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Andrea Hollander Budy

GIVING BIRTH

It's not so difficult — in time you won't even remember the pain.
— all the books on childbirth

On your back, heels locked in metal stirrups,
this immense volcanic shuddering
goes on against your will
as if it were, in fact, a volcano,
and your previous life merely a village of innocents
living on the island, used to it, barely mindful,
going about their daily repetitions, looking up
at each agitation only for a moment, thinking
it's nothing really, then returning
to their business, yanking the cord
of a lawnmower, mopping a kitchen floor,
licking stamps and sticking them one by one
onto a stack of sealed invitations.
And then again the mountain shudders.
Shudders again, this time violently.
But you are inside your breathing now, as you were taught,
and your husband's voice, his breath, that practiced duet now real,
the holding back, the pushing, the pain holding you
in its deep claws until there is nothing else.
And then the mountain erupts — you are sure of it —
erupts and erupts, its molten liquid
pushing beyond you, out, out
of your power, out, out. You wonder
where it will empty, what it will do
to those villagers who thought they had time.
Now there's no looking back, it's coming,
coming, and one of them
cries out — you hear him clearly, surely
as you heard your own pure cry moments ago,
or is this your own voice, or some part of your life
so distant it's barely attached even to memory, the way
volcanic ash showers cities hundreds of miles away, where later the wind might shift and a young man rising onto the street from the metro brushes a bit of soot from his face.
Not through my body but through another’s:
and where she went, you went; what she ate, what she felt,
enscrolled on your mesoderm; her voice, gait, nerves,
the vibration of the pond where you floated,
water lily, winter lotus, your long stem rooted
deep in her aqueous world until you swam out,
not out of my body, but out of your first mother’s body,
out in a rush of her waters, out
beyond where she could keep you —.
Now, before me meet,

high above the pattern of prevailing winds,
above the baffling doldrums, the monsoons,
horse latitudes, westerlies, trade winds,
above even the jet streams that snake and loop
across the world in great meandering waves,
is a wind above the weather,
drifting slightly with the earth’s rotation
as it blows between us, from me to you, you to me:
first we are connected by this wind,
instrument of prayer.
APPRAISAL

Five glass hearts to a hoop.
Chinese coins knotted onto brown silk.
Two sterling silver girls skipping gold wire ropes.

Three emerald beryl beads.
A waterfall of three freshwater pearls.

Angel skin coral cabochons.
Millegrain-edged salmon-colored coral briolettes.

Filligreed dangles.
French screwbacks.

A pair of bezel-set mine-cut diamonds, hinge-hooked.

Her mother’s mabé pearls.
Her father’s gold-flecked agate eyes.
Sapphires snipped out of a coat’s silk lining.

Emerald-cut glass.
A cracked turquoise heart.

Teardrop pearls, off-round to the eye.
One of the silver girls, dew-tarnished.

His angel-skin skin.
Her slippery cabochon.
SUSPENSE

When did I realize I was made of yearning?
The day the doctor tightened my braces
in the gleaming trap-chair?
Or the night I locked myself in
the bathroom with a tumbler of bourbon
and lay down my dancing head?
The check is coming,
something out there with my name
on its way. Each day I hurry
down the long driveway,
the mailbox on the road recedes.
I take root on a ridge above the highway,
a lookout in the shape of a birch.
Every leaf shivers with every possibility.
Weather passes right through me.
I’m looking for what needs to come
while my heart grows teeth.
MORE DEATH BY CAR

Parkas still zipped —
they meant to undo them or
why stop by the frozen lake?
Bad song on the radio,
a shared hatred. No one spins the dial.
He’s chasing a ball into the darkness.
Heating vent flutters her bangs.
She’s riding daddy’s shoulders
backward through childhood.

Outside, snow takes a complicated machine
and simplifies it: a box
with a curved hump, not even the wheels
visible — a shape for a child, shaking
ever so slightly as the engine works.

What do you do with such a bad car?
Take it to the cemetery. Demand the car
sit there and think about what it did.
Make it count the stones in its collection.
The motorcycle passing my bed at night has a rumination so umbrous the whole night stirs. And then the low endless wwhaaaaa of cars far away. This is the whole thing: At night through the silence to hear something far away. If it is a bell, a dog, a motor, a door shut —

In the story of the princess locked in the castle every night she’d listen for the sound of a key, for every night someone would come down the long torchlit corridor and drop their key, clink, on the stone floor. Through the space under her cell door all she could see was shadow, bending to pick up the key. Or so she imagined.

It is a great moment in a story when someone pauses at a door but does not open it.

The motorcycle disappears into its own whisper and leaves me the wake of the road, the little location I can sense just under my left shoulder a moment before it dies.

Over time she fell in love with the clumsy shadow.

The rest of the night, silent, maybe a crack in the joists, or the flicker of a bird, the wind, though there’s seldom wind here. And the life of the princess may have gone on endlessly like this, except for the pig. Who was, of course, a prince with a curse on him. The jailer kept him as a pet. He kept the key chain around the pig’s neck and, at night, when the pig tried to sniff under the princess’s door, the key clinked against the stone. The pig, you see, was a terrible voyeur of fragrance and he thought he smelled a truffle in there.

And so the things that pass are not, after all, what we think they are. Meeting them face to face won’t save us. What saves us is the bed we make for ourselves in the bodies we can’t bring out of the dark. What saves us is the love we think they would have for us if each minute did not have its own direction.
BEDTIME STORY

The way I can carry a canary on my finger through the house, you’d think the littlest part of my body was a light somewhere else. I have been able to do this since I was a child. Since I was a child the boat on my head and the whistle in my hip have both fallen and disappeared. They say it’s important for a woman to have balance. She needs balance in order to have grace. That way the boat and the pale white pear don’t get lost. And the plunger neither. The way I can carry pitch black on my lips, the way I can carry a gun in my sleep, the way I can carry bottles all stacked up my spine and a backgammon piece in my ear and the whole gulf of Aqaba on my perfume, you’d say I was a body on a spirit and spirit’s looking precarious. Even now someone next to you may be carrying on his shoulder, a side of beef or an astrolabe. You never know who’s carrying an 1/8” screwdriver in their gut. Look closely. At the body: a place from which thing after thing has fallen. The way I can carry the book of sitting. The way I can carry the book of kneeling. And the way I can carry the book of leafing through over and over. Carrying the farmhouse and the chickens and dad’s clarinet and this desert and the fine night and the TV-murmur and your sleep all at once—they say it can’t be done. You can’t carry the gray roof and the wire coop and the black velvet-lined case and the saguaros and the 5th of November and the boy in the late movie saying he’s going to make more trees . . . not without dropping a pear or a gun. And it may be true. Sometimes I sway, and men throw down their pillows. A child carries his bedtime all through his life.
Mary Baine Campbell

IT DOES NOT MATTER SO MUCH
ABOUT THE EXPLODING SUNS

We think of Australia, of the moon and of red giants
Because we are sad. We throw rocks
At the oppressors, and we oppress
Because we are so sad. We go to war
And still we can’t forget, when it is time to sleep,
Whoever it is we loved.
We go to work, and we raise the crops;
It must be done. But why? She is so far away.
He and it are out of hearing.
There isn’t even a wind tonight
In which we could breathe their breath.
Quarter Past Blue

It's just the sort of paper-thin night
to make me steal the clapper from the mission bell
and leave it on your doorstep like a stuttered prayer.
In your room I see a writing light,
soft and dirty as an oyster.
I know you can hear me
out here in the static,
scraping on your pane like a raccoon.
I've been to the pond.
It's not as if the swans are your personal secret.
Come out and walk with me across the Sonoma
town square, on the edge of the green.
I'm wearing my papier-mâché wings,
and they're not yet dry. The moon's been released
on its own recognizance. This is serious traffic, gridlock
intergalactical, Friday night lust and spleen. This is
the it they mean when they say this is it. You are so
cought up in your own devotions. You are so not
what you think you are. It's late,
half past revelation, quarter past blue,
and you're still counting the chits, waiting for something
better than love as cold and magical as dry ice
to come along and sideswipe you, hit and run,
without leaving a scratch.
Troth might be spit passed between two sets of lips in the first teen kiss & probably infectious, but divorce, Molly told us as she pre-empted the talk of all around us & cut her boudin with Loretta’s borrowed knife, divorce is the smell under the recently-removed ring, not sweat itself, not the gold either sweating to stay on base metal. She said you spent the first year of marriage waiting for your finger to turn green & the rest of it as a gold-enameled Virgin, the beech paneling it’s on, wormy. Molly’s hand had to re-learn, as mine did after the broken wrist, attitudes of take & release, accepting steadily-heavier goods as, out of the cast, it became human. Molly’s teen son had been passed over a bridge of hands, lifted first by friends probably gone, Molly whined, on goofballs — then those of strangers, a danger so many-handed that it was divided
into affection as the body jerked & was tossed toward the arena stage spotlit for the heavy-metal band

self-proclaimed The Mammon of Iniquity, who had brushed themselves red, their dog-collared vocalist, to himself or to the thousands, acting out a sexual riff on love.
Elisabeth Tallent

THE LOVER AS OED

This is what comes of buying dictionaries with pictures. Seeking uxorious, I come upon an ex, chin on his fist, illustrating himself,

a self decades older than the lover whose ring finger grew seditious warts, whose cock was endearingly small, like a training cock, and now, apart from the dictionary scent, part attic, part ink, there’s the reek of his balls: seashell and latrine. His dispatch and professionalism marked sex and work alike.

From the hair falling into his eyes to his unkempt toenails I adored him. It’s fair to say I learned a lot from him. He liked me on my hands and knees, face, shall we say, buried in the pillow. I was not conjugal: that was clear in bed, in any sustained togetherness. What could we do but part? This was managed gently. He had a wife.

Then another, and book after book, an ascent destined to land him among pages too Bible-fine to skim. The smooth halves of this readable bottom have the weight of compressed, packed-in meaning, the heft and contour of the searchable other, fingers and eyes pursuing a word, the word, as if your lover said Say x, and x began down in your throat, roused sound, and he closed his teeth on it, he bit down on the source. For love of me, I’d always thought, moved to mock violence. But now I see, turning past the page imprinted with his face: it was a case of the lover as OED, eros as magnifying glass. Haven of focus within a blur of cognates,
the wanted word conjured from the obedient body. Ah, *uxorious*: too kind to a wife. He was notoriously kind, raffish, indiscreet. Our days together? Brimming. Sweet. No complaint lifts its snaky head even now that he, in miniature, has his entry here, him with his old half-shy gleam of prolific intelligence, crewneck sweater worn for perpetuity.

I close the dictionary. But on the shelf it troubles me as if a smoldering match got shut up in tinder. Now I would take back every word.
DIMINUTIVES

The rationale for doing away with the rest — actress, poetess — I understand, but I am sorry to lose comedienne, cheeky

and light on her feet, sly, relying on the wit peculiar to her kind, conversant in kvetch, a born mime expert in the droll, dispassionate double take,
faked orgasm, screwball epiphany, Or faux pas, double entendre, dreamy dissociation, Happy birthday to you finally revealed as foreplay, Who, me? as the heart of sex.

How can we relinquish comedienne? Here a sharp-tongued nun, there a ranting spinster, cat’s-eye glasses and Einstein hair, the entire cast of the bad-girl id, vanquished by the loss of an e, an n, n, e.

Knowing slut and termagant vanish, so neat is this androgyne an, so nice the dominant paradigm. Comedian is a stand-up guy. Comedienne was a girly-girl word to the wise.
Right. Right, then.
Thank you very much.
Right.
And now in Chester paddock,
horses whip themselves with tails.
Right.
And now the clouds are
sliced by brights and sharps;
the small rains down do ale.
And Thanks a lot
of tinned meat and gorse;
and then the cause of animal forms.
Right. And
then the royal arrowed deer
and in the weirs a blonde.
Thanks, then; lovely, that.
And then they spray divided Mary in the fens.
Perfect.
All right then.
And piled minis and the proteins
gone all treacly in the sun.
The Hound and Peat,
The Rat and Saddle,
The Dart and Digby.
Fine. Right.
The glass is
brinkling in the grass
and Bill goes down to chalk in boats.
Right, then.
Lovely.
Thank you very much.
When we poured each other a glass of wine
the marriage snatched it
and gulped it in front of us
with odd little snorts.

If we tried to undress,
the marriage sorted our clothes,
folded them along the seam,
hung them carefully in the closet
and began buffing our shoes.

We still gloried in each other
but our union had come to hate us.

Once we woke arm in arm
long before light
and heard glass shattering
in a distant street.
Was our own love jealous of us?

August fatigue, immense city,
graveyards guarded by statues,
names of drugs spraypainted on churches,
radio voices promising delights
greater than Paradise, forces
stronger than God —

and perhaps there were such powers
because God coughed
night after night in the next room
but our marriage turned on us
and began writing
each of our sighs, every kiss,
in a tiny brassbound book.
THE DOG

At twilight we walk each other
in the snowy park.
The leash yanks us apart.
Our trails mix crazily.
Haven't we always traveled
in a series of lunges
away from a missing center?
Something we can't name
obsesses us at the plinth
of the frozen birdbath,
and again under the belly
of Sherman's bronze horse.
Is there a secret passage
to squeeze through and be free
of the endless command?
We shout *heel*, our voice
slurs with longing, at last
we'll enter our own lit door
and there undo our studded collar,
mete out stale friskies, comb
matted hair, turn three times
on nothing, and whimper
in a dream whose ending
everyone knows but us.

24
Jean Valentine

THE LITTLE, FAINTLY BLUE CLAY EGGS

The little, faintly blue clay eggs
in the real grass nest you made and sent to me
by hand:

    It runs through my thighs, even now,
that you thought of it!
for a little while we thought of nothing else.

Frozen little couple in hats,
frozen beaks —
BRIGHT WORLD, AND BRIGHTENING

He said *forsythia*, he was speaking in terms of spears, was it understood that I understood him.

* 

Three bluish birds, in the mouth of one of which what hanging?

* 

He said *each lovely room* fails somewhere and — here, extending to me his map — could I say already where that might be.

*
(As from a bush
no longer burning)

If
I turn

first — ? If

you do —

(As into
water where it is
coldest, and more green)

*

And taking the map then
from him.

And setting the map on fire.

And watched it grow steadily
useless in my hands.
He meant the light.
No.
No, he meant the water, for once like nothing to be made much of.

That, when he moved, he moved with the same kind of chance by which at first dream seems governed, when it must the whole time have concerned damage . . .

As the heron lifts from the earth its own: him, lifting up, toward his again, whose body?

*Him as: abbreviation, part that gives all the rest away —

who said that?

* He was no more where the world stops at than this line of trees —
the usual branches, birds
perched among,

what wind there is,
from the north, making
rise the especially delicate
ring of feathers
at the neck of each,

each a stiff courtier
briefly: collared;
Elizabethan.
Then birds again: on wing until, from here, they

look like stones mostly — released, as
from a sling.
Mark Irwin

AMERICAN URN

A wide prairie dotted with buffalo finding some mountains. A machine on a long track moving west: People in feathered costumes. — Flags, a slaughter. Below, a war with this flag and another that, as you turn the bronze, becomes a modern riot. Now a metropolis and airport, a radio tower and dead tree that resembles a cross as the images become more cluttered — an ad for soap that will make you younger, a tiny action figure staring into the distance, and an enormous shine from I can’t tell what but could be the evening with all its bright tons setting down over wheated fields.
Scott Withiam

HOW TO END IT

In the failed zoo’s final year,

the last of the zoo’s unshipped animals — zoo born lion mates incessantly rocking, rubbing the same concrete post — back and forth, back and forth — given the pink injection.

The heave.

Next to collapse, surrounding businesses. The pink slip.

The abandoned grounds — a drug war buffer zone between two scared neighborhoods. Yours and mine.

Bodies get removed.

Minds, too.

No one ventures inside unless they’re nuts.

Along the perimeter of the brain there’s a path worn by those who keep their distance.

Although, inside the grass stands tall, like savannah.

And lately, a man and woman boldly stroll the cracked and shifted promenade, their heads just above the grass like lions in the wild.

They’re ghosts in love. This is the only place they can meet.
Betsy Sholl

WHEN CURSING FAILS

Snow will you ever give up
Will you ever surrender, become invisible like rain
Will you quit trying to cover us all
Snow you demagogue when will you understand the wet kissing
    time is up
Your time of innocence
The world doesn’t want to look veiled and white
Snow of duplicity, complicit snow
Dictator with your mouth too close to the bullhorn
Hypnosis by snow, dropping endless platitudes
Saying citizens stay home, don’t gather in the square, driving is
dangerous
The children need safety not school
Fear works best when it’s pretty and white
Snow will you stop dividing North & South, creating Puritans
Snow stop making us hate our bodies
Treacherous snow we look at through glass, wrapped up waiting
    for you to end
Then we go out and scrape, throw you over our shoulders till our
    muscles ache
How can we understand people who wear light flowing clothes,
    so few layers between them and forever
Snow you like to keep people shut in bickering over the one and
    the many
You like people looking down when we walk, always in a hurry
I watched my father drive off, absorbed by snow
Scrim after scrim, a swirling sound track of snow
And if you didn’t kill him you killed many
The world isn’t one and you aren’t pure
You’re an industry like everything else
You and your white robes, it’s all cover-up and pose
Snow when we call you a blanket we mean a shroud
When we call you white we mean deadly
No wonder the whole country’s tilting south and west
When we call you cold we are thinking of ourselves fallen
When we call you beautiful it’s because we know someday the
    earth like snow only darker will cover us all
CHARM FOR WHAT LOOKS LIKE

imaginary hats, real plastic
purses with chains

inside them, brown suit or sailor
depending on size, and rabbit

muffs molting on pastel
colors. Exactly one

beagle. A white house with rose
shutters too small to hold them

all, and a willow weeping
in the sideyard for the dead boy

day and night. What looks like
America in hats and gloves

is. With mother and father young
enough to be your own children, how

will you blame them now?
What looks like nostalgia

isn’t. Nobody really wants to
relive it. We’re all too tired

from turning the century. Is that where
your body was? Poor body,

having to get from there to here —
in those shoes! For some things

there are no photographs. A Friday
night in May, for example, when it’s hard
to get a sitter. There are recipes for disaster but you don’t know them yet.

The moon lights the clouds and the clouds race along the phone lines looking like a train or a story, Mother and father have stepped out, how can you blame them?

They have friends everywhere in houses like yours, yellow windows striped black with venetian blinds. The phone off the hook in your kitchen connects to the phone off the hook where they are. You’re supposed to be in bed, but in the story you-never-slept-a-wink-as-a-child, well, how can they blame you? In the receiver at your ear are underwater voices, a chair scraped back, something set down in your head. Exactly once, twice, three times you say hello into the mouthpiece in whispers from low to medium to loud. It would be a story if you cried out,
but it looks like you never cried out. It would be a story if you hung up,

but, often as you pushed
on that phone's plastic nipples —

lightly lightly — heart
racing like a cloud at each click,

it looks like you
never hung up. Is it still a story

when nothing's happened yet?
When you stuff as many cookies in your mouth

as will fit and try on
your father's wingtips and your mother's best

strand of phony pearls and look like
someone so like you in the mirror

you could weep like a tree?
The only recipe you know by heart

is for homemade bubbles, which calls for water
and a cup of Joy.
An hour before dusk on a Tuesday, mid-November —
sunstruck clouds with winter in them,
extrees, white with it too.
Blue sky. Also
an aroma of blue
sky, bell-clear, hard as a river
in your lungs, which is why you’re
breathless again, grateful,
as if it were the banks of the Seine
you strolled on and not
the mastodon back of the Midwest,
gray unraiseable thing like a childhood
slept through, and past.
On the horizon now a kind of golden
gate of sunset. To visit
means to both comfort and afflict,
though neither lasts long.
That charm of finches lifting from a ditch
can surprise you with a sound like
horselips, and paddle toward the trees
beautifully, small,
brown, forgettable as seeds,
but they, too, must sing on earth unto the bitter death —
Tony Tost

AZALEAS AND SO ON

A father may be the author of a man’s form but not his essence: that is the jurisdiction of the unknown.

If a father attempts to be author of both form and essence then the father seeks not to be a father, but the unknown, and thus a god and must be devoured.

When Bob Dylan was a boy and stole his father’s matches he knew this.

He knew this when he was then chained to a door. I know it too, but often forget, especially in times like right now, when I’m breaking into some dude’s house and stealing his stereo. In these moments, my thoughts are usually of obligation; as a thief, it’s my obligation, after breaking into a house, to take something of value. It is also my obligation to leave (the wound’s obligation to ache but also to heal).

Obligation is a chair in the woods: an idealized form placed in the natural world, out-of-place and perhaps even a perversion of its “roots,” but still something to be sought, reupholstered, and then used, if only as an agent of rest.

Or, obligation is an extra hand. Something to be severed.
When I was ten
I broke into my father’s office to steal some money
and there he was,
digitally stimulating my mother
and talking on the phone.

My girlfriend
says I’ve spent my life’s capital
perpetually sneaking into my father’s office
then telling myself

I was a trespasser of the unknown.

“The ancient male ritual
of penetrating the public sphere
only to stumble
upon a penetration of the private one,” she says.

Like Dylan’s sons: their father
talked about a river once
so now they must run all around the house and look for it.
LOVE IS THE HEEL THAT KNOCKS
HARD AGAINST THE FLOOR

I was raw with visions this
day of a God with no skin,
so I held my cup out our
kitchen window and
listened to it rain.

I'd get revisited by the terror
in the silence of a room
without her in it. Logic slips,
panics the rational mind
which whispers back,

you just heard her pony
her heels across the kitchen
floor fifteen seconds ago —
where's she going? —

but so many cities have
burned since then,
their bricks are tired of
licking their own skin,

so you rush you fullback
room to room crying into
an empty house.

"Dude? Dude? she says
out loud, "O Dude!"

And you kiss the sound
on the mouth
before it washes away.
She looked up after
the grass between her arms and ribs
dirt on the bare
slip of back between shirt and shorts.
She breathing beautifully.
Breathing beautifully she looked up out
through to her younger starry body
mouthed to the younger her she saw there.
To the woman she saw there
mouthing bigger louder

breathing beautifully

sticky night grass
woman about the night
the stars and of course skin
the muscles and the skin
of the man agreeing and shining too
mouthing to the younger her she saw after.

What you have to look forward to.
The listening of the girl
the listening of her trying to understand
the possibility of sticky and dirt and grass and skin

breathing beautifully

the sticky night woman mouthing to her
in the night the woman looked up after
started speaking saying
what is forward what is back what you have
have to look to
to look forward to.
GET OFF YOUR HIGH HORSE

How low were they to think
our horse was so high?

Our horse was so low
our horse wasn't at an elevation exactly.

Our horse was under our feet, I suppose.
But no matter the height of the horse —

except it was good that he was so short
when we were on him.

Besides which, I think possibly
I already got off my horse,

and as a consequence he's hardly
recognizable as a horse.

He smiles and that's not like a horse,
he's so grateful.
IF THE WALLS COULD TALK

They wouldn’t be on our side. Our gossip, our rumors.

Why would they even bother to inform on us — and who to? The couple in the hate suite?

Although they might pick up some tricks. At least they would learn how to rationalize,

our special kind of intelligence. But they’re not on our side by half.

Anyway, what they repeat would only make us stubborn.

We’d close the door before we endured more of it.

And besides, they would be distracted by the other walls.

They want to talk with one another, not us tourists.
POVERTY DAYS

We hungered something
terrible. Wore someone else's shoes,
someone else's shirtwaists; the crippling
government of misfit things.

What a party the mind is! We lived on confection,
sublime sceneries of what ifs and someday I'll . . .

"Pretty is as pretty does" mama said. Don't
you believe it. Who could resist

wishing. We kept letters in a pasteboard
box. Said something short when

we ran out of imagination. (We would
invite you in but for the precipice.)

We cooked, of course. My, didn't we
taste!

We had clowders of cats, a wedge of geese,
excessive propensities, pride —

our biggest expense. In a pinch, we did
what we did best. We went wanting.
Leaves flare up, kitchen matches
in the permanent trees.

Black flash of pike on Mirror Lake, dropping
like a roll of nickels. I don’t want nudes
in paintings. I don’t want Beauty through the heart,
small harpoon that opens when pulled out.

I want to break another eggroll with you in moonlight.

Ugly maples, when you’re gone.
As an example, the man is angry at autumn.

As an example, the man is upset at the cat,
buries herself in leaves & cries,
carries them back to him like prey.

As an example, a man
sits at a desk in faded admiral clothes,
medals obtained at yard sales,
the voice of despair drowning in him.

The man gets up,
takes a bowl of milk like a small moon
to the cat. As an example, the man’s wife
slept with another man. The man
walks over snow crust, chewing down
on a peppermint lifesaver. He wishes
the man’s bones would snap like that.

The man rubs the belly
of the cat, hard, the way she likes.

He can see his breath.
Rose like a fog off a lake at dawn as the bus rolled past, a young man nodding sleepily against the glass.

Rose from the runway like an airplane that has not long to live.

*Rise,* the pastor told us, and we rose from our pews and fingered the books because we knew our time was short. We sang and bowed our heads, then kneeled.

It was a gorgeous empire in its brick and marble. Gorgeous, like a new car, all windshield and chrome. I wanted to touch it, to slide my finger along the headlight’s bee-eye of glass

and not think about it overturned in a field, the wheels slowing and the cockpit just smoke.

*Rise,* the gods said in their wisdom and rings. *Rise,* in their fingers nettled over with scars, in their whimsical and gratuitous anger and love. Rome rose and rose like a fog

and we said *yes* to the gods and played our guitars. *Yes* and boarded our planes, or drove the long roads outside of the city

where the sun came down and no one plowed it away. It was a lovely time,

faster and faster like smoke. The baths and the aqueduct, the opulent quarter and the less opulent, I swam in perfume while my servants ate mice, while the borders collapsed

and planes crowded the skies. *Oh give me, give me,* I said to the gods who grinned around their crystal balls.

It was always summer while Rome was rising. The pastor said kneel. The gods just laughed.

We spread our beach towels on the sand and collapsed.
CROSSING THE RIVER NEGRO

Crossing the Negro to the rain forest
there are no mosquitoes.
The acidic water kills them.

Last night I went up steep
steps, knocked on an absurd door,
wanting something.

The ball bearing eyes of a giant black
ant stared back blank as
a painted mirror.

Though I knew the door would never
open, it seemed right to knock
and wait.

At Iguazu, falls fall into falls like
superimposed ghosts; steam stinks
of a wetsockearth.

In front of the door I’m listening hard,
a child who needs to bear
what he can’t understand.

In an Urucu tree a toucan carries a sun
red snake in her banana beak,
swinging it to death.

I stand waiting on the porch.
Inside someone I might know could
be waiting too.
Carol Potter

IT

It wants to get loose.
It talks about home.

Goes up the side
of the mountain.

Taller than any mountain
you’ve ever been this close to.

It walks on the clean cobblestones.
Suns itself. Drapes a colored cloth in the wind.

Has snow on the top.
Looks at beauty and empties itself into it.

It billows. It gives itself over to itself.
It has a white swan and a cold clear lake.

The swan gets up and tries
to get into your lunch.

You kick at it. Get back you hiss.
You throw a piece of bread as a decoy
so you can get away from it.
The large white wings and that white neck

with the hard yellow beak
at the end of it.
WORDS ARE THE DIMINUTION OF ALL THINGS

The brief secrets are still here, and the light has come back.
The word remember touches my hand
But I shake it off and watch the turkey buzzards bank and wheel
Against the occluded sky.
All of the little names sink down, weighted with what is invisible,
But no one will utter them, no one will smooth their rumpled hair.

There isn't much time, in any case.
There isn't much left to talk about as the year deflates.

There isn't a lot to add.
Road-worn, December-colored, they cluster like unattractive angels
Wherever a thing appears,
Crisp and unspoken, unspeakable in their mute and glittering garb.

All afternoon the clouds have been sliding toward us out of the Blue Ridge.

All afternoon the leaves have scuttled
Across the sidewalk and driveway, clicking their clattery claws.
And now the evening is over us,
Small slices of silence running under a dark rain,
Wrapped in a larger.
A cold draft blows steadily from a crack in the window jamb. It’s good for the soul. For some reason, it makes me think of monuments in the high desert and what dissembles them.

We’re all born with a one-way ticket, of course, Thus do we take our deaths up on our shoulders and walk and walk Trying to get back.

We’d like to move as the water moves. We’d like to cover the earth the way the wind covers the earth. We’d like to burn our way there, like fire.

It’s not in the cards. Uncertainty harbors us like winter mist — the further we go, the deeper it gets. Sundown now, and wind from the northwest.

The month is abandoned. Volvos go wandering to and fro Like lost polar bears. The landscape is simple and brown. The future’s behind us, panting, lolling its black tongue.
PARTIAL GLIMPSES OF THE FACE OF JESUS

The hand pulled back from water is always partially
gloved
with water (as the soul
must be, gazing through a river's staggered
brilliance,
cloudwork lighting the weave
of trout) — something a stiff wind
could
evaporate, or fingers leak back to the river.

The same river moving now, undulant,
before me.
Spirit infusing spirit along a rip
in gravity. Current in it like a corkscrew.
Silt riding high
on the rain's torque,
then tiring in a long, dull, nutrient curtain.
Revelation swifter there for certain fish;
sunlight glossing even the spray of the stones.
How could I
ever hope to contain such radiance,
another presence next to mine, touching
mine,
inside me like a liquid metal,
a slur in the heart or blood
carried
as uneasily as word carries matter?
I know the flicker’s cry now — two short bursts of repeatable longing — and where

the woodpecker nests, its song inside, then outside of the tree. A starling on a dead limb, hovering as I hover — wanting to steal its home. Our attention —

the something beautiful given. As the cranes are, or the pepper-black gathering of clouds. My driving parallel to the sunset for awhile in a burnt orange light —

radio playing — then cutting along a backroad — belief so rife in the fields and yards, the cattle lie down around it, horses shuttle in the wind, galloping right up to the edge of wire. And a creek there too, flattened backwater, blister of scum and weeds. I took two photographs near this place once
and stacked them into a single shot,
   a deer’s
carcass up close matching the contour

of the creek so that it was a single body
   of water,
something in the pliant ribs

mirrored exactly in the pattern
   of swaying
reeds. As if the animal

had paused in that last terrible
   in-rush
of breath and held it there until

the truck passed and the water stilled,
   and its eyes
drained of color. And then,

of course, the daylight whistling,
   its long
spears marring the chamois. Torso

and water, my own body and water.
   The smell
of the deer like a garment

thrown down from the afterlife . . . Somewhere
   in the tall
grass, a golden bird. Mules,

in a shaded grove, as magnificent as
   palominos;
a heron, I thought,
drinking from their pool, two-dimensional
   at first
   in the water’s glazed aspect,

then suddenly alert to presence — full-
   bloomed,
wide-winged. Two deer later

staring back at me from their side of this trespass.
Among bitterns one is blind.
Among reeds, bittern is the middle swayer.
In the blind I am all eyes.
To the eye on the other side I am
abstract, an eye, too, and green
but nothing
to beat your wings about.

The blind offered itself as a way to see
deeper into what out there
kept at abeyance, us.
Still, when we were happy we forgot ourselves ... something like that.
Who watches for what moves
and what sits
still among the rushes?
And where the branch
meets the bird.
I didn’t say I was interested in the birds, particularly,
I just said I couldn’t find them.

In the blind we are all eyes and I
am the middle swayer.
In the blind we pull birds out of the sky with other birds
we work like puppets
into the net between the firs.
This blind runs Cooper’s hawks.
The blind with the rain gutter and the burlap-covered boards.

There is concern about the bird whose tail lacks rigidity.
The lure-birds ride pulleys — pigeon, dove, English sparrow.
They wear leather vests and precious little else.

Someone bolts for the caught hawk, checks it for crop, for molt,
for parasites,
the wing pit for fat. Opens the hatch.

It's easy to love a thing against the sky but you can't just look at one
thing and say,
"Oh, it's a redtail." It has to all add up.
LAMENT

Where the hole's been cut

small rocks exposed, embedded, suspended as if floating or
caught by surprise on their way —
where would they be going?

Emma's gone.

And the roots of weeds that had been hidden all
this time ripped and all over up and down
the hole's flanks the haphazard scrape-marks
of the shovel.

*I want to stand where I can see the hole* is overheard and a woman moves
out of the shade into the sunshine.

Emma's gone.

When her father drives the first shovel into the mound of dirt and
drops his burden
onto the casket
that is the most futile sound.

A body lost at sea is *a subject unattended in the waves.*

Emma is attended

although even her father said, "I don't like the earth much now
either."
The Deepest Part of the River is Mekeel McBride's fifth book of poems. My first acquaintance with her work (let's all admit how hard it is to keep up with our exploding poetry scene!) came when we accepted two of these poems for *FIELD*. The publisher is Carnegie Mellon, whose list brings a number of good poets to my attention. It took me awhile to get used to the typeface of this book, which I think was poorly chosen, but I was engrossed in the poems in no time at all, and I am still exploring and admiring them.

Here's her opening poem:

**THE GOLDFISH**

It was a feeder which means it was supposed to get fed to something bigger like a barracuda. But I put the ten cent comet in clean water with enough food, no predators and it grew into a radiant glider full of happy appetite.

That was the truth of it for a long time and then the fish, for no reason that I could see, suddenly curled upside down into a red question mark. Now, its golden scales drop off like sequins from a museum dress and its mouth forms over and over the same empty O. Though I wish to there's no way to free it, even for a second, from its own slow death. You say this fish is the least of it, that I had better start worrying about what's really wrong: a child chained somewhere
in a basement, starving, the droop-eyed man,
cooking up, in a cast iron kettle, germ stew that will
end the world. But that’s exactly what I just said.
The golden thing is dying right on the other side
of the glass; I can see it and there’s nothing I can do.

This has many of the features I admire in our current poetry. It’s
anecdotal, grounded in a familiar experience, but it reaches be¬
yond itself to an uncomfortable insight about this world of suf¬
fering and decay we live in. It has regularity in its lines and stan¬
zas, but it has freedom and flexibility about its handling of that
regularity, as in the enjambment between stanzas two and three.
Its music (“feeder . . . radiant glider,” “happy appetite,” “over /
and over the same empty O”) is well matched to its subject, un¬
ostentatious but exact, supporting the meaning in a way that con¬
ects the poem to poetry’s tap-root in orality and community. The
images are vivid when they need to be — ten cent comet, red
question mark, museum dress, cast iron kettle — but never for
their own sake, or simply to impress or dazzle. The self-presenta¬
tion is a nice mix of diffidence and confidence, something that
current poets have worked out through much trial and error.
Most readers, I would think, ought to find this poem rewarding
and not too troublesome. It’s a good gateway to McBride’s dark¬
ened world.

I say “darkened” because this poem does not want to forget,
or let us forget, what a distressing realm we occupy. The “germ
stew” she mentions in passing has taken on new significance
since last fall, and it can stand for her wish to be honest about
how difficult it is to survive in this world as a sensitive and hon¬
est person. The speaker is anxious to avoid self-pity, I think, but
she aims to be honest about the things that trouble her. The col¬
lection’s second poem treats of domestic violence, the third is ele¬
giac, the fourth begins “Endless dark streets,” and so on. If I had
to describe the lighting of this book’s world I would say that it is
nocturnal and unnerving, with wonderful moments of light, illu¬
minating flashes and lamps. The illuminations are somewhat re¬
assuring, and treasured the more for their occurrence in the eerie.
enveloping darkness. Maybe that's why I like her Ferris wheel poem so much:

I WANT TO BE A FERRIS WHEEL

For Russ Hall

This soft body turned into shining steel, stretching toward farms and spiders and the clean windows of the Midwest. Neon lights on me, that weird kind of green that a tree wouldn't really recognize but aliens might, if they happened to be looking in this direction. A skinny kid, blond, named Joey, not one tattoo on him, hits the switch and the big green wheel just rolls real slow through the darkening air, like dreaming. Whoever needs to can just sit back and be carried into heaven over and over. I don't care if there are owls or stars or clouds or even an Elvis sighting in the sky. I just want to be carried, everyone spinning together in this one big circle that is the same and in the stationary turning isn't the same at all; air smelling of ponies and gear grease, burning leaves, fried dough, the end of summer; everybody wanting to kiss someone real bad even if they're in a seat alone. And my heart, as dependable as the engine, being fed by power from some waterfall full of fat salmon all the guys with hooks can't figure out how to find; a waterfall so fierce meteor showers of August
hurl half their fiery selves there to cool off and not even one scrap of water sizzles. And the wheel scratching out declarations of love to wheat fields and empty cinemas, to garage mechanics in blue cover-alls who still adore every old car with fins and just this once making a song as stringy as Christmas lights on plastic palms in Florida, a song for cows still awake in the slaughterhouse, for the undertaker painting violets on a dead girl’s closed eyes, for insomniac sisters playing mah-jongg by aquarium light; a song for whoever needs it. In late wind, green wheel communing with car chrome, running dreams of collarless dogs, and the electro-deluxe, gone-to-dawn stars.

This “song for whoever / needs it” has manifold pleasures to offer the willing reader. It is partly a hymn to rural America, garishly lit, not compromised by Norman Rockwell-type nostalgia. It opens a big space for contemplation, not only east to west (Northwestern salmon falls by way of the clean windows of the Midwest) and north to south (the plastic palms of Florida), but out to the heavens, where aliens might look in our direction and enjoy green neon while meteor showers rain down in the month of county fairs and traveling carnivals. And it moves inward as well: into the funeral homes of all the small towns and minor cities, and past the aquarium light where the insomniacs sit up and play mah-jongg. It is one of those catalogues filled with detail so expert and so inspired that we wish it would never stop, just keep revolving like that wheel, far into the night. The speaker has imagined an Ovidian metamorphosis, not just enjoying the Ferris wheel’s meaning and strangeness, but becoming the thing itself, merging with its meaning in order to fully appreciate and
understand it. That’s the sort of event that’s only possible in a poem. A novel or short story might take a loving glance at the Ferris wheel, in passing or while setting out a scene, but it probably wouldn’t have time or inclination to take the risk of turning into one.

The poem’s last sentence exemplifies all of its virtues. The music is frank and full. The images join unlike things in an effortless compound. The light effects — neon bouncing off car chrome, stars disappearing as dawn arrives — are scintillating and magical. The uncollared dogs, running free, match the response of the exhilarated and unfettered speaker and, if they’ve been attentive, the readers. I’d rank this poem right up there with Rilke’s and McPherson’s merry-go-round poems. Next time I venture to the county fair, it will renew one part of it for me, peeling off layers of familiarity and dullness, letting even my nose enjoy the pony smell, the gear grease and fried dough that spell the end of summer.

The strength of her images identifies McBride as one of those poets who are expert in creating visual perceptions that resonate musically. In the Ferris wheel poem, as in the goldfish poem, she provides a situational context, using narrative and description, where the images can congregate and interact. Other poems in her collection — “Wild Violets in a Gloveless Hand,” “The Clock Unlocks Its River of Chimes,” “What Follows,” “Egg,” “Quiet Book” — provide less mediation for the powerful imagery, inviting the reader to provide situations and contexts. Still others take objects — an avocado, a fence, a potato — as inspiration for their chains of association and surprise. The reader can also follow the trail of a group of poems that are more personal, based on family relations and traumatic personal experiences, which provide a counterbalance to the more objective delights of the collection. The point is how varied this poet can be, a virtue that’s worth remarking on in a climate where poets sometimes get praised for doing one particular thing over and over. That may make for intensity, but it soon makes for boredom as well, and I rejoiced, as I made my way through The Deepest Part of the River, at its vigorous variety. I wish I had space to quote other favorites, such as
"Dog Harmonica," "The Nest," "The Book in the Pillow," and "I Don't Know How," not to mention the two we had in FIELD, but I leave these discoveries to readers. Those who seek out this book will be well rewarded.

Robin Behn is a poet whose work I have followed for some time, often through my capacity as an editor of this magazine. She happens to be an acquaintance and, quite incidentally, a former student. I had no intention of reviewing her book until I found myself so engrossed in it. Then I faced the question — I should not review it because of the personal connection? — and since that made no sense to me, I pushed forward.

Unlike McBride, Behn is oriented more to the possibilities and powers of syntax and placement, slightly less to the centrality of image. Sonic relationships, in music and in language, are vital to her understanding of how the world makes sense, so that while it is a little too simple to say that Behn's world features sounds as McBride's features sights, the basic distinction helps to clarify the authors' differing alignments. Behn likes to develop a poem around a central metaphor, somewhat in the manner of a metaphysical poet. This architectonic urge carries over to the collection itself: the design of her book is more complex than McBride's, and individual poems tend to be longer. She will often move language, the poem's medium, suddenly into the foreground, so that the reader needs to be ready to encounter different levels of attention and awareness.

Here is her opening poem:

PRELUDE FOR PENNY WHISTLE
— FOR D.

Since then, no day is silent, or only a rare day has enough forgetting in it to be silent enough to keep me from calling you back up out of water or sunlight.
I have a bridge but it is not the one
you stepped from. Nor the one
you used to move from key to key.

I learned it
from the spider who expresses
her beautiful hunger in one strand.

If you play the fat black note of her body
anywhere upon her intricate staff
it only sounds like her.

And her and her.

And her-and-her-and-her.

Other notes she handily
devours in their brief casings.
And so she has no you
that lasts. But still she hungers.

Subject, you are subject
to these spinning whims
because you will not leave
and because you will not fill me.

Mind, our favorite house,
is just a kind of body, not,
as you thought, a body
of thought
that reaches the utter end
of sucked-back silk.

You’ll feel it, this spin.
(Forced grin.)
Let’s begin
to tinker on your old tin
whistle with a tune:
Water and sunlight.
Water and sunlight.
Water and dark.
Dry dark. Dry dock.

Tick tock.
Dark clock.
It’s time
you knocked.

This poem combines a desire for intricate design with a willingness to obey impulse and indulge in wordplay. In that respect, it reminds me, positively, of things I like in the work of Sylvia Plath. It is addressed, apparently, to a long-dead friend or lover, who was a musician and who seems to have committed suicide from a bridge. Image and metaphor, for Behn, are not momentary or incidental choices, but rather the opportunities, as in the Renaissance use of the conceit or concetto, for a satisfying unity of design by means of careful repetition and development. In this case the governing conceits include the musical staff and its notes, the spider’s web and its prey, and the bridge and water involved in the death. Again as in metaphysical poetry, puns are crucial to structure. The bridge the friend jumped from and the bridge that involved the strings of his instrument are associated with the spider’s bridging of space in moving around and spinning a web. This latter bridge, the speaker’s link to the past, becomes a frustration, since instead of connecting things it reinforces a spidery solitude, spinning a web that is a kind of self-portrait, devouring prey but having, unlike the musician and the traveler, who can bridge space and connect to others, “no you / that lasts.” Communing with her own grief has left her silent and unfilled, going nowhere, making no music of note. The puns continue as the poem’s “subject” is “subject” to “spinning whims” and the poem threatens to stall, to spin on itself and go nowhere. To resolve the problem, the speaker-spider invites her dead friend to join her in a new music, made up of the fact of
death, a “duet” that begins in the last two stanzas, primitive as a nursery rhyme, the beginning of something that is, in one sense, this collection of poems.

The rather breathtaking verbal performance I have just described is typical of Behn’s current work. So too is the witty diffidence of the musical metaphor, the idea that the poet is merely performing tentatively on a cheap instrument, a penny whistle, and looking forward (prelude, i.e. preliminary play) to deeper and more resonant playing (making music, but also fooling around) as a hopeful artist. The reader needs to assent to the puns and simple rhymes, to trust the ludic behavior of the poem, in order to follow the tune and hear the harmony. We are being invited on an exciting journey.

The collection that follows continues the musical theme and the use of musical structures. It has three sections or movements, with “interlude” poems between the sections and a “Postlude for Penny Whistle, Spoons, and Drum” at the end. Much of the material has an evident basis in the author’s life: her father’s Alzheimer’s and eventual death, the birth of her son, events in her mother’s life, elegies for friends. Always such material is transformed to the needs of design and the questions of whether language can be trusted to capture and express what is both elusive and inexpressible. We never feel that the speaker is indulging emotions or assuming, as so many lesser poets seem to do, that the emotions are valid simply because she has felt them. The more purposive sense of wanting to make an art that is as inevitable and successful as music, accompanied by doubt about language’s trustworthiness for such purposes, is always overriding. In that respect, both Behn and McBride have something to teach those who would simply report on their personal experiences: pride of workmanship, along with a demand that the poem transcend the incidental and the personal, gives their books their very different strengths.

I’m going to cite two more poems that I think help show the range and strength of Behn’s collection. The first is called “The Composer”: 
Fire sallies its plumes of yellow-orange conveying matter to forever.
Cool ember who built it,
I fuss with cantilevers.

After supper, the man with the young face wanted to know everyone's first loves.
Which made all the faces young.
And put a flame into them.

Everyone has a story.
His wife, barely thirty,
had died. And so his face glows unceasingly

either from his old love
or from his new love
or from the alchemy between which is his life.
An extra music in him.

Fire has something to tell.
Listen: flags, rippling.
Up on the mainmast in stiff sleeves of wind.
And crinkle of rain below, relinquishing extinguishing.

Sometimes we get our first loves.
Sometimes we get our second loves.
Now, the last logs cave into a nestling.

I like the economy of this, the spare way in which it tells its tale of a group of people discussing first love around a fire, a conversation initiated by the young-faced man, presumably a composer, who has himself lost a young wife and found another love. The "scoring" of the poem comes not only in its musical language — think with what care the verb "sallies" has been chosen, in the opening line — but in the exact control of movement that is ex-
hibited in the lines, the stanzas, even the very carefully managed punctuation.

The speaker, who has built the fire and is playing host, is as attentive to her own creation as she is to the stories her guests tell. She feels that her fire, which conveys "matter" to "forever," has its own speech and music. Even as it lights the faces of the guests, who are recalling their happiness in first love, it is telling of change, of flags on the mainmast and crinkles of rain, of a relinquishing and a diminishing. Love comes and goes, as do we. The fire, with its glow and its strange music, is both counterpoint to the guests and their stories, and harmony. If we are immersed in time (and "first" love and "second" love can only be located there), then we are also where love burns down, nestling, whistling and diminish.

The melancholy fact acts as a "composer" — perhaps the fire itself is the composer of the title — to the excitement of love, both in the sense of making music and of settling us down with sober facts. Such a light touch Behn uses here, sketching the poem in with short, sharp strokes, confident in her diction, her movement, her innate musicality.

My second example is a more openly playful poem, one of several that try to map consciousness and its quicksilver leaps and associations. In the process they touch on issues related to her father's deterioration and to the whole question of how language forms and expresses our sense of self:

TO BRAIN ON BRAIN'S LAST DAY AS BRAIN

Svelte sphere,
   smelling, smelting, fear;

fusing what you used
   to do — fish/flash —

with what's
   relentlessly near
which is the same as "here"
which is the same as "ear" and "mere":

Dear one, listen here:
It’s just

the glow of words
boiled down to sound:

a you crooning to a you
in some chosen ground.

At tunnel’s, barrel’s, end,
not light but this:

rivers and dendrites
tuned and twanged,

sticky-sweet, thickly
blissed and glissed . . .

Meanwhile, certain
maps collapse.

But now, at last,
let the band begin.

You, if you’re ready,
fall right in.

Like other poems in the collection — "Moment of Brain," "Slide"
— this tries to track and enact the movements and stumblings of
consciousness. It’s difficult, if not impossible, to portray or ad-
dress the brain from “outside” the brain, but these poems fasci-
nate with their rhetoric of representing raw, unmediated con-
sciousness. In this case, the fact of crisis, a brain about to die,
helps organize the subject and the poem by posing a kind of question: how do you say goodbye to a brain, what do you tell it about itself? As in her opening "Prelude," Behn chooses the elemental fact of rhyme, a discovery the brain makes early, to suggest how its preoccupations, as it dims out, may take it back to its childish stages and behaviors.

As the poem opens, Brain (I’ll use caps to reflect the fact that Behn has made the brain a kind of character, a protagonist) is sensing its imminent end. It smells fear and it smelts, or fuses, the nearness of extinction with its old habits of associating through sound. It could associate sounds like "fish" and "flash," and it could be a flashing fish (a smelt?) in its dashes among language, its love of sound association. "Here" and "hear" are the same sound, close to "ear" and then, in a ploy to reduce Brain’s anxiety, "mere," i.e. merely a simple extinction.

That death is "mere" death may be cold comfort, but that is what the speaker brings. Punning and rhyming steadily, she tries to tell Brain that life wasn’t all that much anyway, just a kind of illusion of contact and communication, a glow of words, a crooning "you" that was probably just conversing with itself (the solipsism problem that the Prelude first acquainted us with). There’s no light at the end of the tunnel, but there’s no firing squad either. Just a mass of cells and pathways, a map that is finally collapsing. And if anything lies beyond it all, it may be expressed by the ineffability of music. The band begins a death march and all that Brain can do is join it, fall right in.

The lancing, lacing wit of this poem is made up of the simplest words and associations, and that is part of its charm and humanity. The results, at least to this brain, are quite persuasive.

*

I hope I have at least suggested the distinctive merits of these two poets. One is a gifted American Luminist, if you like, with a direct line to surrealism and a determination to make music out of difficult experiences and emotions. The world of her collection is especially rich in its visual interests, its painterly effects of
chiaroscuro. The other is a musician and composer who happens to be working with language. The result is a collection that lifts basic situations and dilemmas into complex, resonant patterns, forging a style that is at once extremely simple and extremely complex. I haven’t been able to demonstrate fully the successful ordering and arranging of the two books; that experience comes only from full reading and sustained acquaintance, and it is a pleasure that awaits the individual reader.

David Young
Jane Hirshfield, *Given Sugar, Given Salt* (HarperCollins, 2001)

Jane Hirshfield’s fifth book, *Given Sugar, Given Salt*, lingers in the memory as composed of things — snake disappearing under the bed, rosebush, a surprisingly heavy loaf of bread. But on looking back at the poems, one discovers that there are no more things in this book than in other books of poems; in fact, there are probably fewer. The poems are often spare, quiet, summoning objects almost reluctantly from the wordless space they inhabit. The speaker in “Only When I Am Quiet and Do Not Speak” touches explicitly on the way things can “come alive” in more than the usual sense:

> Only when I am quiet for a long time and do not speak do the objects of my life draw near.

Shy, the scissors and spoons, the blue mug. Hesitant even the towels, for all their intimate knowledge and scent of fresh bleach.

How steady their regard as they ponder, dreaming and waking, the entrancement of my daily wanderings and tasks.

Drunk on the honey of feelings, the honey of purpose, they seem to be thinking, a quiet judgment that glistens between the glass doorknobs.

Perhaps one reason the “thing-ness” of this book is so powerful is that the objects are often literal. They may be strange cups and towels, as in the poem above, but they are still cups and towels. They do not open wings of metaphor or simile, nor do they provide a kind of descriptive field upon which the central action of the poem takes place. Things *are* the central actors in quite a few of these poems.
Sometimes a poem focuses on a single object, and its mysterious humanness edges out toward something even larger. So, in "Rock," we find that "the work of a rock is to ponder whatever is: / an act that looks singly like prayer, / but is not prayer." And while "Button" begins with what could be human — it's an "amoralist, sensualist" — it soon becomes more deeply a button. We learn a number of things it likes, including "the caress of two fingers / against its slightly thickened edge / . . . the scent and heat of the proximate body." Then the poem opens, blooms, and arrives at an extraordinary yet in its own way straightforward conclusion:

Brevity and longevity mean nothing to a button carved of horn.

Nor do old dreams of passion disturb it,
though once it wandered the ten thousand grasses
with the musk-fragrance caught in its nostrils;
though once it followed — it did, I tell you — that wind for miles.

Despite the apparent exoticism of the grasslands scene, it too is literal. At 24 lines in nine stanzas, "Button" is among the longer poems in the book, and its excursion to the veldt doesn't disrupt the overwhelmingly domestic air. In fact the last line's interjection — "it did, I tell you" — is partly an acknowledgment of the unlikeliness of the jump to the wildness the horned beast once knew.

The speaker can present even herself as a collection of objects. In "Dream Notebook," for instance, she considers each of her dreams as one of many lives and wonders what will become of them, "abandoned each morning abruptly to their own fates." A catalogue of dream images follows, along with the image of a bedside jar of shells; the latter were chosen by the speaker, but she can no longer remember for what reason, in what mood. The sense of separation from her life, awake or asleep, culminates in a dissociative portrait—the speaker as someone she isn't. Comparing shells to dream-fragments, she says:
How much more elusive, these half-legible scribblings.
If souvenirs at all, they are someone else’s.
As each of my memories,
it seems, is destined to be someone else’s,
to belong to a woman who
looks faintly like me and whom I wish well,
as one would any stranger passed in a shop, on the street.

The many selves spinning off from the speaker’s life — those step-sisters of dream — take the poem to a strange but convincing place, just as the ending of “Button” does. Her recognition of them creates a surreal responsibility that connects her to the whole world — all its people and objects together. The assortment of dreamed moments has become a self-portrait of this world: the speaker is the fox who talks, the leaky roof, the packed luggage. Or are they she?

These things clustering around the speaker do not seem qualitatively different from the other objects in the book, all of which carry the authority of dream. The things of Given Sugar, Given Salt are earthly but potent, the almost-sacred objects of daily use enlarged by a kind of scrutiny, a kind of openness, a kind of meditation.

To find the book using concrete images strikingly well is not to say that Hirschfield isn’t skillful with tropes. Here’s the ending of the first poem, “The Envoy”:

There are openings in our lives
of which we know nothing.

Through them
the belled herds travel at will,
long-legged and thirsty, covered with foreign dust.

The figure is startling, partly because of the unexpected scale. It is also precise, for the qualities the poet brings out — foreignness, willfulness, need — are the ones the poem requires. The herd is
probably tired, too, and fly-pestered, but those details don’t fit its function in the poem. “Thirsty” gives these inscrutable interlopers their unnerving purposefulness.

“Belied” is a delightful choice because of its suggestion of music and (inevitably) the music of poems. The intruders are not all push and trample, this visually palindromic little word reminds us, as do the “l” sounds of “belied,” “will,” and “long-legged.” The word “belied” also gives the herd a domestic aspect, which is congruent with the book’s overall tone. The venue is often interior, the poems are often reflective.

“In Praise of Coldness” provides other examples of effective figures. Here is the poem:

“If you wish to move your reader,”
Chekhov wrote, “you must write more coldly.”

Herakleitos recommended, “A dry soul is best.”

And so at the center of many great works
is found a preserving dispassion,
like the vanishing point of quattrocento perspective,
or the tiny packets of desiccant enclosed
in a box of new shoes or seeds.

But still the vanishing point
is not the painting,
the silica is not the blossoming plant.

Chekhov, dying, read the timetables of trains.
To what more earthly thing could he have been faithful?—
Scent of rocking distances,
smoke of blue trees out the window,
hampers of bread, pickled cabbage, boiled meat.

Scent of the knowable journey.
Neither a person entirely broken
nor one entirely whole can speak.

In sorrow, pretend to be fearless. In happiness, tremble.

The similes of the third stanza are memorable: both the geometric constraints of perspective and the effect of dessicants are original and accurate figures for “dispassion.” A good simile surprises with its accuracy — its tenor and vehicle must be so unlike as to make the trope unforeseen by the reader. Both of these do surprise, and their surprise is magnified by the fact that the vehicles are so different from one another.

At the same time that I praise the similes, I find my mind turning to the description of the dying Chekhov. And yet what inhabits the fifth stanza is things again — the train’s motion, a blur of scenery, food. Many of the poems in Given Sugar, Given Salt travel around the room, the house, and the garden rather than centuries and countries, like this one — but even here the strangeness has been domesticated with that hamper of pickled cabbage. The figure of Chekhov becomes invisible to us because we enter his mind and participate in the imagined and imaginative reason that he pores over these “earthly things.” The poem makes us party to the transformation of the “dry,” tabular schedules into the imagery of the next three lines. Simple but beautiful language mimics the vision of the dying writer, to whom the ordinary is now extraordinary. The fragment “Scent of the knowable journey” quietly capitalizes on this transformation, evoking the implicit definition of death as the “unknowable journey.”

While objects are central to the many poems, there are quite a few poems that are very nearly abstract, making broad statements about life that are tethered to a very few images, or just one.

“NOTHING LASTS”

“Nothing lasts” —
how bitterly the thought attends each loss.
"Nothing lasts" —
a promise also of consolation.

Grief and hope
the skipping rope's two ends,
twin daughters of impatience.

One wears a dress of wool, the other cotton.

From the title, with its disclaimer quotation marks, through the first two stanzas, I am disposed to dislike the poem — which then neatly captures my attention and my appreciation with the last two lines. It's impressive, pulling a reader in quickly and completely so late in a poem. Of course this poem is placed mid-book, so that the success of earlier poems guarantees that "'Nothing Lasts'" will get the reading it deserves.

Here's another minimalist poem:

HAPPINESS IS HARDER

To read a book of poetry
from back to front,
there is the cure for certain kinds of sadness.

A person has only to choose.
What doesn't matter; just that —

This coffee. That dress.
"Here is the time I would like to arrive."
"Today, I will wash the windows."

Happiness is harder.

Consider the masters' description
of awakened existence, how seemingly simple:
Hungry, I eat; sleepy, I sleep.
Is this choosing completely, or not at all?

In either case, everything seems to conspire against it.

This kind of poem is awfully hard to do well. Addressing "awakened existence" is risky, the phrase itself enough to deflect many readers. And to leave that language exposed, with only a bare hint of imagery to engage or distract us, is a further risk. Usually I ask a poem to tell me something I don't know; "Happiness Is Harder" reconfigures an old question in a way that makes it new, satisfying, and complete in just a few lines. The poem's minimal imagery is, of course, crucial — it would lose a great deal without the coffee, the dress, the implicit windows. Though reduced almost to gestures, these objects are necessary for the poem to have the kind of authority — worldly and other-worldly, in an unconventional way — that the book radiates.

Among the many understated, graceful poems in Given Sugar, Given Salt, it is startling to come upon the very few lines that seem oddly excessive. "Poem with Two Endings" seems to me to be the most noticeable of these; the language toward the end of the poem is not only abstract but conventional. (In the book the last line appears at the bottom of the page, separated from the rest of the poem by a quadruple stanza break.)

Death is voracious, it swallows all the living.
Life is voracious, it swallows all the dead.
Neither is ever satisfied, neither is ever filled,
each swallows and swallows the world.

The grip of life is as strong as the grip of death.

(but the vanished, the vanished beloved, o where?)

It is only fair to say that this is the last third of an eighteen-line poem and that the line preceding it is "A shopping mall swirls
around the corpse of a beetle," which is so original and compelling that it allays the abstraction of the excerpt to some degree. Certainly the choices of tone and diction are deliberate; but it seems to me that the last line, especially, slips over some boundary of emotional restraint that informs the other poems.

But that is a small complaint. *Given Sugar, Given Salt* is memorable for its eerie vision that looks at and into and finally through the things of the world. The overall effect is somewhat like a collection of paintings by Vermeer: a charged domestic twilight in which objects glow with something — is it human, or more than human? — something like wisdom.

*Pamela Alexander*
If one can imagine that John Keats had been born in the American Midwest and lived through the second half of the twentieth century and reached middle age, that poet might sound something like Thomas Lux. This would surely seem a preposterous claim to anyone who only knew Lux’s early work: in the ‘70s he made his reputation as a hip surrealist, smacking strings of zany oneliners effortlessly out of the park. But over the past thirty years, the edgy insouciance has moderated, the frame of reference broadened and deepened, and while reading Lux’s new volume *The Street of Clocks*, the poet I kept thinking of was Keats. This was no doubt partly because he chooses for one of the book’s epigraphs Keats’s familiar credo: “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of the Imagination.” But the parallels are far from incidental: they suggest what is most crucial and distinctive about this poet in mid-career.

I certainly don’t mean to suggest that Lux has gone soft or sentimental. Nor is he among our more lyrical poets in any conventional sense; as I hope to demonstrate, he spins an eloquent and evocative music, but it tends to mutter and murmur laconically rather than sing full-throated. Rather, the quality I would call Keatsian in Lux (and I’m thinking here of the Keats of the letters as well as of the poems) has to do with his vision. On one hand, life in these poems is marked by loss, predation, danger, an almost omnipresent sense of mortality; on the other hand, the dominant mood is that of wonder, curiosity, even joy. Pathos is leavened with deadpan humor, dourness with a powerfully-felt appreciation for the abundance and mystery of life. There’s an essential sweetness in the voice, an innocence that might be called childlike if it didn’t simultaneously acknowledge a perilous darkness in the world.

The distinctive tone of these poems derives in part from the way they layer the familiar and the ordinary with the alien and the visionary. Lux’s world is a fundamentally American one, of
baseball and lawnmowers, pencil boxes and pumpkins. At the same time, there’s often a hauntingly fabulist quality that feels quite east-European, echoing writers like Kafka and Vasko Popa. This grim little saga, for instance, could have been plucked straight from Breughel:

PLAGUE VICTIMS CATAPULTED
OVER WALLS INTO BESIEGED CITY

Early germ
warfare. The dead
hurled this way turn like wheels
in the sky. Look: there goes
Larry the Shoemaker, barefoot, over the wall,
and Mary Sausage Stuffer, see how she flies,
and the Hatter twins, both at once, soar
over the parapet, little Tommy’s elbow bent
as if in a salute,
and his sister, Mathilde, she follows him,
arms outstretched, through the air,
just as she did on earth.

How a poem based on such a gruesome subject attains such charm has to do, I think, with the degree to which the plague victims are given folktale identities and lovingly particularized, and even more with the way they seem to transcend their fate, apotheosized into flight. It’s part grand Guignol, part resurrection scene — astonishingly, the catapulted Hatter twins begin to look a lot like angels — and that strange dialectic gets to the center of what’s memorable about Lux.

More characteristic, and ultimately more profound in scope and reach, is a whole series of poems that explore the relation between the human and the natural worlds. Sometimes nature is the predator ("Baby, Still Crying, Swallowed by a Snake" — the title says it all, though again it’s typical that the poem ends in what might almost be called a lullabye). Other times nature is the innocent backdrop against which terrible accidents happen (as in
"A Man Gets Off Work Early," which chillingly narrates that urban legend in which a man tranquilly snorkeling in a secluded mountain lake is scooped up in a helicopter bucket and dumped on a forest fire. Most often, rather than establishing moral imperatives, Lux simply investigates the synergy that binds natural ecology to the human psyche. "The Road That Runs Beside the River" becomes a metaphor for the way we live our lives guided by, or at least in relation to, natural process, "going the way it must"; the poem concludes:

\[\text{... One small sandbar splits}\\ \text{the river, then it loops left,}\\ \text{the road right, and the river's silver}\\ \text{slips under the trees,}\\ \text{into the forest,}\\ \text{and over the sharp perpendicular}\\ \text{edge of the earth.}\]

Here and elsewhere in the volume, nature demonstrates an enviable equanimity and poise. Or as Lux says in another poem, about fish: "I'd like to roll inside a shoal / of them, down there where nobody goes, / to know what they know, / to not know what I know."

One of the best of the landscape poems, "Grain Burning Far Away," begins as an apparently straightforward description of a recurring natural event:

\[\text{The wheat fields blaze, wide waving plains}\\ \text{of them, on fire again, the black burn-line lapping}\\ \text{the gold grain: nature's delete button eating}\\ \text{each letter of each stalk. Over that short mountain}\\ \text{to the north, barley fields ignite,}\\ \text{and to the south, across the salt marshes, acres}\\ \text{and acres of oats}\\ \text{crackle and smoke,}\\ \text{and, it is reported from the east, the long green stands of corn}\\ \text{sawed off at the ankles by heat. ...}\]
At first this seems to record an agricultural phenomenon as observed from a distance; the language is crisply precise, if occasionally nudged by an apt metaphor ("nature's delete button," "sawed off at the ankles"). Gradually, though, the natural event turns apocalyptic, visionary: the conflagration becomes not simply what the observer can see, but intuitive, internalized, neural, spreading underground through the agency of the speaker's imagination:

... All the flora's, in fact, on fire: onion fields fried underground, not one turnip unscorched, every root, bulb, and peanut on the planet boiled in the soil. Trees burn like matches, but faster, orchids die when the fire's still a mile away. Seaweed, too, and the kelp beds from the top down blacken like candle wicks; spinach, in cans, when opened, is ash. Moss melts, hedgerows explode, every green thing on earth on fire and still all smoke jumpers snug, asleep, undisturbed, the fire station's pole cold, palmless, the fire extinguisher fat with foam. Hear it snap, the red angry fire, hear it take the air and turn it into pain, see the flame's blue, bruised heart never waver, waver, never waver.

Once again here the tone is extraordinarily complex: the planetary destruction is so monumental that it ought to seem horrific, yet there's a kind of exhilaration in it, an arsonist's fascination with the sheer power of burning. The ambivalence underscores the poem's multiple frames of reference, at once environmental, political (from the echoes of "amber waves of grain" at the beginning to the red, white, and blue of the ending), and deeply psychological. This multiplicity is enhanced by the dazzling ver-
bal control evident in many ways here, from the subliminal suggestion that among the by-products of the fire are the pleasures of fried onions and boiled peanuts, to the masterful alternation of long and short lines to control the poem's pulsing rhythm. Perhaps the most surprising development is the moment when humans enter what had begun to seem an uninhabited landscape: there are people here after all, and they could fight the fire, but the smoke jumpers remain innocent, "undisturbed," leaving only the speaker to witness and record. Agency remains the province of the fire: anthropomorphized, angry, bruised, it claims the end of the poem, feeding its pain, flickering and eternal.

The last line of that poem, its unexpected contradictions held in suspension yet never resolving, is a striking example of Lux's ability to use language to evoke shifting states of consciousness. On first glance he might seem a "plain-style" poet, in the sense that his diction is usually simple and his syntax fairly uncomplicated. Yet a closer look reveals the degree to which the language is carefully worked. The following poem, for example, uses complex patterns of rhyme, alliteration, and the momentary hesitation of line breaks to draw the reader in; the subliminal seduction of its music seems the perfect medium for its subject.

MARINE SNOW AT MID-DEPTHS AND DOWN

As you descend, slowly, falling faster past you, this snow,
ghostly, some flakes bio-luminescent (you plunge,
and this lit snow doesn't land
at your feet but keeps falling below you): single-cell-plant chains, shreds
of zooplankton's mucus foodtraps, dust motes,
fishy fecal pellets, radioactive fallout, soot,
sand grains, pollen . . . And inside
these jagged falling islands
live more micro-lives,
which feed creatures
on the way down
and all the way down. And you,
in your sinking isolation
booth, you go down, too,
through this food-snow, these shards, blown-off
bits of planet, its flora
and flesh, you
slip straight down, unreeled,
until the bottom’s oozy silt, the sucking
baby-soft muck,
welcomes you
to the deep sea’s bed,
a million anvils per square inch
pressing on your skull.
How silent here, how much life,
few places deeper on earth,
none with more width.

The beginning of the poem is highly disorienting, both spatially (the second-person address plunges us directly into the landscape without locating it) and conceptually (the first line seems to have us both descending slowly and “falling faster” simultaneously; not until we reach the “you” of the second line do we realize we need to parse the sentence differently). Because “snow” is named in the title and twice in the first five lines, it takes some resistance to perceive that the substance isn’t actually snow at all. The effort to orient yourself, to make sense of the element into which you’re submerged, is of course exactly the experience the poem describes. And the ecology, we learn, is as complex as the epistemology: that glittery stuff falling all around us is actually a fairly mucky detritus (“mucus foodtraps, . . . fecal pellets, radioactive fallout”) — but also a necessary link in the oceanic foodchain (“inside / these jagged falling islands / live more micro-lives, / which feed creatures / on the way down / and all the way down”). That last repetition brings to the surface the metaphorical resonance that has been implicit from the beginning: the poem’s relentless downward motion (“descend . . .
falling . . . plunge . . . falling,” and so on) is a descent beyond volition, consciousness, control. “Unreeled,” “in your sinking isolation / booth” (what a terrific line break!), you go down through the “blown-off / bits of planet” until you settle among them at the bottom. The sea bed is both welcoming and lethal — like Keats, the poem knows what it is to be half in love with easyful death — yet paradoxically, it is also a place of regeneration: “How silent here, how much life. . . .” For me this poem is the culmination of the landscape poems in the book, starkly and beautifully rendered.

In focusing on the nature poems, I’ve risked underemphasizing Lux’s variety and range. I’d like to close by quoting one more poem, which in its unpredictability and imaginative exuberance might stand as a microcosm of the volume’s remarkable spirit. It begins in mock-gothic mode, but soon reveals itself as a meditation on sound:

UNLIKE, FOR EXAMPLE, THE SOUND OF A RIPTOOTH SAW
gnawing through a shinbone, a high howl
inside of which a bloody, slashed-by-growls note
is heard, unlike that
sound, and instead, its opposite: a barely sounded
sound (put your nuclear ears
on for it, your giant hearing horn, its cornucopia mouth
wide) — a slippery whoosh of rain
sliding down a mirror
leaned against a windfallen tree stump, the sound
a child’s head makes
falling against his mother’s breast,
or the sound, from a mile away, as the town undertaker
lets Grammy’s wrist
slip from his grip
and fall to the shiny table. And, if you turn
your head just right
and open all your ears,
you might hear
I called this a meditation, yet it’s really more of a catalog; overtly, anyway, the poem does no more than list a series of sounds one might (however improbably) hear. What makes it exhilarating as a poem has largely to do with its associative energy, the vitality with which it links all these sounds in a focused and purposeful but also quite daffy logic; in a broader sense, it’s also — and this is the Keatsian echo — the spirit of attentiveness to the world’s variety. Lux wards off easy sentiment here, partly through the particularity of his images (note the way the sound of rain on a mirror is concretized by placing it in a landscape), partly through humor (Grammy and the undertaker). When the poem finally gives itself over to what it calls “the finest sound,” the plow cutting its furrow, the ear has been tuned to hear it, and the lyricism Lux allows himself in the final line feels fully earned.

No one would mistake The Street of Clocks for a sentimental collection: the poet’s mordant wit and eye for the malign insure that. At the same time, surely it’s no accident that the last poem in the book is “The Bandage Factory,” or that it ends by emphasizing the healing rather than the wound:

On the west side loading dock
at five o’clock,
when we’ve filled a whole train,
we like to stand there
while it pulls away
(some of the children wave)
and watch our bandages go
out into the world
where the wounds reside,
which they were made to dress.

David Walker
As their titles suggest, both Marilyn Nelson’s *Carver: A Life in Poems* and Allen Grossman’s *How to Do Things with Tears* are more than mere collections. If not quite book-length poems, both volumes derive their greatest strength and interest from connections among their parts rather than from individual poems. And while the genres to which they refer are different, and differently adhered to (Grossman’s book reads less like an instruction manual than Nelson’s does a biography), both draw on apparently “factual” material, and appear to take some of their impetus from that point at which historical and personal narrative meet, or might meet. The presence of photographs in both books adds an element of both interest and tension, in the end suggesting a shifter relation between fact and fiction than we might at first expect. The photographs are but one of several elements that call our attention to seeing: “The perceiving self” is a recurrent phrase in Nelson’s book, explicitly defining its subject and implicitly suggesting the poet, and “the Sighted Singer” is the primary presence in Grossman’s. Both books are written in more or less free verse (Grossman’s more frequently echoing or adhering to a blank verse line); but Grossman includes two unrhymed sonnet sequences and Nelson scatters occasional rhymed sonnets throughout *Carver*, reminding us that, however much our attention is called to their larger structures, the books nonetheless exist in the context of a lyrical tradition.

But while both books are written in a style that is, line by line, relatively clear, the experience of reading them is so radically different that I doubt they will share many readers. It would not be difficult to reduce these poets to respective aesthetic “schools.” Nelson has been anthologized as a “new formalist,” while Grossman’s appearance on the New Directions list as well as aesthetic statements in *How to Do Things with Tears* suggest that
he might belong, in this book at least, among those poets more recently classified as "elliptical." Resisting these categories while at the same time acknowledging deep differences between the poets, I’d like to use their books as a way of looking both at similarities created by the sustained effort of an extremely unified volume, and at differences perhaps made more apparent in the book-length enterprise than they might be in individual poems.

"A Life in Poems" suggests the over-riding structure of Nelson’s book, and chronology is indeed its governing structural principle. As well it might be: the life of George Washington Carver, born into slavery and achieving more in his lifetime as botanist, inventor, and educator than most high achievers do in any of these fields, is an inspiring success story. Not formally sectioned, the book nonetheless divides rather neatly into three emotional movements: from birth and a hard-won education, through the achievements of remarkable career, to a time of spiritual maturity that leads rather smoothly to the inevitable end. Like some (but by no means all) books of poems that follow the life of a single character, Carver gives the reader the sense of having experienced and in some sense assimilated this life in a relatively short period of time. We’re of course given fewer “facts” than a prose biography would provide, but the very act of connecting what we’re given involves us more deeply in the process.

We’re greatly helped by the lyrical details of the book. The catalog is a primary technique: there are lists of Carver’s achievements in school and of his responsibilities as a teacher at Tuskegee Institute; of species he found, uses he made of the peanut, mail he received. The lists help to characterize the book’s subject: the multiplicity of Carver’s achievements is emphasized by the suppression of surrounding text, and many of the details emphasize the centrality, for him, of seeing well: “So clear his gift for observation: / the best collector I’ve even known,” notes one speaker, while another says, “Where he pointed was only a white flower / until I saw him seeing it.” What we’re left with at the end of the book are these perceived details, whether they’re “collected” in lists, or lingered-over like that “white flower” and other details that become the subjects of single poems. “Egyptian
Blue,” describing a pigment that Carver created, is the only poem in which the poet herself appears in the first person, and the list that includes her is both indicative of her technique and suggestive of her personal involvement with her subject.

Look around with me: There it is in the folder on my desk, in my close-up photo of a fairy tern, in the thumbtacks in my corkboard holding up photos, poems, quotes, prayers, a beaded ancestral goddess juju doll (it’s the blue of the scarab in her hand). It’s the blue of that dictionary of American Regional English, of the box of eighty standard envelopes, the blue of that dress waiting to be ironed, the blue of sky in that Guatemalan cross, it’s the blue of the Black Madonna’s veil.

The repetition of "blue" and "it’s the blue of" suggests that there’s more art to Nelson’s apparently flowing style than might be noticed by a biography-oriented reader, and indeed one strength of these poems is a syntax that allows catalog to build through repetition and/or sustained sentences, keeping us suspended in language at the same time we’re given fact. Here’s the first half of “Cafeteria Food,” a poem about Carver’s time at Iowa State University: “Even when you’ve been living on / wild mushrooms, hickory nuts, / occasional banquet leftovers sneaked / out of the hotel kitchen by a colored cook, / and weeds; even when you know it feeds you, / mind and body, keeps you going / through the gauntlet / of whispered assault / as you wait in line . . . .”

As these lines suggest, the skeletal “success story” that structures the book is laden with difficulties; in addition, there’s some interesting tension between the poems themselves and the photographs and biographical “facts” that appear at the ends of some of them. Unlike many books of poems with a biographical sub-
ject, much of Carver is not presented from the subject’s point of view, but rather from the multiple perspectives of peripheral figures: neighbors, teachers, students, a farmer he helped. Most of the speakers in the first third of the book, preceding Carver’s appointment at Tuskegee, are white; only a handful of these poems are presented from Carver’s point of view, and those are in the third person. To realize this is to become aware of the deeply oblique technique that underlies the apparent straightforwardness of the text: we’re not seeing Carver as himself here, but rather from the perspective of the insistently white world in which he spent his early years. Perhaps the most radically oblique poem in the book is “The Perceiving Self,” which is spoken by a flower and followed by the note “1879 Carver witnesses a lynching, Fort Scott, Kansas”:

The first except birds
who spoke to us, his voice high
and lilting as a meadowlark’s,
with an undertone of windsong,
many-petaled as the meadow,
the music shaped and colored
by brown lips, white teeth, pink tongue.
Walking slowly, he talked to us,
touched our stamens,
pleasured us with pollen.
Then he squealed, a field mouse taken
without wingbeat,
with no shadow.
His yellow feet crushed past, running,
his bare legs bruised, he trampled, his spew
burned, his scalding urine.

The icedrift of silence.
Smoke from a torched deadman, barking laughter
from the cottonwoods at the creek.

That the title of the poem, repeated throughout the book, refers to
Carver; that we are not given his direct response to the lynching, but made to infer it; that we remember the poem but are not explicitly reminded of it when a poem later in the book begins "Another lynching": these suggest ways that the reader is invited to construct her own narrative, to make her own connections as she reads.

The result is a good many evocative loose ends. The reader is left to think about Carver's response to the second lynching, given in quotation marks as a statement to his Bible class ("God is right here," he begins), or to wonder about Carver's emotional life beyond his involvement with his plants (which he "pleasured . . . with pollen" in the poem quoted above): relationships with others (including a white woman who speaks as a "rumored suicide" and the "spiritual boys" he corresponded with later in his life) are poetically documented through various points of view, but not fully explained.

As noted, the narrative has a clean trajectory, a satisfying sense of closure: the death with which the book all but ends is one that Carver's perceiving self sees (in "A 'found' poem") as not an end after all, since "Things / change their form, / but they do not cease / to exist. After / I leave this world / I do not believe I am through." But there is a bit more work for the reader to do even here. Carver's intended meaning is given an unexpected gloss in the last poem of the book, when, even as he is dying in Tuskegee in 1943, the first African-American "Tuskegee Airmen" are taking off for combat in Europe. The reader of Nelson's earlier work knows that her father was one of these airmen; here, that fact is provided in the caption of the book's final photograph, which is of "the poet's father." That connection between poet and subject provides a compelling gloss for a re-reading of the book.

If Nelson's book asks for a re-reading, Grossman's is insatiable: every reading invites us to go back again and see what happens the next time, which is always both less (oops) and more (ah!), but in any case exciting. What allows all this to happen is a brilliant but wacky network of cross-referencing that makes even a first reading yield both moments of recognition (the worn sheet again! the sun! the dead cat!) and mystification (but wait, that
was just a simile before! and is that the same man/woman?). This
"system" is so complex that it makes the process of reading diffi-
cult to describe; because everything connects to something else, it
also makes the poems almost impossible to quote from. It’s not
just polyphonic; it’s like being in Hypertext, or a computer game:
each time you read, you follow a different path — but the others
are there beside you; they don’t leave the screen.

The "level" on which people, places and things appear and
reappear is shifty, too, which turns out to be one of the book’s
great pleasures. The book is highly allusive: bits of both Hebrew
and Christian scripture abound, as do classical references and
quoted snippets of poetry. Sometimes the style reflects directly
the high seriousness of these texts: thus the opening of the title
poem ("In thy springs, O Zion, are the water wheels / of my
mind!"), or one of many moments that both evoke and confront
Wallace Stevens ("At the limit, / when the mind becomes intelli-
gible // to itself, the first birth cry ever heard / is heard, because
the poem of the sufficiency // of the mind has stopped"). But
quotations are apt to be misquotations that turn to joke ("What
thou lovest best / DOES NOT REMAIN VERY LONG’’; “Then
the God forgot himself: ‘LET THE LIGHT BE’”) — a process that
is frequently echoed in the movement of the text itself, as in a
long lyrical passage that includes the lines "I am acquainted with
the shouting tiger lily / (I will tell you everything it says), / the
whispering baby breath, the pansy low,” and ends at "the bottom
of the garden” with "the RESISTER WEEDS, makers of the poet’s
mind . . . — / square root of two.” The full impact of the joke at
the end of the passage — as well as the evocation of the garden
itself — depends on context, as do passages like the following: "I
am in a strange house, a house of many cries / where the waters
run by Babylon / and leave no trace, no warrantable testimony / of
what is past, passing, or yet to come. / I will follow the deer
upward as it dies” — which, beyond the obvious allusions, refers
to the deer on the John Deere . . . oh gosh, you really had to have
been there.

More central to the strategy of the book as a whole is the sim-
ilarly complex relation between the poet (or speaker) and his (or
his/her) subject (gender is an intentionally and refreshingly slippery issue throughout the book). A prefatory note begins emphatically: "This is a HOW TO book"; but for the most part the "how to" works not by explicit instruction, but rather by example. The same note tells us that "an autobiography of the SIGHTED SINGER, the American poet who has dreamed the dream of the poet's vocation," is "at the center of the book," and indeed this turns out to be true, but only in the most complex and oblique way: by the time we've finished the book, even the identity of the poet is in question.

The "sighted singer" posits Homer as antithesis, but both the three-part structure and the mode of the book owe more to Dante. The first of the three parts includes a poem that takes place "on Purgatorial Mountain," and the "matter" of the section is itself Dantesque: traveling on various manifestations of a "path," we encounter a number of named characters, often in a Dantesque manner ("Then we came upon a woman with a black cat / on her knees"). These poems are, among other things, elegaic: we will learn "how to do things with tears" by encountering the dead. There's also a Dantesque relationship throughout Part One (and indeed in the book as a whole) between the speaker-guide (the "how-to" man) and someone he alternately addresses as "kid" and "dilectissima" — though in the manner of much else in the book, the identity of this person shifts considerably: sometimes the speaker himself becomes the "kid," and at least once "dilectissima" appears to be his mother.

The longest poem in Part One, "Truluv the sailor," includes a wildly diverse collection of characters: "Irene (retired peasant); / Eloise (wet trousers) at her prayers and / letter writing; Me (the Jew); Bruno, well- / hung blue-eyed sailor . . .; one kid (YOU); / and the talking dog formerly called Butch" — as well as, following this catalog, Edith Stein, the Jew turned Carmelite who died in Auschwitz, and who moves the poem into Nelson's territory, the realm of publicly known history. But this "Sancta Edith" does not come to us from what we "know" of the historical figure: she enters the poem naked, in a limousine, just as "MORNING KNOWLEDGE / itself came into view — top of the line — / with
lights flashing like a Christmas tree, / hatchback up"; she speaks particularly / to the old guy with the Zeiss field glasses / and sketch pad (remembrancer of the world) / and to the bedroom-blue-eyed sailor, well- / hung troubadour of one drone." That the sainted nun addresses the well-hung sailor is but one instance of the book's defiance of the boundary between sacred and profane (this is also a book where Wallace Stevens "entertains a sex worker"). The "guy with the Zeiss field glasses" is of course our "sighted singer," but the poem complicates the extent to which he is or might be the poet by a complex use of quotation marks and the subtitle of the poem, repeated at the end: "This poem is the dernier couac of Rabbi Tarfon." In the last poem of Part One, God speaks to "Grossman," which is about as (apparently) autobiographical as a poem can get; but the poem, an "Epistola," is in quotation marks, which complicates things again.

Part Two is referred to as "Notes toward the autobiography of an American poet," and its mode is indeed more consistently and chronologically narrative than that of Part One. The place is more identifiable too: though Beatrice is mentioned ("Mother Beatrice," in the end), the "Jew purgatory" of the first section is replaced by Minnesota — the "Land of Lakes," rural and cold, frequently named. The section includes photographs — the first of a flat snowy landscape seen through the passenger side of a car, which suggests another kind of journey, and indeed the dedicatory poem of the section begins on a "road." But whose story is this? The dates of the some of the poems (1931 and 1932) lead us up to the time of the poet Allen Grossman's birth, and the narrative both begins and leads up to the point at which "The poet smiles at his mother and says YOU." But the central poems of the section, numbered 1 through 16, focus on Irene, who thus appears to be — or to be standing in for — the poet’s mother (who may or may not be the Irene who appeared in the purgatory of the first section). Which is fine: these are "notes toward" an autobiography, after all — except that some of what happens to Irene turns out to repeat what appears to happen to the unnamed speaker in the first section of the book. Most notably, on a bus trip to "the Cities" (which one assumes to be Minneapolis/St.Paul) Irene
encounters a "fat, blind, honey- / blond" woman, identified as "the Fate," who kisses her and passes a stone into her mouth — an incident which the "I" of the book's second poem has already described in his (her?) own voice. And indeed Irene, in the story of a year that takes her out on a bus and back on a train, speaks and acts as a poet ("I am a poet").

This blurring or transformation of central identities (which on one level suggests the passing on of heritage: "Now it is your stone," says Irene [?] of the "kiss-stone") happens on other levels as well. This is a very "realistic" Minnesota ("Behind the house a path led, / first to an iron pump, and then to a chicken coop / and the slaughtering barrel"); but if "real" people appear there (including, as in the first section, historical figures), and if Gibbon and New Ulm appear on the map, Enigma, MN of course does not. The distance between — and conflation of — the "common world" (Grossman's term) of Gibbon and the "mythologized" world of Enigma is reflected in the smallest details. Part Two is itself entitled "White Sails," which are both a descriptive detail near the beginning of the section ("White sails on the lake peck, peck at the sky") and the source of metaphor later ("On the lakes, white sails! Strength of many / wings. . . . / Great wind-wings / of thought"); but between these references, the "honey-blond Fate" tells Irene about "white sales" in the cities, which pick up an earlier simile ("The town was thin, fragile, // like a worn sheet") which in turn continues to work its way through the section until it appears as "Mother Beatrice" awaits labor: "Profound / the worn bottom sheet unfurls birth thought, // sex thought, breath thought, death thought, / white sails." There is also Irene's father John, who "worked at John Deere / selling tractors," who is also the Biblical John, "back from the Wilderness, / bearing fantastic riches, / honey and honeybees."

These transformations happen even more wildly in the third and nearly final section of the book (more on the fourth in a moment), which in other ways seems not at all to meet the reader's expectations: the tri-partite structure of the book continues to defy and challenge even as it depends on our expectations of narrative order for resolution. Already the order has seemed uncon-
ventional: in Dantecn terms, shouldn't purgatory come second? In other terms, shouldn't birth come before death? Shouldn't the "common world" precede the mythologizing of it? Part Three, which does its own zany mythologizing, takes on the question in a wildly funny yet deeply elegaic poem called "A Grand Caprice," in which "the ghost of a good man" ("as a myth") and the "ghost of a good woman" ("as a truth") marry in the Town Hall of Enigma, MN. The "marriage" is complicated by a photograph of what is apparently the town hall and a water tower with "bbon" legible on it. Gibbon is the town Irene left earlier in the second section, and she is addressed here — apparently by the "he" ghost, but identities blur again: the "he" invites her to flee with him, but the "vehicle" is the same "Grand Caprice" that the speaker of the poem has come to Enigma in at the beginning of the poem — a "Grand Caprice, cream, top of the line" (remember the arrival of MORNING KNOWLEDGE in the first section?). That the person addressed is first Irene, then a "beautiful youth" is consistent with the book's address to both "dilectissima" and "kid," but the identities are by this time even more multi-layered. Part Two, following the "birth" scene, has introduced a joking "boy," who may well be the poet's younger self and companion (driver of the car?) here. In the earlier poem, the joking boy provides the line which becomes both refrain and aesthetic for Part Three, if not for the book as a whole: "And the dead cry their cry, 'Remember / What I remember. Do not remember me.'" The aesthetic implied in this line reminds us, if we've forgotten, of the "how-to" nature of the book, and begins to justify the eclectic, ecstatic, even hilarious quality of Part Three. Characters, things, words reappear as in the finale of a musical comedy, but new ones appear, too: we're in Purgatory again, as in the first section, but now we're with "Latch," who makes coffins there. There's the dead cat, and Trulov (now True-Love), and the garden; there are the Sioux from the "real" Minnesota, and the "kiss-stone" incident from both earlier sections, only there's "No honey-blond Fate this time. No kisses. Hard / Winter on the Great Plains of dream." Instead there are poems made out of all this "stuff" that the book has introduced and made us live with and maybe even
come to love. The last section both demythologizes and re-mythologizes, leaving the reader with something more like an opening out than closure — with random bits of "what I [or a number of I's] remember," not with any clear sense of a distinct "me."

The defiance of closure is deeply intentional, as the fourth and shortest of its sections makes explicit. This section contains three "notes," which themselves challenge the usual structure of notes by claiming their place as Part Four, by including "stanzas" that are in fact written as prose, and by ending with a note that repeats and extends the opening dedication. The "stanzas" define the aesthetic that they continue to illustrate, referring explicitly to the book and its numbered pages as they make a pitch for "a new poetic realism." The stanzas challenge (among other things) the poetic notion of "sufficient response ('what will suffice,' 'answerable voice,' 'closure')" with the statement (which appears earlier in the book) that "nothing will suffice." The same "stanza" refers to a "maxim" stated in the beginning of the book and recycled as the title of Part Three: "Do not be content with an imaginary god."

These statements suggest something of the aesthetic distance between Grossman's book and Nelson's. Carver invites us to remember the "me" that is the book's subject; Carver, if not the author, finds closure, continuance, and "sufficiency" through a God who would have a hard time of it in Eloquent Death, MN. I for one am glad that both books exist. On the one hand, there are too many untold stories in the world for me not to welcome the reimagining of a "life" like Carver's; I also continue to appreciate the trajectory of an ordered narrative, that can take me intensely if briefly into a deeply imagined "other" ("other's") world. At the same time, I'm grateful for a book that is more like the world of thought that I live in, yet is not that world. As Grossman tells us in the notes, poetry "must consider what is in fact thought. What is thought, what can come to mind, figures the world, and determines what in the world can come to mind." If getting caught in the circularity of this statement is something like living in the larger "world" of the book, it's all to the good purpose of learn-
ing *How to Do Things with Tears*, which may ultimately be the purpose of both of these books. Whether "You know" with Carver "you will not die," or whether you find, with Grossman, that "Death is a waste / of space and time, a waste of rain and snow, / a waste of this very snow that falls night-long, / and at first light falls still," poetry speaks both for and against the fact that the snow continues to fall "until all roads, our first road and our last, are lost."

*Martha Collins*
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Buddha at Chiang Rai, Thailand

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