind blew fire sparks
under the moon and its little moo clouds.
But not once, not once have I nibbled
and sniffed, snuggled or hummed to sleep

the tender flesh of a child,
a sweet-smelling squall, dimpled dumpling,
milk breath spittle-grin that looks up
and loves me, me, me.

When I’d see them in baskets, in buggies
and lean down for a finger chuck,
their mothers snatched them up
and hefted them like sugar sacks.

Then I found the girl in trouble and made the deal.
She was all air, wind, blown silk, spider wisps,
and tears, tears, tears—no earth to her name,
and only earth could guess mine.

Soon I was dancing around the fire,
thinking I’ll have my pumpkin, my poodle,
my smooch, my clock wound backward,
my pillow to drool on.
But she grew fierce as she got round,
she sank roots, sent out little shoots that grab.
The child churned inside. The girl gripped down,
grunted him out, and then my name.

Oh, I gave the fig, I frigged and fumed.
Earth wouldn’t let me mother? I stomped
till it cracked. Me, a stump post pounded down,
till I couldn’t get out.

Root rot, stubble chop, rancid slime—
down I went where mountains melt
and sputter their furious sap. I wanted
something to be mine, to sing back what I taught,

and now I’m in earth’s dark gut, garbled.
Nothing but me split in two. Me and want,
pressed down, cold smolder. And still more want.
Want the match strike. Want the roar.
ST. JOHN SITS ON A ROCK TO RECOVER
FROM THE BITTERNESS OF THE BOOK

Illustrated page from the Cloisters Apocalypse

On a bench in a library full of white-haired wandering women, somewhere overhead the sound of a hammer striking sand. One sober man. And a little tin clock on death row, ticking.

I fell asleep eating the illuminated book I'd borrowed, and woke to a window where there'd been no window the night before. Dissolving walls. Pathology reports. This was the winter they told me I might need to leave this world with my son in it.

And I pictured the library described above, but on a cruise ship, dragging emptiness across the Atlantic, and a cloud passing over with a billion minutes in it about to flood the ditches. I pictured cool accumulations of rain and time rising around the ankles of an old woman I'd never be. Behind her, indescribable beauty. Ahead of her, memory—

That door to an invented village. Medieval. Framed in gold leaf. Its fruit trees bearing birds. Without perspective, such intimate distance. Where
a saint sits on a rock with a sickness
brought on by his book’s bitterness. Looking
up to say, I

have already been there, Laura. Follow
me, I know the way.
PRESENT PERFECT

This has been
the tiny house
in which we all
have, at one time, lived

in terror, in safety. History
has buried it.
Have wasted.

It has contained the wisdom
forbidden to us as children.
Little hand
has been slapped in an attic.

And the dark violet of some
summer night
in bed between
parents. The television

has glowed in our faces, and a car
has driven by outside, has built
rafters and pillars in the room
all around us

out of light. Has
brought them down.

Moved on.
THE ANGELS GIVEN TRUMPETS

*illustrated page from the Cloisters Apocalypse*

One day in August I went
to the lobby of the hospital to listen.
One icy night in February
I drove my car into a ditch.
Once, I saw a dog in traffic, and then

the child running after it.

And after the funeral.
And just before the diagnosis.
And when
the phone call did not come
but I did not yet know what that meant.

Each time, expecting trumpets, I
received silence instead.
Expecting angels, tongues
on a slaughterhouse floor. At
the bottom of a filthy cage, their
feathers, silence, and a smell

like a classroom full of children’s
sweaters, but which
might have been adrenaline.
Something glandular.
Something chemical.

It always lasted
half an hour, and then—
In the beginning: grindstones and glinting cursive. A thousand patterns to twine


*The Earth is not your Mother; it’s the creation of your Father*, says the pickup barreling south to Carrizozo. My nephews, raised in this ghost town, invent the names of ghosts; one rings the tower bell: ricochets of silence. *God’s powers are neutral,*

*like a zero. By breaking the circle, you can shape any letter or number.* Hanging Barb. Merrill Four-Point Twirl. Dodge Six-Point Star.

In what used to be the school—*not only*

*an ornament, but an absolute necessity*—names of every child who sat in these knife-nicked seats. Gabriel, a kid when I last saw him, gangly and quiet, lifts his shirt: *El que no habla,*

*Dios no lo oye.* Inside the florid script’s pink Mexican ink, a naked woman. *If you don’t speak,*
God won’t hear you. My sister says, “I thought he’d be a scientist or monk.” Bet-a-Million

Gates stampeded his longhorns in the new corral with gunshots and torches—Light as air, cheap as dirt, and strong as good whiskey—to prove the knots would hold.
SURVIVOR’S GUILT

Daisies border the lawn
like poor embroidery. You do not want them
to be beautiful. Thick-hearted,
on their wayward stems. No one can explain
why you deserve this. Not the doctor. Not
the clock. Not God

in his stained-glass field. The flood recedes.
The fire swerves around your house, your bed, your
face. Hard roses on the breakfast china.

Everyone at their time, they tell you.
The nurse crying in the nursery. The crib
carried down, the buckling

floor. You watch light through the ivy—
day making its same mistakes; spring rain
straying into summer. You breathe as the last
coughs rake blood from his lungs. No one
can change this. The bodies are buried;
music seeps from shutters—hurricane plywood;
cracked glass; the station where the train will leave
in a wake of dumb bright songs. No one can take back
what you prayed. You wanted to live.

You wanted to be safe.
SANCTUARY

In the flats around
your reefless bay
saturated with cantaloupe,

no, saffron light,
plant me.
There it’s forever

dusk, forever mud
and wind
where my mangrove roots

would drink your
salt water, withstand
your surges of

rage. Or make your
open mouth
my sanctuary. Do I speak

too loudly?
You’re the eel, I’m
the cleaner shrimp

assigned to your fangs;
this nibbling on
the detritus stuck

to each infected
tooth—feeding
me, gratifying you—
keeps me alive:
a meal in silence,
weak light,

without eye contact.
I’d have a house
but no home.

God, no father.
EVENING SONG

At evening, when we walk the dark paths, our own pale forms appear before us.

When we feel thirsty, we drink white water from the pond, sweetness of our poignant childhood.

Dead-tired, we rest under the elderberry; we watch the grey gulls.

Spring clouds loom above the dark city, making the higher time, that of the monks, go quiet.

As I took your slender hand, gently you opened your wide eyes. That was long ago.

And yet, when dark harmonies haunt the soul, then you appear, Whiteness, in your friend’s autumn-landscape.
DE PROFUNDIS

Perfectly night, the chamber of the dead as my father sleeps, and I stand guard.

The dead man: his hard face, white, flickers in the candlelight.

Flowers ply their sweetness. One fly hums. My heart listens, mute and numb.

The wind knocks softly at the door; brightly it creaks; it leans ajar.

Beyond, a field of wheat is rustling. Sunlight crackles in the sky’s pavilion.

Bush and tree droop full with fruit; moths and birds swoop through the room.

In the fields the workers thresh through the depth of noontime hush.

I let the cross drop on the dead, and soundless in the grass, my steps dissolve.
DECEMBER

first version

At evening jongleurs parade through the woods with fabulous carriages, little horses. In the clouds a golden treasure-chest appears, shut tight. Villages stand out as if painted on the white plateau.

The wind swings its shield and its cudgels, dark and cold; a raven trails after the sullen company. A ray of light falls from the sky onto the bloody gutters, and gently a funeral surges toward the churchyard.

Nearby, the shepherds' huts dwindle in the grey; a gleam as of old jewels sparkles on the pond; farmers sit down to a flagon of wine.

Shyly, a boy sidles up to a girl. There's the sexton to be seen in the sacristy, and red tools, beautiful and obscure.

translated by Stephen Tapscott
THE BURDEN

Was her brother trapped
down there, too weak
to signal? Did he hear
the shovel’s scrape, the thunk
of dirt, the muffled
conversations? Sixteen.

His skin was so alive.
She’s a girl again, telling
me this story, a stranger
who can cry, my father’s
funeral cake
drying out on the table.

As if instructed not to touch her,
I listen while she struggles,
tiny Alice drowning
in a roomful of tears.
I sink into my chair. The dream
in which my mother lets me hold her
waits in the wings, adjusting
one thin satin strap,
one pink satin slipper.
Karin Gottshall

RELIQUARY (II)

One finger. As though to trace
the curve of a horseshoe. The schooner

sailed into the loop of the bay.
Oh wear your blue dress. Glass bowl

balanced on the rail too clear and open.
Two fingers. Rain on the broad

waves. Knees. They will collect
your femur and knucklebones

for evidence of passion. They will
kiss them in your afterlife. In your

life the thunder has no home. One
finger to follow the lightning’s jag.
RELIQUARY (IV)

The accelerated particle
being a proton culled
from the preserved breastmilk
of the virgin—and thus
our latest anomaly. Rings
of distant planets
are ground up for garden-use
like bone-meal: deer won’t eat
crops fertilized with the products
of quantum states. We all
covet antlers, rutting.

In the clean lab everything
is made of rock crystal
except the stainless
steel bars of the animal
cages. Mary is balanced
barefoot on the crescent moon.

The accelerated particle
being a neutrino culled from the
subject’s harvested tympanum.
If my nose had been shorter, my entire life
would have turned out different.
Mine was a June egg, that much I know,
but which of two hundred million spermatozoa
whipped its ambitious tail faster, faster,
and made it to the ovum first?
One more kiss in that noisy bed, one more
creak of the springs and I could have been
somebody else. Blue eyes. Red hair. If my father
hadn’t come to this country when there was
still time, I’d be speaking Russian
or sunk in the ditch at Babi Yar. If my mother
hadn’t stepped out on the porch
where he could quietly
give her the eye. If I
had met you, love, when we were young,

this nose of mine
notwithstanding. If I could decipher
that dream of yours and know
how many years we have left,
fat years or lean—

If your grandma had balls,
my father would shrink in his Russian Yiddish,

she’d be your grandpa.
THE LITTLE ICE AGE

Europe shivered for centuries in the Little Ice Age. Rivers froze; crops failed; people chewed on pine bark, begged the stubborn heavens for mercy; people starved.

That’s why the Stradivarius cries so convincingly. It’s the wood remembering, the stunned wood shuddering, too numb to grow, the tree rings huddled against the cold.
Linnaeus missed the fish in it—the seeds queued up like scales—thought *Asclepias* mostly for its root and sap, folktalm for rashes, warts, the blood that doesn’t clot: there was a god who loved a girl who was a whore and we burn bitches, which is where the thing began, medicine, in the belly of the slut Asclepius is being cut from the way you pluck alive the filaments from the pod—white moths, if they catch wind. For such insect life inside he also would not note it, but as a panacea it leaves something—don’t you think?—to be desired as sweeter species can be toxic; others deter the worms. And could Coronis help it if she no longer loved Apollo? Stranger things are written down: bees once bred in bodies, cunts smell of low tide, milkweed is grown for pillow down—and exactly so white-soft-sweet was she.
WHY I AM CRYING INTO MY GIN-AND-TONIC

Not the burst blooms of the pear, not the chartreuse stems it shed, their fine eyelashed cups peaked and emptied of petals, but finding a few at midnight in my hair.

It is past time for going inside: the people in this novel are so sad—as if it weren’t enough they are young and lovely, as if the rain had been more than routinely violent, as if grief could not be cut with golden, as if it might be a pity to be a man at forty on a porch, crickets legging it to the heart’s old etcetera, honeysuckle so wetly sweet with rain that fireflies rising from it, absinthe-winged, totter onto the mineral air and even the stars are getting lit.
Jeffrey McDaniel

QUEEN OF THE SHORTCUTS

Talking with her was like entering a dimly lit room in August, after building sand castles in mid-day sun, salt in your swim trunks, fried lotion on your lips, eyes adjusting to her acute darkness. Ah, to be ten years old again, coming upstairs, finding your mom, donkey-eyed, whispering there are four ways to find god, her smile like a pile of leaves burning from within, but here is a shortcut, lifting her sleeve: a series of bright pink nicks in her forearm.
Vénus Khoury-Ghata

“DARKNESS ERASED HER PILLOW”

Darkness erased her pillow and the poems we wrote for her

Twisted in our sleep
The mother untangled us
Then placed us on the windowsill to watch the hills migrating
toward the coast

Our backs turned to the house
We begged it to keep the same number of walls
Not to bargain away the lark’s nest
Not to stride across the ravine to make its bed in the forest
Far from the skylight’s benevolent gaze and the grave where we
were buried
We promised to collect the snows of past and future winters till our
eyes turned white
And to open the door to the wolf who tells sad stories that make
the drainpipe weep
Since only the drainpipe has feelings.
“THEY LOVED US IN THE GROOVES OF THE FLOORBOARDS”

They loved us in the grooves of the floorboards
Simmered us in impertinent women’s basins
Put us in the oven when we weren’t able to get our books as far as the mill

They wrote us between two lines as soon as we went away
Dried us out despite the shortage of sentiments
Rubbed us with kisses and benzine

Then offered us fishbones in compensation, and a blond donkey
They grazed on the first fog when we replaced the breadbox with a bicycle

Then on a second fog which preferred thresholds to doormats
They became complicit with a newly-milled cumulus-nimbus which had nothing of a cloud about it but its name and its habit of letting itself go above the rooftops without making any distinction.
"WHEN NIGHT BECAME TALKATIVE"

When night became talkative
We exchanged ideas
Lend me the view from your window and I'll sign you a lease of silence with the street

We were the house and the road that led to the house
We moved the door at each procession toward the cemetery
But the earth remained the same despite the dead buried in it
We wept for them together
But we laughed separately for fear of being caught
We were less afraid when the sea splashed the pavement with the soot from its cauldron
But since the mother no longer had a cauldron
Her kitchen utensils fled from her after the first wall fell
I try to imagine that fall and find only lines crossed out in a notebook.

translated by Marilyn Hacker
That was the year that ice begot ravens singly in pairs and crows
a gathering flock fed well of the damaged trees their desperate fruit
come to trouble what little sleep come to comfort the stoneheavy days
come to this house locked in ice the stacked snow sealed over so cold
the owls died off from the branches such delicate flowers falling and
falling silent no call and no response I think the bones of birds must
trouble this earth more than most those hollow bore needles fallen
eventually white on white snow and still the cold thickens strange
slow tidal sea pierced above by a different falling the Geminids
December’s bright detritus going down in snowflake fire as if a wake
could be a lovely thing as if broken were just another glittering season
into which you bundle the children into which you carry them to stare
to see a sky quiet and on fire in this season of no more miracles season
of so much beauty such harm
Strange, all day I hadn’t felt
or sung emptiness: 空

which is also how one writes
another word for empty:

air. Brisk, then
laden, it’s spangled

with snowflakes, and I’ve forgotten,
until now, what snow

augments: absence. How
the gap between trees

A and B extends,
a scroll spread open,

how the theatrical pucker
of a Chinese roof won’t

hush under white weight. How the character
for snow, 雪, is a full cloud

with a boar’s-head
broom beneath it,

something we tried
to contain, to own

and, again, have
failed. Inside
in warmth, the woman
is pulling noodles, pale

threads of the cosmos—
this, our twisted lunch.

And everything I see
is larger than I thought.

And everything I’ve asked for
and more, I’ve been given.
IN MID-AUTUMN
Shanxi Province, 2007

The moon was not *the moon*

but it *was*, it *was* moon

yes, and cake, *yuè bīng*.

*bing*, I cried. *ice* or *sickness*

depending, *sweet*

heart, you are still where you are. the kitchen

again, the cricket’s vibrato in the sink.

the onion turned, blinked by the window.

Sick, a hush slides on bathroom

tile, blue and white, ice alone

finds its way to bed.

*yuè*, I said. *moon*

or breathing *you*. Come,

draw the circle. Reach north, where I stand.

Night is the syrup, cupped between our hands.
NORTH RIM LOVE SONG

How I feel about you has nothing to do with love.

The usual things:
Elemental, capable of creation
and destruction.

How I feel about you is a Chinese finger trap,
a frog in my pocket,
ever-ending ice cream cone,
a clock flashing 88:88.

How I feel about you is an exclamation point
on fire,
a shape clouds often take,
place,
precipice,

Right here:
a century plant that blooms every year
to even its own surprise.

A stone at my feet with your coloring,
five million years of evolution
a green curl among charred trunks.

How I feel about you is beyond the horizon,
above the legal limit,
below me:

In your home hangs the idol
to whom you occasionally pray.
WHERE THE MISSISSIPPI BEGINS

In a trickle of northern water, clear and cold,
Knuckling over the low stones, who could tell
It would spread out, nosing
Those slow miles of scrub and rushes,
Fattening on its own lazy swell,
Then muscle its way down the Midwest, past ports
And pine bogs and towns with twelve churches and one whore,
River on a mission, from flood rise to mud bottom,
Sliding in a long swoon around New Orleans, picking up
Barges and broken logs and shrimp boats bound for the Gulf,
A dirty splurge reeling in fish spawn and essence of oil,
Until all those drops carried from its high pure source
Marry the brown waters warming toward Mexico—
And what wouldn’t I give
To put my mouth to its mouth, and taste again
That strange flow, that blur pouring down the motherland,
Half junk, half jubilee?
Midsummer and no moon. Low beams on the dry highway. And that twang from a silver disk? It's Sister Rosetta Tharpe On her gitbox, raw voice argufying for the Lord.

I no longer know what music suits me. For some moods, The skeletal airs of oboe and bassoon. And then I give in To a pigfoot piano, to the bark of a swollen saxophone.

Sometimes beauty becomes so neurotic it can't look at itself. In the arc of the car, maybe I've taken the last wrong turn, Gravel under the wheels, gravel under the tongue.

How little we change over the stale years, living On this small blue stone, not on some planet of tilting rings In a cauldron of stars. And not even a rumor of moon tonight.

Gauges waver in the radium glow of the dashboard lights. Beyond the windshield, vapors hang from the vanishing point. I steer by instinct now, by nudge and muscle and spin.

The mind at midnight travels out on vectors of exhaust, On its own drone and grind, moving toward some great capacious phrase Fluent as itself, the nomad mind, free among the rude mechanicals.
A quarter of a cloud, a third of a weasel—the summer is breaking its hand-painted plates. Fragments of the absolute, they shimmer deep inside the courtyards. It is dead here. Violence, boredom, disgust, melancholy.

Red-pawed prince, your head rests on the blaze’s cold knees, your head rests in agony.

* 

The blue wood of the carts with the blue heads it carries toward that final blue sky. The russet feel of the earth that rises in September. The russet rivers that rise.

I can see that thing out there, wrapping the pond the way weariness blankets the evening. Tonight will be a long dark night. It is time now for the trees. It is time for whipping and for silence.

* 

The queen’s dogs are barking: see, it’s autumn come running with its tongues hanging out, painting these strokes of sorrow in the fading grass. Autumn like that old impatience or the freshest flesh.

The carved wooden wolf in his den, the calf’s pallet of water, the naked god (it’s a worm), the day that drags itself along the ponds.

* 

The little animals of the sun try to milk the big animals of sleep. The big animals of sleep try harder to milk the night’s dark cries. The night talks in her sleep of the wolf that takes her.

He is tiny. His coat fits in my hands, his fur on your breasts. We picked him apart as best we could. You had a smile and I had it too. We never asked his name.
Your limbs. The pale thrill of the slow curve of your spine as it breaks my fall, and this bramble where I build you. The wound that adorns your mouth. Let that soft deposit of blood alone when September turns its horses toward the sea.

Fleshy snow, a seated dream, the world grinding up its wooded sleigh bells. Someone arrives, and it is a horse. Someone is living in the tent of the gods. Turquoise stones and flies are beating against the washhouse.

* 

The blue hell, the crazed hawk of tomorrow hurled after yesterday’s. When it was always time to hunt, it was time to do homework, and you dressed those girls of reason in feathers to write with. September sticks a heart through the sharp feather in its cap.

If you touch the snow’s belly, death will smile at you; if you don’t, she will laugh. This instant is still so far ahead and yet it’s already behind us, and it’s in each passing moment. If you touch her breasts, death will come after you.

* 

First wet scent. First delights without you, and the acrid wine of the wind. First sip of time.

A day without wells is a lost truth. September without a mirror, September without a sword, an autumn of paper. The blood of the dogs smolders on the hillside, the night spreads from woman to woman.

* 

The stag’s feathers in the storefront window. The battle and the sand, the scales of thirst, the hard scales of your silence. Time grows timorous; we are going to die, we look so alike.

The white sink, the grey bowl, the blackout. The white face of the cow nailed to the pillowcase. The black bone of the gypsy bangs at the North’s windowpane.

translated by E. C. Belli and Sasha Fletcher
Sarah Maclay

If the presence in the hallway

    Turned out to be music,

It was more like shadow—

    As a boy silently exploring

A foreign hotel

    Middle of noon

A kind of night—

    That quiet, private

Stifling

    The corridor, long and weirdly still

(As if all drapes are made of velvet)

An orchestra playing the one secret chord

(A small tapping, wavering, slight

    As a twig almost hitting a window

Repeatedly, in shadow,

    Not sound, but the small repeated movement

One could make out in the window shade

    Or pale, gathering drops of rain—
Their silhouette and huddle

How their presence barely arises,

Registers as visible—)

That may, in fact, be memory

Or some other pattern

Shifting, nearly imperceptibly,

In the mind

As the coughing begins again

And a woman in the theatre

Leaves her seat, trying to muffle

The sound

In her chest

There is a looseness

Trying to get loose

Whispering

To the young man taking tickets in the lobby

Do you have some water
Sandra McPherson

ANNOTATIONS ON POET B.

composed
by a method of reading
which offers keepsakes
of response

the azalea-codfish emotion
the mum-salmon emotion

This is where “self-expression”
as an instrument
is a concert of selfishness.

A fly draws a line across
the air my cat and I
share to breathe.

A fish swims a seam,
trails on a leash
of hunger.

Yoshitoshi embosses the eyelids of noblemen
to emphasize their weeping
to the koto of Lady Gosechi.
The order of presentation:
first the rose bobs
beside the road,
next it is eaten.
But then you realize you
are viewing a snack
from the highrise of horseback.

We can picture, up front, a big shoe sole. In the woodblock we might encounter the sole first; in the poem we encounter it last. But that means it stays, impressed on us like a wearprint.

Here's one where the mum is large and the soulmate image distant and diverse:

    Chrysanthemums' scent—
    In the old towns of Nara,
    Many ancient Buddhas.

The scent hits the nostrils twice.

It should be possible to turn some palette into haiku and thus perceive the order of Hiroshige's thoughts, the movement of his mind, forward, confrontational, introductory—greeting.

Ueda: "a comparison between the finite and the infinite which are brought together in one experience, which is the poem"
I have purchased
a nose,
Noh mask
just for its old
man's nose
— never stopped growing
— yet carved down from wood

How many friends' faces
can I hold it up to?
"Close" friends—
how close will the stately profile let us be?

brushwood-moon emotion
blue light over an unbolted gate
emotion
what have we learned
from *The Chronicle of Fires*?

before the bottle
all are equal

that vodka be rated
on the following scale:

good
& very good

first glass like a stake
the second a snake

the third is all
darling little birdies

if you are not free
you will drink

when you drink
you are free

*like a hot rose*
blooming in your chest *(G.)*

forbid it and it will come
burn your house down

seize its throat it will come
burn your house down

you don’t hope
to contain it

*(some call her*
*Ms. Swaggers in a Glass Jacket)*
never leave a glass
empty on the table

never leave a bottle
not fully emptied

never leave an empty
bottle on the table

if you’re coming down
with chills fill it up

if you’re a little up
knock some down

after the last vodka
watch your socks
drying in the oven
like blackened salmon

watch the steam
rise upstream don’t slip

back into dream
vodka how close you are
to water (voda)
my dear little water

my dear little fire
-water how you ignite

my parched
voice vase

how everything burns
before it awakens

everything burns
to wake
CATACOMBS OF THE EYE

On the ocean floor, find it. In the corner store near the frozen dumplings, press it into service. Soak the local: anarchy of milk on a May Day tablecloth, the curtainless shower swamp, the hand-twisted shirts dripping from every curtain rod, an empty rental flat. Outside, imbroglio of iron flowers on canal fences above time-sledged sidewalks. The rising canals spill past stiletto-flexed calves of street walkers, their moving picture -esques. Sitting at attention, the veteran of amputations, his glacial blue gaze, his military cap in his lap like a sponge for change.

The glue-sniffing urchins slouched on the crumbled window ledge of the Currency Exchange, their faces all edges. Their gray frames ashiver, memorized, seized birds. The water rises. Glut of the mouth, the unslaked eyes.
Catherine Pierce

FIRE BLIGHT

Def: A plant disease which has destroyed pear and apple orchards in much of North America, parts of Europe, New Zealand, and Japan... Very susceptible pears, apples, crab apples, and quinces appear as if scorched by fire.

—Encyclopedia Britannica

You’re sixteen. You carry a camera—a real one, you’re learning words like aperture and f-stop.

You’re sixteen. You’ve stopped brushing your hair, and would like someone to ask why you’ve stopped brushing your hair. You’re thinking of dyeing the tangles plum. You’re thinking of. You’re sixteen.

Last year you weighed more. This year you’re as tall as you’ll get, and there’s a boy whose eyes are poisoned marbles. You’ve photographed him again and again but you can’t get the poison right. You’re sixteen. You say this again and again but you can’t believe it.

In bio, your friend shows you her bruised stomach.

We didn’t use a condom, she whispers, so I was careful.

You blink. Down the rabbit hole. Your teacher drones about splitting the atom and you imagine your imperfect young skin melting and feel a tenderness for yourself that surprises you. Slides of destruction flash on the cinderblock wall. A girl missing her face. A fetus in a jar. An entire orchard stripped and blackened. Once, your grandfather’s apple tree had sickened and died. The grass littered with apples, shining brown and wrongly.

A fairytale curse, you’d thought. You think it now. The poison-eyed boy ruins everything with words. He wants you to be a dropped fruit, a twisted vine.
THE UNIVERSE IS A MADAM

Your star-marked hair is set
with laissez-faire,
but you blink and comets
hightail it. All my life I’ve tried
to be like you. All my life
I’ve failed. What do I have to do
to match your husk-voice, your red-light-pulse? You with your
Spin inside me, worlds. Your
Today a fire appears, today one blackens.
Some nights I walk through
my silent neighborhood with my head down.
I’m giving you a chance, Universe.
Pluck me up. Scold me. Tell me
I’m failing, that the clients
have complained. Then give me
one more chance. Go, I’d like to
hear you say, supernovas churning
inside your gaping mouth,
and make me proud.
WITHOUT CEREMONY

Once, many skies ago, we drove across the ache of Kansas straight to the base of a large mountain. We were nearly engaged. We were close to knowing each other. At the peak I couldn’t breathe and I was elated. A fear with a name and I named it. Hypoxia. Asphyxia. Things we might call a daughter. Later, we played on pinball machines from the ’30s.

There was a natural soda spring. I still can’t explain it. Something else I loved. There were animals that popped from the mountainsides, built of curled horns and indifference. Our raft nearly wrapped around a boulder. At the take-out point, I jumped in and almost drowned from the weight of water ballooning my jacket. I didn’t drown. Neither did you. I loved that, too. I learned that gin comes from the juniper tree. Could we name a daughter Juniper? There was an early evening the color of whiskey, all the trees sending out their air of clean and quiet, six hummingbirds spinning their wings around us on our cabin porch. On a hike too hard, lightning flashed. The ground growled.

Here, too, I thought we might die. Then we didn’t. That night the primavera had just been invented. We were eating our lives. We were toasting syrah to luck and odds. Outside, the night dropped its blanket of lake water. But inside a fire burned. It was meant to be rustic. It succeeded, or we let it. Sometimes something worried me—something always did, my fear
a constant shark—but there it stopped circling, grew feathers. It nested in the rafters, suddenly a quiet starling. One night we ate chili rellenos. One night we drove far out. We were lost in a strange neighborhood. Meteors blitzed over the dome of sky without ceremony. You held my head in your hands. We stood there. We stood and heard lowing. We stood and heard wind.
SECOND MESSAGE

She sang, or I thought that she did.

Melancholy Baby, Stardust hung in the slightly blue air

by a white and broken concertina

against which children stood measuring themselves.

All night? Did this go on as we slept?

She was like cream over a bowl of cherries set in a window beside the King's mistress. Is that who she was, aching before us, counting beads with an ivory pin? When we came fully awake, she lay next to us a moment. Hummingbirds, gash-like at their throats, hovered over her like a message not quite forgotten and not quite known.
SISTER MIDNIGHT

Returned from the underworld,
Its warm blue milk

Streaming
From my shut mouth.

Up from the invisible
Kingdom

Its scrims of death, its
Forests of flies.

Starving in a delirium,
Ferrying

In the wondrous
Blind demons:

Female, half-crazed, and
In multitudes.

Psychopomp, dragging the flat
Souls of the dead

In through the window
Of this weathered world.

Riding a vessel
Half skiff, half sky

Jet, down into the blacked-
Out spheres of history,
Tendrils
Of light like sweet

Outreaching,
Chandelier arms.

Night is a sun,
And beneath the false dusk

I'll build an empire.
I will

Live in it, a fevering mutation of breaking
Lies.
TODESARTEN

I am driving dead
Into it—the wind
Howling against glass
The train racing
Into the mind of the German
Forest.

Whose past are we rattling into? What
Strange limbo of gestation?

I will hide the sealed treasure
Inside the locked hive-
Like box, caging its radiance forever.

I will lick the secret in its shut bonnet.

Someone is coming to me
With a terrible omen,
Moving Biblically,
Centering its danger into me.

I try to move
But the weight is the weight
Of an oil drum
Fixed deep inside me.

Now the oceans have stopped
Their incessant moving,
Four men lift me onto their jewel-
Studded palinquin,

And carry me over the endless
White desert.
When I am lifted out, and laid
Flat on the earth, the animals
Come to me, brushing up against me,
Tasting my palms with their warm wet tongues.

There are no stars in this blue heaven.

If I speak again, it will be
Never.
Gro Dahle

from A HUNDRED THOUSAND HOURS

Inside my mother sits in the rocking chair and watches me. All is so still. All is so still. The glass cabinet listens. It is just before she begins to rock.

***

My one heart says: Look down. My other heart says: Look out. I hide behind my mouth. Laugh a lot, run fast. My one heart says: Wait. My other heart says: I can't wait. I stand on the diving board and peer into the water. From the corner of my eye I see my mother standing like a signal flag.

***

I cut my daughter out of willow. Whittle a flute out of her fingers. When I blow into her, I hear how beautifully she cries.

I wear my child. A mail coat. An armament. A daughter-shield. Hold her on my lap. My lap is a throne. The people celebrate.

***

How I suck power from your fingers. Volt by volt. And your heart holds its fast trot. A mechanical horse never gets tired. Gallop through my chest. Another day. And another day.

***

There is so much I want to tell you. About the wind that blew the birch over. About the rings of mushrooms on the lawn. And the fire in the neighbor's house.
There is so much I want to show you. The tomato plants along the wall. Cherries. The Virginia creeper. I have seen a forest full of tall yellow lilies.

***

Tears follow me down the street. A shadow that shrinks and grows under the streetlights.

One evening I try to glue the little porcelain figure together again. Bit by bit. When I see it now on the shelf, I see only the seams.

translated by Rebecca Wadlinger
THE SONG

I first heard the song
from the treadle of the old sewing machine
as my grandmother pumped it.
She was putting a girl together.
"I’m doing the arms," she said.

But the song gets around.
It was in the wheels of the IV pole
my father scooted around the hospital corridors.
He was siphoning off another day.

And that salt-eaten pickup,
its bed piled with mattresses and cardboard boxes,
the hopeful detritus of another move,
it hauled the song.

The song's scald was in the old file drawers
at the county clerk's,
deeds and wills, last testaments, being retrieved.

And now it rides
in the boy's empty, rained-on wagon,
his little load of nothing
that he happily pulls around for hours.
Gretchen Primack

DORIS OUT OF LOVE

I liked you and your silly bed. You danced me around, sailor, in your stains, your eye slick as a ballroom, black as a cloud. It hit me like disease. It shook me like a team of bones. I watched it close, upper and lower lashes clasped in a warm handshake. I watched it open, and it made bread and fudge of my belly.

Each moment is one I am about to lose. The trick is to stay tired even after the lights go out. You had a dirty church of a mouth, and when it touched me I didn’t know what to do with the paddles at my wrists. From it one day you made the sound a tiny lion would. From it one day you frowned a frown even a firefly could light. The big gods and the little would see it, the big lions and little ones.
SWIMMING (AFTERLIFE)

Tonight the night dissolves
in waves, the lake
against the shore. The safest
dream I've had through water

floating on my back.
A little city floats
above me. You are living there,
a still reflection,

stars. Rising with the scent
of reeds, the rotting mud.
If I close my eyes, the distance closes.
I'd like to hold my breath

and bury us above
our bodies. Here, in this,
it takes at least an hour to get cold.
Rachel Contreni Flynn

DESK ON FIRE

I've been tamed by seminars
but made wild by what?

By how tightly a thing
can hold, stay whole:

The factory's glass case full of padlocks
shot through—the dials blasted open,
but not the chambers, tumblers, shackles.
The placard proclaims Tough Under Fire.

How often it must be done:

Three women, ashen and recovering,
a few sturdy stitches now knotting shut
our cervixes. These new babies must
stay put, not rush out as if into traffic.

And how quietly it happens:

The Edens Expressway that September:
speckled with backlit, abandoned faces. No honking
or gesturing. All the silence of all the grown ups
alone in their cars beneath the astonished sky.
THE QUICKENING

What’s happening
is an all-company meeting

on compliance: all the ways
we must behave to continue

making money unmolested
by the Feds. And so

I hold forth on training,
tracking, disclosing,

reporting. Outside, the
early spring snow

flecks the windows.
And what’s happening

is that just this morning
I lay flat in bed in the dark

while the shower beat softly
on my husband’s body,

and I was quiet enough
for several minutes

to feel an insistent
wiggling—a quickening—

in the low lump of my gut.
So what’s happening

in the meeting, above
the commiserating

and cajoling is just
the snow. The light,

flutter-tapping
at the windows.
now sprawls against the fence. Now bends a foreleg under. Now gums a stalk, tongue so pink
the fescue seems to bleed. Look,

her head is anvil. Her ears, ridged by veins, flop & curl. Curl & quiver. I like them. Streaks of dark, streaks of pale. Elegant frames

for an elegant neck. I like the way the long ears of these Nubians splay the ground—outriggers, landing gear—a full inch before the lips

part, dark lips, revealing the kernels of her tiny, ancient teeth. This is graze. This is abdomen, the fast throb. Lava tubes of her pupils:

what they see is what they see. But now her legs, four Floridas, erotic with flex, send her flying to perch on the overturned enamel tub,

a 180 mid-air, some little skate rat. It’s hard to keep up. I’m breaking in pieces. Of giggle. Perfect. And the fence is a dulcimer, too.

Posts for frets. Wire for strings. Play it, little goat. Let the breeze. Let the sun, shadow machine. Showy, showy & a bit spastic, her hop

from tub. Dainty, cloven toes. Now Mama’s here, Miss Clementine, so doeling kneels, tail atwitch, neck jive-pistoning for milk

Brendan Constantine

A THOUSAND CHANDELIERS O.B.O.

A grape fell out of my mouth
looking up at your Empire
State Building costume

What windows were your eyes
behind, your mouth I could barely
hear you over the tourists

waving from your observation deck
Nobody recognized my Tower
of Babylon hoop dress, but

people said it was pretty One girl—
the Bank of China in Hong Kong—
said at least I didn’t cram it down

everyone’s throats like the World
Trade Center husband & wife
I don’t think they could see thru

their masks; they just stood there,
not talking, not touching
their champagne You gotta feel

bad when people blow it like that
How’s anyone supposed to know
when it’s safe to laugh at God

again Is it true you went home
with the Duomo di Milano
He was hittin’ the Jäger pretty early
I hope you drove  I got a cab before
the real partying started  It’s still
hard for me to watch that kind

of drinking  Takes me back
to when I went for ages without
bathing or remembering who I loved,

when I slept where I fell
THE FAVOR OF YOUR COMPANY

There would be no sand,
    there would be no sea,

no straw, no bird, no tree
    in a window, no window

There would be no shadow,
    there would be no lamp,

no word, no letter, no stamp
    from France, no France,

no feast, no reason to dance
    for no reason at all

had a coat not hung on a wall,
    had not a cup been spilled

& laughed about
    & filled
Rainer Brambach

POETRY

Besides poetry and me
no one was in the park.
Only someone like Poe
shows up in the twilight
under the elms.
I've seen Poe.
He stood under the elms
in the wet leaves, alone
and drenched.
I've seen Poe.
He wore the coat
with the velvet edging
and looked gloomy, like—I don't know.
Whistle something, Brambach! Try
a melody,
think of a bird,
take Poe's old, black bird,
let him fly, really,
I've seen Poe
and how he gradually became one
with the elms in the rain.
MARCH IN BASEL

Whatever March has in store, all gardens are agreed to bloom. Don’t hesitate, throw the ashes winter left behind into the wind.

Whoever’s lost his glove in the snow doesn’t pine for it anymore. Whoever’s dressed like a fool, fifing along in the wee hours toward home, sees the moon as a swollen pig’s bladder.

Whatever the moon has in store, don’t listen to the sceptic! The blackbird escaped the frost, listen to her.

*translated by Stuart Friebert*
Junior High Football, Wingback

On the bus I didn’t care we’d lost by huge numbers.
I wondered how I looked running midfield
mad across chalk and Johnson grass.
That bus carries me still. Nobody talks, everybody talks.
Through sage and deep bewildering hay, past Holstein
shapes staring back, stars abandoning wet ground,
silos leaning too close to barns, cars
in fields deeply overtaken, wind glossing
engine, torn seats, radio waves floating
through time, wild onion, mesquite so dry
I hear it crack. Someone’s uncle waits
in his Ford Falcon like logic. We dance
beyond our likeness, bright holes, and consequence;
night rolls past and blinds open;
the way back and the way forward walk across
the drifting day, enough the same
that we forget first the names of things, then things,
then the motion of time glancing everywhere at once.
Angela Ball

STATUS

A black enameled Singer
Guarded the spinster’s room.

Its printed garlands hinted
The distant beauty of pianos.

Through threads of rain,
A hearse passed, bearing its slanted S.

The spinsters lived in a row. We were not
Pretty. Our work was close,
The day a thread
Knotted at one end.

We were The Casual Seamstress
In need of a tissue of dashes
Pinned to the goods.
A woman writes, “We can meet at the car dealer’s
If you want.” They pretend to be married, shopping for
Transport.

On a particular retaining wall
At the bend of an exit, blurry boys spray paint
Love over love.

A walk along the sea must skirt the lines
Of jealous fishermen
Guarding their silver.

A woman says, “A transistor radio
Was my first love.” Her body directed
Through a primitive earpiece.

The great cities hunt their sisters
With mixed success.
It’s hard for them to throw a voice,

Pressed as they are
On their seabords,
Like too many adult teeth.
CONFESSIONS OF A FIRESTARTER

Someone arrest me
here in this city park where an ivory

heat combs itself in slow strokes
from the swamp. Where a jogger

and her mallow-jowled
Rottweiler have just

spontaneously combusted—only nipples
of the dog collar's nickel

screwback-spikes lie
in the trail's crowsfoot violets. No

vertebrae. No clothes. The newspaper
knows a layer of methane

hangs over the water, ready
to spark. Or maybe it's my dark

night terror that recurs
in which an old alchemist whispers

as she sits on my chest, sizzles
her palms to my shoulders

until my elbows turn
heavy as gold. I don't need a cigarette

to set this trail burning. I don't need
any learned advice:

Leave your man. Run
to another. One thought of you
will char this city. One thought of that 19th century

hotel with its ivy-drowsed courtyard of brick where Poe

played as a child, where he whipped a single chrome wheel

with a violet birch branch until the stick snapped between spokes. Where you wrapped your black belt around my throat after I asked. I hear sirens. I hear the twitchy armadillos shiver from the warp of a near highway’s whine. In the water,

the cypress knees jut their muscled limbs from the green ferment, rigor-mortised, white. Like those women who kicked a long time before giving up a finger, a red dress, a breath, an over-tongued name. Before each of them gave her face to the swamp which, as I pass by, remembering, flames.
ANGELA BALL lives in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where she teaches in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. Her most recent book of poetry is Night Clerk at the Hotel of Both Worlds.


CHANA BLOCH is the author of four books of poems, including Blood Honey and Mrs. Dumpty, and co-translator of The Song of Songs and books by Yehuda Amichai and Dahlia Ravikovitch.

RAINER BRAMBACH (1917-1983) was born in Cologne. Conscripted into the German army in WWII, he deserted and made his way to Switzerland, where he spent the rest of his life, primarily in Basel, working as a gardener and landscaper while freelancing as a poet and prose writer. The poems here are from his Gesammelte Gedichte, published in 2003 (Diogenes Verlag/Zürich). His translator, STUART FRIEBERT, who has published many books of poems and translations, has recent prose and poetry in a number of journals, among them World Literature Today, Malahat Review, and Sou’wester.

RALPH BURNS has had recent poems in The Southern Review, Epoch, Iron Horse Literary Review, and Cimarron Review. He has recently completed a new manuscript titled Free Will Sonnets. Burns lives in Fair Lawn, New Jersey.

MICHAEL CHITWOOD’s most recent book is Poor-Mouth Jubilee, published in 2010 by Tupelo Press.

BRENDAN CONSTANTINE is a poet based in Los Angeles. His second collection, Birthday Girl with Possum, is available from Write Bloody Press.

CYNTHIA CRUZ’s first collection, Ruin, was published in 2006 by Alice James Books, and her second, The Glimmering Room, is forthcoming from Four Way Books. She teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and was the Hodder Fellow in Poetry at Princeton for the year 2010-11.

Born in Oslo in 1962, GRO DAHLE made her literary debut in 1987 with the poetry collection Audiens (Audience). Since then she has written over 30 books in different genres. These are the first of her poems to appear in English. Her translator, REBECCA WADLINGER, is a doctoral candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Houston, where she works as the managing editor of Gulf Coast.

KATE DANIELS teaches in the MFA program at Vanderbilt University. She edited Out of Silence: Selected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser.

RACHEL CONTRENI FLYNN’s most recent book is Tongue (Red Hen Press). She is an instructor in poetry at Northwestern. The first line of “Desk on Fire” is a variation of the first line of Roger Fanning’s poem “House on Fire.”

ELTON GLASER, a native of New Orleans, lives in Akron, Ohio. He has published six books of poetry, most recently Here and Hereafter (University of Arkansas Press, 2005).

LINDA GREGERSON’s new book of poems, The Selvage, will be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2012.

A recent graduate of the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, NICHOLAS GULIG is the recipient of the Mark Leidner Poetry Prize, the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize, and the Cut-Bank Big Fish Flash Fiction/Prose Poetry Prize.

LESLIE HARRISON’S first book of poems is Displacement, from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2009). She was the 2010 Philip Roth Resident in Poetry at Bucknell University and holds a 2011 Fellowship in Literature from the National Endowment for the Arts.

CHRISTOPHER HOWELL’s ninth collection, Dreamless and Possible: Poems New and Selected, was published last spring by the University of Washington Press. He teaches at Eastern Washington University and lives in Spokane.

A. VAN JORDAN is the author of Rise, which won the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award (Tia Chucha Press); M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A (Norton), which was awarded an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and listed as one of the Best Books of 2005 by the TLS; and Quantum Lyrics (Norton). He teaches at the University of Michigan.

ANNA JOURNEY is the author of the collection If Birds Gather Your Hair for Nesting (University of Georgia Press, 2009), selected by Thomas Lux for the National Poetry Series. Journey lives in Los Angeles where she teaches creative writing at the University of Southern California.

LAURA KASISCHKE’s most recent collection, Space, In Chains, has just appeared from Copper Canyon.

Lebanese poet and novelist, long-time Paris resident VÉNUS KHOURY-GHATA is the author of seventeen novels and fifteen collections of poems, most recently Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits (Mercure de France, 2006). Four collections of her poems and one novel are available in English in Marilyn Hacker’s translation. She was recently named an Officer of the Légion d’honneur. Her translator MARILYN HACKER’S twelve books of poems include Names (Norton, 2009) and Desesperanto (Norton, 2003).

MARY LEADER practiced law for many years in her home state of Oklahoma, and now teaches at Purdue University and in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Her latest book of poems is Beyond the Fire, published in the UK by Shearsman.

KELLY LUCE’s story collection won the 2008 Jackson Award from the San Francisco Foundation and was a finalist for the 2010 Bakeless Prize. A recipient of fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, Kerouac House, and Jentel Arts, her work has recently appeared in The Southern Review, American Short Fiction, Crazyhorse, and other journals.

ANNE MARIE MACARI’S most recent book, She Heads Into the Wilderness, was published by Autumn House Press in 2008. Her book Ivory Cradle won the 2000 APR/Honickman first

SARAH MACLAY is the author of three books, most recently *Music for the Black Room*. She teaches creative writing and literature at LMU and conducts workshops periodically at Beyond Baroque and the Ruskin Art Club.

JEFFREY MCDANIEL is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *The Endarkenment* (University of Pittsburgh Press). He teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

SANDRA MCPHERSON’s most recent collection is *Expectation Days* (Illinois, 2007). Retired from teaching at the University of California at Davis, she is assembling a book to be titled *Certain Uncollected Poems*.

PHILIP METRES is author of *To See the Earth* (2008). He was awarded the Cleveland Arts Prize for an Emerging Artist in 2010.

THORPE MOECKEL’s most recent book, a long poem entitled *Venison*, was published in 2010 by Etruscan Press. He teaches at Hollins University.

ELIZABETH MURAWSKI is the author of *Zorba’s Daughter*, which received the 2010 May Swenson Poetry Award.

PIERRE PEUCHMAURD is a late French surrealist poet who published dozens of volumes over a forty-year career. He was involved in many surrealist ventures such as the Éditions Maintenant, Éditions Toril, and the literary journal *Le Cerceau*. His translator, E. C. BELLI, has published bilingual work and translations widely. Nominated for a Pushcart Prize for her chapbook *Plein Jeu* (Accents Publishing, 2011), she is also the recipient of a 2010 Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowship for New Americans. Her co-translator, SASHA FLETCHER, is the author of a novella, *When All Our Days Are Numbered Marching Bands Will Fill the Streets & We Will Not Hear Them Because We Will Be Upstairs in the Clouds* (Mud Luscious Press, 2010).

CATHERINE PIERCE is the author of *Famous Last Words* (Saturnalia, 2008). Her second book is forthcoming from Saturnalia in 2012. She lives in Starkville, Mississippi, where she co-directs the creative writing program of Mississippi State University.

GRETCHEN PRIMACK’s most recent publication credits include *The Massachusetts Review, Columbia Poetry Review,* and *Poet Lore*. She is the author of *The Slow Creaking of Planets* (2007). She teaches in prison through the Bard Prison Initiative.

ELIZABETH LINDSEY ROGERS, an MFA candidate at Cornell, was born and raised in North Carolina, graduated from Oberlin, and spent several years teaching in rural China. Her poems have appeared in *Agni Online, Asheville Poetry Review, Comstock Review, Seneca Review,* and on *Poetry Daily*.

BETSY SHOLL’s most recent book is *Rough Cradle* (Alice James, 2009).

ALEXANDRA TEAGUE’s first book of poetry, \textit{Mortal Geography}, won the Lexi Rudnitsky Prize and was published by Persea Books in 2010. She was a 2006-08 Stegner Fellow at Stanford and a recent visiting professor of poetry at the University of Arkansas.

GEORG TRAKL’s lyrics are arguably the most important poems written in German between Goethe and Rilke. After seeing action on the Eastern Front in 1914, Trakl, an Austrian, died in a field hospital in Krakow in 1914. Oberlin College Press will publish his \textit{Poems}, edited and translated by STEPHEN TAPSCOTT, in the autumn of 2011—in time for the centenary observations of World War I.

GREG WRENN’s poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in \textit{The American Poetry Review}, \textit{Gulf Coast}, \textit{Pleiades}, and elsewhere. His chapbook, \textit{Off the Fire Road} (Green Tower Press, 2009), features a long poem about a man who travels to Brazil to be surgically transformed into a centaur. He’s currently a Stegner Fellow in poetry at Stanford.
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The Press also receives essential operating support from Oberlin College.
Dear David,

I am cooking wheat pasta with tuna, listening to the Moth podcast and revisiting the October section of Seasonings. I love that you'll be in Harvard Square this weekend; I miss both it and you! Hugs + respect — Sarah G.

David Young
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44074