CONTENTS

Lee Upton 7 Why Am I Not Invited to Your Party?
8 The Sunflower

Bob Hicok 9 America: a primer
10 Faith
11 Two sides of a coin

Diane K. Martin 12 Two Bits

Michael McGriff 13 Wig

15 Intimacy

Daniel Biegelson 16 We Move in Abundance
17 We Live in an Unknown Sea

Talvikki Ansel 18 16 Stanzas in February

Mark Irwin 20 Dissolving Parable
21 Open

Aleš Šteger 22 He writes
translated by Brian Henry

Aimée Sands 23 The longer we stay the deeper the knowledge
24 Verge

Steven Chung 25 Forgery
26 Bad Children
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Poem/Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heather Sellers</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Peninsula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennie Malboeuf</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>First Mirror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Wasserboehr</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Tea with Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabeth Murawski</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Number 156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Hopkins’ Room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray Amorosi</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Sparta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Sharkey</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Kollwitz: The Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison Adair</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>When Horses Turn Down the Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph Burns</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Vinita, Oklahoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>The Valium Song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Thomas</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Sonnet with Backpack and Jack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Sonnet with Mozart and Bear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Wagenaar</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Heat Wave (Poem for Novica Tadic Perhaps)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>The Flight of the Astronomers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Huffman</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Double Sonnet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diane Louie</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Visiting Gertrude Stein in Père-Lachaise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Set in Motion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ute von Funcke</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Postwar Fragment (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>translated by Stuart Frieber</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Postwar Fragment (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Molly Spencer 47  Conversation with Shower and Vestibule
48  Conversation with Distance and Shaking
49  Conversation with Windows and Green

Sandra McPherson 50  Runneth Over

Jackson Holbert 51  James Madison

David Baker 52  Early May

Poetry 2017: Four Review-Essays

Kazim Ali 54  “I Would Give a Sacred Mountain a Wedgie”
    Tommy Pico, Nature Poem

Martha Collins 59  Underspeak
    Wesley Rothman, Subwoofer

Pamela Alexander 62  Poodle Tails and Empty Chairs
    Adam Giannelli, Tremulous Hinge

Mark Neely 67  Dreaming of Heroes
    Jonathan Blunk, James Wright: A Life in Poetry

From the Archives

David Young 75  Translating America (Spring 2005)
85  Contributors
WHY AM I NOT INVITED TO YOUR PARTY?

And what are your parties like without me?
   Dancing? Is there dancing?
I used to dance. I danced like someone stung.
   Agony was my means. I danced
to words I’ve never said aloud:
   like scullery and larder.
And whenever what was playing stopped
   I poured myself back into my body
like a deer at the side of a highway turning
   away from the impulse to cross.
And exactly because I was all over the graph
   someone left the party
saddled in the biggest gleaming body.
   More than once I sacrificed my dignity
on the slab of a kitchen island.
   I wore my hooves on backwards.
The household lamps shook with fright.
   I must have saved countless lives.
More than once I danced off the cliff
   and let everyone, first, jump from my back.
It was wonderful, wasn’t it?
   It was. That’s what it was.
THE SUNFLOWER

When I was in my twenties
   I used to wash the same blouse in the sink
three nights in a row
   so I could keep wearing it.
I liked that blouse that much

   although it didn’t bring me luck.
I’d lie on the couch that was my bed
   with books around me, my hands stuttering to sleep.
I’d wake up, ink on ink.
   I was like someone who burns down a barn—

full of contrition
   for the crime and for being in love with the hay.
I didn’t know how not to trust strangers.
   I met a man who chastised me for being happy.
Being serious: what he wanted from me.

   I became like one of those sunflowers whose heavy head
perpetually bends to the dirt.
   I denied I was happy. The truth was:
even when some of the worst happened
   one part of me was happy. I hid my happiness

as if I knew I would need it later
   and like anyone I did. I never liked sunflowers
until my mother asked for them. When she was losing her sight
   they were what she could see.
AMERICA: A PRIMER

I sleep with a lot of women,
a lot of men, but my bed’s

as big as my house, my house
is as big as the city, the city’s

as big as the country, you see
where this is going?—

heaven’s everywhere
someone needs a place to rest

and someone else says,
Come in.
FAITH

Judaism would be more popular without gefilte fish, I tell my wife's rabbi every time I see her at the grocer's getting her sustenance bagged by the Holocaust denier who lives down the street from me, a nice kid who's only a Nazi out of loneliness, unlike his friend, who's a Nazi out of tradition, his father telling me once the same brand of shit I've heard my whole life about Jews or blacks or people with elbows other people don't like, with dance moves and ideas that breed fire or need a shave, and the cool thing about her is she's working on the kid, on his big eyes and spasmodic smile by talking to him about baseball and Auschwitz and girls and girls and BMX bikes and zyklon-B, she talks to anyone who has a face, who won the lottery of breath, and she'll get there with him if not his pal, is my prediction for evolution in my little burg, teeter teeter teeter totter, something tips, something falls in some minds and decency wakes up, blood notices blood and one day he'll realize he doesn't even know what kike means, and how alone he is, and why punch the world in the face when that's a very big face and hands are fans of hold more than shatter
TWO SIDES OF A COIN

Using the Freedom of Information Act,
I made the sun tell me what it’s thinking—

I am a busy busy busy busy bee—

and told it about skin cancer,
which brought home a point
most of us know but forget:

even when the sun wants to,
it can’t cry, the moon can’t cry,
whales sound as if they’re crying
when they’re not, and people are alone
in crying at the sad movies we make
to make us cry at sad movies.

We’re also the only creatures
who remember going to the beach
with a pail that had a picture
of a little girl
at the beach with a pail,
who had a similar pail
and a little girl all her own,
and so on, infinity
digs and digs its holes
and the credits run
and we sniffle and adjust
to the light of reason
we have every reason
to fear doesn’t want us
and will never leave us alone.
The street was the old street, and the house
the one you know, though the hill was steeper,
more imposing. We drove down to a shop
I never knew was there, its sign marked by type
—narrow gold sans serif three feet tall, on a black
ground—and you parked and went in for matches.
They had none. So you turned the car around
and drove back uphill, but just past number 27
you changed your mind and pulled into a drive
—the neighbor, Lynne D, who is dead now,
—and then, because you will do these things,
you honked: Shave and a haircut (pause) two bits.
I got out, slamming the door so you would be
sure to know I was angry and hadn’t just forgotten
my sunglasses. I found myself inside, at the window,
noticing our car, a black BMW, and wondered how
we could afford one. The boy was asleep, again,
still, in the backseat. I wanted you to stop the car
and you did, and I waited, watching us both: who
would make the first move, who would say sorry.
Michael McGriff

WIG

My mother in the backyard
adjusting her wig
down the gully the dead gathered
beneath the shade of evergreens

I always wanted to hang lanterns
from their invisible antlers

the wig was new
one of three

that made her look
like she'd spent the morning

getting ready for dinner
and the creek run dry

and filled with wasps
like dice set loose

from a tumbler
and the air still

as an envelope stuffed
into another envelope

and carried in the breast pocket
of a man who's since

become that rustling sound
of matted velvet

forked and scraped and rutting
against the low branches
Libby Burton

YOUR MOTHER: FRANZ KAFKA.
MY FATHER: A HOLE RIPPED IN THE NIGHT.

When we met the hot song on your lips did not stand a chance against the things I wanted to do to you, things that would damage your person in delicate, irreparable ways. Now Wednesday evenings are filled with quiet cars caressing the curb, dead voices of distant children, some hot hum of normalcy. And the dress I wore was this weary world. But in the future of our inevitability, there are broken shopping carts. And you have buried the cat’s bones in the yard, so when I move to admire the gazebo, to touch the unruly lavender bush and break its fruit to pieces, I cross a delicate death and arrive unscathed.
At dusk, a rabbit quick in the yard like liquor, and once, how Josh called me the most beautiful thing to ever perch naked on his brown chair.

That summer I learned loving oneself is difficult, and it takes a very long time. But the prize for this is two bodies and how they will betray us—easily at first, and then with vigor and memories.

It is moments like this that I wonder: did my mother wear skirts as a child? Where did she place her knees? The cough and the wine mean different feelings at different times. The lilies mean only one specific word.

Bent over Josh’s unmade bed I learned to be kinder to my body. The skin loose from my mother’s naked knee saying: hold even this hurt close, too.
It’s a ridiculous argument, but my son stands his ground. Why can’t he attach a balloon to a teacup and fly to New Jersey? Why is our neighbor’s yard filled with dandelions and drift? Why do you own a house and not a home? Why do you mow the lawn and despise clover? It’s bedtime. The fawn is speckled. Tears the grass up. So the roots dangle. So you received awe. Does the gardenia sleep in a garden bed? Go to sleep. With stars.

And what about the column of air above? The water rights below? Why is my wife so beautiful? Why is the ground so hard even after rain? What have years done to this poem? Catastrophe upon catastrophe? Each to each? As layers of sediment disparately touch? Why is a bell ringing?

Why do we long for a past we never lived or even visited like tourists in Neil Young t-shirts staring into an Icelandic volcano? Why does my friend solder stained glass windows in his garage at night? Fumbling with light? Why is a bell ringing? Why do I assume all the hives of my life exist somewhere still as if I could walk into anyone again and end somehow here? Why do I feel guilty for writing this poem? What makes us legible and through which lens do we look? Why a sudden explosion of question marks?

Someone is playing a violin on the subway platform again. Someone has an open case of cast coins and a few fisted dollars. Someone has a litter of roses. Someone is holding hands with someone. Someone in white kicks tips upright on their toes to see the light pouring out from the darkness. Someone is playing with a bow easing along strings when the gunfire begins again and people we know and don’t know scream and crouch, scatter and dive, cover heads and each other and fall in pools.

Do we experience the same violence? From the inside out? The outside in? Save it and store it and feed it to each other. Bitter. Brittle. Stone. These are bodies. We exclude ourselves. Our experience uniformly distinct. Rendered and unredeemable. Immediate and at a remove. Earthly and inhuman.
WE LIVE IN AN UNKNOWN SEA

City of secondary egresses or flightless egrets. Everything contains or radiates commentary. The v’s above diminished and misplaced. North and south reduced—a redaction of climate. Trees move west. No handholds. No guardrails, but passengers suspended in the tiled light of the subway terminal. There is someone there standing with one hand holding a bouquet in a hurry to apologize and stave off an ending or hurried at the proposition of making love or both or anxious to hit the shrinking window of visiting hours at the hospital around the corner or to make a daughter’s first grade recital or to reach the Long Island cemeteries before rush hour. The sky we cannot see does not speak. It burns. Tracks rust off into darkness. The footholds exist but grow and grow larger. When you were younger, you stacked stones upon stones. We will not be remembered into life.
Talvikki Ansel

16 STANZAS IN FEBRUARY

The cow pasture and starlings
that settle all at once like a blanket,
dark raisins over the cows' heads,

* 

lone goose, flying down river
third violin, does it hope to catch up

* 

did it not notice the gathering,
others heaving themselves from the pond?

* 

third violin in the shadow of
the violas, who would like to be a viola

* 

rich-voiced as a blue-tick coonhound.

* 

In February, sun edges the tree trunks
like a talent still to show itself,
maybe the third violin would slide into
the seconds,

* 

the adolescent in "Personal Use Typing"
realize she could slow down and make no mistakes,

* 

an acceptable skill
for the world of work.
When a new chicken was introduced
she was first boss of the flock but now they all
get along: scrutinize my boots,
mittened hand reaching into the grain pail,

the radius of a white bowl.

To see them together is to forget
one was the boss, one ate a mouse,
one was intent on finding seeds

in the curved wrists of the maple roots.

The latch on the front door opens
as you bring in firewood, blows open
the back door

sends cats up the walls of the mudroom
to cling to the shelf
with its faded bottle of soap bubbles,

an empty wand, frozen, open-mouthed,

March, all that deceptive light
but no fruits yet.
Mark Irwin

DISSOLVING PARABLE

In the woods they cut each other's hair and let it fall
just like that, just

like the sashaying yellow leaves they finally lay down on, just
a magic blanket

the earth would eat, and once in the new apartment she lay down
on her open

suitcase of clothes and slept till those clothes were warm, just like she
was getting ready

to walk into the woods to become involved in falling snow,
but not the way

soldiers did in the Ardennes, in 1944, throwing red snowballs, just
like that, just to

pass the lousy time, he told her in the dusk as she
dug with her hands through

snow and the earth where pieces of mica and quartz glittered among
dark roots and stones

and she remembered unmaking the bed when he was inside her, just
like that, just
as the sky clearing

became diffuse like a face in memory.
When they entered the house, which was a very large house the way a cloud is large, the pages of their story seemed like cracks in the earth, a man’s shirt, or a woman’s blouse, and the stranger in the house told them to make themselves at home in the house that was not their house, and told them to write down the three most important gifts in each of their lives, and then continued to explain how there were three doors in the house and at each door they must forfeit one of these gifts, and how the real story always begins at the third door, where each of them will pause and begin to crawl, leaving the field of time, where now you pause, touching the door of this page, wiping away each word, waiting to enter.
He writes, places marks, becomes excited,
Wastes his whole life on an apparently useless activity.

No one notices his undertaking.
Children run around, unaware they erase his efforts.

Despite everything, he’s convinced that the fate of the universe
Is in his hands, depends on his persistence.

What was uncovered countless times
Will be uncovered again.

His activity prolongs the word *foam*,
The word *fan*, the word *this*, the word *presence*.

It prolongs the artful veiling
That accompanies the seducer, poetry.

Weary bathers shake the towels
They were lying on all day on the sand.

What remains is an impression that will be erased again and again.
What there is is the revolt against the end of summer.

*translated by Brian Henry*
Aimée Sands

THE LONGER WE STAY THE DEEPER THE KNOWLEDGE

It didn't rain today, apples stayed on the trees and crows flustered a hawk high above the beeches. The littlest birds traveled among brushy seed heads, alert and brown as stalks they clung to. No water ran in the streambed, but a shadowed pool remained.

Need is like crabgrass, brittle and tough, weeds that hide their roots, undergrowth parting as leaves shrivel, caution of light between wooden shafts; Is this a warning or a promise, darkness turning and turning, the boil of October a lens to winter.
Down, like a spider unspooling, sticky-legged,
the industry and gait, omnivorous attention
to plaster, cornice, basin, flange, and the wide swing
from leaf-tip to stalk, trapeze of the glistening, trailing thread.

It’s like this: the unspooling of our pursuits,
solitary and waxed with spittle, the clefs, the borders,
the stanzas we make, mouths pursed, fingers
fretted to keyboards, trowels, a splay of colored pencils,

the wide curves we trace like the wild, unsparing
swings of the spider, knotting, unknotting as we go,
the urge, the practice, the factory of our regard—
and emerging, spent or futile at day’s end

the spider girdling its porcelain web at the gable,
the threshold, what we have and have not yet begun.
FORGERY

Ignore the winter stranded
on the windowsills. Each whale
beached in similar fashion
lands into celebrity. I only celebrate
when the coast is a ghost,
just a simple haunt for spring
breakers on booze, or else
I miss you. More and more
the window seems too ornate
without your body blocking
the view. I want to give the tourists
privacy. Well now here is the sunset
maybe the whales wished to witness.
One eye in the sand, the other
awash with overhead sky. Please
place the creature off its side,
give it a fraction of dignity.
But I know, I know: it’s too heavy
with helplessness and by now
the stars are already out and winking
and I’m remembering how
my first winter with snow
you said that no flake
is replicable, each has its own
signature, and I joked,
I can’t tell the difference.
BAD CHILDREN

The animals that would want my body are extinct in glaciers. They can’t be anything useful, not even coal in an otherwise empty stocking come Christmas or the petroleum to fuel traffic collisions. But the government is injecting life into them, or injecting the death out from them, to save ourselves. No better way to learn from our collective mistakes than to exhume our ancestors. Bad child, my parents would never say, though I saw it in the way they left me too soon. Naughty, naughty boy. Not even history follows as stubbornly as a reputation, and history always repeats itself. So it is no surprise I agree to never have children: for what is disagreement worth other than my legs, raw but not yet frozen, trudging towards that ancient hunt called belonging? Or what use are my digits besides to count the hours left until their frostbite, the time until I meet the same fate as those almost-thawed pursuers?
Florida decays in a bold specific way: constancy.
The patio table crumbles into rust
dust as the possum skeleton shines
in the garden transparent as glass.
Even death doesn't die here.
My teeth. The tin roof, silver blossoms—
everything softens, thrives and contributes
to our collective project: turn
into a vine. People pair up for safety's
sake and I watch them retreat
to higher ground as I dwell between
mystery and envy, living as I do alone
at the seam between sea and land.
A woman, the coast, and solitude.
Vulnerable to flooding. Water rising.
To live here is to meld with here
as it disappears.
Before the looking-glass, before amenity, the calm water pitch black. Stock-still, placid, undisturbed. Incident light beat a filmy façade. How long a glance did it take until eyes knew: eyes, nose, mouth? Eve alone and confused. Reaching for the woman caught in endless drowning. How long until Adam joined his wife at the lake’s edge? Until she understood her own looks by matching another’s?

Mirrors at some point were made of stone. Icy and lambent. Smoke. Hard sand, soda, and lime. Make believe a magpie accepts her own image. Head turning in the likeness in smack perfect time. What does it mean to see the self and have the self stare back? The mind a hall of mirrors, a mother (behind you) wishing your hair had stayed black.
TEA WITH MILK

I don’t know nothing
about specific wind patterns
thank god

such violence to flowers
I can hear the blink
Or I am the trash man singing
putting in all that good karma

every music
is porn music
so if basketball be jazz
then baseball be the blues

watch the sky slowly
disappear into the moon
the moon is growing bigger
the moon gives me that face

he says look at me I’m
the very best at what I do
he says look at me
why don’t you look at me
Someone's left flowers
on her chest,
beside the life-vest
from the wrecked
Lusitania. A slightly
chubby curly-head,
on her face,
the fury of a troll,
lips in a twist,
as if to snarl a final
Never! to the mother
who disappeared
in all that water.
Was she cursing the angels
who did nothing
but watch
when the U-boat struck?
A child that young
thrown on her own
into a sea
that swallowed her
whole. The rue
in the overlong sleeves
of her sweater.
She will be buried
in a small pine box,
her rage preserved

in a mortuary photo
so disturbing
permission is required

to view it, our
nightmare Goldilocks
eaten by the bear.
HOPKINS' ROOM

Waking, he jabs the pillow, burrows deeper. Sunlight
hisses like a badger through the pane. O window
four flights up! Jump says the tempter, throw
yourself down, you boring lost sheep! His priestly
coal-black hat and coat wait on a chair, patient
as the straight-edge razor in the China basin.
The siren desk entices him to write.
Conflicted, he just lies there
crushed by doubt. Fears he’s no better
than that animal Whitman. On the mantel,
a coil of white beads, specs catching the light
like crockery in a Chardin still-life.
Ray Amorosi

SPARTA

I’m quite aware that love does not exist. After all we’re human and need to protect ourselves just like those three hundred Spartans at the pass. In this village no one has laughed openly for years ever since the first born suddenly died so young, though my tomatoes are still sweet due to several hundred pounds of time tilled through the soul each spring. Corn sways and the asparagus spears taunt the young deer failing to nibble them.

My mother was a noble woman from Capri. She believed that after she was dead everything would also die: love, farms, buildings, everything. She took small nips of vodka all day and kept her dog in the cellar at night. Her voice was a chorus of tiny birds in the sunlight. Once when my father, a Roosevelt Democrat, asked for an orange she sent a bag of them splattering down on the concrete driveway and laughed at him.

What is all this about? I died in that grey house down there with four chimneys. I soar above the fields with black wings, faster than any speed, any death. It’s all below, all mine.
herself made man, a brute
beast crawling
hauling a weighty sky

herself made woman, legs
splayed, body laid down
among the cabbages

herself made peasants armed
with scythes and pitchforks
hurtling to the fight

herself made peasants bound
and penned, heads bowed
broad shoulders useless

herself made faces combed
with dark herself etched
stroke by stroke

herself a sketch, a sleeve
a cloak, a hand, a paw
a nose, a nostril

herself a skull almost
a jaw, an absent mouth
herself drawn smoke
Allison Adair

WHEN HORSES TURN DOWN THE ROAD

Until we crossed the Md. line our men behaved as well as troops could, but here it will be hard to restrain them, for they have an idea that they are to indulge in unlicensed plunder.
—Maj. Gen. William Dorsey Pender, C.S.A., to his wife, June 1863

First, both rings into the hollow clock. The clock, then, behind a canister of flour on the pantry shelf. At this hour shadows will soften edges. Candlesticks under a floorboard, use the old book to pound it back flat, just like he showed you, before wiping his neck with a slow hand, before waving from the yard. Work the third stone out of the hearth’s floor, papers folded and folded again, bring the children to your skirts. Turn their faces away from what comes, from what will be done, stand as these soldiers’ own mothers would stand.

The small white shoes on the mantel can stay—some things won’t be taken no matter how many boots cross the gate, no matter how wide you open your own stone door.
When my Uncle Ralph arrived to drive my father to Vinita State Hospital he was careful to sit down in a kitchen chair and smile then say, *Now Bill, we have to take you to the nut house.* My father had been drunk five days. He looked across the room at my mother, who obviously had telephoned Ralph—he looked like that day we pulled out of Ten Killer, when three birds laughed above our heads, as we loaded tackle into the trunk so quietly rods and reels so lost in line set themselves near tire iron. We could hear the rattle, my brothers and I, we could chart the way the silo held its sliding grain, the Burma Shave narrative distending crazy calm. It was where they dried out, the people we became, who drank to be drunk.

They took a Pittsburgh left and passed under a great eucalyptus as if an elephant could hear them, as if change were a dance and dancing gave way to the smell of alfalfa at night. A turbine called from outgoing air. What did they say, the hard things? The words from years from breath from salt build up. I’m forgetting now the face as it looks back, the lock of hair, the reversed confused question of it. Each time the car backs away from the garage made into a bedroom the glare hides the uneven expression altered by memory and my own lying. They’re younger than I am, going there to a front desk where two men like in the movies walk one of them away and out of sight. To electrodes on the temple. Arc within wings over duck’s ass.
THE VALIUM SONG

The regularity of the honeycomb. The boy
on a bike riding into the center of town. Hexagonal
cells making a cluster the boy pumps away from.
The First National Bank of Tulsa going pink
to orange to blue even in daytime.
Bees waiting a few seconds before letting go of nectar.
Hanging out on a front porch. Wanting
exact water in the honey in the cell.
The boy gets sunstroke like bees get honey.
Bundles of pollen get brood. The sound
of flesh hitting flesh in the dark. The way
he throws his bike down and runs hard across dirt
to stop his father from hitting his mother.
The scraped abdomen, spine on the basket
hitting a wall. Not the violence but the time
after the time. Not the heavy smell of oil base paint
off tint finding moonlight, but the woman who fixates on it.
Each time thinking maybe of singing in that college
she had a scholarship to. Snake bit Eurydice.
Orpheus wanting back in,
his love declaring itself, bawling
on a porch, weaving through light and dark,
that it's sorry. Sorry moonlight sticks to oil base.
Sorry when bees come back in daytime bumping the window
you can still hear I'll never do it again. The mind
and its anger still live and lips tremble
and body with its own mind in the wheelchair in the nursing home comes in and out.
When it's warm she sits outside and a boy
wheels by on a bike, no hands, perfectly shorn.
Bees fly out of pomegranate with the look
of the underworld reaching out unable to touch.
We must try to listen to her singing
across valium colored fields.
SONNET WITH BACKPACK AND JACK

For your big day I bake you a Betty Crocker. Jack toasts a brioche he roughed up, then stuffed deep in his brick oven. I haul a haiku, awkward as a whale, ashore for you. Jack sings you an opera he wrote on the green back of his backpack on BART, jamming Mozart and Trent Reznor’s best riffs into a third thing, the music music would make for itself, if it had his hands. I burn cedar logs in a granite hearth. Jack sets your house on fire, then sprawls with you on wet grass till the heat hits the flash point, your eyes widen, everything widens and I am white thread lost in the night’s wide eye.
SONNET WITH MOZART AND BEAR

Whoever you’re with, I’m sure he’s the real deal, the pith of the myth, a fanged Wolfgang to my toothless Salieri. Your unsheathed claws never exhaust his mahogany scratching post. He can overhaul the night and underwrite its darkness while you wait. Your ram pens Hamlet for his restless ewe. I hem and haw with the mule in the barn. “Sometimes I just want a man who does things,” you say. Maybe I should kill a grizzly, fuck the Thou out of your whiz kid’s sublime I-Thou. Jazz like that. When I say “I do things too,” a silence falls. Scarlet embers of a thousand angels flare and perish.
Mark Wagenaar

HEAT WAVE (POEM FOR NOVICA TADIC PERHAPS)

It was so hot people were unzipping
their people costumes
even the phantom limbs had melted
the cats were on strike
the postman said it'll be the short pants today
I was assigned to the dead letter office
he said now count the years between names
count the miles between towns
silent as shipwrecks
when I finished snow was falling through the roof
through the ribs of the dead
the letters were fed to prisoners
he said otherwise they will outlast this country
the only lasting monument to our lives
THE FLIGHT OF THE ASTRONOMERS

She walked in & pushed an elevator button. She wore a transparent poncho with short ragged wings hanging from her shoulders, nothing beneath. You look out upon the universe but the more you look the more you realize that the lens you look through is suffering, & the lens is other lives, the ones who have left, & the lens is the soft rain that keeps you awake all night—you've spent your life looking upon the all-there-is, but it's the all-there-is from ten million years ago or longer, & you begin to drift, dreaming long strands of dark matter that trail the Earth as it drifts facedown through space & soon you see your mother's dark hair as she's brushing it, she's making ready, she's somewhere beyond you, there's a room she's preparing, as when your nursery was being prepared. Not many people know that astronomers collect bits of silk & web all their lives, & close to the end weave them into wings. And then they look until they find a high point. Once in a while you see them but they're distant, you think they're only seeds on the air, she said, as the elevator doors opened to the roof.
It runs together—awareness, interpretation, and object. Lear, heath, storm, not to mention Holy Spirit.

Someone on the God mic calls five-to-places. The fool gets into character as someone else might get into a cab.

It’s a matter of image rubbing up against concept— The real door and the prop door. Its real knob and real hinge.

To the left: the fog machine. To the right: the fog.

I enter from the vom, an orange feather in my hair. My memory—the vom. My remembering—my entering.

Memorization—the feather. They replace the orange feather with a more-orange feather.

The orange of the feather foreshadows my death.

A weeping—a gnashing of teeth—but I digress.
Her stone is not the largest. Polished gray, edges square. Her name engraved. One could stand on it. One could sit. Others have placed stones upon the stone. Gravity would do as well. Bones don't expatriate from earth. But a name. Among so many names. Every heart once beating on its own. Trees weep. Seeds scatter to the gravel path, perfect seeds. Imperfect seeds. The wars we have seen. The sky is so convincing, but wars? Each replaced by the one which follows. You never think it's going to be like this. You never think the thinking ends. I am sitting on a wooden bench. For the view, for the vale between. I have walked to her door. I have walked away. Atoms, all atoms. All quivering space.
We are learning our father where our father stood. Late afternoon spills from the sun. Shells flock with shadows on the outgoing tide. I am skirting the subject. Everyone should have one, said my father. A crowbar. My father was poking through the rotting corner of our redwood deck. And a sledgehammer. We were still children in our father’s eyes, seated on corkscrew wooden stools with newsprint and graphite pencils, drawing the contours of our father’s head, his nose, his neck, the curve of his spine. My father was prying loose, then piling rusted nails. How hard they work, the six external muscles of the eye: up, down, left, right, rotate left and right. When Marie Tharp mapped the backbone of earth, first in fathoms, then in corrected fathoms, then in the metric system, one thing led to another, the continents moving closer, the oceans moving apart. There you are, said my father, you’re set to go. We are planting *Helianthus* in the footprint of a redwood deck. There are no old rocks on the ocean floor. There is no surface to the sun.
the coin wrapped in paper
the pitch
to the organ-grinder in the yard

the one-armed man nods
turns the crank

the mother smiles
still sways her hips
when the music’s gone quiet

the man looks way up
full of expectation

once more
the child begs

just once more I want to
throw the brown bird

another time
the mother whispers
and closes the curtain
POSTWAR FRAGMENT (4)

the child stares at the doll
in the bassinet in tatters

lifts it up
throws it into the air
and doesn’t catch it

dust on the doll’s blue eyes
and the gray in its face

the child wipes away at the right eye
stares at the pupil

slowly it tears out the arms
they fly away like the birds
and so do the legs

translated by Stuart Friebert
CONVERSATION WITH SHOWER AND VESTIBULE

From his side of the bed he says how do you feel
About the shower she says what do you mean
He says I mean getting in it together conflicted she says

And that is the end
Of that while the rain

Falls no that’s just the sprinkler he says are you asleep
She could answer but she is
Thinking about the last time

They moved together it was years ago now
How the heat bore down like a long, dull labor and
The thick air clung wet to her skin and hair

Like regrets he says are you asleep again
She says nothing

Next morning checking realty sites
This one looks good he says

No why because I’ve had enough
Of patched screens and the little gasps

Of roofs at night she says I want a narrow
Empty place made for entering it’s called a vestibule

She says and I will press my hands along its walls
In the dark if I have to

You are not being helpful he says I am
Being honest she says I am looking for a room
To walk away through see this

Tool in my hand see these nails I am driving them in hard
Under my feet as I go
CONVERSATION WITH DISTANCE AND SHAKING

She rolls off him to her side of the bed that was good he says
She says did you close and lock the back door

His footsteps down the bleak hall
Of a night she knows by heart she thinks of distances

How they start with ordinary things silk
Over skin even a thin silk the inevitable shift

Of sand during storm done he says
And winters with your back to the shore how the ice is strong

Enough to hold you until it’s not then you break
Through to another farther world are you awake he says

She says you have more time than you think
You have to swim yourself up out of the hole then roll

Away then crawl she says or if that fails
Get your arms up out of the water reach

As far as you can he says what are you talking about
So winter can hold you in place she says

So maybe someone will find you
You have about an hour he says why

Are you telling me this she says no one is dead
Until they’re warm and dead he says jesus he rolls over

To his side of the bed she says next they will warm your body
Slowly this is called revival it means to live

Again she says then they’ll shake you
Gently they’ll say can you hear me

Can you hear me and if you can
You will have to admit that you can
CONVERSATION WITH WINDOWS AND GREEN

Let’s buy the Cape Cod in town he says she says
Let’s buy the mid-century on the river bluff

It needs too much work he says
She says it understands distances, depths he says

What are you talking about the windows
She says the way the light milks in

Thin through the trees and past them
The deep cut which is river

And the cladding around the fireplace
How the rough stones speak

Of the body she says also it’s on the bus line
He shakes his head which is like saying

I will never understand you
She says remember last summer

When we took the kids down
To the river and you

Told them not to go in no he says
She says I do I let them go in

Anyway while you stood on the bank
Shaking your head and I went in too

She says I went in so they would know more
Than the shore so they would

Know the green, insistent pull of river
Over skin why

Can’t you just be happy he says she says
And also to keep them from drowning
After the end of his last class in the prison, the teacher saw, and always saw thereafter, shadow-bars across his way to light. Kickstand loved him, and Kickstand could love. Kickstand was getting out, taking his love to freedom. My husband hoped I’d find someone beyond him if he died. He did die. Riding the carousel we had traveled far but never any further now. Golden poles, legs-in-air mares, steeds moored in a painted herd. I thought I’d found the map for any road closure or detour. Frivolous map: it was circular, like a grit-sanding disc. I stopped sinning and spinning precisely at nine one morning when I found him stilled. Kickstand won green freedom and the ability to write long inspiring lines. Walter went to feed the darning-needle roots of a small commemorative tree. I held out my best cup, and, for days, the sun wouldn’t pour. Until the first beam of sun was caught serving, violating its parole . . .
When he stares in a mirror or a bowl of very still water he cocks his head and imagines he is a horseman who does not want to be a horseman. History, he has discerned, writes its name on the walls of his veins. Though peace may lie ahead, the great writing is done. What of days when he could feel a nation in his ink what of stars hardening under a Virginia sky and the streets of Paris with their shopkeepers and children? Some are moved by everything: pink skies, tobacco blooms, the elegies of birds. Tonight shrikes are tapping on all the headstones of Montpelier. Hollyhocks, tulip bulbs hard as stones, knots you knead and knead out of a horse’s back: the knobbly fruit of labor. The knobbly eyes. A teacher in his rigid schoolhouse used to speak of laws and spring and Greece; a great colossus over Rhodes that one day the earth shook down. Not even the great things withstand their weight. Much as it was when men crossed the river to burn the capitol and burnt the capitol. Much as it was when, as he aged, the moon began to lose its color began to resemble his skin seen in front of a candle. Dying, he thought he saw—in flickers—not the idea of the country but the country itself. The bells are ringing in the swamp. The water takes the sound, turns it, lets it in. Slow rivers cut the knees of cypress. James Madison stands on his veranda. The moonlight has traveled far to reach him there.
It’s torn apart
like a white reef no petals over the yard
that kind of mist this morning but how bright as a clot in
those high green limbs if you open one chunk of it small heads
“inconspicuous” by an involucre like bracts he broke apart
chunk of coral and found living inside
more than fourteen hundred polychaete
worms belonging to 103
different species how did we lose it
more than morning mist we don’t call it
extinction we never had it like
white siding peeling off the barn’s sun side
like smoke no a white shelf no fog of wild-
fires chewing through California searing
the rain forests pushing up from acid
vents far below the white urchins dying
*we talk about it* what color gets this
right in the backyard as “biotic attrition”
on the canopy it’s been tea for fevers
poultice of *cornus* tannin for wounds
and berries after “slight bletting” for jam
estivate of what- ever we might do
are we too late blood bone salty leafing
star motes hurrying going down through the
floating now green canopy white petals
is that snow—
"I WOULD GIVE A SACRED MOUNTAIN A WEDGIE"

Tommy Pico, **Nature Poem** (Tin House Books, 2017)

The "nature poem" has had a problematic history in American English; the traditional mode of it is a pastoral and romantic poem that places the (generally European) individual in a supposed "virgin" wilderness (read: "uninhabited") landscape being an essential part of the social and political project of the "settling" of the "American West." A reader can recognize in the proliferation of scare quotes how actually unsettled and problematic even the vocabulary for talking about the nature poem really is. It's a problem recognized and shared by Tommy Pico, an urban-dwelling queer "NDN" (as he calls himself), writing (as in his previous book *IRL* and in his forthcoming book *Junk*) in a kind-of autobiographical mode as a character/persona/self called "Teebs" in the book-length project he has—at first the title seems ironic, eventually not so much—chosen to call *Nature Poem*.

The book is comprised of individual prose narrative sections (with occasional line breaks within them) that accrete and begin first to present and critique the idea of "nature," and then to explore what possibilities exist for a "nature poem" in a contemporary, urban, media-saturated world. Though it opens with the poet looking up at the stars, it is no traditional view—besides considering the looking itself to be a "death knell," he describes the stars in terms of the arms of a starfish being pulled apart, using the verbs "lesion" and "knot" in the comparison. It is hardly the typical stuff of transcendent musing on "nature." The comparison to starfishes' arms being pulled apart leads to a recounting of Teebs exercising to YouTube videos that are helping him to strengthen his arms.

The transition from star to death to starfish to the exercise video is typical of the collection and seems intrinsic to Pico's grappling with the highly developed and perhaps overdetermined concept of the "nature poem" as it might be practiced by an Indigenous poet. Pico is from the Viejas reservation of the Kumayay Nation; the designation itself speaks to the vexed state of his grappling with historical forms in the context of a designated history. The Kumayay
spanned what is now southern California, northwestern Mexico and the Baja peninsula; though the Viejas reservation is in San Diego County, most of the historical cultural and linguistic area of the Ku-mayay lies across a national border, if not contested politically then certainly contested in the imagination.

Teebs himself declares comfortably, “I can’t write a nature poem / bc it’s fodder for the noble savage / narrative. I wd slap a tree across the face,” and then later on, “I can’t write a nature poem / bc I only fuck with the city / and my dentist is the only man who’ll stick his meaty fingers / in my mouth rn.” His mistrust of the form is double—first because of its political and literary history as a tool of American settler colonialism and second because the lack of relevance to his own lived life is pronounced—not just in the experiences (unfulfilled sexual desire) but in the actual language and diction of the form; Pico’s “bc” and “rn” deploy contemporary terms more tied to our instant dromoscopic electronic communication rather than Wordsworthian notions of recollections in tranquility. In his very posture (and posture feels important in this book) the poet is separating himself from the tradition of nature writing and the identity of a “nature poet.”

In the poems that follow the speaker engages his own city life—clumsy passes in pizza parlors, reading the news, negotiating OKCupid and media culture. As much as he is preoccupied with what a “nature poem” is, he identifies with what a “nature poem” isn’t. In a discussion of the outrage of the destruction of cultural artifacts by ISIS in Mosul he writes, “How do statues become more galvanizing than refugees / is not something I wd include in a nature poem,” and later, “Ray Rice punches his girlfriend unconscious on camera and drags her out of the elevator, and I’m supposed to give a fuck about pesticides? / / That’s not a kind of nature I would write a poem about.”

Two things happen here: first Pico questions the importance of the “empty” wilderness of the typical nature poem vis-à-vis real things happening in the natural world (whether they are such national or international events such as a global refugee crisis or destruction of cultural artifacts in ongoing political and religious conflicts or as particular as a sports figure committing domestic
violence), but second he understands on a deeper level that the moment that could seem less "global"—that of a man beating his partner on an elevator security video—is also a part of "nature"; it's just a part of nature he does not wish to engage with in a literary fashion. One begins to question whether the random TMZ video isn't both part of and really inseparable from "nature" and as such, as globally significant as the issues of Syrian refugees. And of course, apophastically sly, he does include in the "nature poem" the things he says don't "belong" there.

There are ways, in the following poems, in which the relationship between personhood (the particular) and the larger and abstract ("nature") seem to fail. When his father teaches him a prayer of thanks for sage as they cut it, Pico wryly remarks, "I'm swoll on knowing this? Sharing the pride of plants." Later, ominously, he notes, "My mother waves at oak trees. A doctor delivers her diagnosis." He even rejects a traditional stereotypically objectifying relationship of Indigenous people to nature when a fellow student at his college sees him pick up litter and throw it away: "Yr such a good Indian says some dick walking to class. So, // I no longer pick up trash."

This conflict between what is expected or delineated of the Indigenous writer does not trouble Pico in the least; in fact, it gives him power to be able to turn the tables and reclaim or reconstruct an idea of nature that has political as well as social relevance to the life he is living today. In her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad usefully points out that the "natural" and the "social" do not need to be defined against one another or that one be a fixed referent against which the other can be understood. This concept, which Barad is drawing from the concept of "diffraction" in quantum theory, is also useful for considering the ways in which one writes about "nature."

The ecopoetic movement sought to re-theorize the "nature poem" as one which included the human impact—what some called the "anthropocene"—and Joyelle McSweeney took it one step further in her theory of the "necropastoral": a pastoral that included its own decay, degradation and death. Pico seems to be reaching into all of these theoretical pockets and pulling out something influenced by each.

Ultimately, the turning point in *Nature Poem* comes in the form of the physical and human, and not only that, but in the specifically
sexual nature of touch. Teebs finally admits: "Knowing the moon is inescapable tonight // and the tuft of yr chest against my shoulder blades— // This is the kind of nature I would write a poem about."

But in the end, it's not sex but death that seems to wake the poet up to the real possibilities (necessities?) of the "nature poem." Besides the illness of his mother and health problems facing many in his hometown, he muses on mortality and illness frequently in the pages that follow even as he grapples with the shape and form of the poem itself, including his original strong resistance to the notion of writing a nature poem. "Revulsion, I thought," he writes, "was abt self-esteem but now I think might be a warning. / Solution to the problem of having a body. / Body: don't get too attached to me." While the personal sense of danger here is affecting, the wider world still enters the poem and contests any possibility of the pastoral or romantic that is such a strong part of the tradition of the nature poem. Pico's use of prose, rather than the poetic line, as the dominant mode of the poem adds to its impact:

NDN teens have the highest rate of suicide of any population group in America. A white man can massacre 9 black ppl in a church and be fed Burger King by the cops afterward. A presidential candidate gains a platform by saying Mexican immigrants are murderers and rapists.

It's hard for me to imagine curiosity as anything more than a pretext for colonialism

so nah, Nature I don't want to know the colonial legacy of the future.

This excerpt also demonstrates the ways he is mixing standard English diction and spelling with a more slang use ("ppl," "nah," irregular punctuation) and the way he deploys the poetic line break in the context of an otherwise normative prose paragraph. The uneasy form of the poem does match the world Pico seems to run in. Amid simulations of on-line chats, descriptions of encounters in bars and on city streets, he begins assembling the landscape of his life, as nourishing
as any that would appear in a forest or a lake or a glen. There’s humor too—"Def do NOT send him that txt, Jess says"—as well as a sharp wit at work: "People r so concerned abt ‘the Earth’ / in the sense of kale salad and bruised / gin." The second line is even funnier when you’re the reviewer who tries to Google "bruised gin" and figure out what it is and you discover that it is so hipster-obscure that there’s not even general agreement about the concept.

At a certain point the speaker fesses up: "I can’t write a nature poem bc English is some Stockholm shit, makes me complicit in my tribe’s erasure—why shd I give a fuck abt ‘poetry’? It’s a container // for words like whilst and hither and tamp…. I wd give a wedgie to a sacred mountain and gladly piss on the grass of / the park of poetic form / while no one’s lookin.” He recognizes that his own “abrupt American body” is incapable of inhabiting the tradition of the form and somehow, seemingly without the writer or reader being truly aware, a new kind of nature poem has been occurring all along throughout the book itself.

What if—the poem asks—Teebs truly feels that connection to land and landscape and history that inhabits every stereotype of the Indigenous writer? “I look this thought full in the face and want to throw myself into traffic,” he says. It is a beautiful, rigorous, difficult, complicated book, one in which the writer himself is thinking—and hard—about the poem and the poetry he is writing even while he is writing it.

And yes, it ends in a sunset. And no, not the kind you were expecting.
In 2007, Major Jackson’s much-read essay “A Mystifying Silence: Big and Black” questioned why so few white poets were writing about race. Ten years later, Jackson’s criticism appears to have been heard: books and poems by white poets that explore racial history and experience are appearing everywhere.

But Wesley Rothman, in his remarkable first book, is not really writing about race; he’s writing into race. Although he addresses contemporary events such as the killing of Michael Brown and frequently references and reworks the lines of African American musicians and writers, his primary interest is not in retelling racial history or recording instances of racist actions and ideas. His concern is rather to uncover what, for himself as a white person, is beneath those narratives and attitudes, and to begin the work of transformation.

The first of the book’s epigraphs, from the last sentence of Ellison’s Invisible Man, is telling: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies I speak,” Rothman quotes—omitting Ellison’s “for you?” Rothman is not speaking for anyone, white or black. More importantly, he’s speaking on the “lower frequencies”—exactly those picked up by the loudspeaker of his title. Not the melody, not the narrative thread, but something harder to discern.

The task is implicit throughout the book, much of which, with its anaphorically repeated imperatives (Give, Listen, Hear, Hustle), feels like a kind of instruction manual for the self. “Request Hour” zeroes in on the bass line the book so often evokes, fusing a metaphor of dismantling with the DJ metaphor (“Give me a set list of wrecking ball bass”) before it arrives at “Give me / The self, deconstructed.” Ending the first of the book’s three sections, the powerful poem “To Do This” begins:

I’ll need all the history I think I own. Plus, a drum of gasoline,
Every question mark I can muster, more, more. Two megaphones—
Amplifying & listening—whatever holy text I keep in the bedside table.

I'll need one dry, strike-anywhere match, & a place to kneel.

And then, crucially: "This is key: redact comfort from my list of possessions."

The self-instructive process involves some personal history, but the role it plays is subtle: where another poet would write directly of experiences, Rothman slides obliquely into his sub-history. The briefest mention of the speaker's whiteness appears in the book's second poem ("I grew in my white"), and only at the end of "Transubstantiation" does an ancestral slaveholder appear. "The Sleepers" narrates an incident in which the speaker and his adolescent friends utter, repeat, and lob "like a football" a word that, in the context of the poem and the book, we may infer is the "n-word," though neither it nor any other reference to race is given. "Listen, / Always, to silence" another poem directs, which the book invites us to do as we fill in the blanks.

There are just enough explicit references to whiteness to make race-conscious readings of most of these poems not only possible but necessary. "Whiteness As Hyperbolic Bass Line" is one title; "Whiteness" (which "works from within ... beneath the skin") is another. The only extended foregrounding of whiteness appears in the opening lines of "swallow": "All we white boys get into white vans // With coolers of white-bread peanut butter / & jelly sandwiches ... with white towels / Headed for the white sand beach." But reversing the movement of other poems, this one moves into metaphor as it asks the central question "How to unmake // swallow ( // Me?)" And then, shifting voices: "About time he drown, start again, other—"

Water plays a major role elsewhere in the book too: "Exodus" recounts the narrative experience of jumping or diving into a river and then rising, "Dripping what I have broken," and the Michael Brown poem is called "Baptism." But smoke and fire are even more dominant. "Throbbing in the Bush" equates music with the burning bush of (again) Exodus, and the longest poem in the book, which references both Judeo-Christian and Islamic Scripture, updates James Baldwin in its title, "This Time, Fire." Water and fire, which are of
course traditional means of purification, take us repeatedly into the deeply spiritual center of Rothman's book.

That water, fire, and spirit are all integrally fused with contemporary music and its accouterments and practitioners suggests something of the complex transformation that Subwoofer performs—and it's not only music as metaphor that makes this happen. There's a great deal of prosodic variety here: long lines, short lines; a villanelle, a golden shovel / ghazal hybrid; syntactic feats based on "If" and "When" clauses; lots of repetition. And like the bass line, the "lower frequencies" are heard in the assonance and consonance of passages like this:

... This tune must become an anthem,  
Must whir & thunder as blood still cooped, manifesting.  
Amplify the lowest lowdown notes, nos, & nonsense  
I've thumped, the loudmouth breakings I've trumped,  
The hardest bass lines I've missed.

Not just about music, then, but music itself. Not just about race, but one white writer's race discovered, explored, cross-examined, and transformed. Echoing earlier references to Exodus, the book ends with "Kneebone in the Wilderness," in which the speaker says: "With my beat kneeling down / I am free from its beating." And then: "when my legs are taken from me ... I will bend what whisper / Of me remains ... begging pardon / With praise & bone on whatever knee I can improvise."

If Subwoofer is a record of Wesley Rothman's own spiritual journey into his racial self, it's also an invitation to the reader to make or continue her own. I'll be listening for my bass line.

Martha Collins
Adam Giannelli’s debut collection of poems, winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize, introduces a virtuoso lyrical voice to American poetry. The poems in *Tremulous Hinge* cover much ground; eclectic subject matter and variation in tone are among the reasons for this effect. Some subjects are presented with an accuracy and a delight in language reminiscent of Marianne Moore, as in “Hydrangea” and “Porcupine,” two of my favorites here.

In the former of these, three stanzas describe the hydrangea in a burst of tropes: the blossoms are “zeppelins” that “soar all the way into September,” they’re “colored like the flavored ice atop snow cones,” each is a “mophead.” Some stalks, heavy with flowers, “rest, like the tails of tired poodles, on the ground.” The pleasure the poet must have experienced while assembling this riot of metaphor and simile is reflected in the reader’s pleasure in encountering it.

In the fourth stanza, the poem addresses the bush directly: “You hold blue and pink in the same body.” While this move was startling on a first reading, it now seems a successful strategy. The hydrangea has so much personality by this point in the poem that it is a only short step to considering it as a character. The second-person address (and the “person” created by it) continue for three stanzas, the mid-section of the poem, and then fade.

“Hydrangea” ends with the words “to make more dutifully a world.” A world is what the poem has made of the hydrangea blossom, with its own “continents, craters, peninsulas of cloud,” and by doing so has demonstrated the virtue of looking at things closely. “I learned / from you to place the most generous part first, to complicate always,” the poem says. One of the delights of this book is the transparency of the poet at work.

A similar strategy of address plays out in “Porcupine.” A dazzle of description, a cascade of metaphor, greet the reader in the opening lines: “At rest ... it is wickerwork, canebrake ... when / provoked it erupts as bayonets, asterisk, threshing floor, / Cupid in a fury.” The exuberant descriptions are followed in the third stanza by the freshly
imagined animal being given second-person status as well: the “you” of “your salt drive, / your night-sleuthing, your implacable whiskers.” The closeness of address and detail (“your paws are polished / and pebbled”) continues through three more stanzas to the end of the poem.

Here’s the second stanza of the poem, ending with a sentence that is enjambed with the third:

Its strategy is not precision, but exuberance—
a briery boast. Let the arrows fly—
gold with lead. Florescent-quilled, in dark makeup, like the bass player
in an 80s band, it announces its eccentricity—
then fades, making meager

its own spotlight.

Exuberance indeed. The bass player makes me laugh, and the word “florescent” makes me pause and recognize the difference between it and the more common adjective “fluorescent,” as in overhead lights. This poet is careful, accurate, observant—and exhilarated by a fellow creature to the point of eloquence: “I choose you .... Although you’re slow and nearsighted, // when you unveil your ribbons, fantailed, I feel / as though I am entering / lightspeed.”

Another exceptional poem in this excellent book, called “How the Light is Spent,” shows Giannelli writing in a tone altogether different from “Hydrangea” and “Porcupine.” I quote the poem in its entirety.

Even the light accepts the trespasses
against it, so that a bit of shade

chars the grass. Across the gravel
at the underpass

it makes a clean break,
but more often ends in a mottle of amber and umber.

The bevels of leaves become the light's ambivalences—and below, the veil.

In the spokes of a bicycle, it pulsates, and between the loiterers by the taco stand, erects pillars.

Beneath the maples it concedes whole realms that house any leaves that may fall.

There are places it won't go—the sea floor, the ingot of shadow in a drawer. Like a visitor in a hospital it waits, warming the spot off to one side—and it takes such lengths to leave the room, lingering at the bedside, the far wall, the doorjamb.

While I've just praised this poet's exuberance, I also admire the quiet, almost stealthy mood of "How the Light Is Spent." The title itself hints at mortality, summoning Milton's famous sonnet, and the first line suggests the Lord's Prayer with the use of the word "trespasses." And while the middle of the poem is filled with images from a scene on a city street—underpass, bicycle, taco stand—the final simile focuses on a hospital room. Such a room suggests illness, perhaps grave illness, which inhabits the last six lines of the poem. "Lingering," though it's used to describe the light, nevertheless brings to
mind a drawn-out illness. Such are the connotations that accumulate in a poem in which the light “concedes whole realms”—surely a metaphor, but one that doesn’t call attention to itself.

“Takes such lengths,” in the penultimate stanza, is almost a pun, giving us both the slowness of light moving through the room and the actual “length” of its apparent shape on floor or wall. Notice the sequence “the bedside, the far wall, the doorjamb.” The word “far” ensures that the reader will be left behind at the bedside, perhaps viewing the scene from the bed itself, as the light departs. Another haunting choice, simple but with complicated effects.

The sonic effects of the language in the poem are musical. The phrase “amber and umber” in line seven is perhaps the most obvious example, but consider the way the “v” sound resonates throughout the next three lines: “The bevels of // leaves become the light’s ambivalences—/and below, the veil.”

“Incurable Cloud,” another quiet poem, is explicitly elegiac:

Don’t know why, but the dog is barking.
Rain pesters the roof,
faint but incessant, like shame.
In the dark I see the tall posts
but not the wire fence that separates
the vineyard from the road.
The eyes are not doors. They
are small containers.
They cannot hold the moon,
but they hold its flare.
They cannot hold the departed,
but they hold their names—
Dom, Julius, Caroline.
Under a balcony, where it is dry,
someone has dragged two chairs
and left them. Fallen
from the elms, leaves curl
into empty cups, pale basins.
I cannot love what doesn’t
fret or crumble or grow cold.
I cannot bear to love what does.
Wind rummages through the screen.
Lying under a blanket, I close
one eye. The room closes the other.

Two abandoned chairs. Cups and dishes full of leaves instead of food, as if the table were set for the spirits of the departed. The leaves themselves, fallen, dry. The half-visible boundary fence. These images remind me of Archibald MacLeish’s lines “For all the history of grief / An empty doorway and a maple leaf.”

Exuberant or elegiac, the poems of Tremulous Hinge examine the world with close attention and scrupulous language. The speaker, while often solitary, is nevertheless deeply connected. “Alone so long, I am everyone,” he says in “The Shards Still Trembling.” Everyone and everything, the hydrangea might add.

Pamela Alexander
In 2002, James Wright’s widow Anne gave writer and critic Jonathan Blunk permission to write her husband’s authorized biography. Almost fifteen years in the making, this vital, fascinating portrait of the most influential of the so-called “deep image” poets has finally appeared. The delay in publication is due no doubt to Blunk’s meticulous research, which involved nearly 200 interviews and a careful examination of Wright’s papers, including almost daily journal entries, and a voluminous correspondence with everyone from his high school crush to literary luminaries like Robert Bly, Anne Sexton, and Leslie Marmon Silko.

The result of this admirable toil is a detailed and illuminating rendering of a man utterly devoted to poetry, sometimes to the detriment of his personal and professional life. The biography moves quickly through Wright’s working-class childhood in the factory town of Martins Ferry, Ohio, a stint in the army, four years at Kenyon College studying with John Crowe Ransom and others, his marriage to his first wife, Liberty, and his studies at the University of Washington, where he worked with Theodore Roethke, along with talented classmates like Jack Gilbert, Richard Hugo, and Carolyn Kizer, who remembers, “[Wright] was our genius—we knew that.”

When Wright took a job at the University of Minnesota, he was already an acclaimed poet, winning the Yale Younger Poets Prize for his first book, and publishing in the best literary journals. Blunk paints a vivid picture of Wright’s time in Minneapolis, which proved to be both tumultuous and productive. With his marriage falling apart and his career in jeopardy, the poet reached “a moment of crisis that sparked the transformation of his life.” The transformation was, of course, Wright’s celebrated “break” with formal verse—and his leap into the free verse, jaggedly lineated poems that would become his legacy.

For many, the publication of Wright’s third book, *The Branch Will Not Break*, in 1963 was something akin to Bob Dylan going electric at
Newport a few years later. It marked a shocking, even disturbing departure from the style that had already won him broad acclaim. But Blunk argues this evolution was not so radical as most critics would have us think, thinking it a “misconception that [Wright] had renounced the rhymed, metrical verse that had first won him recognition.” The new poems, he says, only “appeared to be entirely different,” and were actually part of Wright’s continuous experimentation with both formal and free verse.

There is some truth to this, of course, and Wright did continue to work in traditional forms, but to speak of his work this way minimizes the tremendous difference between the early books and the “breakthrough” poems of the 1950s.

Look at these lines from “A Girl in a Window,” from *The Green Wall*:

The supple outline fading black  
Bosom availing nothing now,  
And rounded shadows of long thighs,  
How can she care for us, allow  
The shade to blind imagined eyes?

and these more famous ones:

In the Shreve High football stadium,  
I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,  
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,  
And the ruptured night watchmen of Wheeling Steel,  
Dreaming of heroes.

It is inaccurate to see these differences as merely a choice between formal and free verse. What is revolutionary here is how the new style allows Wright to deftly mix colloquial speech (“Pollacks,”

---

1 One of the biography’s many delightful details: before he moved to New York, Dylan was a frequent visitor to Wright’s house in Minneapolis, where the poet would ask the young folk singer to play “Delia,” often several times in an evening.
“nursing long beers,” “the blast furnace”) with a more heightened rhetoric: the adjective “ruptured,” for example, or the poem’s famous conclusion, when the football players, transformed into war horses, “gallop terribly against each other’s bodies.”

Blunk doesn’t belabor this point, however, and he does a fine job tracking both dominant themes in Wright’s work and the evolution of both specific poems and the manuscripts for Wright’s most important books. Blunk is at his best when viewing Wright’s career through a wide lens. His analysis of individual poems is usually brief, perhaps intended for new readers. He quotes, for example, the last lines of “Outside Fargo, North Dakota”:

Suddenly the freight car lurches.
The door slams back, a man with a flashlight
Calls me good evening.
I nod as I write good evening, lonely
And sick for home.

The poem, Blunk says, “exists in a kind of eternal present, unfolding for the reader at the same moment the poet is writing in his notebook. This immediacy helps convey the depth of the poet’s isolation, as mirrored by the details in the landscape.” There’s nothing wrong with this, but it doesn’t quite stand up when compared to a more nuanced and complex response like this one from Robert Hass’s essay “James Wright”:

Those last two lines ... were not written by the poet who is lonely and sick for home, they were written by the man who noticed that the poet, sitting in his room alone, recalling a scene outside Fargo, North Dakota, nods when he writes down the greeting of his imagined yardman, and catches in that moment not the poet’s loneliness but a gesture that reveals the aboriginal loneliness of being.

Despite Blunk’s obvious care, occasionally he makes an odd mistake. After identifying “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave” as a transitional poem, which portrays the “biblical landscapes and cadences”
of the work to come, he claims "a kind of ghost-pentameter sounds beneath the poem’s free verse lines," even though all but one line is clearly written in a fairly regular iambic pentameter. But Blunk’s eye is usually quite keen—he discovers, for example, that a later poem, "May Morning," though printed in prose, turns out to be a "near-perfect sonnet."

The genius of the book is not Blunk’s close readings, however, but how his research allows him to trace the origins of poems in Wright’s journals, letters, and drafts. Readers familiar with “In Response to a Rumor that the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia Has Been Condemned” will delight in the description of Wright as a teenager, walking across the bridge to “Wheeling on summer evenings, where the streetwalkers appeared on Twenty-third Street near the river,” or in a journal entry describing “the B&O railroad track that lay peaceful among the hobo jungles like a scar.”

It was a surprise for this reader to see how directly Wright's surreal, "leaping" poems sprang from his daily life, since they are usually put in a separate category from the confessional poems of contemporaries like Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath. A Life in Poetry makes an unspoken argument that perhaps the poems are more confessional than they first appear. In contrast to John Berryman, who bristled at the idea that he and his character/speaker, Henry, might be one and the same, Wright seemed to embrace this conflation. When he says, “My name is James A. Wright, and I was born / Twenty-five miles from this infected grave, / In Martins Ferry, Ohio...” at the beginning of “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” he closes the distance between poet and speaker to a hair’s width.

For Wright, there was no boundary between life and literature, and often his reading and daily events come together in interesting ways. Once, driving with Robert Bly, “Wright insisted they pull off the highway and cross a barbed-wire fence into a field where he saw two horses in the shade of some willow trees.” As they got back into

---

2 "I will grieve alone, / As I strolled alone, years ago, down along / The Ohio shore. / I hid in the hobo jungle weeds... I saw, down river, / At Twenty-third and Water Streets / By the vinegar works, / The doors open in early evening...."
the car, Wright "began scratching in his notebook." He didn’t have a driver’s license, and Bly lamented that he "always had to drive while Wright could smoke and write as he pleased." Most readers will immediately recognize this encounter from "A Blessing." Blunk quotes the poem’s "perfectly balanced" closing lines:

Suddenly I realize,
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

The effect of this "balance" is to highlight the vital contradiction made so evident by the enjambment. In order to "blossom," one must first be broken, even destroyed. What Wright is talking about here is nothing less than resurrection. Even more compelling than the biological anecdote is Blunk’s discovery of some lines from Antonio Machado Wright translated in his journal the year before: "On the naked earth of the road / The hour breaks into blossom."

The influence of works in translation on James Wright’s poems has been written about elsewhere, but never traced so clearly and carefully as in A Life in Poetry. Blunk captures the spirit and tensions of the age, when politics and poetry were inextricable, and "the impact of international poetry in translation gave younger poets a profusion of new models." The book also serves as a sort of mini-history of The Fifties (later The Sixties and briefly The Seventies), the magazine founded by Bly, where Wright was a frequent contributor. Through their work on the magazine, and Wright’s visits to Robert and Carol Bly’s farm in Western Minnesota, the two developed a collaborative friendship that had a wide-reaching influence on American poetry.

Blunk exposes one misconception about this relationship. Wright’s transformation is sometimes seen as a result of Bly’s call for a new "leaping" poetry (with Wright playing Whitman to Bly’s Emerson), but the biography’s detailed timeline reveals a much more equal and collaborative relationship. Because of The Branch Will Not Break’s long gestation,3 Bly’s book, Silence in the Snowy Fields, appeared

---

3 Wright ended up cutting 85 poems he had once included in previous versions of the manuscript.
first, giving the impression he was the first of the deep-imagists, when in fact the two had been working side-by-side for several years.

One mission of *The Fifties* was to champion the work of foreign writers like Tomas Tranströmer, Federico García Lorca, George Trakl, Pablo Neruda, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and César Vallejo, all of whom (along with Tang dynasty poets like Po Chu-i and Tu Fu) had a profound influence on Wright's work. Translating poems was a lifetime practice for Wright, who believed it was "the only way" to truly know a poem from another language. Blunk identifies many instances where ideas and phrases from translations made their way into Wright's own poems. "The Jewel," for example, a short poem from *The Branch...*, is taken almost entirely from a translation of Vallejo's "Espargesia."

Wright was known for improvising translations of poems on the spot, and this, along with his memorization of thousands of texts, made him a dynamic performer on the "arduous tours of consecutive readings" that provided a good portion of his income. Wright had what Blunk terms a "phonographic memory," a "precise auditory memory for sequences of sound patterns." Many people have poems by heart, but it is another thing altogether to be able to quote entire Shakespeare plays, or to recite from memory not only most of D.H. Lawrence's poems, but large swaths of his criticism. Wright's son, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Franz Wright,\(^4\) recalls his father didn't talk to him so much as "lecture." He says, "I got my whole education just sitting listening to him talk. And when he was drinking he was radiant. It was like listening to Bach."

Perhaps the most intriguing revelation in *James Wright: A Life in Poetry* is that the character of "Jenny," who appears in many poems, was based on his relationship with a former student, Sonja Urseth, with whom the poet started a long correspondence the summer after her freshman year. Essentially an unconsummated love affair, their relationship was almost entirely epistolary, and soon veered into a

\(^4\) Franz attended Oberlin College and published some of his first poems in *FIELD*, which was also a publisher of James Wright's work.
strange fantasy with Wright insisting Urseth sign her letters to him, “Jenny.” As Blunk says:

Wright deliberately set about confusing the twenty-year-old college student Sonja with a Muse figure of his own creation.... Over the course of nearly one hundred letters, it is impossible to see where the woman Sonja leaves off and the figure Wright makes of her begins.

After Urseth married (against Wright’s protestations), he essentially killed Jenny off, and she became a kind of “ghost-figure” in the poems. One famous product of this bizarre relationship is “To the Muse,” from Shall We Gather at the River.

Revealing so much of Wright’s relationship to Urseth (and a later affair with Anne Sexton) might seem gossipy if it weren’t for its relevance to the poetry. Though the biography contains a few salacious details, Blunk also sets the record straight on some matters, reporting Wright’s life in all its complexity, where others have put forth a tidier, less accurate story. In an article in The New York Times, for example, Dinitia Smith writes, “When [Franz’s] younger brother, Marshall, was born, his father left and had an affair with Anne Sexton.” But the biography makes it clear that James had already separated from Liberty when his correspondence with Sexton began.

The personal aspects of Wright’s life—his terrible struggle with alcoholism, his relationship with his sons, whom he rarely saw for more than a week at a time, his relationship with his second wife, Anne, and his heartbreaking and untimely death from tongue cancer at age 52—are thoroughly detailed by Blunk, and help us understand both the poet and the poems. It is interesting that many of Wright’s most famous works were written about places he claimed to hate: Martin’s Ferry, the “pure hell” where he watched the suffering of the

---

5 Wright took the name from a minor character in Tristram Shandy.
6 Wright and Sexton both wrote about their relationship, and critiqued each other’s poems.
7 He moved out and back into their house several times before Liberty finally left for California, taking the boys with her.
poor and disenfranchised (including his kindhearted father, who started factory work at age fourteen), and Minneapolis, a "city of horrors" where James suffered the indignity of losing his marriage, sons, and job all in the span of a few years. Though many of the poems have their roots in despair, they are nonetheless some of the most ecstatic and affirmative works of the era. As Wright himself said, "if you can only be true enough somehow to your own feeling" about a place, then "you'll end up blessing it."

Mark Neely

Donald Justice has gone, taking his piano. There is no more music left in North America. So might a lament run, paraphrasing his "Variations for Two Pianos," for the gracious, cranky, Iowa/Florida master of his art who turned out so many good poems and, during his years of famous teaching, so many good poets. But of course the music is still with us, embedded in this fine *Collected Poems*. And the teaching continues, for any careful readers of this volume, especially those curious to learn about the felicitous relationships that can develop between the textures and tones of American experience and the larger world of poetry in other languages.

Surely one of Justice's enduring accomplishments is that of a translator. Not in the sense in which we usually use that word, someone who translates Dante or Homer or Mallarmé, but indirectly, as one who took often unorthodox paths and methods to mediate between his world and the worlds of other poets, especially those poets of other times and other languages. Whatever the model for this behavior—Pound may be cited, certainly—the result has created possibilities for our poetry that we are probably just beginning to understand.

Here is a poem from the 1987 book, *The Sunset Maker*:

**SEA WIND: A SONG**

Sea wind, you rise
From the night waves below,
Not that we see you come and go,
But as the blind know things we know
And feel you on our face,
And all you are
Or ever were is space,
Sea wind, come from so far
To fill us with this restlessness
That will outlast your own—
So the fig tree,
When you are gone,
Sea wind, still bends and leans out toward the sea
And goes on blossoming alone.

after Rilke

When I mentioned I was reviewing Justice’s Collected Poems, a friend of mine cited this as a favorite, a lyric of quiet perfection and astonishing grace. I found myself agreeing, and then grew curious about its relation to the original. In what sense is it “after”? How much of its excellence does it owe to the original?

In fact, Justice’s poem can almost be said to improve on Rilke’s. Curious readers can find the original German and a good translation in Edward Snow’s New Poems [1908]: The Other Part, pp. 112-13. I’ll illustrate what I mean by a glance at the ending. Rilke concludes with “O wie fühlt dich ein / tribender Feigenbaum / oben in Mondschein.” Snow renders this quite well as “O how you’re felt / by a burgeoning fig tree / high in the moonlight.” That’s good translation, something we can never have too much of. But Justice’s handling of the ending is a kind of alchemy that shifts the image from a fairly static and predictable Symbolist-era picture, the tree in the moonlight, to a dynamic realization of the world of process and change; he is importing insights from elsewhere in Rilke, particularly the Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus, that transfigure the lyric and strengthen its power.

I emphasize this alchemy because I suspect that many readers approach this example and its implications blinded by certain stock prejudices: that translations are not as important as “original” poems; that “after” poems are a kind of oddity marred by a little cheating, an uneasy merger whereby we get neither a faithful version of the original nor an original poem that deserves respect. If you were selecting poems for an anthology, you would not, I suspect, include any “after” poems.
Such prejudices might then be strengthened by Justice’s modest note, which mentions that this and another poem that follows “came out of an attempt to write a play” based on the period of Rilke’s life in which those poems were written. Thus we have a poem that “fails” to be a translation and “fails” to be an “independent” or “pure” Donald Justice lyric, and that is left over from a “failed” attempt to write a play. Justice makes it especially easy for us to ignore the difficult, smooth, breathtaking thing he has accomplished.

My emphasis, however, is not on the modesty of the poet’s stance; it is on his exploration of poetry in other languages. In the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties, American poetry underwent a period of expansion and experimentation, a deliberate widening of its horizons. Robert Lowell turned away from his earlier style and, under the influence of William Carlos Williams, wrote his best book, *Life Studies*. Allen Ginsberg wrote *Howl*, Frank O’Hara wrote his lunch poems, Theodore Roethke wrote poetry that came directly from the depths of the primitive self, and Gary Snyder wrote Buddhist poems.

A great part of this included a new interest in poetry from traditions other than those of English, to surrealist poetry, to Asian poetry, to the work of poets in Spanish, German, French, and Italian. Robert Bly, editing *The Fifties*, which turned into *The Sixties*, wrote back when I submitted to tell me that my poetry was “bowed under the weight of English tradition” (I was in graduate school, reading Donne and Marvell and Milton). He was right, and when he urged me to model poems on work by poets in other languages, I recalled how struck I had been by a brief exposure to the prose poems of René Char. Eventually, I learned how to act on Bly’s advice.

My point is that Justice was a quiet part of this revolution. “Sea Wind” is one piece of evidence, but the entire picture is much broader than one “after” poem can demonstrate. The real subject here is the complex topic of American experience. The exploration of other languages and their poetic traditions was part of a patient and gradual self-making whereby Justice accomplished the task of naturalizing poetry, finding it in the America
of his own experience and lifetime. No two poets confront this problem in quite the same way (think of Hart Crane!) and the process continues for each generation. My contention here will be that Justice’s solutions to the problem of American lyric poetry, particularly as it relates to the larger tradition of poetry in other languages and as it wrestles with the constant risks of sentimentality and nostalgia, while related to the activities of his generation and his time, are finally very much his own. They are also, I find, increasingly successful over the span of his career.

On the jacket flap of this book, Anthony Hecht calls Justice “the supreme heir of Wallace Stevens.” Supreme? Heir? While Justice no doubt admired Stevens—his poem “Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens” is a canny mixture of affection and exasperation—I do not think he can be called his heir. One does not imagine Donald Justice writing poems like “The Snow Man” or “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” Reading through the first volume collected here, The Summer Anniversaries (1960), and the group of early poems that accompanies it (1948-62), certainly does not bring Stevens to mind. The poems are carefully rhymed and metered, and the master behind them seems to me Auden, especially the Auden who was busy rewriting Yeats. If any American poet comes to mind, it is probably John Crowe Ransom, who fashioned lyrics about quaint eccentrics and bereaved lovers and parents in a kind of neo-metaphysical style during the thirties, forties, and fifties. But Auden’s is surely the dominant presence, and in having him as mentor, Justice was reflecting the experience of a number of his generation of poets (Hecht included), born in the twenties and, many of them, “discovered” by Auden as he edited the Yale Series of Younger Poets.

Then how did he gradually escape from it, to become both a more American and a more international poet? The second volume, Night Light (1967), shows him exploring prose, syllabics, and accentuals, all as alternatives to rhyme and meter. His deliberate widening of range in this and subsequent collections partly reflects the fact that he had begun to listen to Williams, not for technique but for subject matter, a more direct rendering of the life around him, in its dailiness and comedy and dereliction. At
the same time, while widening his base and adjusting his subject matter, Justice was far from repudiating traditional forms, as one of the more successful poems in *Night Light* demonstrates:

TO THE UNKNOWN LADY WHO WROTE THE LETTERS FOUND IN THE HATBOX

*To be sold at auction . . . 1 brass bed, 1 walnut secretary . . . bird cages, a hatbox of old letters . . .*  
—NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT

What, was there never any news?  
And were your weathers always fine,  
Your colds all common, and your blues  
Too minor to deserve one line?

Between the lines it must have hurt  
To see the neighborhood go down,  
Your neighbor in his undershirt  
At dusk come out to mow his lawn.

But whom to turn to to complain,  
Unless it might be your canaries,  
And only in bird language then?  
While slowly into mortuaries

The many-storied houses went  
Or in deep, cataracted eyes  
Displayed their signs of want: FOR RENT  
And MADAM ROXIE WILL ADVISE.

This is very deft, and a part of our pleasure, as we take in its comedy and pathos, must come from the formal skill displayed in the quatrains, with rhymes like "canaries" and "mortuaries" and the enjambment into the last stanza, where the people are replaced by the houses as the leading evidence of change and decay. The question was whether such expert formal treatment would be a consistently effective way of capturing the kind of
Americana that clearly interests the poet here: the life of small towns, the melancholy of change that overtakes both urban and rural neighborhoods, something nearly everyone has experienced. And the answer, for Justice, was evidently a "no." He continued to experiment with other ways of organizing poems, never fully abandoning his faith in rhymed and metered poetry, but restless, always, about his own horizons and possibilities.

If we move forward to Departures, his 1973 volume, we can begin to see where the solutions come from. An obvious place to linger and learn is at the poem titled "Variations on a Text by Vallejo." By its title and epigraph—*Me moriré en Paris con aguacero...* —Justice makes very evident that by means of musical form, variations on a theme, he is taking a foreign poet (his note also mentions a Greek poet who had a similar motif) and adapting him, and his sonnet, for native purposes. Here is the final stanza:

Donald Justice is dead. One Sunday the sun came out,
It shone on the bay, it shone on the white buildings,
The cars moved down the street slowly as always, so many,
Some with their headlights on in spite of the sun,
And after a while the diggers with their shovels
Walked back to the graveside through the sunlight,
And one of them put his blade into the earth
To lift a few clods of dirt, the black marl of Miami,
And scattered the dirt, and spat,
Turning away abruptly, out of respect.

We know that this vignette is "derived" from Vallejo, "inspired" by the Peruvian exile's original decision to write a comical, self-pitying poem predicting his own death. All the cards of derivation are on the table, so we can concentrate on the musical transposition that brings us into vivid contact with Miami, the canny repetitions of "sun" and "shone," the hymn of the traffic, the color scheme that produces such brilliant black against such white and brightness (Justice was, like some painters, a student
of American light in all its forms). The indifferent world of the imagined Miami Sunday may ultimately derive from Auden’s “Musée de Beaux Arts,” but it is now entirely Justice’s and entirely American.

If the Vallejo example is particularly obvious, it is also representative of a growing tendency in Justice’s poetry to fuse Americana with the sights and sounds of foreign language poets. Reading around in this Collected, especially if one is attentive to the notes, one finds them everywhere: Attila Jozsef, Wang Wei, Lorca, Alberti, Catullus, Rimbaud, Laforgue. It is evident that Justice was a voracious reader, using other poems as springboards to his own. And not just poems: we also run across Kafka’s diaries, Henry James’s notebooks and travel writings, the films of Bergman, the photographs of Walker Evans, and the paintings of Charles Burchfield. Always, though, the material is transformed into Justice’s own idiom, and, strikingly, into a rendering of American light, American loss and dereliction, American innocence and experience.

Here is a very telling note from the back of the book, about a poem in the Selected Poems of 1979:

"Memories of the Depression Years": The second section (Boston, Georgia) is a kind of imitation of a Wang Wei poem, which has been translated as “A Farmhouse on the Wei River.” The third section (Miami, Florida) bears a similar relation to Baudelaire’s Je n’ai pas oublié.

Readers do not really need that information on any ethical grounds. All poems have models and predecessors, and listing them has never been an obligation. No one reading the poem in question is likely to say, “Well, that second section felt rather Chinese to me, while the third one felt rather French. I wonder what that can mean?” Most readers are not conversant enough with all the traditions in question, and besides, the transformations are too complete. Why then does Justice offer us this peek into his workshop? Because it’s interesting. For a working poet (and
maybe the notes are most of all for other poets), it's fascinating to see how a Chinese poem adapts to the here and now, and how a French poem can be transformed to pair with it. That result says something about the universality of poetry and confirms a giant conversation among poets and among poems, one that is always going on and that is never limited to the living or to one language, not if the poet is a good conversationalist.

Meanwhile, as he turns more and more to the subjects of his childhood and its landscapes, both rural and urban, Justice obviously runs the risks of sentimentality and nostalgia. His fascination with porches, attics, junk heaps, forgotten senior citizens, girls overlooked at parties, music teachers, tenant farmers, and other examples of American dereliction is artistically dangerous. The America in which he grew up, rapidly receding, calls out with a siren song, urging him to lament its disappearance and cherish its details. How to avoid overindulging the emotions of loss and recognition?

One does not solve the problem by avoiding such emotions. They constitute the risk poems must always run. If poets wish to move us, then they must work with materials that are emotionally charged, and that will always mean working in the neighborhood of excess, of sentiment threatening to turn overripe and become sentimentality. Thus, American sentimentality—a large topic currently under vigorous discussion among Americanists—can be seen as a specialized version of a recurrent problem that accompanies American culture even while it dogs, recurrently, the practice of lyric poetry.

One answer to the question has to do with technique. Poetic form and poetic tradition make available to us materials that help temper that risk of excess. So Justice's formalism is already at his service as a defense against sentimentality. But there is also, I am arguing, his sense of that larger conversation, a perspective on, say, the Great Depression that sets it in an enlarged context of human experience. That is why his notes and his "after" notations on the poems are important: they help us listen for the musical rigor of his translations/transpositions. His wrestling with the angel of American sentimentality is sometimes a draw and sometimes also a victory for world poetry.
By the time we arrive at *The Sunset Maker* (1987) this poet has matters well enough in hand that he can turn back to his original expertise with forms like the sonnet:

**MRS. SNOW**

Busts of the great composers glimmered in niches,
Pale stars. Poor Mrs. Snow, who could forget her,
Calling the time out in that hushed falsetto?
(How early we begin to grasp what kitsch is!)
But when she loomed above us like an alp,
We little towns below could feel her shadow.
Somehow her nods of approval seemed to matter
More than the stray flakes drifting from her scalp.
Her etchings of ruins, her mass-production Mings
Were our first culture: she put us in awe of things.
And once, with her help, I composed a waltz,
Too innocent to be completely false,
Perhaps, but full of marvelous clichés.
She beamed and softened then.

Ah, those were the days!

This poem is part of a group in which the poet explores and invokes his childhood world of music lessons and cultural discoveries. Mrs. Snow will reappear two pages later as part of a trio of portraits, less formal and more intimate, but here she is as firmly fixed as a character in Eudora Welty (I am thinking of *The Golden Apples*), and I do not think many readers would judge the portrait sentimental or nostalgic. Rhymes as comical as "niches / kitsch is" undercut the rush of sentiment, as do details like her dan-druff, a visual pun on her name. The isolated exclamation at the very end has its own built-in qualification, both from the rhyme (clichés / days) and through our sense that the triteness is deliberately acknowledged. The line "Too innocent to be completely false" may be the real payoff in this poem. A tribute by a teacher, to a teacher, loving but unglamorous.
The last third of this *Collected Poems*, then, with poems like "Cinema and Ballad of the Great Depression," "Manhattan Dawn (1945)," "Lorca in California," "Dance Lessons of the Thirties," "Banjo Dog Variations," "Pantoum of the Great Depression," and "The Small White Churches of the Small White Towns," shows Justice in full control of his art, an American master with a wide acquaintance in art and literature. He is still deeply attached to music, his first love, but he has also taken up painting, as the cover of this collection, reproducing four examples, demonstrates. The paintings are, of course, more Americana. And they are well-tempered too, though that is another story. All across the country his former pupils are spreading the word about poetic form and tradition, documenting the nation's spiritual gains and losses. Donald Justice may indeed be gone, but he has left us with a firm sense of the value of his art, carefully practiced and gradually perfected over many patient years.

*David Young*
CONTRIBUTORS


RAY AMOROSI’s new collection, Promises: Poems New and Selected, is just out from Lynx House Press.

TALVIKKI ANSEL’s most recent book of poems is Somewhere in Space (The Ohio State University Press, The Journal Award in Poetry).

DAVID BAKER’s poem is included in Swift: New and Selected Poems, which will be published in April 2019 by W. W. Norton. His edited volume, Seek After: On Seven Modern Lyric Poets, appears this spring from Stephen F. Austin University Press. Baker serves as Poetry Editor of the Kenyon Review and teaches at Denison University.

DANIEL BIEGELSON is the author of the chapbook Only the Borrowed Light which is forthcoming from VERSE. He is the Director of the Visiting Writers Series at Northwest Missouri State University and Associate Editor for The Laurel Review.

RALPH BURNS’ last book, But Not Yet, won the Blue Lynx Poetry Prize and was published by Lynx House Press.

LIBBY BURTON is a senior editor at Henry Holt. Her debut collection, Soft Volcano, was selected by Ross Gay as winner of the 2017 Saturnalia Books Poetry Prize and will be published in March 2018.

STEVEN CHUNG splits his time between the San Francisco Bay Area and Vermont. His poems appear or are forthcoming in such venues as the Financial Times, Rattle, and Redivider.

BOB HICOK’s ninth book, Hold, will be published by Copper Canyon Press in 2018.

JACKSON HOLBERT is originally from eastern Washington and currently works as a librarian in Texas. His poetry has appeared in Greensboro Review, Colorado Review, and Best New Poets. He can be found @JacksonHolbert.

JANE HUFFMAN is a third-year fellow at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she completed her MFA in poetry in 2017. She is co-founder/editor-in-chief of Guesthouse, a new literary journal.

MARK IRWIN’s nine collections of poetry include, most recently, A Passion According to Green (2017), along with a collection of essays, Monster: Distortion, Abstraction, and Originality in Contemporary American Poetry (2017).

DIANE LOUIE’s work has appeared in Cloudbank, Offcourse, The Iowa Review, and elsewhere. She lives in Paris, France.

JENNIE MALBOEUF is a native of Kentucky. Her poems are found in the Virginia Quarterly Review, Oxford Poetry (UK), The Hollins Critic, AGNI, and Best New Poets. She teaches writing at Guilford College in North Carolina.

MICHAEL MCGRIFF's recent books include two volumes of poetry, Early Hour and Black Postcards, and a collection of short stories coauthored with J.M. Tyree, Our Secret Life in the Movies. He serves on the MFA faculty at the University of Idaho.

SANDRA MCPHERSON is the author of some 20 books. Her forthcoming collection is with Salmon Poetry. New poems are forthcoming in Poetry, Crazyhorse, and Plume. She taught for four years at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and for 23 years at the University of California Davis.

ELISABETH MURAWSKI is the author of Zorba's Daughter, which won the May Swenson Poetry Award, Moon and Mercury, and two chapbooks. Heiress will be published in the fall of 2018.

MARK NEELY is the author of Beasts of the Hill (2012) and Dirty Bomb (2015), both from Oberlin College Press. His awards include an NEA Poetry Fellowship, an Indiana Individual Artist's grant, and the FIELD Poetry Prize. He teaches at Ball State University.

AIMÉE SANDS' work has appeared in FIELD, Missouri Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, Poetry Ireland, and other journals. Salmon Poetry published her first poetry collection The Green-go Turn of Telling in 2012. She is the Co-Director of the Brookline Poetry Series and Master Classes, a 17-year-old venue in the Boston area.

HEATHER SELLERS is at work on a collection of essays about living in Florida and completing a new manuscript of poems, After.

LEE SHARKEY is the author of Walking Backwards (Tupelo, 2016), Calendars of Fire (Tupelo, 2013), A Darker, Sweeter String (Off the Grid, 2008), and eight earlier full-length collections and chapbooks. Her recognitions include the Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize and the Abraham Sutzkever Centennial Translation Prize.

MOLLY SPENCER's poetry has appeared in Blackbird, Copper Nickel, Georgia Review, and other journals. Her critical writing has appeared in Colorado Review, Kenyon Review Online, and The Rumpus. She is Poetry Editor at The Rumpus. Find her online at www.mollyspencer.com.wa

ALEŠ ŠTEGER's books in English translation include The Book of Things, Berlin, and Essential Baggage. BRIAN HENRY's most recent book of poetry is Static and Saw.

ROBERT THOMAS's lyrical novella, Bridge (BOA Editions), received the 2015 PEN Center USA Literary Award for Fiction. His first book, Door to Door (Fordham), was selected by Yusef Komunyaka for the Poets Out Loud Prize, and his second collection, Dragging the Lake, was published by Carnegie Mellon.
LEE UPTON’s most recent books are *Visitations: Stories* and *Bottle the Bottles the Bottles the Bottles: Poems*. She is the Francis A. March Professor of English and Writer in Residence at Lafayette College.

UTE VON FUNCKE has published three collections of poems, most recently *frau auf der flucht* (scaneg Verlag/Munich). Two earlier collections appeared from Deutsche Nationallbibliothek/poesia. The poems in *FIELD* are from a selected collection she and Stuart Friebert are working on, tentatively entitled *Fallen Stars, Stained Stones*. STUART FRIEBERT’s most recent books are *First & Last Words: Memoir & Stories*, *Decanting: New & Selected Poems*, and *Votives: Selected Poems of Kuno Raeber*.

MARK WAGENAAR’s third book of poems, the Saltman Prize-winning *Southern Tongues Leave Us Shining*, is forthcoming in early summer from Red Hen Press. He is presently a Visiting Assistant Professor at Valparaiso University, and can be reached at markwagenaar.net

JEFF WASSERBOEHR’s work has appeared in *Missouri Review, Midwest Quarterly Review, Passages North*, and several other journals. He lives in Columbia, Missouri.
FIELD and the other publishing efforts of Oberlin College Press receive financial support from the Friends of Oberlin College Press. In a time of increasingly scarce resources, we are particularly grateful to these individuals for their continuing support of our mission. We invite others to join the Press in our efforts on behalf of contemporary poetry. Friends at the Supporter level receive a free subscription to FIELD. Friends at the Sponsor, Patron, and Benefactor levels receive copies of all our new publications. Contributions are tax-deductible to the full extent allowable by law. To learn more about joining the Friends, please contact our Managing Editor, Marco Wilkinson.

**Benefactors and Patrons:** Ray Amorosi, Anne Marie Macari, Nina Nyhart, David Walker, David Young and Georgia Newman

**Sponsors:** Anonymous, Barbara Florini, Dennis Hinrichsen, Cynthia Hogue, Judy Karasik, Kurt Olsson, Tom and Mary Van Nortwick, Diane Vreuls and Stuart Friebert

**Supporters:** Lisa Aaron and Peter Schmidt, Alice Andrews, Marianne Boruch, Peter Buchman and Jolene Hjerleid, Michael Chitwood, Edward Derby and Caitlin Scott, Angie Estes, Carol Ganzel, Paul and Susan Giannelli, David Goodman, David Hernandez, John Hobbs and Jutta Ittner, Ben Jones and Tanya Rosen-Jones, Martha Moody, Mark Neely and Jill Christman, Carl Phillips, Elaine Scott, Susan Terris, Charles Wright

|$1000 and more: Benefactor |
|$500-$999: Patron |
|$250-$499: Sponsor |
|$100-$249: Supporter |

Our appreciation also to the following donors: Leah Falk, Sarah Maclay, Fred Marchant, Mary Ann Samyn, and Linda Slocum.

The Press also receives essential operating support from Oberlin College.