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Michael Teig

THERE IS A DAY UNDER A BOX

and in that day an engine,

and out from there a prairie
or a conversation amid kindness, between parking,
subject to all sorts of weather.

It is a Monday sometimes
though I know of no accord,

and it can be difficult; it can take
everyone you know, in a rainstorm
or an awkward sweater; it can be cold now.

Under one box are more shovels than
you’ve ever seen.

Under another box is a chicken
on a riverbank slowly drifting away.

There is a woodblock and a stranger
or a series of strangers like side effects
you’ve never thought about.

It’s very beautiful. There are delicatessens
and generations, and soon friends

and a little currency are sent in,
shoulders and grippers, and unstitching
there a road without appointment.

Under one box a man holds another smaller box
out in his hands like an invitation

or a detour you might duck into.
It’s that kind of day.
It might last a lifetime or even now
a new conversation queues up the horizon
of alibis or model homes

a row of books the future
is always just browsing,
overlapping, leaving a person

or something like a person
in the dark without program.

There are friends who fade off
like movie credits
on the horizontal. How strange.

A woman you barely know holds
a grasshopper in her hand in a green dress

as if married or thinking of marriage
or simply recalling the marriage of her parents,
who were sweet people named after lakes.

There is a lot of going back,
and going forth the sun’s gadgets in thickets.

There were faces sometimes
and other times
the currents of a body

and you laminated among them
like a guest all the while.

A whole city stutters past
as they put it together, frame by frame,
inside of which are buildings or feelings,

or advertisements
for feelings.
The moon touches up windows.
The lights encourage campers.

Under one box are the offhanded flowers of our confusion
with their heads together like little explorers.

Some people send cards
and others reach out into the distance
like horses or causeways. Slowly,

haphazardly is how they do it,
one leg at one time.
BLACK BRANCH

The first time
the suicide’s ghost
breathes, a small bird
lifts uneasily
from a black branch.
One world at dawn.
By dusk, many more.
The unfinished
nest softened by
ripped bits
of old calendar.
For years, blue wind.
No other color.
Quietly now, death
unties its little boat
from the windowsill.
GHOST CAKE

Go away and forget being so proud of snailing tight spirals into your shell of burnt sugar and black roses, for making shiver-music with combs and waxed paper.

Go away. You never married anyone but the man who lived in the dumpster while I was your geisha, your inky Jesus, your blister-colored mother.

The only life I can save has been saved. Go away. The sky needs privacy to finish feeding the horizon’s clouds, ghost cake, to the hungry dusk.
BULB

I bring my mother to the green conservatory grounds. She stands on a peastone path between a water feature and low pine and sniffs the air. Her eyes are closed, there is a fragrance in the wind she wants to single out and savor, a curve of scent that begins elsewhere and ends elsewhere. Has nothing yet been planted or has nothing yet appeared? Joy’s bolted in her face to sorrow like a pair of shears.
AUGER

I want to show you a poem
about walking on a frozen lake.
Tired of seeing me reach
for that shelf you’ve drifted
deeper into the store.
I find a chair in a corner,
keep my thumb on the page.
The Manx cat comes and goes
and the day loses a degree.
Following shapes of wind
in snow we’ve spoken
sentences between
shores and turned
to find only ellipsis.
Putting the book back
fills a hole in water.
I should find you now
where paper shivers
against your skin
but the cold,
coupling hydrogen
remains too thin.
WARD

It comes from darkness older than itself and wants out. Testing us with tiny sounds it flies a holding pattern in the livingroom, waiting for a wall to turn to night. I quell calls for a broom, find a plastic bag, time a pursing snatch. With fingers that once fastened on your throat, I open the front door, almost drunk enough to think remission’s in the other hand. Before we met you burned yourself with cigarettes. I became your scourge. Round and round we flew. First to find an opening you married someone else. I loved the snare, not you. Electric eyes are closing streetlights overhead but the bat won’t un grip all the world it’s sure of now as I try to loose it on the lawn. Not until I roll the bag back upon itself, the way a doctor’s glove comes off, and press thumbs down, does it spill out— wrinkled infant face up, gasping into fear it’s hurt, laboring against dawn.
SARDINE LAKE 1992

My father wandered and found them
rose quartz, amethyst, obsidian
a dandelion’s ghosted globe

and a stupid paper chart
for lost alone in the woods

in our sarcophagi sleeping bags
and our arms in our shirts

each starry animal
the major and minor

and the glacier’s pale belly
upon the rocks

in the tilted valley where we camped

my brother, younger, unknowing
this will end

My father held the flashlight
crowded by pines, his bristled face
his smell

I knew then I didn’t care
about stars
but what was close

wouldn’t last

*
Swings and graveyards
double-shifts

never feeling quite himself

his clay torso in the shed
beneath a sheet of plastic

life piled on life

For what?—

the thoughts
that sometimes come

we don’t write down

The years commuted

in his silver Tercel with half a million miles
the melatonin, felt curtains

earplugs in order
to sleep through the day

*

In the monochrome
    of the macula, the either/or
of the eye

the Sierras under sheets
of snow, an unused room

I sat awake in
a rehearsal of birds
Venus

indian paintbrush mixing its pigments
till my eyes adjust

And in the morning we'd switch-back
toward the lookout

the metal stairway like a carnival ride
in which the ride is
standing and looking

across airy mountains

where one can see from miles
the fires

We gnashed our jerky
and on the sunny metal

slipped off our packs

seemed to float
SINCE THEN

Outside the high windows of what was once
our kitchen—before that, a weaver’s room—now a study—
the breeze-bent lilacs continue to wave and sway;
the weeping willow grazes buffalo grass;
the copper roses blaze and extinguish,
blaze and extinguish and blaze . . .

but the peacock that appeared one afternoon
strutting up and down the back garden’s brick path
hasn’t been seen again, and was not—

unlike the five tawny owlets
perched for weeks on a beam of the kitchen portale—
digitally photographed, turned into a screen saver.

Almost everything’s been put on automatic pay
but on some cloudless nights
I find my doormat’s openwork rubber

enstarred with a cellophane sheen—
the moon’s monthly bill,
still in your name.
My lost sister used to try the trick
with the tablecloth, waiting until
the wine had been poured, the gravy boat filled,
before snapping the linen her way

smug as a matador, staring down
silver and crystal that would dare move,
paying no mind to the ancestor gloom
gliding across the wallpaper like clouds

of a disapproving front—no hutch
or bureau spared, no lost sister sure
the trick would work this time, all those she loved
in another room, nibbling saltines,

or in the kitchen plating the last
of the roast beef. How amazed they would be
to be called to the mahogany room
for supper, to find something missing,

something beautiful, finally, they could
never explain, the wine twittering
in its half-globes, candles aflutter, each
thing in its place, or so it seemed then,

even though their lives had changed for good.
Because of the roadside museum.
Because I am your engine.
Because of Theocritus:
death and forgetting are the same.
To say nothing of pain.
To say: worse than the riverboat casino.
Worse than the rattlesnake eggs.
Worse than an error, the way
you can be so inflexible.
The way your close rubbing
has worn me. This season
of your snowy promise,
we drift like Oregon
to the ocean. We collect
arrowheads and fools gold,
the gift shop’s pouches
of polished stones.
From the parking lot
hear the beach flinching.
OREGON

Wasps surge our windshield. These hills rushing with red flowers. The interstate gathers antiseptic noise, darling, I have been counting my own teeth again. To stalk the expanse of the unmapped mirror:

*and she tried to fancy what the flame of the candle is like after the candle is blown out.*

Here are the bodies you asked for. Motel rooms made of sudden harm and each room has its own carport. I fear a confederacy between hands and their successors, as if each plea were expiration. Dagger Moths crowd the columbines.
Nicolas Hundley

WHAT THE WIRES FEED

WIDOW IN THE LABYRINTH

She follows a single wall for years, traces its meanderings informed by perpendicular angles and perverted logic. Each day she awakes in the labyrinth, lacks recollection of how she arrived. Birds refuse to instruct her to attain exit. She hauls a sack filled with the limbs of statues. Frost has been administered around her eyes. You are the widow in the labyrinth. You are the walls and the cracks in the walls, the gravel on the ground. You were widowed by the labyrinth.
Amy Newlove Schroeder

THE MAGICIAN’S ASSISTANT

Men’s hands crabwalk over my skin
persisting until I part like water

The boss, his face white & inflexible, burn-scarred,
takes the money
    and hands some to me
at the end of each day

Green salvage, white corset—
earnings secreted between my breasts

What a hue, this green embroidery, this green *sortilege…*

In some dreams, the same terrible occurs
only it is normal, it is for love,

and the green is the green of field corn,
fodder feed, corn grown only for cows goats & pigs—

In some dreams I even keep my own name.
LESS REMAINS

in the field past the final version
there are beds and beds of flowers

poppies, opium flowers
red as the back of my throat

petals like pills, easy to pluck
when I took them, they took me

nobody else seemed to

my body a candied fiction
no longer felt

as if I had stepped cleanly oh so cleanly out of it

like a winding sheet

I was under the ground in the infinite sinister

In the infinite sister
of the minefield artform of my life

the poppies chorus
first left then right then left

some muting, then yield
DEAR THANATOS,

I did what you told me to,
wore antlers and the mask, danced

in the untilled field, but the promised
ladder never dropped from the sky.

In the burned house strays ate bats
on the attic floor, and trottled out

into the dark with wings in their mouths.
I found the wedding dress unharmed,

my baby teeth sewn to the cuff.
There's a deer in the woman, a moth

in the chimney, a mote in God’s one good eye.
The fire is on the table now, the bear is in

the cradle now, and the baby is gone.
She's the box of bones under the bed,

the stitches in your lip, the moon and the hollow
in the geode, in peaches heavy with June.

If I enter the river I must learn how to swim.
If a wolf's ribs are bigger than a man's,

and if the dead float, then I am the witch's
second heart, and I am the sea in the boat.
DEAR THANATOS

I stole the hand from the reliquary.
The saint invited me to the fire,

to the star in the lake, and the match
itching in the drawer. I am the one

who burned the hand to get at the miracle
and unmake it, to untie the hair

the hand plaited, to return the fever
to the child, to let the dead rest

unresurrected. I took the charred bones
to the celery field during the perigee moon.

I howled. I raved. I tantalized. I saved
the flood for another world.
Camasin Middour

BONE POEM

You look abstract, like a bridesmaid

And groom your hair as though measuring out

Yards of brown silk.

I do forget (against the bust of you)

That we are only so many feet

From a road also nettles grow,

Provenance hides in the trees,

But look how far your arm bends

Around my stem

As I lie down in the grass like an artifact.
in my mouth that devours words.
We were having a barbeque when the neighbor
said Jeff had been electrocuted while washing the car.
Upstairs I could see the corpse laid out on their new
drive. “I’m sorry,” I say later and the jet puffs toward
Ray, Jeff’s dad. He opens his mouth and turns away
to the little forest by the freeway. Now the turbine
in his throat whirs till the jet rises, circling our neighborhood.
We all look up and point while a deer walks near
our houses, past the flat screens in picture windows, past
our motorcycles and cars. The deer’s hungry and can sense
the new wilderness in that yard. The doctor arrives. Everyone
looks down as the jet circles higher over roofs and power
lines. The car shines next to the dead body. Now
they must clean and dress it up, then put it in the ground. Look,
someone says, a deer, and I place it next to the jet, humming on the page.
He got that way, said the man who hired him, by hunching over rows to do what I hired him to do: hunch over rows, to twist a stem—beans, squash—and snap it off. See: his broken back bends downward and to the left. He ate with us at the picnic table, leaning on his higher elbow, after the hay was in, during which he was little help; he could lift a bale but not heave it above his hump onto the flatbed truck. In a good year, hay's second mowing is the season's last, so he'd stay until all the eating was done and then walked home, the back way, through the woods, on a path he knew, two miles closer than by road.
THE MOTHS WHO COME IN THE NIGHT
TO DRINK OUR TEARS

always leave quenched,
though they’re drinking,
in composition, seawater,
which does not make them insane
as it does parched humans
if we drink it, even
with our big, big bodies.
If you knew
a leper’s tears do not contain
the bacillus leprae
would you let him weep on your chest?
Let the moths come, let the sandwomen and -man come,
let Morpheus and Dreamadum come
unto me, and my beloveds,
let the moths come
and drink of the disburdening
and brackish waters.
Franz Wright

FOUR IN THE MORNING

Wind from the stars.  
The world is uneasily happy—  
everything will be forgotten.

The bird I’ve never seen  
sang its brainless head off;  
same voice, same hour, until

I woke and closed my eyes.  
There it stood again:  
wood’s edge, and depression’s

deepening  
shade inviting me in  
saying

no one is here.

No one was there  
to be ashamed of me.
PEACH TREE

Winds are blessing one by one the unlighted buds of the bent peach tree’s unnoted return. At first light, gray, I stand beside the tree my height. Such fragile limbs, as of bark-covered glass—how did we ever survive, find our way back and take again our alien stand here, reappearing at the tip of one of the endless branching roads, a dead-end finally? One of quiet’s addresses. Where I would endure five more years, lying low; survive until I couldn’t. I’d often wondered where it would happen. So, one more northern spring has been given me, too, frail peach tree. You look good. You look like you could go on doing that forever. I have no more idea what I look like than you do, I am happy to say, all of that is over, that business with the mirror. One lifelong winter afternoon I noticed it had stopped. I couldn’t any more, and that was all, wish I’d thought of it sooner. Trembling with the effort not to break, between thumb and forefinger, this one hidden branch I identify with and am trying to lift and lower my eye to. Leaves receding as I reach out, some force inside me pushing them away, maybe; I hope that isn’t so. Because I long to touch, polish frictionlessly a velvet row of greenest dark beginnings, infolded, growths destined to develop into nothing more than stunted fruit stripped from their boughs overnight by black birds. I wish I could go inside one of them, past the tough rind into one of identical pink, erect, closed eyelid-colored buds, curl up the size of a comma, and wait there for the softly sifting wind to find me, lift me; wait there alone with everyone else in the darkness before we were born. How did we ever drift into this chill state? I’m feeling kind of backbent myself; and I see us both bound for the fire, lone peach tree, then nothing, then pure spirit again, even Lazarus has to die—what have I done, what have I been so afraid of all my life?

For D. G.
CRUMPLED UP NOTE BLOWING AWAY

Were I not here
to witness it,
could the sun be
said to shine? Clearly,
you pedantic fool.

But I’ve said all that
I had to say.
In writing.
I signed my name.
It’s death’s move.

It can have mine, too.
It’s a perfect June morning
and I just turned eighteen;
I can’t even believe
what I feel like today.

Here am I, Lord,
sitting on a suitcase,
waiting for my train.
The sun is shining.
I’m never coming back.
Karl Krolow

ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER

Doing one thing after another—all goes along splendidly slowly like music, which lies on the tongue, and that’s the way you can come by death-from-love, like Isolde under the shower of light in summer, it was too hot, you stood under the torrent, your favorite aria in the air, a shot sounded for the fun of it, and someone had written on the wall of the house in lipstick, in huge letters, that he’s glad he’s alive. Their glow’s really red. The contact was quickly established, and you still weren’t a dead man by a long shot, because there was a woman, still wanting to make love with you, the shooting practice continued and someone or other was born into something he wasn’t able to handle.

translated by Stuart Friebert
Marianne Boruch

PRACTICE SAYING

So practice saying: my name was—
What exactly. And why did I live?
Then those words the poet, the quiet one, puts
into a mouth. Spit them out.

Not all of us get to be ghosts.
A few still need a good
googling, or the Ouija board sitting level on knees
to ask stupid questions. No matter: we’ll
all telepath into the ether.

Will we be another species then, strange and endearing
as a cat that talks incessantly? I had one
one time, a little much,
though such sweetness, her insistence, her
wanting to tell me at every turn.

What a puzzle death becomes, rainy afternoons
to put who we were
back together. Certain poems begin
with a pine tree in the middle, or a bird yet to be found
in any Peterson guide. Good. That’s
great. Call it in life or
of life, before
the before and after
rolls into one giant look-down-upon-the-well-of-all-being.

Here. You know
where that is? Little dot on the horizon
that isn’t a flower,
 isn’t a man walking home.
HANDS

A whole roomful of hands—
drawing hands! Then I know I'm thinking too much.
My teacher said keep looking when I figured
done, the broken-off
conte crayon in my fingers.

Early spring, wired urgent with spring
means the catbird
never lets up, his small chaos falling
again, again to the tell-tale whiney note,
the meow of no cat
I ever heard. In reflexology, you press hard
between third finger and the little one
to dull such ringing in the ear.

The hand in cadaver lab—the first fully human thing
we did, I thought. No hands alike, raging
small vessels run through them—you'd never
believe how many ribbons. The arm
kept springing up, no
not to volunteer. We tied it down with ordinary rope
you'd get at the hardware store, and even then—

The catbird is gray and dark gray but you can't
see him, not with the trees
leafed out. That hurry in a throat, no sound
like another he repeats
sideways, down,
inside out.

A whole room of hands drawing hands!
I still love that. Look away then. You should
look anywhere else
in that other room, hands with a knife to dissect
the hand, no fat there to speak of, busy
traffic of nerve and vein and tendon and trust me,
it stops.
Hildred Crill

THEY BUILT THE DANCE MUSEUM

because we are seen
as mountains on the move
because our mirrors shoot back the sun
because our lake scarves catch the wind
over a feather skirt of peacock
over a raffia skirt of palm
because we are hooped
and tacked and netted
because we are seen as the trees
because we are weightless
because our bodies are written
on rice paper, the bending stem
bound into us like a watchword
because of the drum’s hidden
chamber and because of its skin
because of the floor and the street
because our legs are untwining
because the last survivors slip by
in marupa canoes and long masks
because we are bandaged to stilts
and transcend the crowd, because
up here we exercise our eyes:
wide open for wonder, sideways for hope
and shut tight for the reason we dance
Sarah Wangler

TOWHEAD IN THE SONORAN DESERT

I am already a body under a bridge,
pocketful of pebbles and twigs, corner torn.
I was a dust of snow, trailside.

I dangled, engulfed in afternoon flames
on yellow rocks, over Onk Aikmel. I was
a brick when I fell. A bone-china teacup crushed.

My flaxen curl was clipped off post-mortem
and a guide kept me in his pocket to ward off luck.
O San Guadalupe of the Salt River Flats,

I will be a dancer, next life, not a Five Lined Sphinx
mistaken for a hummingbird as I hover
by a prickly pear flower—that pink fate

is for suicides, climbers coyotes eat.
Ray Amorosi

SPANDREL

There’s the shadow of a life.

Where do we go.
How many times to the river, the island, marshes.
In our rooms a silence so singular,
with its back to us.
Where’s my brother in the hallway, the streaked window.
Its gold drops above us.

Pumpkins on Damon’s Point in March
on the far shore where the schooner sank,
its ribs yawning at low tide.

Rowing over gourds are seeds sunning on
rocks.
The island grows red from here, lonely
for the open loss.

I’m deeper in the marsh. Deeper in the yellow mud.
MAIZIE

I would make the fair sun be your shadow as you pass.

A vile world of happiness along the ridge.

Grenade clouds shifting the bunkers ripped out cannons staring at the coast.

Save my children. God whipped the angels to serve

us in our prison as we grip on the filtered light through apple trees.

I'm crippled like Richard by the beauty of your lost eye and the open shine in the other.
Jean Valentine

THE ROPE THAT PULLS THEM WHERE THEY DO NOT GO

horse running sideways
on only water

no school  no teacher  fire
made out of fire
poison houses

children in a rough line
holding onto a rope

a man with a cell phone pulling the rope
the reception breaking up

*

The man had to leave the books behind
Leave night behind    I know you don’t use words there

sleepwalking a word-scrap    Day-walking my Redeem’

I’m lifting something very light    a blanket
Outside the window you’re lifting something very heavy

Pat the rope then
crush the rope apart

I know you don’t have teeth there
I know you don’t have hands there
2. The Gold Violin (Season 2, Episode 7)

Would you agree that I know a little bit about you? No boiling, no diaper service, no plastic pants. All you have to do is look at my file. I’m just here to make sure you don’t shake his hands and take his fingers. It’s what you wanted. Every maternity ward will get a visit from a registered nurse and a doll. Isn’t that from West Side Story? It’s delicious, and it’s hot, and it’s brown—we don’t need more than that. The eye is drawn to it. It squeezes my head. There’s no problem at all—it’s very clear. ABC did research. If you are trying to blend into the wall, you can’t. A lot of people find me very interesting, you know. Ride the horse in like Lady Godiva. Slide over. Unfurl the sales please. It’s time for the horse to catch the carrot. Behind the tree there, no one is looking. Come, come—taste the sauce. Pull back the curtain and take your seat. We should only do this.
Elton Glaser

AFTER THE EVENING NEWS

Out of the foreign dark, a bloodstained breeze
Wipes its hands across my face.

Already it's November of the crippled oaks,
Cold month the flies crawl over.

I've been listening to some spooky blues—
Blind harmonica, bottleneck against the frets.

I've been milking the stones for a little pity,
Burning the bibles for light.

Is the night under new management?
Stars brawl in their billions

While the moon spills itself around me
Like a chalk outline of the truth.
Are you feeling anything?
Are you forgetting
your breathing?
It’s your river,
running coldly.
It’s your star
coldly following,
saying thank you
for the anchor,
good moon, good
moon falling down.

Drowning looks like sleeping.
The quiet, a comfort,
the lighting, pleasing,
a weak rain beginning,
but nothing trying, no
nothing too terribly heavy
upon your head.
They were pebbles,
but I called them stones.
I forgave them. I tucked them in.
I kept them with me,
counting slowly, as we
put the boat to bed.
PILL BOX

Every wife is a still-life.  
Here I am with the vacuum,  
my good arm reaching after time.

Half the apple tree is blossoming.  
A quick lark shakes a branch.  
A headache can be beautiful.

Little doll murdering her chores,  
how alike you look in the photo  
of you and your father.

How agreeable you are,  
lying cold on the bathroom floor  
thanking your mirrors and corners.
I was alone in the wilderness. It wasn't unusual.

I was alone in the kitchen, your hand on my shoulder.

Unknown to myself and protective of it.

*Nowhere-place like home.*

An intake of breath, different from all the others.

I was elsewhere. Where else could I go?

If this was home, this second storey, this light and winter, buried cars,

then I was wrong to make a home. Then I was wrong to want one.
APOLOGY

It was summer.
It was spring and autumn.
Winter lasted and lasted and
we were warm enough.

Weren't the seasons nice? So many of them,
*piled up on one another like the leaves.*

It looked like a window,
looking out onto a street.
A dairy on the corner,
the pins of light for stars.

Didn't you want to believe it?

I believed it. So beautiful.
One of those things, looking back,
that seemed impossibly true. The colors
too gentle. The light, as they say, sympathetic.

As if the scrim could be pulled up
at any moment.

And then it was.

A theatre blacked-out backstage.
A stifled mausoleum sound.

Darkness listening only to darkness.
Someone will be coughing. Someone will be coughing in the back of the room. Someone will be playing a mandolin or six-stringed instrument. The point of acceleration or deceleration where things shift. Prosecuting people, using the few sentences still at hand. Inductors, resistors. Whatever the individual response. There were never so many plants that needed homes. Where should they go? Topographic maps certainly factor. The four corners and eight walls of this city. Bonfires are supposed to be inexhaustible. Then they flame out. Someone will be looking at a face in the mirror saying the face has a kind of current in it, the face is just about ready to blow. Because eyes and cheeks are visible only so long as light deflects them. As a flag floats over and hits air in triangle patterns. A mobile nation keeping up the weight and heft of earth. Someone will be saying put your heart down, will be saying take up rows of ribbon. What sounds like it will break is coming near. Laws of physics (seen) flake off the glass. When someone flicks the light off I’m lying down. Then I’m climbing up brittle glazed stairs. Someone will be summering elsewhere. Gears of an eager machine. Distance between two negatives. Unerring voltage. No matter what I do, someone else claims the body, some external force. No matter how often I plead. At each turn a less apparent burden. Ancient evening. Speckled history. Circuit allowing shifting. Allowing the closing off of sheer flecks of the eyes. Someone is singing.
Kathleen Winter

HARDWARE

the last time you slapped me
hard across the cheek
I'd been playing around

with locking the bedroom door,
trying to get the old bolt
to shoot all the way in

to that space in the striker plate,
to obliterate the dried paint
impediment and be home free—

fitted perfectly to vacuum—
but this wasn't working:
the metal was sticking:

and I deliberately remember it
vaguely,
not what it was about

but the spirit of impotent dissent,
us bickering on the landing
at the top of the stairs

then you at the bottom
suddenly—your limbs splayed
on hardwood,

the wool skirt bunched
oddly and you looking up
at me—different
Beckian Fritz Goldberg

MY NEIGHBOR’S BODY

What can I do tonight about the wild camels in Australia whose herds the government will thin by aerial gunning? The truth is all I do these days is watch the neighbor’s hedge of brooding oleanders sway, heavy with dark red blossom. They are twelve feet high on his side of the arroyo and hide his house. I don’t know who lives there but I know he has a truck and listens to the country station. I can’t help what I know and what I don’t know helps me. I stand out on the patio and smoke when I have work to do. The blooms light their deep pink auras. All spring my neighbor rattles things behind his house, throws things on top of other things. It echoes. I haven’t done a good day’s work since that day in class when I required every poem henceforth to have in it a jacamar & hereby have followed policy. It’s the least I can do. My neighbor’s song tonight rues some faithless woman as he kills the engine, leaves the radio on until the song is done. I have never seen his body. I have never seen his faithless wife. I am on the side of the black oleanders moving their great mind under the little moon. They are fifteen feet high and hide my house. It’s been good, our not knowing each other. He won’t mind me still out on the patio not telling him in Egypt once I heard camels call to one another as they milled about and one by one kneeled for tourists to mount. It is an ugly cry trapped, I can only say, like the body of the letter m set on fire on their throats. In Cairo’s heat I moved around like royalty with a retinue of children asking for American dollars. Like royalty I gave sometimes and sometimes not. The hotel that summer was filled with engineers working on the underground, work that stalled each time they hit a buried wall or well of ancient kingdom, and late afternoons they’d drink with Madam Ariana, the manager, a Coptic Christian and a true believer that ketchup was the cause of cancer and that opera refined the soul. Tonight the moon holds its high white note over the desert slopes. Here we are. What can we do about camels in Australia stunned in the warm sheen of their own blood? Dry yellow petals scatter on the patio. They do this when they are alone. The world is full of the helpless.
seeing its one hand, the petals mounded briefly at the patio wall. Their whisper like the guard’s pulling us aside in the museum where they kept animal mummies, mostly ibises and cats. Their necks were wrung in sacrifice, their bodies emptied, filled again, sewn and wrapped like dolls for gods who looked just like them. For a dollar, he said, we could touch one. I know everyone has to make a living. I don’t know how my neighbor does. He has somewhere to go to and somewhere to come back and isn’t that enough? Each day if I say he’s happy he is happy. If I say he is miserable he is. If I say put on a song sometimes he does. Then I don’t get much work done, another iridescent jacamar lies unwritten. Tonight a hundred living things chirr in the arroyo, the rest is quiet. Our lives are quiet. We know what we know. I know my neighbor’s body must have fire like mine. It must have dim soft places no one’s touched for the longest time. I know it must rise sometimes at night for no reason and then must go somewhere and sit. I don’t know what it is that aches. The body does not know how to speak for itself. It stands out on the patio in the dark thinking this time of John-Michael who has tattooed across his chest a line from a poem he loves. He is brave. Think of the women who’ll face it there, a love no thing or woman will come between, and turn & some come anyway. They’ll know and not know. There is no language there. The hedge shifts its thick ocean of leaves in the wind and John-Michael is gone. Light winks through. My neighbor is home, and if he knew he was on my mind tonight he’d call the police. For all I know he’s a cowboy and would kick me to crap. For all I know he is the police. For all I know he is lonely and would weep. Beware of the neighbor. Beware the one who imagines you in some form other than your own, filled with other desire, empty of other emptiness. Beware of the one who does not. You are the gentle camel. You are the rufous-tailed jacamar. Your blossoms hang open in the dark, riding the black wave of oleander. And I am kissing my neighbor’s full mouth, tracing the moon above his left nipple. I am lying against his body, reaching down and cupping them, gently, in my hand, for didn’t we come helpless into the world, my love, but we came anyway.

—for H.C. and for J.M.B.
MIXED-MEDIA BOTANICAL DRAWING

Contorted blossoms, slack,
lascivious orchids,
the tulip's petal so saturated with purple
that it looks black,

the ah-weary-of-time sunflower
crazed by living like a weed
next to the railroad spur,
periwinkles, peonies—

why them? Why them instead of
nothing at all? Well, who cares, really?
Only the feeling they excite counts.
It might be love,

it might not. The grafted rose bleeds
clear liquid at the sutured places.
It's a face, just one face,
in the middle of all the faces.
TRAILING CLOUDS OF GLORY

Even though I'm an immigrant,
the angel with the flaming sword seems fine with me.
He unhooks the velvet rope. He ushers me into the club.
Some activity in the mosh pit, a banquet here, a panhandler there,
a gray curtain drawn down over the infinitely curving lunette,
Jupiter in its crescent phase, huge,
a vista of a waterfall, with a rainbow in the spray,
a few desultory orgies, a billboard
of the snub-nosed electric car of the future—
the inside is exactly the same as the outside,
down to the m.c. in the yellow spats.
So why the angel with the flaming sword
bringing in the sheep and waving away the goats,
and the men with the binoculars,
elbows resting on the roll bars of jeeps,
peering into the desert? There is a border,
but it is not fixed, it wavers, it shimmies, it rises
and plunges into the unimaginable seventh dimension
before erupting in a field of Dakota corn. On the F train
to Manhattan yesterday, I sat across
from a family threesome Guatemalan by the look of them—
delicate and archaic and Mayan—
and obviously undocumented to the bone.
They didn’t seem anxious. The mother was
laughing and squabbling with the daughter
over a knockoff smart phone on which they were playing a
video game together. The boy, maybe three,
disdained their ruckus. I recognized the scowl on his face,
the retrospective, maskless rage of inception.
He looked just like my son when my son came out of his mother
after thirty hours of labor—the head squashed,
the lips swollen, the skin empurpled and hideous
with blood and afterbirth. Out of the inflamed tunnel
and into the cold room of harsh sounds.
He looked right at me with his bleared eyes.
He had a voice like Richard Burton’s.
He had an impressive command of the major English texts.
*I will do such things, what they are yet I know not,*
*but they shall be the terrors of the earth,* he said.
*The child, he said, is father of the man.*
Chris Santiago

A YEAR IN THE SNOW COUNTRY

Later I married, in
the careless zoning of the American West
the sense of not only all the time in the world but
the space too.

Amid the sun-struck strip malls
of Torrance and Gardena we found markets
that smelled like Tohoku’s:
stalls with stewing pork-bone broth;
skate and mackerel bright
with brine and ice; flags
of komachi rice bento’d
and bloodshot with umeboshi: and daikon
cut down to spindles—

radishes I’d seen
grow long as oars
washed white of earth and draped
to dry from the eaves of farm houses;
roofs thatched of water reed
winter-cut and singed to strong
stems, steep-sloped against one-hundred-
and-eighty days of powder and drizzle; all that rain
and reckless growth—

grated, to help my mother-in-law,
a fierce and endless task
to produce a mere garnish, mild as apple,
pinched raw with cheek
of blackened pike; this side of
root and accumulation.
TWINS IN CONTRARY MOTION

1

I fold Proust into white pines and tend them back to seeds.

When a corpse sits up in bed I lead it back to its mother.

I have faith in love suicides, dynasties folding back to a garden and one man. I’ll turn his astonished chin and lead him to the bottom of the stairs.

Our tribe will walk toward the fire; they’ll gather flames like sticks and build silence.

2

Like you, I walked under a current of gulls.

Now I wait for the last one out; that’s him, with the hourglass.

I stop his hand on the knob, offer him a drink, seduce him.
I’ll bear twins without bodies, 
translucent, like the end

of a dream of the dead.  
They’ll have their father’s eyes

which can see the end in things, 
and know they have none.
SOLSTICE

Shortest day
of the year, almost.
Redwood tip
bedraggled like a pelican
feather I’ve scavenged
off a beach.
The pomegranates
split, they spit seed
underfoot. Crisp
taffeta of leaves wrens
tussle in—see, just
what’s here. Look

at this kitchen
from Chardin! the copper
kettle upended on
a slab of wood; an
earthen bowl (big
e不够 to beat
two eggs) glazed
umber brown. Erect
in its wooden fist
the pestle. A knife
pares the shadow
of a red onion.
The empty laundry basket fills with molecules of light. She stands beside it, arms falling into the aftermath of the task. Gesture is a proto-language researchers say: the same circuits light the brain when a chimp signals *help me please* (hand outstretched, palm up) as when human beings process speech. In the cave the hunter figure mirrors his spear’s trajectory toward the deer it will never, we know, attain. The woman sees nothing untoward. Her body bars the spattered something in the middle distance, though all of this is very close: the shed they’ll use to dress the meat, the plane geometry of white sheets on a line. The world is beautiful, she thinks, or feels, as deer sense something coming, move out of range. Beautiful, the woman thinks, and lifts the laundry basket to her arms—beautiful, and orderly.
They stripped the father and son, this man says,

They made the father strike the son.

Son and father, the stripped they, I write.

I listen as I draw and try to disappear
And make the father strike his son

While I draw and try to disappear
Scratches turn into words,

Hovering in words around his unbound head,
Like a hovering mother or torturer
Scratches turn into words,

They could not make son hit the father.

I sketch with a stylus on a copper plate

Father hit son make not could they

How they made the father dig a hole
The words scratched backwards, as in a mirror.
And they made the son get into the hole.

How they made the father dig a hole
I have to write very quickly
How they made the son get into the hole
And made the father bury him up to his neck.
I have to write very quickly
So I do not lose the
And made the father bury him up to his neck
And later ride him like a donkey.
So I do not lose
Each etched face, each bound body
And later ride him like a donkey—
I sit in a hotel room and draw this Iraqi.
A wing, in parts,
was dipping in

at the water's edge
and some feathers,
torn free,
sheened up

in the light.
What a mess.

A red spill,
like an oil slick

with its rainbow chill
spread at my feet.

I went to work
recomposing

loft, a span,
a feel for thermals,

making it once again
whole

and still working,
socketed, hinged—

I wanted to see
finery,

which isn't just show,
which had its uses
laid over
curves tensing,

neck arched
and breast puffing

when once the system,
the dance of desire

was an ordered rebuffing-
relenting-receiving,

and the snowiest feathers' job
was to reel her in.
Bruce Beasley

ANTITHALAMION

Now will come the bride, now will the Hymen-song be sung.
—Catullus

[1]

As Hymen is
to nuptial bed: the god of it, and
what’s ruptured there.

[2]

Carp’s
mouthgape
through the apostles’ mesh-ripped, half-
mended fishing nets, left
on Galilee-lake-adrift: interfluence
of left-behind wives and Christ,
stagnation and pulsive stream

[3]

They were under a certain
flower: say,
lobelia—

the garden book spoke of its
“terminal
clusters”—

They were under a certain
planetary influence:
Saturn’s, say:
the depression-
book called it
taciturn, beglooming, ice-
ringed . . .

[4]

Would no one
listen at least till the couplet’s
rhyme-end
that would have made it what
it was to be

[5]

Skin-fringe, perforate, semilunar,

the hymen has,
say Masters and Johnson, no evident function—

Tear-veil

[6]

To her he was as far now
as apostate
from apostle,

as vertex from vortex
To love
the word
*sunder*, but not
the sundering it means

and the *harrowing*
of hell, but only if
to *harrow* means

in that case to plough

Omega’s
seeds everywhere blown

over alpha’s ploughrows

There they were, at altar, all vow and vowel: *do.*
Here they are, all altered, dissonant and undervotive: *done.*

Say them some requiescat,
say to them: Do you take this antonym’s antonym, this homologous devoting:
do us

part.
Caesura's a cut
   a halving

A sense pause down the middle
where the gist went.

The paired gray and reddish bodies
the "dual-lobed mass" of the thalamus
lie close astride the cleft
at the brain's innermost chamber
consummation-place where sense gets made
of the senses, what the nerves bring on—

vaginal-spread in sagittal section
lobed and lipped: the thalamus

named by Galen for the bed-
chamber outside which the bridal party
would gather to intone their wedding song
that her cries might not be heard when the hymen breaks.

As Hymen is to wedding-night: the god
of it, and what must be gotten rid of
for their pleasure.
Angie Estes

EVENING

Uncle Osie showed me how to lean
the chisel into the lathe, make the chair leg
curve as strips curled off the long rod
of walnut the way Dante’s invented verb
dislagarsi makes the mountain of Purgatory rise up
out of the lake: it un-lakes itself while God keeps
turning his lathe with a Florentine form
of the verb torniare and makes the world above
inform the world below. Wider
than a mile, for sure, the Milky Way, and waiting
just around the bend, where my grandfather said
everything would be, planted like hostages
or some host of hostas we’d call Moon River for the blaze
their leaves rake across the dark
lacing Purgatory with possibility, plenary
or partial indulgences adding up like frequent
flier miles. In Purgatory, it’s always late
summer, after supper, the cicadas ratcheting up
their cocktail shakers while the gloss
I’ve painted on the white picket fence runs off
in long drips and the pots of red geraniums you call
planets ascend the front porch steps. To the Good Humor man
just making his way down the street, we shout
Wait! And to the scuffed leaves that once waved from
trees, now turning beneath the maple: Everyone
in favor, hold up your hand.
On behalf of life, its befogged aioli logic, its belief a-go-go, and the chief coifed geological good, like Beatrice, I come from where I most desire to return. To have a small ball in Italian, avere il pallino di, is to be crazy about something: a filched lifeblood bagel, a big illogical loggia, Childe Cedilla or the first of July when the coho flailed in the lief ago. But if it is a big ball, essere nel pallone means to lose it: Bah, Fidelio, send it back to Chef Gigolo, tell him I am a beige foal afield in a folio of age. Bring me agile, biologic bail for my icefall hood and a hedged, bifocal feel. An aloof child, failed achoo, lilac-hoofed loaf—with my big ideological foliage, my haloed half, I am the alibi of oblige, my hobby is ball.
Kurt Olsson

DE KOOKING'S SHIRT

I want the shirt, the shirt
that screams jump, screams
fuck you and I want another
shot and who's the skirt.

I want the shirt, paint smears,
gobs of snot. Howl mommy,
spread your legs, here come
the jazz and bourbon fears.

Don't pasteurize my hurt.
Don't breathe my ten-foot smoke.
The rage phone's ringing, bub.
I want De Kooning's shirt.
I don’t know when I realized he had one eye that watched me, alive, the other free to read the heavens. Could he see I grew where others couldn’t, could he read my face, in its lines all their faces; my aunt’s that morning, in the mirror beside mine, hissed, don’t stare, don’t forget details, it’s your honor to look for all of us. Did he see I hated his eye, sometimes, hated my honor: the hand always above me, the one I try to stop or hold. Which eye reads that hand? Which eye can judge that weight? I wanted to look away. Wanted to cry. His untethered eye was milky as a tea cup. Why have you come here, daughter? Couldn’t say. My father made me. Couldn’t blame. You looked at Her hand, but you didn’t save Her from a firing squad. I wouldn’t confess. I am afraid I’ll spend my life crossing the line between looking and feeling. He never touched my palm, imbedded with pencil lead, or the moon under my thumb, scarred while opening a can. He assured me I’d make a fine wife, a fine mother of fine sons, prove to be a credit to my family, while his iris swiveled like a wobbly fan. I made up my mind right then to watch each face in front of me with steady eyes; to open my hands, unsaved, with their forked wires, their lines of names and places. Take them.
Unraveling his 40 years, he’d looked up
To greet scenes never expected:

Hail over green sugar cane;
A rose-red wedding sari, deliberately unwound;

Carved into mountain walls, the speechless lips of God;
Ladies’ shoes, shot out the window of a train;

The 25th day of monsoon rain;
A neighbor, hanging by his own turban from a flowering black plum tree;

The highest peak in the measured world;
Twice, the shuddering of a brand new flag.

None of these could lessen his shock—
On 133rd, between the Mormon boys and the shawarma shop—

That the sky could open and send
Soft flakes falling from a wide darkness.

So many. So many falling toward him.
They burned for a moment, like tongues.
THE PATH NOT TAKEN

I took the path into the woods.
The fog unfolded itself, the path sank
into hummocks of moss. Foam flowers
winked their white stars underfoot.
Trees still wearing their lichens
like loosely knit shawls died and fell
silently into the arms of their comrades.
From deep in the woods I heard
the rising arguments of waves, the thwack
and whump of them, slamming the cliffs,
a blow to knock out your breath forever.

At the cliff’s edge, a gull flashed the blade
of its wings and caught the current out.
The sea threw up its hands and clattered
into the gorge, shining. I shivered.
What did I know about living in the world?

I carried nothing but the soft-shelled body
I was born with. On the sand lay
charred roots, kelp in rubbery heaps
like abandoned udders, and black rocks
pocked and beaten and rolling like dice.
Stranger, if you sailed a ship you would turn

at the clink of the buoys, chained to the water,
singing of cliffs hidden in the fog’s fist.
You would listen for its horn, for its path
as you feel your way through dark waters.
Late March of 2011 brought me an unexpected pleasure in the mail: a fourth gathering of recent collections by Charles Wright, a selection from five books published between 2002 and 2009. Its cover is Piero della Francesca’s *Madonna della Misericordia*. She’s perfect, somehow, for this book, embodying as she does both the ordinary and the divine. She’s real and otherworldly, human and marmoreal, pensive and peaceful.

Wright’s previous compilations have been trilogies, selections that cover three books each, so this one breaks a pattern and presents an ambitious design. I’m fairly familiar with the collections this book gathers and selects from, but I decided to start reading, making some notes, and those notes turned into a sort of journal, an appropriate form of response, I’d contend, for this poet.

3-29-11:
This book begins with a three-part poem, “Looking Around,” and almost immediately the reader realizes that he or she has joined a giant circulatory system that involves the seasons, other poems and poets, and questions of meaning and purpose that preoccupy the speaker—and the species. In that sense, formal matters like structure and closure are slightly irrelevant. You can enter the system at almost any point, really, and depart at any point.

But the fact that openings and closings, markers of poetic organization, are arbitrary doesn’t make them less useful or attractive. It’s like the frame around a landscape: you need it, but you also need to know it’s a frame.

The charm of the voice is the first impression that strikes this reader. This monologue of experience is affable, modest, wry, and perceptive. It invokes other poets—Machado, Campana, Mandelstam—not in order to display the writer’s erudition but to emphasize that the vocation of poet is an old and communal one, passed around; Charles Wright is one of many, a servant of the craft and art.
Painters too. Morandi shows up, a familiar Wright icon, and Seurat helps the poet try to characterize a back-yard June evening:

Now into June, cloverheads tight, Seurating the yard,
This land-washed jatte fireflied and Corgied. (9)

Unpacking that requires the reader to overlay the cloverheads, fireflies, and Corgies with Seurat’s great painting Le Grande Jatte, a duality that will enhance our pleasure and confidence in this voice: passages like this manage to be casual and magisterial at the same time.

Some may find it too complicated or clever, but the complications alternate with striking simplicities:

I find I have nothing to say to any of this. (11)

Saying you have nothing to say is saying something, of course, but we like to be told that the speaker/feeler/voicer of all this knows that there are limits.

Down by the creek bank, the water sound
Is almost like singing, a song in praise of itself. (11)

“Looking Around” both is and isn’t such a song. The whole poem is like water, singing, but not only in praise of itself; it turns outward as much as, or more than, it turns inward. I reread, nodding with pleasure and affirmation.

3-30-11:
Ronald Blyth, praising Gilbert White, says “White had integrated himself with the movement of two calendars, the simple movement of a rural parish and the infinitely complex movement of the natural year. Because he had to act on the movements of both calendars daily he became a philosopher of the present, which is why he is so satisfying.” What caught my eye in this were the phrases “infinitely complex movement of the natural year” and “philosopher of the present.” Surely these observations fit the composer of this poem:
Transcendence is a young man’s retreat and resides in a place
Beyond place, vasty, boundless.
It hums, unlike the beauty of the world,
without pause, without mercy.

If it’s an absence, it’s we who are absent, not it.
If it’s past, cold and colorless,
it’s we who are colorless, not it.
If it stays hidden, it’s we who hide.

March is our medicine,
we take it at morning, we take it at night.
It, too, is colorless, it, too, is cold and past tense.
But it’s here, and so are we.

Each waits for deliverance.
March, however unlike ourselves, knows what to expect—
April again in his Joseph coat.

The seasons don’t care for us. For them,
transcendence is merely raiment,
And never a second thought.
Poor us, they think, poor us in our marly shoes,
poor us in our grass hair. (25)

The tone here could not be so complex and playful if it were not securely grounded in that constant attention to the seasons and the natural year; if it were not, in other words, the product of a “philosopher of the present.”

So rooted in those commitments is this poet that his variations upon them take many forms and attitudes, including this speculation about transcendence (a mug’s game, we gather) and this personification of the indifferent seasons. Just as Gilbert White’s daily observations were the product of a long and joyous faith in the things he was
responding to, this poet sends his teasing bulletins out to us, one after another, as the year rolls past. He’s always on the lookout for whatever divinity may reside on the other side of the seasons, but he always comes back to those seasons, in the absence of transcendent answers.

3-31-11:
I realized yesterday afternoon that my reading of “Is” coincided exactly with this season. As I walked in a snowfall among dime-sized flakes, I could ponder March on its way out and the Joseph-coat of April coming over the horizon. Pure coincidence, but pleasing.

I’ve been looking at the poems that Wright has trimmed out of A Short History of the Shadow in order to fit it into Bye-and-Bye. I don’t see any disastrous omissions or problematic disruptions to the texture and progression of the original. The book still flows effortlessly, like a big river, sometimes placid, sometimes agitated.

Two of my favorites, “Appalachian Lullaby” and “Thinking of Wallace Stevens at the Beginning of Spring,” are still there. The latter poem, again, is perfect to read at this time of year. The sunshine of this last week of March has been especially intriguing, cold but unmistakably hopeful. We stare up at the chilly but promising sky, as that poem closes, waiting for grace to fall, “our palms outstretched, our faces jacked toward the blue.” That ending nicely echoes the ending of “Is.”

Shadow is a self-possessed and natty book, its shifting moods and brilliant images passing over and around us like clouds and their shadows. It begins, in “Looking Around,” with the observation that “I sit where I always sit,” and it ends with the speaker making fun of his aging and sloth: “Getting too old and lazy to write poems, I watch the snowfall / From the apple trees. / Landscape, as Wang Wei says, softens the sharp edges of isolation.” It certainly does, as the book has demonstrated over and over. Now comes a joke (from the White Rabbit of Lewis Carroll, as I recall): “Don’t just do something, sit there. / And so I have, so I have, the seasons curling around me like smoke, / Gone to the end of the earth and back without a sound” (66).
4-1-11:
Next up is *Buffalo Yoga*, from 2004. That’s a title you can spend some time pondering, compounded as it is of the Montana setting and the mystic pitch of so many of the poems. The title poem is a long meditation on time and memory, particularly majestic and somber; it turns into an elegy for Tom Andrews somewhere along the way. It covers 14 pages in the original volume, but I like its *Bye-and-Bye* presentation better, spread out as it is over 17 ½ pages. More room to breathe. The sections vary greatly in length, and are set at different times of day, though night sections are the most prevalent. The pieces of the poem—time, weather, memory, thirst for divinity, northern light, the presence/absence of the dead—are so generalized and impersonal that it’s a little startling to encounter the specific death of Andrews, first in a section about someone finding a water ouzel’s nest, where the speaker wishes that, like an ouzel, he could walk under the water and bring the body back (Tom got sick in Athens and died in London); then again in the third-to-last section:

Chortle, and stuttering half-lilt, of an unknown bird.
They are burying Tom in West Virginia in a couple of days.
Butterfly yo-yoing back and forth above the short flowers.

White horse and mule and fjord horse
at grass in the glistering field.
They are burying Tom in West Virginia on Monday next.
Hum and hiccup of generator, hum of the creek.

Black dog and golden dog at large in the meadow marsh.
They are burying Tom in West Virginia, and that is that,
Butterfly back at the dandelion,
as cosmopolitan as the weed. (86-87)

The fact of death, set as a refrain among mundane details of the Montana summer, mimics the way grief threads itself in and out of consciousness.

The poem tries to regain its original meditative poise in the final two sections, but I suspect the poet was not wholly satisfied with its ending, since he went on to write three codas (which, I am happy to
recall, appeared first in FIELD). The following summer, finding himself back in the same landscape, he picks up the poem where he left off, extending its manner and preoccupations. The poem and its three codas make “Buffalo Yoga” one of Wright’s major accomplishments.

4-2-11:
James R. Gaines, in his book *Evening in the Palace of Reason*, has this to say about Bach’s Goldberg Variations:

The aria’s return at the end, precisely as it was stated at the outset, closes the circle: We have listened to an extravagantly various set of variations on a simple series of notes that represents a stunning demonstration of the ideal of identity in variety, analogue of the indivisible presence of God in the manifold, phenomenal world, a feat that was possible only in counterpoint. (216)

What if this feat was possible in language, as well as in counterpoint? Isn’t *Buffalo Yoga* and the larger book it is part of a demonstration of that possibility?

Then what about God? More on that later.

4-4-11:
I can’t move on from *Buffalo Yoga* without mentioning another elegy, the next to last poem in the present selection. It is for Holly Wright’s brother, Tim McIntire (1944-1986). It’s called “Sun-Saddled, Coke-Copping, Bad-Boozing Blues,” and it is funny, tender, nostalgic, and deeply compassionate. One of my favorites in the whole *Bye-and-Bye* collection. Read it, and weep.

4-5-11:
*Scar Tissue* today. The poems go down easily, one after the other, sly and lovely, for the most part. There’s the usual portion of self-mockery, of course, as in “Confessions of a Song and Dance Man,” and “College Days.”

Meanwhile, the Montana wilderness just keeps growing in importance and reassurance. To the God-haunted and God-denied poet it is the hushed and undistracting place where something of the
sacred survives and even flourishes. "A reliquary evening for sure," says the speaker of "Last Supper," where orthodox religious beliefs are treated parodically. "Iconostasis," he asserts, in "A Field Guide to the Birds of the Upper Yaak." I had to look that up; it's the equivalent of a rood screen in a Greek Orthodox church. Here it's a wall of evergreens.

What matters especially in Wright is that the sacredness of nature is never taken for granted. It has to manifest itself over and over, a new surprise each time.

4-6-11:
I'm in the middle of the title poem of *Scar Tissue*. I realize I like some parts a lot better than others. Here is what I tend to pass over rapidly:

The slit wrists of sundown
tincture the western sky wall,
The drained body of daylight trumps the Ecclesiast . . .

There's a familiarity there; poets have been doing this mixing of the familiar sacred with the natural profane, juxtaposing faith with its absence or opposite, since Baudelaire and Eliot. Wright knows that, of course, and is using it teasingly. Still, I am looking, I realize, for something more novel, and there it comes, in the next section/stanza:

Chipmunk towering like a dinosaur out of the short grass
Then up the tamarack, sparrow harrowing, then not,
Grasshopper in its thin, green armor,
Short hop, long bound, short hop and a long bound . . . (162)

I like the imagery, and the music. They are inseparable, as they should be. "Towering" and "sparrow harrowing" match nicely, internal off-rhymes, "short grass" becomes "grasshopper," and the rhythm that acts out the grasshopper's movement in a pentameter is exact and reassuring. I know the diction of the earlier passage was appropriate, carefully chosen and orchestrated, but I'm more at
home in this little American scene, so compact and so sharply ob-
served.

4-7-11:
The title poems of Scar Tissue, I and II, occupy the middle of the vol-
ume, which then goes on to a series of short poems of great variety
and aplomb. One of the things that’s marvelous about Wright’s
world and work is that he can build his poems, again and again,
around disappointment and anti-climax, making those features work
in his favor rather than against them. “Vespers,” for example, starts
with some high visionary materials, borrowed from Hildegard of
Bingen:

Who wouldn’t wish to become
The fiery life of divine substance  blazing above the fields
Shining above the waters,
The rain like dust through his fingerbones,
All our yearning like flames in his feathery footprints?
Who indeed?
And still . . . (186)

Some poets would work toward this moment of vision as a grandiose
conclusion, but for Wright it’s a great afflatus that he must slowly
bring back to earth, let the air out of. The middle of the poem mixes
details that are pleasing with ones that are mundane or banal or dis-
heartening, “burned lightning strikes of tree shadows,” “the dusk-
dazed heads of the oat-grass,” “the bullbat’s chortle,” and then sim-
ply “a flannel shirt on a peg” and curled postcards “thumbtacked
along the window frames.” The deer are just outside the window, the
generator hums its familiar hum, and the poet concludes:

Not much of a life but I’ll take it. (187)

What’s most interesting to me is that Wright can reverse expected di-
rections, create a kind of downward spiral into glum acceptance, and
still craft a poem that leaves me exhilarated and happy. Hildegard is
not erased, nor is her visionary ardor dismissed or mocked. Some¬
how, instead, the poet has made room for her in his world, putting
her next to details that manage to validate and even celebrate her.
Wright's "sense of an ending" is very different from the tradition and
from many other working poets. It owes a good deal to the Chinese
tradition, I think, but he has made it distinctive, made it his own.

4-8-11:
Now I come to Littlefoot, a book-length poem. I already know that I
think this poem is one of Wright's major accomplishments. I am
going to suspend my journal-keeping for a few days while I just sit
back and enjoy it.

4-11-11:
One of the central questions of Littlefoot (and a good deal of Wright's
other poetry) is whether paradise is located here or elsewhere. Is it
earthly or heavenly? The earthly is the true paradise, as the poem's
sixth section makes beautifully clear:

The winter leaves crumble between my hands,
December leaves.

How is it we can't accept this, that all trees were holy once,
That all light is altar light,
And floods us, day by day, and bids us, the air sheet lightning
around us,
To sit still and say nothing,
here under the latches of Paradise? (216)

By making it a question, Wright acknowledges his, and our, ambiva-
lence about the matter. By making it a rhetorical question, he slips us
the answer. Bam!—as they say.

And in the matter-of-factness of crumbling winter leaves juxta-
posed to the thrill of sheet lightning, he acts out, yet again, his cen-
tral understanding of life, its peculiar exhilarations nearly always in-
terpenetrated by its banalities.
4-12-11:
The roominess of *Littlefoot* is one of its special pleasures. Since it's a book-length enterprise, the poet can take his time if he wants to. He can be succinct, of course, as in the section that simply says "Time is your mother in a blue dress." But he can take memories and fill them out, favorite times from the past. And he can elaborate on favorite icons. For example, he's long loved Kafka's fable of the Hunter Gracchus, the man who was caught between life and death and condemned to sail from port to port in a ship where he lay as an invalid. Gracchus shows up frequently in *Bye-and-Bye*, often floating overhead in the night sky, like a constellation (Orion?). But in part 9 of *Littlefoot*, Wright takes more time and space for Gracchus; he retells the story, relishing some of Kafka's details and adding a few of his own. Plus some from W. G. Sebald. Roominess.

4-13-11:
The year wheels by, the poet turns seventy. The locale changes, from Charlottesville to Montana, as June arrives. Old age does not frustrate him, as it did, for instance, Yeats. He's more like Stevens or Whitman, not exactly welcoming it but at least accepting its natural process and meaning. He can "look forward" to yesterday, or the day before that, and wonder why it took him so long to figure certain things out. There would be more drama if he raged against time, like other poets, but there would be less reward, less insight. He risks something by being relaxed and wryly affirmative.

One of my favorite sections in *Littlefoot* is 23. It begins, "One needs no Paradise when the rain falls," and then it lists the small wonders of the time, place, and season. It admits to passivity and a certain pointlessness, and it ends with a mock prayer:

     Lord of the Sunlight,
     Lord of the Leftover, Lord of the Yet-To-Do,
     Handle my heaven-lack, hold my hand. (262)
4-14-11:
The Montana ranch is so fully portrayed, in all its weathers and its
details of life, that by the time you finish *Littlefoot* you feel like you’ve
lived there for a season. You think you would know it if you saw it
and feel right at home in it.

I believe I’ve been dreaming about it, sleepwalking toward its
windows, its meadows, its silence and remoteness.

4-15-11:
Section 27 (275-78), with the snipe standing on its reflection in the
pond, is a perfect example of how effortlessly Wright can stitch to¬
gether the details of the day and the inner concerns of the aging poet,
with Fra Angelico tossed in for good measure. This is one I already
look forward to coming back to.

Any astute reader of Wright will know that this book-length
poem is not going to rise to a grand climax in its final sections. That
would compromise its honesty and integrity. The summer will come
to a close, the yearling horse who gives the poem its title will finally
be named (in 28). August will expand, autumn will begin to manifest
itself, as it does, earlier, in Montana. The poet will mark (the word
“celebrate” doesn’t really feel appropriate) his seventieth birthday on
August 25th. The meditation will resume, back in Charlottesville, as
September and October sail by.

The end of 33, a brilliant translation/transposition of the famous
Ungaretti couplet (“M’illumino / d’immenso” into “I empty myself
with light / Until I become morning”), would make for an emphatic
and lovely close, but there are two more sections added on. Almost
as if to thwart the idea of resonant closure. The poem’s final section
is somebody else’s words, the Carter family’s hymn-like “Will You
Miss Me When I’m Gone.” Bowing out with a song, a little more
country music, the poet is gone and the longest poem he’s written is
over and done.

4-18-11:
And now what strikes me as a brilliant transition. To move from the
grand extensions and sober reverberations of *Littlefoot* into the next
and final collection on which this volume is based, *Sestets*, is to encounter a distinct change of tone and manner:

**TOMORROW**

The metaphysics of the quotidian is what he was after:
A little dew on the sunrise grass,
A drop of blood in the evening trees,
    a drop of fire.

If you don't shine you are darkness.
The future is merciless,
    everyone's name inscribed
On the flyleaf of the Book of Snow. (309)

The familiar melancholy pervades this, perhaps, but there is also something sprightly and devil-take-the-hindmost about it that hoists it up, spins it around, and produces a kind of merriment. The brevity, the diction, the informality of the images: all these contribute to a new way of approaching familiar materials. It's exhilarating.

If the whole of Wright's art is an Anatomy of Melancholy (and it is, it is), this is definitely a part of it; but the tone is also that of a brisk joy that follows the completion of a large and absorbing task. As if Dante had finished the Divine Comedy and then dashed off some slightly jocular glosses on it. Or if Beethoven had finished composing and conducting the Ninth, and now wanted to fool around on the piano.

The smallness of the poems is definitely a factor. They happen fast, and they have zany titles, like "Hasta La Vista Buckaroo." One might be tempted to think the Wright corpus doesn't need this volume. But who in his/her right mind would want to be without it?

4-19-11:
Did I mention Dante yesterday? He shows up in the middle of *Sestets*:
WITH ALIGHIERI ON BASIN CREEK

All four of the ducks are gone now. Only the mountain remains,
Upside down like Purgatorio
In the pond’s reflection,
no tree at the top, and no rivers.

No matter. Above it, in either incarnation,
The heavens, in all their golden numbers, begin to unstack.
Down here, as night comes on, we look for Guido,
his once best friend, and Guido’s father, and Bertran de Born.
(336)

The poet does not lack for companionship, exactly. He’ll have Walter Benjamin’s ghost for company too, a couple or three poems on. Turner will turn up, no surprise. And Etta James. While Wallace Stevens is never very far away, even if he’s just being playfully misquoted.

4-20-11:
As I read and write about Sestets, however, I am overlapping with Martha Collins’ review in these pages, last year, where she covered both Sestets and its sidecar, Outtakes. Her account of the book is so considered and accomplished that I can end by quoting her and close this log/journal and the delight I’ve had in taking my time to read and ponder the 367 pages of Bye-and-Bye:

The vague arc of Sestets—which I suspect emerged both during and after the writing process—makes the book more than the sum of its small parts. But I think the ongoing pleasure will lie in individual poems—here, for the like-minded, as meditations to meditate upon. (FIELD 84, p. 70)

Ongoing pleasure all tangled up with melancholy. Meditation meditating upon itself. That’s what Charles Wright is all about. Like Bach. Like Basho. Like any number of other masters.

David Young
Richard Grossman’s visionary 400-page *The Animals* was first published in 1983 by Zygote Press, was re-issued in paperback by Graywolf in 1990, and is now available in a revised edition from American Letters Press. Its history alone suggests the book has enduring appeal; one might say it has legs.

Animals of all sorts, from amoeba to zebra, present themselves individually in the single-page poems of the second of three parts; in the first and third, they converse as a group with a shepherd on subjects all over the epistemological and emotional map: astrology, shyness, civilization, time, sex, literature, light. The third section also contains dramatic events that give the book resounding closure.

In fact, the pacing reminds me of Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain* and its extended conversation-as-meditation followed by a brief but catastrophic ending. In *The Animals*, the first two sections of musings—one with the shepherd and one without—run 300 pages (more than triple the usual length of poetry collections). In comparison, the events of the last section seem shockingly (and deliberately) sudden. More about them later.

Most of the reader’s time is spent in the middle section, meeting 200 thinking, articulate animals. Grossman has collected his creatures from all over the world, some familiar to North Americans and some so unfamiliar I had to look them up (tericola, guachero, aye-aye).

A few of the animals simply say what they see, such as the section-opening canary (“When I was brought into the world, it was / a striped egg. I didn’t ask for the furniture I got”). Most probe more deeply. The firefly addresses first causes:

Light and life must spring from the same cause, perhaps each other. Who knows?

Perhaps there are no causes. Only effects, reasonless urges lighting themselves.
The mantis is a believer, but not in providence:

It is not my own force that climbs the twig
or is the twig, that shines
wet in the leaves, in my lens:

I am a helpless supplicant
to some overall lack of intelligence.

Comic relief makes intermittent appearances that keep the book from being somber. Some of the humor is due to the use of rhyme, which has a touch of Ogden Nash in it. ("When God pulled out His giant easel, / He said, ‘I’m going to make Me a weasel.’") I’m quite sure Grossman is the first poet to rhyme "fascinate" with "grassinate," an event that occurs in the poem "Wombat":

I utilize my giant bucks
to deracinate roots and degrassinate
grasses. Then I chuck
it all into my hole, fascinated

with my own ability to burrow.

Many of the animals think about their place in life and, indeed, in the universe. While each animal’s monologue is distinctive, its tone amusing or fearful or bitter, the overall question is Who am I?, a question most humans ask as well. The animals’ answers can be terse or lyrical. The sponge says, "We are me" and "If you press me through a strainer, / I’ll swim back together." The cricket, being a more lyrical soul, says,

A fast-aging chorus, we are bent
on happiness,
singing our own requiem
to please others: like stars, a soft tent
of loneliness,
the pulse of emptiness and mortal pleasure.
Some of Grossman's creatures confront the topic of consciousness, but none does it more charmingly than the coatimundi. Here is the entire poem:

Propped in a notch,
my snout moving
through the blue sky

like a windbag,
my sensitive eyes
appealing to our young,

born in July,
and to the crowd
on the ground sniffing,

I suddenly realize
that consciousness
is only process,

the universe one movement,
and I
am the manifestation

of nothing,
surrounded by
a coatimundi.

After attending carefully to the shepherd's discourse in the first section, then describing themselves in the second, the animals—again a group—become sullen and rebellious in the third, informing the shepherd that his leadership is worthless and humanity itself suspect. "Man // . . . kills his children / then weeps like a baby. . . . // We must study hard / what to avoid" (from "Humanity").

The shepherd, too, doubts himself. "I cannot regulate / my own life or face anything // with precision, calm and clarity. / I am a beggar, // reliant on the animals / for charity" ("Self-examination").
Following this crisis, he buries himself in dung, dies and is resurrected. After running off the insincere shepherd who briefly replaced him, the true shepherd relates what he learned while he was dead to the animals, who become enlightened. The shepherd has reached a transcendent state of peace. Here is “The Grave”:

The limits of sensation receded into a vast emptiness and left me weightless, the shepherd explained.

Climbing, climbing up to where the stars breathe their fragrant mists, I found new lightness 

and saw the grasses reaching up from my mound. Their wands were like hands. The dark was like another dark once: Above I heard breath! Where was I going? Into what new life? 

And then I finally sensed the beauty of Her voice. Its message, its source that filled the first void.

I saw that my life was that mound on the ground. Where did it come from, how far down?

When the unformed forms, it must name itself and be. It cannot see itself, just see. Her voice sang.

The death-and-resurrection plot of course suggests a Christian perspective. And in the poem “Eden” the animals plead for the shepherd to tell “that story about the magic tree,” that indicating that they have heard the story before, perhaps many times. The shepherd’s Eden references some Christian elements (“there were no fruit or snakes around”), but his story leads to the polar opposite of sin and expulsion: “That tree is still there. / None of us has ever left its garden.” That story and the shepherd’s epiphany sound more Buddhist than Christian, and the book as a whole suggests a pantheistic phi-
losophy, one in which the god (or divine presence) is not He but She, as discovered in the fifth stanza of “The Grave.”

In “Epiphany,” the next poem, the shepherd realizes that he, She, and the animals are part of the same infinite system of energy, or desire, or movement:

Her notes cannot be heard,
The shepherd stuttered.

It is still that energy that still
moves everything. The one movement

that keeps the present moving. Skill.
Knowledge. Change that is form.

It is the song we call desire:
Chaste, limitless. The sound that hears!

Death leaves us in the universe.
We are what we are. Her voice is ours!

In other words, he has found what he and the animals have been seeking throughout the book: the individual’s place in the universe, which he now sees as a network of beings connected in divinity.

I think readers will enjoy The Animals on several levels. Grossman knows his animals. Yes, the jellyfish is “99% / de l’eau. // The rest, bowl.” Yes, tarantulas live 25 years. Yes, shrimp undergo ten molts. The poems’ authority is manifest throughout, but fortunately the poet isn’t satisfied with the facts. He uses them to create convincing animal portraits, complete with personalities, temperaments, and a variety of emotions.

The writing has further pleasures, as I hope the lines I’ve quoted in this review illustrate. Lyricism is a strong suit. Here’s the beginning of my favorite passage, from “Genius” (in the first section), with its delightful similes and imagery:
High in the trees
could be heard the breath

of genius. Like a bird
with a sore throat

or ropes groaning
in some sky harbor

holding at dock a boat
barely afloat. . .

Whimsical and funny at times, but mostly deadly serious, The Animals addresses the existential realities of life and spirit in a highly original form. Its length encourages reading in many sittings rather than one, and its intelligence, insight, and wit will reward such readings generously.

Pamela Alexander
A GOOD WAY TO FALL

Kevin Prufer, In a Beautiful Country (Four Way Books, 2011)

The title poem opens Kevin Prufer’s new volume; its undemonstrative, genial title and low-key diction are apt to lull us into complacency until we fully register what we’re reading. Here are the first three stanzas:

A good way to fall in love
is to turn off the headlights
and drive very fast down dark roads.

Another way to fall in love
is to say they are only mints
and swallow them with a strong drink.

Then it is autumn in the body.
Your hands are cold.
Then it is winter and we are still at war.

From the outset, an uncanny, almost subliminal tension is established between the anodyne references to “beautiful country” and falling in love and the dawning realization that “love” here bears the burden of suicide and war. We may want to interpret the first two images as simply reckless behavior, and indeed the next lines might seem to authorize a more optimistic reading: “The gold-haired girl is singing into your ear / about how we live in a beautiful country. / Snow drifts from the clouds // into your drink. It doesn’t matter about the war.” But the poem then turns again, this time unmistakably:

A good way to fall in love
is to close up the garage and turn the engine on,

then down you’ll fall through lovely mists
as a body might fall early one morning
from a high window into love....
What makes this poem, like much of Prufer’s extraordinary new collection, so powerful is its command of a multilayered and utterly distinctive tonality; turning repeatedly back on itself, shifting between major and minor keys, it keeps the reader on guard, uncomfortably alert to what will happen next, and in the process implicating us directly in its emotional landscape. The final stanzas tunnel even more relentlessly down and in:

...Love,

the broken glass. Love, the scissors and the water basin. A good way to fall is with a rope to catch you.

A good way is with something to drink to help you march forward. The gold-haired girl says, Don’t worry

about the armies, says, We live in a time full of love. You’re thinking about this too much. Slow down. Nothing bad will happen.

It’s a devastating moment, too unfiltered and interior to call “irony,” which would denote a certain rhetorical detachment. And yet of course, paradoxically, our experience of the poem has been minutely managed and controlled.

The quiet, plainspoken voice we hear in these poems is in fact deeply subversive: in its measured and meticulous way it manages to uncover powerful strains of psychological and political unease. As in his previous collection, National Anthem, Prufer’s subjects are at once deeply personal (though not overtly autobiographical) and haunted by social and cultural crisis. He engages the political not by locating the poem in specific historical conflict, but indirectly, through implication and suggestion, so that, for instance, the war in the title poem could be any modern war. Individual poems evoke the ominous power of militarism, but in a peculiarly private and domesticated way, as in the beginning of “Patriot Missile”:
I loved the half-constructed hulk of it,
the firing condenser that, bared,
captured the light
and made of it a copper flare—
nose and husk, electrolyte.
And I, tweezing a clot of oil, a metal shaving from its stilled heart,
might smile, as if to tell it *Live*—

Another poem, which begins “I’ll make you a bomb,” is disconcertingly titled “Love Poem,” and, after proceeding through a series of increasingly tender-yet-alarming offers (“I’ll make you a swan, / one-two-three folds and now it’s done, but it will not fly, / its wing tips burning like fuses,” “I’ll make you a little white dress, / inside it your heart says *bang, bang, bang*, your mind / like a swan’s”), concludes:

...Careful, it’s shaped like a peanut,
careful of when it decays, careful, it may implode.
Don’t you love me? Look what I’ve made you.

Prüfer’s willingness to let the poem’s creepy logic extend itself this far pays off; its portrait of a romantic obsessive taps into a broader cultural obsession with bombmaking (military? terrorist?), and somehow the voice holds the disparate impulses together in a completely persuasive and chilling way.

The book’s elegiac mood is constructed in part by its awareness of its historical matrix: a number of poems (“What I Gave the 20th Century,” “The 20th Century”) bid a rueful farewell to the past, while others (“The New Century”) cast an apprehensive glance ahead. But much of the collection takes a more personal approach, framing its concerns through individualized, character-based narratives even when a title suggests a more thematic focus, so that, for example, a poem called “Late Empires” is centered on the image of a murdered girl’s body by the side of a road, and another, titled “Recent History,” tells the story of a man who dives by accident into an empty swimming pool. (Characteristically, though, the latter poem is
punctuated three times with variations on the refrain “There was a war on,” which seems like a *non sequitur* yet is anything but.)

The emphasis on lyric narrative goes a long way toward accounting for the book’s exceptional poise and balance: narrative distance keeps even the most intimate poems from feeling confessional in any conventional sense. Indeed, at a number of key moments, the speaker draws back from the story he’s telling to acknowledge his own status as storyteller (“That painting in front of you now / I made from memory”; “From footsteps and the noise of wheels, I made up stories”; “I am inventing this story on a quiet night in an empty house / in the rural Midwest”). In lesser hands, this sort of self-consciousness might feel merely gimmicky, but Prufer manages to make it seem all of a piece with the book’s deep anxiety about the nature of identity in a fragmented age.

As the examples I’ve cited will suggest, the landscape of *In a Beautiful Country* is uncommonly dark: illness, violence, accident, war, or death appear in nearly every poem. The mood is sometimes reminiscent of the grim detachment of Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” or Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (“He’d fought in the war / and won. / When he died, they put him in a vase”), or even the sardonic flippancy of Edward Gorey (“I saw you tumble from the roof. / It broke your head in two”). Crucially, though, the experience of reading the book, while bracing, is also exceedingly pleasurable. This is in part due to the sheer versatility of Prufer’s writing, its command of cadence and voice, its formal variety. The poems range from sonnets and off-rhymed quatrains to multisectioned poems to long prose lines that spill down the page, suggesting a variety of approaches to its obsessive themes. The book is divided into twelve sections of four poems each, adding another sort of formal interest.

Fundamentally, though, what keeps this collection from unremitting gloom comes back to the way its tonality is layered and multiplicitous, its sensibility capacious, so that, for example, “How he grew to love the jets / risen from the base / and heavy with bombs” can be followed by “Or gentler things, / a bee ravishing a flower, / the plummet of leaves.” If on one level the title “In a Beau-
tiful Country” carries a heavy load of irony, on another level it’s meant sincerely: this is a beautiful country, the book insists, and much of the elegiac force depends on our recognizing it. There’s also a note of innocence struck throughout the collection: many of the narrative poems are constructed as fables or parables, couching their often brutal content within a frame of memory or invention, or infusing them with a tender dream-logic. It might sound as though these conflicting impulses would end up canceling each other out, but in fact they cohere in dynamic, resonant ways. This is most apparent in poems too long to quote here (such as “On Mercy,” “The Dead Mother,” and “Night Watch”), which accrete meaning as they spiral back on themselves. But I think I can demonstrate the point by quoting entire a poem which I find almost continuously surprising, and yet completely persuasive emotionally. It’s Prufer’s work at its most visionary, compassionate, and true:

SEEDS

The pepper on the cutting board and the seeds inside it: a tiny congregation in a doomed church.

Or the sliced canteloupe and its stringy heart—sweet and slick, the closest thing to rot.

I was thinking of you when, distracted, I cut my hand so blood pearled, then, seed-like, dripped into the sink.

I was thinking of the thick blue vein where the IV goes.

(Or the mourner who planted his wife beneath his window. She didn’t sprout. She didn’t sprout.

Then, one day, an onion shoot, which he devoured.)
Darling, do not die tonight. The doctors are good, the hospital quiet as a pill beneath chaff-like stars.

Darling, I brought you flowers and sat by your bed until the white moon rolled behind the towers.

These days, the faucets won't stop dripping, and I stand in the kitchen dreaming of nurses who roam the white halls like quiet animals—and you, in your bed, unable to call them.

Kevin Prufer is one of the most vital poets of his generation, saying important things about our culture in fearless, eloquent ways.

David Walker
Evie Shockley, the new black (Wesleyan, 2011)

It wasn't so long ago that formalism and innovative poetry seemed to be mutually exclusive categories. Rebel Angels, the 1996 anthology of formal verse, was as forcefully a manifesto as the anthologies of "language" and post-modern poetry that were still coming out in the 1990s; and if "experimental" or "innovative" poetry has become more mainstream in the years since, it has rarely crossed into the formal camp, at least among white poets.

Meanwhile, there's been an enormous outpouring of poetry by African Americans. Following the work of older poets like Marilyn Nelson, who have put form to surprising new uses (Nelson's royal crown of sonnets for Emmett Till is perhaps the ultimate example), many books by younger African American poets feature poems in both traditional forms (the villanelle, the sestina) and more recently invented ones. On the other "side," there has also been a less-noticed but equally important flowering of innovative African American poetry; Arielle Greenberg discusses this movement, specifically among younger poets, in a deeply insightful piece in the January-February 2012 American Poetry Review.

But some African American poets themselves have recently looked back and shown us that much African American experimental poetry is in fact rooted in the use and subversion of form. Elizabeth Alexander's "New Ideas about Black Experimental Poetry" in the Fall 2011 Michigan Quarterly Review notes the phenomenon of "innovating from within" the form, using Gwendolyn Brooks as a primary example. In much more detail, the first half of Evie Shockley's Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry (Iowa, 2011) discusses innovative uses of form by Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, and Harryette Mullen.

Shockley's own new book of poems exemplifies this fusion of the formal and innovative as well as any recent book I can think of. Shockley isn't simply a formalist, nor does she always seem radically innovative: the new black includes love poems and poems in narrative and epistolary modes that provide accessible moments of relief.
against the more demanding work. And no matter how experimental, the book as a whole allows, in Greenberg’s words, “subject matter to remain at the core.”

Much but not all of the new black is written (to use a distinction I recently heard Natasha Tretheway make) not just “from racialized experience,” but explicitly “about” race; equally important is a focus throughout on (mostly) African American women. The book begins with a prefatory unrhymed sonnet implicitly referencing Obama’s election; it’s followed, early on, by an epistolary poem in the voice of Frederick Douglass. The long first section, called “out with the old,” foregrounds both distant and recent American history: Thomas Jefferson, Stanley Tookie Williams, and many African American women make appearances. Then, following a short section that turns both more explicitly autobiographical and more generally “political,” a long third section that we would expect to be called “in with the new” turns out to be “out with the new” instead. Historical references continue in this section, which begins with a rhymed sonnet called “owed to shirley chisholm,” but the past is more often explicitly juxtaposed with the present here. The penultimate poem of this section brings together Obama and Frederick Douglass, who had appeared separately in the first section, a coming together that represents one of the driving forces of the book: from the first Obama poem onward, it’s clear that past and present, old and new are entangled in intricate ways that make it important, for instance, “to ask how new / and re- beginnings differ,” and to note that “the hard part comes afterwards.” Ultimately, “out with” suggests “out in the open with” as much as it does “away with,” whether in reference to the old or to the new.

The innovative use of “old” forms is a stylistic counterpoint to—or outgrowth of—this thematic concern. The new black includes three rhymed sonnets and fourteen unrhymed ones (including a sequence), a sequence of haiku, two ghazals, a poem in rhymed quatrains, and a sestina, as well as three gigans and a bop (forms invented by Ruth Ellen Kocher and Afaa Michael Weaver, respectively). One poem uses mesostics, another a variation on acrostics; two are shaped poems: an X and an O appear in different sections of the book, referencing race on the one hand (the intersection of
African and American) and women on the other. There are a number of prose poems, often reflecting other literary forms, including a collage of fairy tales ("never after") and nursery rhymes ("duck, duck, redux"). Anaphora is a frequent structuring device, as is the catalog.

But even when she's using these forms—or perhaps especially when she's using them—Shockley is subverting them in ways that make them among the book's most stunningly innovative and deeply challenging poems. Perhaps my favorite poem, which takes me by surprise each time I read it, is a sestina called "clare's song" that is a collage of words appearing to have come from a thesaurus: each line contains several synonyms for a meaning of one of the end words—and the "meaning" changes in each stanza. This is pretty amazing in itself; but as the title and "after nella larsen" at the end of the poem suggest, the poem itself is a kind of abstraction of Larsen's *Passing*, whose character Clare passes for white and dies at the end of the book. Experiencing the poem is like reading a condensed form of the novel, with emotional complexities moving us through a series of apparent triumphs and ultimate defeats. Here is the first stanza of the poem—and, to give a sense of how it shifts, the beginning of the second:

```
blonde fair bleached faded pale pastel light
blameless clean innocent guiltless pure clear
anatomy build figure person physique form
complexion countenance hue mien tint cast
bead dab dash ounce iota spot trace drop
succeed qualify answer do suffice suit pass
authorization permit ticket license paper visa pass
effortless facile moderate smooth undemanding light
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And here is the end:

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model pattern fashion form appearance contour cast
luminous radiant clear sunny ablaze aglow light
ebb fade wane depart drop end die decease pass
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The last word is made more poignant by the fact that this use of "pass" is more common among black speakers than white: the "pass" of the first line, which takes Larsen’s tragic heroine “out” of her race, brings her back in the last.

As noted, women are central in many of the poems, including Frederick Douglass’s letter, which addresses his daughter and discusses his wives. The poem in the shape of a (sort-of) O is filled with references to women both past and present, and begins: “at the musée de l’homme an exhibit called femmes du monde”—a reference I thought must be invented until I looked it up. This is one of several “facts” I learned from the book; another is that Marilyn Monroe, a “huge fan” of Ella Fitzgerald, helped the singer in the beginning of her career. Shockley brilliantly uses the recently invented form of the gigan to fuse the two women and the fact of their “stardom” into a celebration of “all women”:

her name was ella, elle, french for all woman,
everywoman, she, the third person, feminine,

hippy, buxom, regal curls piled atop her head,
soft shiny crown for her diamond voice, the soaring swooping bird, the orchestra in her throat, the stars

in her eyes, the star in front of her eyes each night,
one week, at the mocambo, her name was norma,

she wasn’t normal, blonde, her name was marilyn,
in i in angelic, first person, created, an immaculate
concept, the image of pure beauty, sound, power,
her name was ella, elle in french, all women,

in her, i’s, the star in front of her eyes, each night,
glamorous, first lady of song, iconic, backstage,
the effort behind the effortlessness, the exercise,
the training, the makeup that made up the woman,
her name was norma, marilyn, ella, est-elle, the star.

In this poem (and differently, in the sestina), there’s a great deal of what I think of as “word work.” The shifts between words for third and first person aren’t just playful; they’re one of several language-driven moves (follow, from these, the eyes and the stars for others) that make the movement between Ella and Marilyn seamless.

“Word work” like this becomes a driving force in the last section of the book, a sequence of thirteen unrhymed sonnets called “the fare-well letters” that move through so many wickedly wonderful associations of both sound and meaning that I discover new aha! moments on each return visit. Here is “dear white xmas”:

cross my heart. heat. hurt. an
insulting injury. the wound
is hard to place. oh. ou? x marks
the spot. spooky. ’tis the sea-
son to be haunted. attached
to the past. in the grip of ships.
ahoy! unmoored. a pale ailment.
hail and well met. meant well.
enough. frothy, snow-capped
waves. an icy greeting. a cold
snap. slap. slip. a lightmare
lightly whipped. screamy. hissy.
fit to be tied. a tempered tantrum.
just like the ones I used to throw.

This, the penultimate poem in the book, quotes not only the first poem in the sequence (“the wound / is hard to place”) but also the “X” poem. The focus on African American history is much more subtle here than in “x marks the spot,” relying on a juxtaposition of Christmas and race and conveyed by constant shifts in sound (“snap. slap. slip. a lightmare / lightly whipped”) as well as line breaks (“sea-”) and caesurae (“well met. meant well. / enough”) that allow double and qualified meanings to proliferate on the page.
The function of strategies like these is defined as well as illustrated in a poem called "Explosives." Written in columns that extend across two pages, the poem is impossible to quote properly; but here are its beginning lines, minus very large spaces: "a bomb is a statement a poem is a question / a bomb is what a statement a poem is a quest / a poem requests / the pleasure of your mental energy." The reader of the new black is indeed so energized: one simply can’t read these poems passively. One section of the sequence "the cold" begins "—that some morning we will push / the earth too far" and ends: "we should quake :: it's our fault"; another of the unrhymed sonnets, "dear mid-afternoon nap," ends "wake up, wake up, / wherever you are! mourning / bells. hear? ring, rang, wrong." Rarely mere puns, the word shifts often involve skewed allusions, as in "just like the ones I used to throw" at the end of "dear white xmas," or "it was a dark and nightly / storm" at the beginning of "bop for presidential politics, c. 2008." These distortions are often a lot of fun (a ghazal about southern trees includes the speaker saying to a northerner, "frankly, my dear, that's a magnolia"); but they also pack a lot of emotional and intellectual resonance, as old phrases are recycled and made new.

Another strategy that requires the expenditure of "mental energy" is the suppression of overt reference. Used in poems like "dear white xmas," this technique becomes central in several poems that suppress the tenor of a metaphor altogether. Here is "my life as china," the prose poem that opens the first long section:

i was imported :: i was soft in the hills where they found me :: shining in a private dark :: i absorbed fire and became fact :: i was fragile :: i incorporated burnt cattle bones' powdered remains :: ashes to ashes :: i was baptized in heat :: fed on destruction :: i was not destroyer :: was not destroyed :: i vitrified :: none of me was the same :: i was many :: how can i say this :: i was domesticated :: trusted :: treasured :: i was translucent but not clear :: put me to your lips :: I will not give :: I will give you what you have given me
The poem not only references past and present, it also implicitly brings together “my life” and the life of a people. The exclusion of reference is similarly used in “to see the minus,” another poem in gigan form that, without saying so, references both Hurricane Katrina and a more general sense of racial loss. The poem begins:

the ghost. the thing we could touch if its throbbing absence were any more vast, any more like a molecule

of jupiter, all mass, weighing us down, but nothing we can put a finger on. we squint to see the minus: water take away holy, take away book, take away tree, take away phantom limb, a connection our brains keep trying to make with the dead and gone. minus family, minus portrait,

minus heirloom, minus hand-me-down, minus hand.

A “connection our brains keep trying to make / with the dead and gone” describes one side of the new/old thrust of the new black. The other appears as one of a series of “notes to my nieces”:

trust me on this. g o d stands for good old days, and if you have enough faith, you can remember them almost like you were there, on your knees with us, scrubbing them clean or praying for the millennium, that next life, when the g o d would be n e w : not especially white.

For a white reader, the experience of reading into this “not especially white” world is an exhilarating and perhaps even attitude-altering challenge. For any reader, the most complex of Evie Shockley’s poems are indeed explosive.

Martha Collins
RAY AMOROSI has a new book, *Lazarus*, due out from Lost Horse Press this spring.

BRUCE BEASLEY is the author of seven collections of poems, including *The Corpse Flower: New and Selected Poems* and *Theophobia*, forthcoming in fall 2012 from BOA Editions.

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MARIANNE BORUCH’s recent work is a seventh collection of poems, *The Book of Hours*, and a memoir, *The Glimpse Traveler*, both published in 2011. She’s currently on a Fulbright, teaching and writing at the University of Edinburgh.

BEVERLEY BIE BRAHIC’s work includes the poetry collection *Against Gravity*, and translations of Francis Ponge, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Hélène Cixous. A selection of Apollinaire translations, *My Little Auto*, will be published by CB editions in February.

TRACI BRIMHALL is the author of *Our Lady of the Ruins* (Norton, forthcoming), winner of the Barnard Women Poets Prize, and *Rookery* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), winner of the Crab Orchard Series First Book Award. She’s currently a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University.

HILDRED CRILL’s poems have appeared in many journals. Her English translations of Per Wästberg’s poems are published in *Ortbestämmning/ Determination of Place* (Ars Interpres Publications, 2008). She lives in Stockholm, Sweden.

ANGIE ESTES is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Tryst* (Oberlin College Press, 2009), named one of two finalists for the 2010 Pulitzer Prize. Her awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, an NEA Fellowship in Poetry, and the Alice Fay di Castagnola Prize from the Poetry Society of America.


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DORE KIESSELBACH lives in Minneapolis, just shy of the 45th parallel. His first collection, *Salt Pier,* won the 2011 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize and will be out this fall from Pittsburgh.

KARL KROLOW (1915-1998), one of Germany’s literary giants of the last century, published many volumes of poems, prose, translations, and criticism. His translator, STUART FRIEBERT, has published two volumes of Krolow translations, one in the FIELD Translation Series.

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LIA PURPURA’s new collection of essays, *Rough Likeness,* has just been published by Sarabande Books.

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JEAN VALENTINE’s most recent book of poems is Break the Glass, published by Copper Canyon in 2010.

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NANCY WILLARD is the author of twelve books of poetry. Her most recent is a collection of essays on writing, The Left-Handed Story (University of Michigan Press).

KATHLEEN WINTER’s first collection, Nostalgia from the Criminal Past, won the Antivenom Poetry Award and will be published by Elixir Press in 2012.

FRANZ WRIGHT’s Kindertotenwald, a book of 65 prose poems, appeared last fall. His next collection, F, poems in prose and verse, will be published in 2013.
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