FIELD

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www.oberlin.edu/ocpress

Published twice yearly by Oberlin College.

Subscriptions and manuscripts should be sent to FIELD, Oberlin College Press, 50 North Professor Street, Oberlin, OH 44074. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Subscriptions $14.00 a year / $24.00 for two years / single issues $7.00 postpaid. Please add $4.00 per year for Canadian addresses and $7.00 for all other countries. Back issues $12.00 each. Contact us about availability.

FIELD is indexed in The American Humanities Index.

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ISSN: 0015-0657
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TWENTY YEARS APART

The light of our arms distresses us as it flings itself away from its sleeves.

I remember cows in a field of blue maize, their faces dancing the cow wedding dance.

Some fragments of springtime bred in the shade of a night fisherman, whistling.

I remember the smile of a grey wagon at dusk as it did nothing among the wildflowers.

All over the island, lamps came on like jars with old men inside them, lighting their pipes.

I remember how we sat on a stump above the harbor naming the heavens, letting our own names go.
ONE MUST DIVORCE ONESELF

:from the trouble. From the woman walking out with the box of herself from the man. That rattle on the backseat. From the man’s ache as he lights the stove and the stalled whatwhatwhat begins to stew. From the dog wagging from one to the other: who who who holds the leash to the former life?
THE THING IS

the iron valve's been
shut off so hard,
it's henceforth
unopenable. The thing
is bottom-drawerer. You
were its tourist
and now it's yours.
Its frosted curlicues
burnished. Monochromed
by memory. What
was it called? Earth's
best guess goes in
on top. Hunkers
down. The thing is
the thing was
something in its day.
Michael Chitwood

APOLOGY FOR CROWS

If you want something, big something,
to take a personal interest in you,

try a flock of crows.
They are speaking each to each of you.

Their reach, with flight, exceeds their grasp.

We teach God. They fly.
And eat. Don’t know about love.

Imagine thinking God cares about your job
or daughter or if your flight will make it.

Crows don’t, but would pick through the remains.
They would do that for you,

your shiny effects, gold bracelet,
crystal watch face, whatever,

whatever.
EARLY WALK WITH EVERYTHING TOUCHED WITH DO NOT TOUCH

Sun-stung, the hoary grass breathes. You can see it exhale.

The mailbox smokes, night’s black frozen loaf.

I quicken, feet feeling held to a fire and pick up the news. The doorknob burns my ungloved hand. This cold is not. It’s hot and has scorched my ears. Inside, the cold comes alive.

I’ve brought it in. It caresses my neck.

My skin sings, growing cold as it warms.

I blush. Its attentions are not unwanted.

My white cup steams, the chill at its lip,
good little death coming back into my body.
Lance Larsen

ROUGH TRANSLATION

I slip outside into a corridor of clarity and breeze—that pinking time when owls home to barns, when bats fold their hunger into gloves of sleep and cranes whoop in the morning like freckled boys on stilts.

One body: some days, I swear, one is almost enough. But today? I want to climb free of this narcotic dark, squeezed into that broken parable we call first light. Sadness and wind, meadow and awe. Who will teach me to listen with leaves, make sky my skin? I lean, wondering which of my faces morning will erase first.
In the subway station, a man wearing my face lies across the tracks.
Each time he tries to rise electricity surges through him, so he rests,
still as a medieval city
the Renaissance has passed by.
I hurry to his side, but never draw any closer.

Commuters tall as trees stare with camera faces. Pigeons weave a perfect figure eight above him.
Finally, the gardener arrives, damp gloves still on, and covers the man with a giant blue wing, to keep him warm, to hide the approaching train.
The freighter, unknown, rust red, looming in the overcast Columbia, drop offs, news of drownings, at the Point, dead bottles, poles, scum, gulls in from the harsh coast; I lose it:—No herons; why come down to the river? 10000 years, new name: no point, no world, just us, who happen to be alive, yap yap, and talk of nothing—Oh you shake your hair the north has dulled, and answer me, with a swimming you’re in trouble look: —I know an old song from China: wild birds sing from the tops of pines; that music is the gospel: wildflowers cover the hills; that fragrance is its meaning. You with me?
On the ride back, by heart, the north-running river, green bridge, down home café, washed up sawmill; you lift your finger:—We used to daybreak in that jazz house. . . I see us, rail-walking, by the old boxcars in the seedy yard across the shooting highway, love fluttering in, out of the air:—Lost days: all divorced, all scattered. You smile contradiction:—We still couple in your songs. —I’d be consoled, but who’s to hear?—Anonymous, 8th century: In the long sky, the geese don’t try to cast their image, or the cold water to catch it. Oh dear music, our under the rose goes on, and Mystery Train, by the grace of radio.
The first real rains, and the October light failing, in the low west hills: red leaf, red leaf, mortality blows, off cedar, downpour stars, oblivion stains, under our feet. —I see this ghost café with future eyes, obliterated, all of the jazz and rockets of our century, and us: no soul, no hope? You frown in mystery:—The tender girls, the chapel in white, pray to a city, not invisible, not there, but you wild boys ditch the ascension, and Jesus with it, into the meek waves. I follow Lucretius: in flesh, bones, fused, your soul, obscure, mortal, as your going hand, but evergreen.
MONK LIVES

After a day of grey meetings
I lean out the window and see from above
an old man with leads to five
dalmatians taking the long zebra crossing
to the park on the other side
stripes and patches black and white
two rhythms through each other dizzying

in the theater wings below my skull’s roof
someone stumbling over something or someone
swears and in his fall pulls down a rope
rustling, a projection screen descends

snowflakes swirl
outside in the schoolyard
the streetlights already on
over the pale face of a clock
a severe hand hiccups round

on the blackboard the chalk
writes who’s counting what
there in how late is it
hesitant laughter
the teacher
turns to the class
the question’s the stupid clown
the answer the white one
fat billy doesn’t know freckle
doesn’t know jimmy and arend
and I don’t know
hesitant

laughter Swells
into curious applause
when from the wings
two figures tumble into
the pool of light on stage
do you know that one
—no, I don’t know that one
two grains of sand
are walking together
through the desert
one says
pssst
watch out
don’t look back
—why
I think we’re being followed

from the dark hall
the applause flows like a wave
over the stage
the applause is a giant shell
the applause is a rising wind
who’s blowing there
  shouts one
who’s snowing there
  shouts the other
like a school choir
  with one voice
the audience answers it’s blowing

the applause is an avenue lined with poplars
a load of pebbles being dumped
the rush in a tower-high hourglass
the rain drumming on the roof
the pounding of blood in your head
the humming early in the morning
  of the pipes in an old hotel
the speckled sound of the television
when you are startled awake on the couch at night

is the wind ruffling the leafy treetops
that shakes the branches of the chestnut trees
among which the man and his dogs disappear
One night sixteen seasons long
he hears himself continuously
squatted in front of a footpath signpost
by the railing of a ferry
at a juncture in a subway corridor
and always under the stars
with a head in his head
thinking 'where am I?'

An artichoke has a heart but no direction
A helicopter has a destination but no destiny

"I," one letter, one shoot
of a larger, chaotically branching word

Where there is shade, growing wildly
in moist woods kilometers long
mycelium randomly
sticks up its head in the form of mushrooms

Startled, bewildered
upwardly dropped parachutists

Once Polynesians used
to chart their way in the Pacific
maps made of thin sticks
that closely resemble bamboo poles
climbing beans are loosely tied to

And Canadian Indians carved wooden coastal maps
that look like Bavarian corkscrews
Depending on the legend key
in short anything can be a map:
hand palms, irises, birthmarks
and the branch-like shapes in sheets
of a crumpled bed

So it happens when the sleeper
has finally shaken awake
long after awakening
‘where are you?’ is the question

*translated by Arthur Sze*
Ellen Wehle

KEY HIDDEN IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

Secret forgotten, I circumnavigate our house

*

Always the trellis, ornamental, refusing human weight

*

Train that bore me here long since gone

*

Moon keeps her counsel on whatever gleams: jewel-like,
   Cut to fit my palm

*

*Abacadabra* I say but the eyelid only flutters

*

First this latch, then that
HYMN

Scarab tethered to a nail, I circle the question

* 

Have I wandered so far from myself

* 

East, West, the compass-points glowing

* 

Granite stela worn to sand

* 

O Invisible, trailing your wake of broken starlight

* 

Span between us *ad infinitum* halved
VICTORIANA

after Joseph Cornell

No one has enough...
Hoarders we keep hoping
Someone else has laid the feast
In the next room, a radio
Tuned to static
Lunar dove-shells
Overtorned goblets
Frozen spilling gypsum sand
Troubled that here, too, time
Has given up
Its forward
Motion...in the left corner
In the G-clef
Cool of evening
Shrewd bright
Eye, a bobbin
Spooling un-spooling
Sparrow’s careful twine
APOLOGY

The more I read about you,
the more I want to take you apart.

Not like other people do,
hoping they can find a way
to re-arrange you to feel whole.
Not that. I want to leave you in pieces

and string them up around the room,
watch the light come in. Listen to the sounds

you might make when the wind comes.
I want to assume you were never whole,

assume I am returning you to your natural state—
pre-meaning, pre-relationship. Wouldn’t that be better?

The child before the mirror of his mother’s eyes,
the language before the language before the language.
Michael Dickman

THE SEA

Everyone’s first memory

First blue breath
first bath

Your loved ones swim out and back all morning, tirelessly calling your name

all your enemies
are drowned

Prospero helps the dead Neruda over the weird dunes covered with bees
and scrub grass

gingerly stepping

around

the hypodermics in the jellyfish

*

My mother floats across the new floor in the yellow kitchen and kisses me on the forehead

My second memory
second
sea

Smoking a cigarette

She’s alive
but she’s acting
like she’s dead
That watery light people get sometimes
when they’re first arriving
and when
they’re
leaving for good

The cigarette ash falling
into the sink
it

sounds like the sea

*

The foghorns
are spelling
someone’s name

Not your name

Maybe
they used to, but not
anymore

It serves us right to be alive

We walk out across the water in our stupid bodies and blow out
the breakers one by one

Delivered from our names
into some secret
home

made
out of salt
NEVERS

It is late on the evening of September 25, 2006, and Cio-Cio-San has now killed herself for the 800th time on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, so we leap to our feet because Ruskin was right—we don’t want buildings merely to shelter us, we want them also to speak: in the narrowest house in Paris, Abbé Prévost listened until he heard Manon sing *Adieu, notre petit table* after she had given up love for wealth. When you move into a new home in Japan, it is customary to present your neighbors with buckwheat noodles known as *hikkoshi soba*, as if it were the day your daughter, looking for the first time through a calendar, comes and asks what color the new moon will be. *Soba* is a homonym for *near*, and *hikkoshi soba* a play on words, a honeymoon meaning *we moved near you*. Out of the blue above Hiroshima, the cloud was not a room for two but a parachute, a pair of shoes reaching for ground that continues to deflate. *I was never younger than I was in Nevers,* says the woman in *Hiroshima*.
Mon Amour, and her lover always replies, out of the thousand things in your past, I choose Nevers. Now the moon is a missing plate, facing each evening as if it were the telegram my father sent my mother in 1944 on the day before they married, saying, Arriving tomorrow. Stop. Don’t stop.
GLOSS

My mother said that Uncle Fred had a purple heart, the right side of his body blown off in Italy in World War II, and I saw reddish blue figs dropping from the hole in his chest, the violet litter of the jacaranda, heard the sentence buckle, unbuckle like a belt before opening the way a feed sack opens all at once when the string is pulled in just the right place: the water in the corn pot boils, someone is slapped, and summer rain splatters as you go out to slop the hogs. We drove home over the Potomac while the lights spread their tails across the water, comets leaving comments on a blackboard sky like the powdered sugar medieval physicians blew into patients’ eyes to cure their blindness. At dusk, fish rise, their new moons etching the water like Venn diagrams for Robert’s Rules of Order surfaced at last, and I would like to make a motion, move to amend: point of information, point of order. I move to amend the amendment and want to call the question, table the discussion, bed some roses, and roof the exclamation
of the Great Blue heron sliding overhead, its feet following flight 
the way a period haunts a sentence: she said that 
on the mountain where they grew up, there were two kinds 
of cherries—red heart 
and black heart—both of them sweet.
After the grey squirrel has been run over, another keeps coming back, in between passing cars, tugging with its teeth at the edges of the flattened body stuck to asphalt outside the cemetery of Little Washington, Virginia. Inside, the tombstone of a World War II soldier is inscribed \textit{Forward!} on the front and \textit{Jamais Arrière} behind, even though in \textit{verre églomisé} gold leaf is always applied to the backside of a glass or mirror so that some design can be etched in reverse. A six-inch statue of a fawn once surfaced in a shovel full of dirt from my garden, as if it were the first creature to emerge fully formed from Ghiberti’s \textit{Gates of Paradise}, whereas in the catacombs of Rome, a medallion of glass encasing a unique gold design was pressed into the mortar of each grave when someone died, either to mark the site or to assist the angels in the resurrection. The belief is that remarkable clarity comes
when a design is viewed
through glass, although Ghiberti was chosen
to cast the doors of the baptistry

in Firenze because he could capture
paradise: the past
and future are flat, what’s near is high

relief. My father’s arms
were freckled like the back
of a fawn, and beneath

his white hair ran a bristle
of rust, which still grazes
my temples though he’s been
dead for years. Gold leaf
can’t be handled directly because it sticks
to the skin, so it must be

picked up with a gilder’s tip,
a flat brush
made from the soft hair of a squirrel.
Even though he’s dead, my father dreams repeatedly of the Eisenhower era.
The clarity of fresh concrete spanning the Great Plains. That runway—hill—runway—slow curve north or south rhythm across the face of my childhood.

His fatherhood.

My own memory is of a helicopter flying over our house through the sorghum haze drifting from the Quaker Oats plant on the south side.

What I remember is the smell and the gleam.

My father pointing to a dot in the sky as bald as Krushchev, saying, “Look.”

I am considering buying a gun. I suspect this is the result of my father’s dying.

I know his anger fuels it. Anger at his father for giving away the farm or stealing the hog he raised on kitchen scraps.

Anger at his mother and her rattlesnake of braids.

The Navy tattoo stinging where he razored it off.

I want the crispness of the shot, the recoil, the settling in again on the target.

And those years, 1956 into the early sixties.

My tumbling towheaded with a busted lip along the river bank while he hauled up catfish or carp the size of my arms, and knocked back beers.

And those slow, sad trips through towns with Indian names to the farm. Once
I am remembering this, I am already haunting my waking life),

he and I were feeding chickens
just before father died. It was Sunday,

and he was still wearing his pressed Sunday shirt so when the sun
angled through and hit him,
he disappeared above his pants.

From torso and target, to nothingness. As clear as albumen.

Now each bullet (imaginary) smacks the
membrane of paper and leaves a finger-sized hole in the skin

of his rage. I have questions. Is it better than here?

Yes, I'm okay, don't worry.

Have you seen God?

No, but my brother is here, and my mother. Have you stopped
drinking?

And then from nowhere, that smell as if from the inside

of his hat. An aura of flesh and grease, cultured by wool and heat.

An earth smell, water smell.

Grief rolling its head and mumbling the feedback

of the dead. When I buried my father, it was like setting a book
in the earth. A box
like a composite of ash, or scabbed over skin.

A man (a gardener, I think) met me at the mausoleum.

He had a hook in his hand, a shovel,
the book of ashes.

There was a manhole cover under a bed of ornamental stones.

The man shoveled the stones aside,
hooked the cover open, set the book on top of other books
in the fake lump of hillside. There was a wall of names and dates but nothing corresponded.
My father was not a letter addressed to God.

More like the top book in a stack of books next to God’s unmade bed. Something from His to-read list.
Some ash fiction.

What is time but a slow worm eating its way through our lives. A slow bullet with a glistening afterwash we call memory or loss.

Krushchev arguing with Nixon over kitchen appliances. Francis Gary Powers, a black spirit falling from the sky.

My father’s one and only love perfecting the casserole. And then one day, when I am doing dishes, I know I have lost him.

He will not return. I wonder if I have offended him, loved him too much, not enough.

Relished in his sins, which were many, too readily. My own, which are partially his. Where does rage go after we die?

Is it picked up like a flu or virus? A temporary haze. Or does it cut through whoever remains like a back pasture creekbed.

Dusk moves like gold paint over everything. Clouds shift. Trees spring and collapse. I dream I am Kurosawa’s dog.
I trot with a severed hand in my mouth.

It's that moment in *Yojimbo*, a film from 1961, the Eisenhower years.

I wonder: Did Ike see it? Did Nixon? Did that helicopter ever land in our town where we were never really happy, but always poor?

It is okay at first—this feeling—because I am trotting and somebody—not me—is staggering backwards.

My father as Toshiro Mifune, or God, Eisenhower, as Toshiro Mifune, trapped between some self-serving clan of alcohol and rice.

Another—like their shirts—of silk.

Landscape reduced (it will become our fear) to smoke and ash. And then it is my own hand in my mouth—I am biting the hand—cooling me down.
DOES NOT SLEEP

My father has pulled this fish out of me. A northern pike he lays on a bed of ice in a bathtub, Minnesota, 1958, so I am up all night slapping my hands in the wet, saying, *you little son of a bitch*, and letting its cold flanks say back to me *the rouged cheek or the bare asses of waves*, so that the beating (along the shore) is already built into the shape, and the waves in that part of night are lullaby. Both parent and child grow groggy, sleep. But the fish does not sleep. It is a child buried in a snowbank, a white tunnel collapsed. Somebody has dug all night to find this body, this meat—a tremor of muscle, its lips pulled back, teeth bared.
Come closer. So close I feel you,
how easily you breathe.
Imagine that I lead a life,
which consists of moments
and blows away in a moment
if the wind turns imperceptibly
when the door’s still open,
enticing you outside,
where there’s nothing but the others—
turning round and round with the wind.
COMING AND GOING

Stay or go. On another day the woman’s no longer the one she is today. As for the man, more or less the same. Everything’s alike or can look as if it is, and that’s how

it is every day: the same blue of the sky or it starts to rain as usual. At some point, one’s had enough of changing feelings, feeble now with so much coming and going. One can see the change in some: curve of the back, when couples separate and quickly disappear amid boughs and walls or come back together if they catch that hint in each other’s eyes, the one you never unlearn.

translated by Stuart Friebert
The year Jeffrey’s Shooting Star filled the marshland of Mowich lake with chaos, white bands around the tube of each purple blossom called hello there I say hello there please walk around me as they clustered inside-out. The long filament tube, reflexed petals (usually five), sticky anthers promising generations into infinitude of Jeffreys. Your leaving is not easy on the world. When I press tent stakes, when I boil a mug of water, when I sit and stare: no deer this evening, no tail twitching the bear grass, no snorting at the lake; my mind will not allow that flower to leave the marshland but it has. I tried not to say these words, but here they come: no remission, no treatment, no telling the kids, quiet, dear, go back to sleep. The year was 2002, I think, and Jeffrey’s Shooting Star let loose in my mind. Every sticky anther extended toward the stigma.
RAIN FOUR: ELEGY FOR A BOTANIST

I need you to help
me grieve for you
—C. K. Williams

In the same way that, when the pews filled,
your wife walked down the aisle in her
gray wool trousers with your mother;
lights from the acres of yellowing
cottonwood blazed in Hell’s Canyon;
your sleek silver computer and
sunglasses clip and sweat-worn Huskies
cap were you at the altar; a woman
in a green fleece brought your stuffed
spotted owl up right before Mass; and
you were sitting at home with the little
precious radio, listening to the game,
howling when the Cards beat the Tigers.
I know that howl, the one that hovers
low over the house and embodies your
youngest daughter, your dog, the cry
that troubles the dividing clouds
and carries with it the mineral scent
of your kayak in the sun, Colvos
Passage awash with stillness, Clamshell
Lake frozen under a heavy snow, still October.
George Bilgere

GRADUATES OF WESTERN MILITARY ACADEMY

One day, as this friend of my father, Paul, was flying over Asia, he vaporized a major Japanese city.

True story. They’d been chums at a military academy in Illinois, back in the thirties.

My father was the star: best in Latin, best in riflery and history, best in something called “recitation,” and best at looking serious.

In the old yearbooks he has exactly the look you were supposed to have back then: about fifty-two percent duty, forty-eight percent integrity. Zero percent irony.

But somehow, all my father got to do later on was run his own car dealership. A big one, but still. While Paul got to blow up Japan. My father ushered in the latest models. Paul ushered in the nuclear age. It seems unfair, but there you are.

Paul had been an indifferent Latin scholar. Weak in history and recitation. For these and other reasons my father took a refreshing swim across a large, inviting lake of gin, complete with strange boats and exotic shore birds, which resulted in his interment under some shady acres I occasionally visit.
While Paul went on for decades, always giving the same old speech. Yes, he’d done the right thing. No doubt about it.

He improved his skills at recitation and developed a taste for banquet food. To this day he struggles with his weight.
The tiny shedding feathers of the eye: 
what knowledge cost. My hair ribboned 
white scatters ash where I go, the skin opens 
to take more of the fire he sends. 
No more resistance. I am done with him.

His walled garden, the little traps: 
siren voices of the flowers and the moon 
to cut me open. I’m done needing someone 
to agree with me, to nod, to say my name.

Do you know, by his side I had forgotten? 
Invisible hands have the job: to part us 
from our dear flesh, slowly. As close as this 
to myself and as clear and distant (—what once I was!—) till now I have not been.
Matthew Gavin Frank

DES PLAINES

We ford the river with red construction paper. Here, dalliance
is a virtue: a little glue,
a little glitter...
We can make adulthood an octopus
put it in the mouth
of a seven-story gargoyle.

Like I told you, you should
see this: the wastebasket
filled with medication samples, the last inch
of your first joint, hair
and the yearbook page with
your old boyfriend’s message: something
about a Michael,
  something about a braid.

When radiated, the milkweed tires, tries,
can’t produce for even the skinniest
of nieces. The new one.
Let’s cut her a leopard-skin cape
  and pink hood from this catalog.

Let’s cut her matching mittens. Make her
a collage that can heal.

  I don’t mind when
you vomit into the water.
On the outer bank, a redbird
  on an electrical box
pecking at the padlock.

I don’t mind. The instructions are inside.
ROW, ROW

In the park, the child falls
from her rhinoceros.

A Russian nanny lifts her from the woodchips
by a cotton hood.

We watch this through two red telescopes,
the rowboat gentling
the river.

Even from this distance, you say,
you can distinguish cotton
from other cloth,

a gnat from a star. We talk
about your family, my family,
strokes and sore throats.
A miscarriage
pulled by horses, a sister riding

behind. The stream, evaporating, becomes
the chamomile tea she needs at night.

Above us, life is
but the osprey fighting off the Canada goose.

In the nests,

a pulled sound, babyish
horrible, the goat not yet dead

stretched into a drum,

the tea steam wishing itself
a geyser. Or a dream—
of a rhinoceros
detached from its spring, its horns
finding our mother’s arms

exotically jungled, where the medicine
goes in, merrily.

(The things that push us down
are big enough to house us.)

The little girl knows
(we imagine we watch
her knowing) those things in the trees
could be tap shoes or bloodbats.
That thing the goose trips over

is the island.
INDIAN SUMMER

1.
Dawn bailing out the sluggish dark as if
the day still might right itself in the wake
of the equinox—

in this season of the second thought,
with its clear blue falsetto sky and flashbacks to crimson.
Like spring, in a bolder key.

2.
By now, each day’s an anniversary of something—
a first or final touch, or kiss, or blow...

back to a split-level girlhood in the Appalachian South:
pom-poms and curlers and a red-leather Bible embossed with my gold name.

I left home with a pedigree of Pentecost
and Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
Which I did, in my earnest and wanton way.

3.
Last night a cake on fire and plastic cups of champagne.

Today, it’s drunken bees in a wheelbarrow of windfall rot,
and poison, tit for tat, on the poison ivy.

Think what you wish for, they cheered
as I blew the decades out—
think, think.

4.
A storm front slips across another state line,
moist touch to the cheek of the rain-starved air.
And who could begrudge the geese and the asters, the last field of corn shriveling in the October sun?

Yet I keep my eye on the conscientious oak and, closer, the slender limbs of the locust, trifling with the wind through my bay window glass.

5.
The pang that passes understanding—and, all morning, a cello’s mahogany grief.

Where else but in this small white room can I weep, not wronged or widowed, forgiver or forgiven?

Outside in the breezy yard, the sun blusters on, and hard buds tighten on vines—little think tanks, with their farfetched scenarios of pink.

6.
The days slide round again to this one, drawn back as if to the scene of a crime, and the heart still sifting through the evidence.

What did you mean by the pronoun ‘my’? chides the wind, unraveling the maples with its Buddhist hands.

7.
The sky shakes out a scribble of starlings, then erases them from its lavender slate. Why are they more real once I want to tell you of them?
Grief, love, anger—which would I send
as a swoop of starlings over shattered fields?

And beyond them, in a nonchalance of dusk, the moon
full again and face to face
with the trembling light of Venus.
Yosa Buson

_HATA UTSU_: TILLING THE FIELD

1. Spring plowing:
   twenty-five bushels of millet
   in the farmer’s face

2. Tilling the field:
   at the foot of the notice board
   of the Three Part Law

3. Tilling the field:
   the man who asked for directions
   has vanished

4. Meeting at Basho’s Hermitage
   Tilling the field:
   the cloud that did not move
   no longer there

5. While tilling the field:
   my deafness
   becomes solitude

6. Tilling the field:
   not even a bird calls
   in the shadow of the mountain

7. Tilling the field:
   from the small temple on the ridge
   a rooster’s cry
8. Tilling the field!
   From the east wind’s country
   a bell cries out

9. Tilling the field:
   in the temple between trees
   a bell’s requiem

10. Ambition:

   Tilling the field, all the while
   never losing sight
   of Maya Mountain

11. Tilling the field:
    my own house still seen
    in the slow falling dusk

NOTES

The Three Part Law was passed by the founder of the Han Dynasty, Emperor Liu Bang, in the 3rd century B.C.E. The law was one of many of Liu Bang’s policies that lessened the burdens on the peasants, such as taxes, rents, conscription, land annexation, slavery, corvee labor, etc., and farmers prospered under his rule.

Maya Mountain is in Hyōgo Prefecture, near Kobe. It is the site of Tori Tenjo Dera, the temple to Buddha’s mother Maya, who became the goddess Tori. But the characters for the name of Maya also mean “illusion,” making the poem rather ambiguous.
Ari Banias

A HISTORY OF JASMINE

A memory, a fragrance, the spiked white flower—

but there were none, or hadn’t ever been, on this bush or any other bush.

There is no such thing.

Or me, fifteen, curdling at the throat, draining anise-flavored shots in a stranger’s house, white

flower creeping along the window ledge, my mother inhaling, saying

jasmine is the smell of my girlhood.

Her eyes closed, the thirsting throat pulling the room in towards her. Like she always did.

Or the liquor became a sieve I ran myself through; anything could have been.

Because there is no jasmine, there is no history. No mother looking at me pointedly, as I curl the shot back, at the word girlhood.
One night I swore
I could smell it, walked faster, away—

or doubled back, found
that wedding dress
of a bush

like a white dog shedding—

or only green, a thicket
of smooth leaves unblinking.
SHIPBREAKING

Ships too die, twisted sharp
in Bangladesh. On the cutting beaches
men solder in the tidal pools,
breathe burnt metal, chemical stick.

Dissembling: flares in the sand
& heaps of bolts
thick around as your wrist. It’s swiftly
broken, skimmed
like a sharp thumb cut.

Now they melt down the I-bars
& oxen tow the hulks away.
Smells of raw fire, fish salt coats
scaffolding planks & pulleys

for the welders
who split the hull
to take it down.
Sing, sea cathedrals—ships
who used to be whole,

bridge me back. Hiss &
spark, tanker, what’s in
your hold? Chittagong

tethered at the waterline.
How to disappear: the ocean:
wet heat, salt spray. Who needs

a savior? It’s better to be
pieced; it’s better to be nothing.
ECHOLOCATION ISLANDS

1. Elk Island

The lost eye lands its lusty lens wherever it finds an impression:

here, below the canopy of sky
shouldering trees, the old folk

search on their knees
for mushrooms, hushed rooms

between the fields and cities.
This is Losiny Ostrov, Elk Island,
pillared isles of birch and pine,
lost islands of light arcing

into sight. Half-blinded, I can’t see how tanks could have pulled down

this heaven, islets the eye lets in and the islets that inlet the eye.

2. Elk Island (2)

Eye, find a place to get lost. Ostrov, you are all you have been, site

of troop maneuvers and mushroom hunting, a maze of hidden dens

and open fields unscrolling, rolling... now surrounded by a frozen plain
you lie, lost island of elk, birch
like bleached ribs bared to air. I hear

your branches clack like antennae,
see them snag the yolk of moon, sky

spilling into facets of light. I see a sea
that is no sea, churned and frozen

white. Island, I don’t see where you end,
unbroken amnesia of snow.

3. Solovki

Every island is a main, undone
by. Every one is a word

some eye can unsay. Such as: you
are an enemy of. Or: you are no one.

Pages torn out, washed away.
Millions of ears and what is heard?

Some unwording cry I
cannot fix into form. Such as:

( and: (

The dead voices loiter, edge
the island unsighted. History is

the sea slapping the mute shore,
sapping the shore of the shore.
THE TRANSLATOR

Under an umbrella, in the plaza of the saints.

One table, two chairs: the first signs of what occurred—
the flutter, the settled air, the wings etched with words

I tasted with another’s tongue. And birds

I couldn’t name were there, and the waiter

in his apron, cupping his cigarette, staring at his sky,
and as the plaza blurred

and as my other’s tongue swelled
at the first faint pricks

of its new language

I invented what concerns me, and began
Una mesa, dos sillas:
DOGS IN MY DREAMS: #3

I walked a mile. The dog following pretended he couldn’t speak. He shrugged as if he were deaf. I picked up my pace, hoping to lose him. I yelled “Go, dog, go!” Each time I looked back, there he was, a regular trotter. Then it occurred to me he might be a foreign dog. I said “Hola” and “Bonjour.” Suddenly I recalled a line from a film: “Are you the dog of my dreams?” But suppose he was, and would, as in the film, disappear the instant I asked? Was all his coy shrugging a strategy? Was it possible he’d rather die than follow me? How did he know what films I favored? It was then, looking back, I began talking in my sleep, and then, when I looked back, packs of dogs were howling my name.
ARIADNE AT SUGARLOAF KEY

Cast out
fishing line tangles in clumps
on the telephone wire,
so many knots of dead bait,
skeletons, lead weights, feathered floats.
Spun nexus of tiny pale fish
and airborne debris. There’s

so much in those skeins
of wire. Tiny bones and the fish
smell of women, the copper-penny taste of men.
Salt in the air. Wine gods.
One watcher for signs of life
on the abandoned bridge, sidestepping
tide pools of flaking cement and tar.

One speedboat skims under the causeway,
one skiff prods the edge
of mangrove hammock. More
boats reel off into the waters,
a long draw of sparkling wake
out into the ocean,
down the long stream
among the green islands.
ON UGLINESS

Beauty underlying ugliness
is a hackneyed subject
further into the thought
one finds ugliness again
but fundamental
a hard and arid soil with nothing more to hide

dthis is what a redheaded girl with blue eyes writes down
on a blank page of her travel journal
she just passed a quiet night at the Hotel Krasnapolsky
—fate's hotel—
she is having breakfast in the mythical winter garden
feeling chic and a bit outdated
she has a passion for William Morris
and Tiffany
establishes no hierarchy between decoration and art

Where are the frost-whitened orchards
which, two years earlier,
seemed, beneath the springtime sky
to be singing the creator's praises?
Where is the kingfisher perched delicately on a branch
whose gaze went back and forth between the pond
and the painter with an evangelist's eyes?

He is still slogging through the dawn mud
leaving the household in slumber
and stops in front of the rosebush at the coomb's edge
each time he repeats his miracle:
tarnishes the immaculate petals
darkens the crisp leaves
today a beetle adds its touch to the picture
its emerald becomes blank pebble
sometimes he sees his despair
as a veil
and at others
as what raises the veil

*translated by Marilyn Hacker*
Dennis Schmitz

OUR PLACE

in the universe
is midway between a bacterium’s

& Antares. Our love is a nibbling,
somewhere between a black bear’s appetite

& the smallest eater that solved the fence’s
fir posts except where a tin patch

shimmers & ferns glow.
Against a shredded log we lay our clothes

for ants to eat out what itches.
Another hunger: a hand’s breadth across

a small birthmark, above your bare
shoulder, your hair shimmers, undisturbed.

***

Our place is also this summer rental—
this August we live under laurels

which themselves twist for sun
under redwoods. This August is long;

the tar-paper roof steams & the torn grass.
Greedy sweat gathers the down under

your pinned hair, twisted back
for comfort. But comfort is the last thing

you want from love. Comfort is an affliction
that gathers jewels like the grease in the drain

of stones shines where you spilled it.
Susan Tichy, **Bone Pagoda** (Ahsahta Press, 2007)

Susan Tichy’s long-awaited new book might be seen as the last part of a trilogy depicting places that have known violence. Her first collection focused on time spent on an Israeli kibbutz in the 1970s, her second on a trip to the Philippines in the 1980s, expanded to include the Philippine-American War. In *Bone Pagoda*, she turns to Vietnam, where her husband served in the war and where she traveled with him shortly before his death in 2002. The carefully observing traveler, never mere tourist, is a constant in the three books, as is, increasingly, the subversive political commentator.

What is most different about the recent book, besides the increasing depth of its political awareness, is its form. Tichy is one of a growing number of poets who began writing free verse that valued imagistic clarity, but who have gradually shifted to a more elliptical style. For Tichy, the shift is particularly fortuitous, not only because she has so brilliantly mastered the techniques of juxtaposition, collage, repetition, ellipsis, and allusion that are everywhere in this book, but also because these skills are so deeply appropriate to her subject matter.

The central strategy of the book is juxtaposition, primarily of the time of the Vietnam War and the return trip to Vietnam, and of the politically active poet and her veteran husband. The first of the book’s two sections is a series of collages, most of them in several parts, that include fragments of description but no clear narrative line; the poet’s life in the 1960s and the husband’s war experiences mingle and overlap with each other, and also with the voices of both in the present, most overtly in “Bridge Fight,” a precursor to the second section, which is more clearly set in the recent visit to Vietnam.

Beginning in Hanoi’s Temple of Literature, the poems in the second section often depict what is seen from the small boat in which the poet and her husband travel through southern Vietnam; a number of them focus on museums and other places
visited by tourists, including the “bone pagoda” of the title, which holds the remains of 3,000 people killed by the Khmer Rouge. But description is a challenge that can only be met by difficult techniques like the one Tichy defines in “Swerve”: “Bow of our boat a reverse frame / Around it what we see must be arranged.”

Although she begins the book by saying “I would call the poem What I Did Not See,” both the effort to see and the pain of seeing are central throughout. Utilizing the obsessive repetition that governs a number of individual poems as well as the book as a whole, “Nui Sam” (Sam Mountain) is perhaps the clearest but also one of the most disturbing poems in the book:

On the steps of the pagoda
A man was begging

A man with no eyes was begging
On the steps of the pagoda

It might be fire it looks like that
It might be Willy Peter

A smooth tight kind of burning
To the bone it might be that

Someone had drawn red circles
Maybe he had drawn them

Someone had drawn red circles
Where his eyes would be

It might be lipstick it looks like that
It might be red lipstick

They make a place to look
When you are looking
A place to put your eyes
It might be that

While the poem is almost unique in this book in its focus on a single image, Willy Peter—white phosphorus, a chemical weapon that burns all the way through the flesh "to the bone" and was used by the Americans in the war—appears throughout, sometimes named, sometimes not: "fire designed / To burn in a human body // Is fire designed to burn / in a human body" ("Bridge Fight"). This passage echoes Neruda's "in the streets the blood of the children / flowed like the blood of children," and is one of several tautologies that force us, like the poem quoted above, to stare at a thing until, as Rilke suggests, it stares back at us; thus "Beggars with no hands say / Beggars with no hands," and, extending beyond tautology after the line break, "A shot fired is a shot fired / back."

Willy Peter itself becomes a kind of leitmotif, or even, in the complex poem "Persephone," a character. Other recurrent figures include "Mr. Chien with his hand on the rudder / Mr. Thuong with his thumb shot off," who, between them, become almost Virgilian guides on the couple's boat trip, their presence marked and remarked by the absence of the thumb, just as another recurrent character, the "VC in the restaurant," is marked by the continuing presence of the war, "the American bullet in his arm."

Lines also repeat, among as well as within poems. "If you are not war what are you? say" appears and is repeated near the beginning of the book, in "Desk and Chair," and also appears as an epigraph to the final poem. Repeating another line from two pages earlier, "Desk and Chair" foregrounds and, through the ambiguity created by line break, complicates the technique: "The first line is repeated / / The first line is repeated here / Are parallel lines that never meet / / but carry."

The "parallel lines" suggest the poet and her husband, whose experiences often merge without meeting. Thus, in "River":

'Cross the river on a fiddle string'
I wrote but you erased it

With canteen helmet flak-jacket fear
And navigational charts

Later in the same poem, when the observing poet is cataloguing the river’s contents, "Tree branches fish net trash," a final image suddenly merges present and past, without transition:

And here is one pink woman’s shoe
Fished out of the backwash around the filling station

Fished out of the oil scum
A flame-thrower leaves on the water

In "Street," which focuses on the time of the Vietnam War, juxtaposition becomes conflation, beginning with the line "Man with a car":

Stickered all over with flags
Twice tried to run me down

In a Safeway parking lot
Man with a car

Burned himself to death
In the city of Hué

Later in the same poem, the line appears again, and the American patriot and the Buddhist monk are joined by Norman Morrison, unnamed in the poem, who burned himself to death at the Pentagon in 1965.

More unsettling is the conflation in "Persephone," which references not only the myth of its title (and through it the poet’s younger self), but also the ballad "The Unquiet Grave": "Said I never had but one true love / And my Willy Peter burns to the
bone." That the "one true love" suggests elsewhere and even here the poet's husband takes us to one of the most painful levels of the book, which is an implicit elegy for both the husband who "now in greenwood . . . lies" and those whose more violent deaths he witnessed.

That love and death are twined not only in ballads but also in their physicality is foregrounded in a brave poem that contains some of the book's most disturbing images of dismembered bodies and body parts. "Fine line between erotic tour / And scatological descent," says the poem, the title of which, "Blazon," seems to be most explicitly illustrated in a couplet that collages an earlier line of the poem and Ben Jonson: "Wound like a rosebud / Love's enflamed shaft."

As several of these passages suggest, what is perhaps most elliptical about Bone Pagoda is the lack of connective tissue. In this, perhaps unconsciously, Tichy's book resembles much Vietnamese poetry, which because of both the nature of the language and poetic tradition often omits subjects and referents, and leaves the reader to connect lines and images.

But Tichy's lines are, like her images, more disjointed than those in most Vietnamese poems. "Study stutter," she says in a wonderful collage of a poem called "Versari." Repetition is one kind of stutter; breaking off is another. Referencing J. Edgar Hoover, she writes, in "Street":

'Develop discord,' Hoover said
And I distort, disjunct, obey

'In this stage of structured confrontation'
Speech comprised of equal parts

I cross your cruz, cruise your
Disobedience dismay

To "distort, disjunct" and (from the same poem) "In this plain machine of verse / Itself a stranger broken to // Disallow discharge disjoin" may be necessary ways of getting at the violent
contradictions of a war that continues to haunt our nation, whether we recognize it or not. In a book so full of body parts and bodies distorted by the weapons of war, including chemical weaponry (the supposed presence of which in Iraq helped drive us into our current war), the business of breaking apart on the one hand and violently juxtaposing on the other is central.

Which is not to say that Tichy’s poetry is without its traditional formal elements, as the short passage quoted above suggests. Bone Pagoda is written exclusively in couplets (except for an opening prose poem called “Couplet” and occasional single lines). Rhymes (obey/dismay) and ghosts of meter (iambic tetrameter here) appear often, and many of the couplets, combined, offer a hint of ballad quatrain.

Nor, as “The Unquiet Grave” and Ben Jonson suggest, is the voice of English poetry absent. In the Notes, Tichy describes the book as a “conversation” with her husband’s voice and the voices of 33 named others, including both literary and political figures. Almost none of the voices are identified when their words appear in the poems, blending with the poet’s own without flourish or quotation marks; but the contrasts can be startling. Like the list of names itself, there’s a terrible tension here between love of language ("my precious collection of English words," as Tichy has it in “Desk and Chair”) and knowledge of the “Absolute violence of our language.”

The last line appears in the final, title poem, which begins with a line from Robert Browning and ends with Emily Dickinson; the “He” and “She” that mark four of its five sections (with a section significantly titled and addressed to “Gaze” interrupting) suggest not so much the poet and her husband as the presence of male poets such as Donne and Hopkins on the one hand, and on the other Emily Dickinson, who is both quoted and (in the word from “Street”) “disjuncted” in the book’s final stanzas, which also reprise the line from “Desk and Chair”:

    O dear collection of English words
    Expended to accommodate
From *Slack* to *Slave* on a single page

‘War seems to me an oblique place’

Made Flesh
And tremblingly

In a book so filled with wounded flesh, the juxtaposition of the line about war and the line that follows is startling and disturbing, like so much that precedes it. But the beauty of language, reflected partly in the rhythms, rhymes and near-rhymes, as well as in the glimpses of poetry of the past and images of present Vietnam, also permeates *Bone Pagoda*. In the haunting Dickinsonian lines, and in the book itself, it is partly the “oblique place” of war that is “Made flesh / And tremblingly”; but it is also the “dear collection of English words”—a collection that must include the profoundly disturbing yet wonderfully made place that is Susan Tichy’s book.

*Martha Collins*
AND THE ELAND COMES AND GRAZES ON ITS GRAVE


This reissue of Randall Jarrell’s *Selected Poems*, thoughtfully edited and introduced by William Pritchard, appears seventeen years after the first publication of the volume, and more than forty years after the poet’s death. How has the passage of years treated Jarrell’s poetic work? Has time transfigured it, tarnished it, bled it of interest? For Pritchard, Jarrell ranks with Lowell and Bishop as a leading mid-century poet; recent critics (most notably Stephen Burt in his landmark *Randall Jarrell and His Age*) have paid him the attention appropriate for such a figure, but that fact alone does not tell us why or how we should turn our attention to Jarrell in this new century. The reappearance of this selection is cause for celebration not because it encourages us to renew our acquaintance with Jarrell, but because it allows us to form an entirely new relationship with him. Viewed from the vantage point of the present moment, Jarrell appears more distinctly set apart from his contemporaries, stranger than we may have thought, and more unsettling.

As the anthological territory available for mid-century poets is rubbed away by the jostle of later writers, Jarrell’s entire oeuvre threatens to vanish in the narrow, stark shadow cast by his most famous poem, “The Death of The Ball Turret Gunner”:

> From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,  
> And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
> Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
> I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
> When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Viewed afresh, in an age where the detonation of bodies receives little more than routine notation in the news, the poem’s power to shock appears both imposing and obsolete, like the turret-bearing B-17 or B-24 bombers themselves. And like the airships, the poem itself appears both intricate and primitive, impregnable
and vulnerable. Adopting its tone from the best of Wilfred Owen’s poems of the first world war, its voice is one darkened by unimaginable suffering even while it proceeds from a realm wholly beyond suffering. Its plangency and brutal dispatch animate its public life as a poem of anguished anti-war ardor, an anguish rendered all the more dreadful by the suggestion that war may be an inalienable mode of being for any State. Taken out of the context of Jarrell’s other poems (even his other war poems, accomplished, but for the most part tentative, experimental, struggling to free themselves from the influence of Yeats, Owen, and Auden), “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” says intently, univocally, “Don’t you see? I will make you see.” Like Owen’s work, it redirects the actual physical violence of warfare into a different show of force, the forced witness of horror, the ironclad refusal to let the viewer look away. The person we complacently declare a “casualty” or a “fallen soldier” is in fact no longer a person, but a slurry so effectively liquefied by an exploding shell that what remains cannot be retrieved, only hosed away. The final line brutally asserts the primacy of a material reality: in the invisible, spillable nature of human embodiment, in the irresistible strength of first the shell and then the steam-hose, and in the indomitable resistance of the intact turret, which stands, in turn, for the supremacy of the machine over the fragile mortal form. The preceding lines are nightmarish in a more literal sense. The speaker is loosed from the earth’s dream of life into a Yeatsian “tumult in the clouds,” a tumult which is for Jarrell not a form of vigor or aliveness, but a deathful dream, the realm of obliterating “black flak” and of “nightmare fighters."

What this poem for all its hideous strength leaves out is the possibility of wakeful, reflective thought. To this degree the lived human world remains utterly remote; “six miles from earth” might as well be a universe away. If then we take the successes of this poem to be the successes of Randall Jarrell, we lose sight of his greatest accomplishment, the subtlety and grace with which he illuminates the ordinary and the everyday. However, we must proceed here with great caution. Even as it distorts Jarrell to read him as a poet of extremity, it flattens him to praise the work only
for its muted, delicate, minor-key epiphanies. We can just as easily lose sight of Jarrell in the gathering number of confessional poets as we can in the throng of competent war poets. If it is true that the late poems startle because they are so, well, suburban, they reassure as well by being comfortably alienated from suburbia. Unable to get Jarrell to sit tight among the war poets, we place him with the confessionals, in hopes he’ll have an easier time fitting in. If he does, we can rest easy that everything going on in the mid-century was exactly what we thought was going on; it sure is gratifying to reflect, from time to time, that the Tupperware Levittown American Dream had grave spiritual costs. But the cozy sophistication of such a sentiment gives a sour ring to our applause, our easy approval of the fact that “Jarrell wrote often in the persona of a woman!” as though the most radical act in the world were to dress up in drag to go vote Eisenhower back into office. If “The Woman at the Washington Zoo,” “The Face,” and “Next Day” are easy to like, they are easy to like for suspect reasons. If all we want to say about mid-century poets is that they explore new registers of personal candor, that they suggest, in titillating ways, that consciousness can never be distinguished from mental illness, that with the coming of the Cold War we all found ourselves trapped behind an iron curtain of anxiety—then Jarrell fits the bill perfectly, right? But grouped thus in the reunion snapshot of mid-century poets, Jarrell is always the one whose face gets obscured behind Lowell, say, or Berryman. Surely if, in Berryman, we already have an outrageously bearded, charming, antic, erratic, and self-extinguishing poet, and if in Lowell we have a slovenly, quasi-southern, intermittently manic, grave, and tormented poet, can’t we just keep Jarrell around as a sort of backup or spare?

Reprinted with a cover so aggressively unprepossessing as to give, in the competition for Absolute Drabness, even the most dour and brittle Faber paperback a run for its money, the book suggests that Farrar, Straus and Giroux has done little more than offer Jarrell’s poems a place in its Museum of Mid-century Culture. But while it reminds us how a poem such as “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” still can stand as such a tour de
force, it reveals a Jarrell wholly his own, possessed of a sensibility so unique and fresh that it stands entirely alone. In the remainder of this essay I will try to explain what I mean by this uniqueness by discussing the entirety of one of Jarrell's greatest poems.

"Seele im Raum" takes its title (which means "soul in space") from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, and shares with that poem a concern with the naked vulnerability of the soul and, as David St. John has pointed out in these pages (FIELD #35, Fall 1986), Rilke's interest in imaginary animals. It is spoken by a woman who has not only a husband and children, but an eland as well. (The eland, in case you need to bone up on your even-toed ungulates, is the world's largest antelope, or rather, it shares that distinction with the giant eland, which is, by the way, exactly the same size as its non-giant cousin.) The trouble with the woman's eland is that it is a figment of her imagination—an hallucination, perhaps, a delusion, or a dream. But a dream, for Jarrell, is not synonymous with unreality. Dreams express the reality of the inner life, even when we understand and acknowledge that this inner reality is incompatible with the outer, social, shared reality we also inhabit. If madness is the failure to distinguish these two realities, the woman, however crazy her world may seem, is not mad. Instead of madness, she suffers heartbreak that these two worlds cannot be brought together. Dramatizing this heartbreak so that it becomes our own, the poem offers us an account of the imagination as unique as it is penetrating. The woman comes to understand that her soul, and perhaps every soul, floats in an abyss. The soul's deepest reality, she comes to believe, is its solitude, its distance from others, even those, like spouses and children, nearest to our hearts. The poem thus conceals within its domestic suburban premise the ambition to define this radical solitude and to identify it as an inalienable condition of being alive. To be alive, for Jarrell, is to be divided, from others certainly, but from one's self and one's dreams as well. The poem begins with a scene both touchingly ordinary and entirely impossible, expressed in a voice both hauntingly urgent and vividly direct and precise:

It sat between my husband and my children.
A place was set for it—a plate of greens. 
It had been there: I had seen it 
But not somehow—but this was like a dream— 
Not seen it so that I knew I saw it. 
It was as if I could not know I saw it 
Because I had never once in all my life 
Not seen it. It was an eland.
An eland! That is why the children 
Would ask my husband, for a joke, at Christmas: 
"Father, is it Donner?" He would say, "No, Blitzen."
It had been there always. Now we put silver 
At its place at meals, fed it the same food 
We ourselves ate, and said nothing. Many times
When it breathed heavily (when it had tried 
A long useless time to speak) and reached to me 
So that I touched it—of a different size 
And order of being, like the live hard side 
Of a horse's neck when you pat the horse— 
And looked with its great melting tearless eyes 
Fringed with a few coarse wire-like lashes 
Into my eyes, and whispered to me 
So that my eyes turned backward in their sockets 
And they said nothing—
many times
I have known, when they said nothing, 
That it did not exist. If they had heard 
They could not have been silent. And yet they heard;
Heard many times what I have spoken 
When it could no longer speak, but only breathe— 
When I could no longer speak, but only breathe.

The opening lines of the poem solicit our curiosity even while making nearly unmeetable demands on our ability to keep up. Of course we must inform ourselves what an eland is, and we must imagine it seated at a table, eating its food, perhaps negotiating with cloven hoof the tricky demands of knife and fork.
What makes this difficult, however, is not its mere weirdness; this is the sort of strangeness for which we happily suspend our disbelief; if wolves can dress like grannies and beanstalks pierce the clouds, why make a fuss about an ungulate in the breakfast nook? More daunting is the exhaustingly fastidious, excruciatingly precise volley of qualifications and multiple negatives unleashed immediately thereafter to specify the real-but-not-really-real-but-still-somehow-real-er-than-real irreality of this animal. The eland is, on the one hand, all too real for the speaker, and yet, on the other hand, it is as cut off from her in its muteness as it is from her family in its invisibility and failure, in their eyes, to exist. Communication between woman and animal occurs at precisely the moment when each must despair of communicating, when each “can no longer speak, but only breathe.”

Eventually, tragically, the woman is cured of her delusion even as her animal companion is wrested from her, taken away by “others” to be, in a hideous irony “cured”; this cure, which is of course intended to be the cure of the woman, entails the animal’s death:

And, after some years, the others came
And took it from me—it was ill, they told me—
And cured it, they wrote me: my whole city
Sent me cards like lilac-branches, mourning
As I had mourned—

and I was standing

By a grave in flowers, by dyed rolls of turf,
And a canvas marquee the last brown of earth.

It is over.
It is over so long that I begin to think
That it did not exist, that I have never—
And my son says, one morning, from the paper:
“An eland. Look, an eland!”

—It was so.

Today, in a German dictionary, I saw elend
And the heart in my breast turned over, it was—

It was a word one translates *wretched*.

It is as if someone remembered saying:

"This is an antimacassar that I grew from seed,"
And this were true.

And, truly,

One could not wish for anything more strange—
For anything more. And yet it wasn’t *interesting*...
—It was worse than impossible, it was a joke.

And when it was, I was—
Even to think that I once thought
That I could see it is to feel the sweat
Like needles at my hair-roots, I am blind

—It was not even a joke, not even a joke.

The speaker—like Jarrell and Freud (who interested Jarrell immensely)—knows that the accidental particularities of the psyche (its affinity, say, for even-toed ungulates) are both the product of incalculably complex processes and yet still effectively meaningless to any other psyche. For the speaker, the eland is in some quasi-magical way the actual incarnation of her *eland*, her wretchedness and hers alone. Another person might sympathize with her, but no one can ever share her eland. The embodiment of her wretchedness is the truest thing to her, and that part of her being most remote from the world of others. If this is a joke, it is one that no one else can get, a joke as outlandish as saying "this is an antimacassar that I grew from seed." In our public reality, such a statement is an absurdity, just as it is an absurdity to say: while it is true that my eland is imaginary, it is also true that he is sitting at the table with us right now. But because the woman knows that her eland, in spite of being imaginary, is also, in some way, profoundly real, she cannot remain content, as most people can, that the world is full of real things and unreal things and to
be sane is to know the difference. Instead, even though the woman might be cured by the disappearance of her eland (having been assisted by her entire city, and perhaps by lilac-strewing Walt Whitman himself), the woman feels the entire phenomenological and existential underpinning of her world shake to its very roots. Instead of learning the difference between those things appropriate to believe in and those not, she learns that the very concept of belief has somehow, in the process of revealing its complexities to her, become irreparably damaged.

Yet how can I believe it? Or believe that I
Owned it, a husband, children? Is my voice the voice
Of that skin of being—of what owns, is owned
In honor or dishonor, that is borne and bears—
Or of that raw thing, the being inside it
That has neither a wife, a husband, nor a child
But goes at last as naked from this world
As it was born into it—

And the eland comes and grazes on its grave.

The credibility of this speaker derives from the fact that she is in possession of, or perhaps possessed by, not one but two truths, each one incompatible with the other: the eland is unreal, and in being unreal, it embodies the unworldly truth of her soul. We believe her not because her statements are consistent and coherent, but on the contrary because she can profess and swear to two incompatible realities. Here Jarrell is meditating, with immense subtlety, on the terms of representation itself, and on the relationship between the world of art and the social world. While it can be true that the Prince of Denmark is thrusting a sword through an arras at one end of a room while parents on folding chairs peer through video-cameras from other end of the room, photographing their children on stage, one of these realities must frame the other: either parents are watching a production of Hamlet, or Hamlet is ignoring a strange group of Danes pretending to be dotingly enthusiastic parents from the future. Similarly, in
imagining the eland grazing on its grave, Jarrell is showing, in a brilliant paradox, exactly what it is like to occupy two realities that cannot occupy each other. If you are an eland, the one place you cannot graze is your own grave. If you find yourself present at your own funeral, that means either (a) you are not at your funeral, or (b) you are at your funeral, but you are not you. But surely this is senseless, senseless to dither with thought-experiments, to dally so maddeningly with counterfactuals! Perhaps, but precisely therein lies the rub:

This is senseless?
Shall I make sense or shall I tell the truth?
Choose either—I cannot do both.

I tell myself that. And yet it is not so,
And what I say afterwards will not be so:
To be at all is to be wrong.

Being is being old
And saying, almost comfortably, across a table
From—
from what I don’t know—
in a voice

Rich with a kind of longing satisfaction:
“To own an eland! That’s what I call life!”

There is an immense and unappeasable pain in this view of the world. This poem recalls affectively what the last lines of the early poem “90 North” state outright: “Darkness [comes] from the darkness. Pain comes from the darkness / And we call it wisdom. It is pain.” Just a few lines before Jarrell had written, “I see at last that all the knowledge // I wrung from the darkness—that the darkness flung me—/ Is worthless as ignorance.” A grim recognition, perhaps, but something as worthless as ignorance is not precisely ignorance. In fact it is wholly different, not meaninglessness but something closer to a purifying poverty. Jarrell suggests that what we call wisdom is not wisdom but in fact pain,
but such an acknowledgment is itself a kind of wisdom, a wis-
dom purified of Big Ideas, a wisdom as empty as a mirror, per-
haps one in which our wretchedness and our imaginary animals
can finally appear. The paradoxical richness of this poverty, this
"longing satisfaction," is Jarrell's great topic, and it is his master-
ful treatment of this topic that secures his position as a great poet.

DeSales Harrison

Reading around in a group of new poetry collections, I find myself drawn back, again and again, to Sandra McPherson's. Why, I ask myself? Poet X juggles the junk of our culture very adeptly, but I soon tire of that. Poet Y is eloquent in variations of grief laced with surprises of language and form, but her world is finally somewhat claustrophobic. Poet Z has always been extremely adept with both form and subject, but he doesn't seem to know when to stop; he seems too pleased with his own voice. McPherson, on the other hand, stands in a sort of magic circle and conjures up a world I am glad to be part of. Here is the first poem in her newest collection:

**GROUSE**

This water flows dark red
from alder tannin:
boot-stain river

between white rocks.
An ouzel, flannel feathered,
sips the current up.

Mossgatherers
spread their patches
across a dry, flat turnaround.

They seem embarrassed,
want to shelter in the dark.
A coyote running in broad day:

stumps ruffling
with sulphur polypores
woody to the tongue,
woody to teeth. Early
yellow leaves paste river to its bed;
blackberries drop, the last,

many out of taste
and strictly smudge.
Puddles loop in the road:

Bottomland—
the foolhen
waits there for

the fool gun,
gray throat-down free in a burst,
the pose, the afterslump.

Carcass beside spirit.
O come to my hand, unkillable;
whatever continues, continue to approach.

There's much to admire here, from the careful music ("an ouzel,
flannel-feathered, / sips the current up" makes you purse your
lips, then smile twice, then purse again) to the play of syntax
against form, the hesitations and impulsive jumps that make the
language alive and vibrant, requiring second and third looks. But
what strikes me most is way the speaker is placed, as is her lis-
tener, in a natural world full of non-human forms and activities,
a world that inevitably governs the poem’s tone and meaning.
What we take away from the last sentence, with its longing to
connect human mortality and fallibility with whatever "contin-
ues" and might "continue to approach," is going to derive its
caracter from the environment the poem has created for us, an
ample Northwest wilderness full of astonishing and minute
details.

When we talk about the practice and knowledge of the Wild,
some people roll their eyes. They feel more comfortable in the
safety of the city and with poets of urban experience and "urbanity." Auden, for example. Frank O'Hara. Frederick Seidel. Fear plays a part in this, I think. Many contemporary poets don't really know very much about the natural world. They won't ever have seen a water ouzel, much less a coyote at large, and they likely won't have thought about how polypores (the kind of shelf fungus that grows on wood) can decorate stumps in a way that echoes the fan of a ruffed grouse's tail feathers. They probably won't know that "foolhen" is a folk name for the spruce grouse, so they won't have a chance to accomplish the witty comparison to the hunter's "fool gun" that takes the notoriously unsuspicuous bird all too readily and easily.

But the speaker of this poem is not especially intent on demonstrating her knowledge of natural history. She wants to understand, just as Keats did through his nightingale, the mystery of life and death, the "unkillable" aspect of nature that survives the grouse's death. Yet it's obvious to me that she couldn't mount this kind of investigation without having spent patient hours outdoors, or without something of a scientist's curiosity about the workings and forms of nature. As in the great poems of the Chinese tradition, the poet takes the trouble to establish the human presence within the larger context of the nonhuman surround, seeing as essential to any depth in the human inquiry a sense of the run of the seasons and the mystery of other living things, their lives and deaths that interact continually with our own.

One must have, and be at ease with, a large and intricate knowledge of nature to be able to handle it playfully, as in the river red not with blood but with "alder tannin" or the grouse's "pose" and "afterslump" (a spruce grouse will sit in a tree and look curiously and fearlessly at the approaching hunter who shoots him off his perch). I take the "mossgatherers" to be most likely human (there's a Roethke poem informing that choice, and I think there's some Pacific Northwest folklore as well), but I can't avoid connecting them to the old saying about a rolling stone, which could make them into boulders. I also like the combining of names (sulphur polypores) that are "woody" to sight and to pronouncing on the tongue, evocative to eye and ear, but
inedible, "woody," to any teeth tempted to munch on them. The playfulness yoked to seriousness is part of what delights me and makes me return with increasing confidence to this poet’s guidance, craft, and celebration.

Still, *Expectation Days* is not a book of what some people call "nature poems." Indeed, it has a wider range of subjects than most collections, evidence that this poet can transform all sorts of material into poetry. There are poems about airport security checks and about moviemaking and movie watching. There are many poems about the experience of bereavement, as the autobiographical thrust of the collection records McPherson’s recent years of widowhood, often with a kind of mild comedy, as in "Living with an Urn" and "Bereavement: Leaving the Radio On All Night for Company," which stars a purring cat. There is a poem about the death of a bat, written from the bat’s point of view. "Lucid Dreaming: Oxycodone" is a candid and tender account of her dead husband’s drug hallucinations, painfully funny and quite unforgettable. If the book has an overall theme, it is certainly bereavement, its oppression and uncertainty faced and challenged by the poet’s courageous and imaginative response.

Nevertheless, I continue to feel that McPherson’s true stability lies in her enlarged and detailed understanding of nature, of the nonhuman world. It can be as small a thing as noting, in the poem "Living with an Urn," the world outside the window—"Through lace panels to the south, / plum trees twist like shiners"—where the very existence of leaves and minnows, as well as their curious resemblance, brings a kind of comfort and even a mysterious order to a disorderly room full of memories and grief.

I could illustrate this with any number of poems, including the marvelous prose poems that fill the book’s third section, or the "virtue studies," as they are called, that populate the fourth section, but I’ll close by looking at "Poem for a Late Birthday," a poem that comes late in the book and that was originally titled (when it appeared in these pages in 1995, the acknowledgments tell us) "Poem for My Fifty-First Birthday":

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POEM FOR A LATE BIRTHDAY

The boat has been upside down for the last five blooms of hydrangeas that harbor it.

The boat is a stranger’s boat, stranger’s hydrangea.

The boat does not grow but it grows as its slivers pull apart, pull discrete as if for better view of one another.

The purpose of the boat is now out of the hands of navigators. Fish

no longer see its shadow. Oar? Motor?—just the savor

of the grass, and a tendency to drift.

Some ship! Shallow as it is, isn’t there still draft to deepen in?

Out from under the bow a cat—

who knows how long it has been cagey, watching?—a cat comes into the open

high tail, one candle.
The poem can be seen, of course, as a delicate self-portrait of the aging poet. As such, it is without self-pity and exhibits the kind of detached wonder that has always characterized McPherson’s response to the world around her—wonder at the possibilities of language, wonder at the immensity and variety of life on this planet, wonder at her survival and privilege of observing. But it is also a poem that plays pattern against change, and that dialectic, I think, is what the best “nature” poets do, responding to both the order and the disorder of the universe, not choosing one or the other but staying open to their co-presence, their interdependency and interfusion. We can trace this in Wordsworth, from whom I just borrowed that word “interfusion” (“interfused,” actually, and I think he got it from Milton), and we can find it everywhere in Emily Dickinson. It’s related to the perception of the Sublime and to Hopkins’ notions about inscape and instress.

Am I loading too much significance into this lightly sketched study of an overturned and unused boat? I think I am responding to the author’s guidance of my perceptions, what she chooses to notice and emphasize. Most people would see an old boat, overturned among flowers and grasses, and if they attached any emotion to it, it would be pathos about disuse and ruin. But consider what McPherson does with this boat. It “does not grow / but it grows.” And the growth is like self-awareness, a ruination that allows its splintering parts a “better view of one another.”

The boat’s “purpose” has not been lost, but it has been taken out of the human “hands / of navigators.” It has traded obvious purpose—oar or motor, going somewhere, catching fish, etc.—for the savor (wonderfully chosen word!) of the grass and “a tendency to drift.” That tendency, here comically attached to aging and its apparent loss of purpose, is a whole new value to ponder. Drifting is what the universe does, after all, and what poets do when they stand and ponder an old overturned boat for longer than is “normal” or “useful.”

And the speaker is rewarded by the emergence of the cat, which brings a new vitality into her life and her poem, a birthday candle that is a one rather than a fifty-one, since years and numbers don’t really matter in a moment like this. It’s not an
armadillo, as in Bishop, or a skunk, as in Lowell, or a porcupine, as in Montale. It’s a cat, an animal that features splendidly in this collection, wild and domestic at the same time, comforting to the bereaved while still mysterious in its presence and being, threaded in and around our lives. I think the cat tells us that McPherson doesn’t have to enter any literal wilderness to carry on her dialogue with the Wild, that she has become such an adept of the world’s hidden wisdom that she can find it almost anywhere. A nice reward for the various privations she has endured, and will endure. A poet among us who deserves more readers, more homage, more celebration.

David Young
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LARRY BECKETT lives in Portland, Oregon. The blank sonnets 41, 42, 43 are from a sequence. The first forty were published in Songs and Sonnets by Rainy Day Women Press.

GEORGE BILGERE’s most recent book, Haywire, won the 2006 May Swenson Poetry Award. He teaches at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio.

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YOSA BUSON was a haiku poet and painter in 18th-century Japan. He is considered the “second pillar of haiku,” the most important haiku poet after Matsuo Basho. His translator AMY ENGLAND’S second book of poems from Tupelo Press, Victory and Her Opposites: A Guide, was published in summer 2007. She teaches creative writing and poetics at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

MICHAEL CHITWOOD’S fifth volume of poetry, From Whence, was published by LSU Press in 2007. His sixth, Spill, was released by Tupelo Press in the fall of the same year.


ANGIE ESTES is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently Chez Nous (Oberlin College Press, 2005). Her second book, Voice-Over (2002), won the FIELD Poetry Prize and was also awarded the Alice Fay di Castagnola Prize from the Poetry Society of America. Her awards include a Pushcart Prize and a 2007 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry.

MATTHEW GAVIN FRANK has been featured at Verse Daily and in The Best Food Writing 2006 and The Best Travel Writing 2008.

LILAH HEGNAUER’S Dark Under Kiganda Stars (Ausable, 2005) was a finalist for the Library of Virginia Literary Award. She has an MFA from the University of Virginia.

DENNIS HINRICHSEN’S most recent book is Cage of Water, from University of Akron Press.

KARL KROLOW (1915-1999) was one of Germany’s most prominent writers of the twentieth century. His longtime translator STUART FRIEBERT has published two volumes of Krolow’s work: What’ll We Do With This Life: Selected Poems (Fairleigh Dickinson U. Press) and On Account Of: Selected Poems (Oberlin College Press). Friebert’s own 13th book of poems, Speak Mouth to Mouth, will be out from David Robert Books early next year.

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K. MICHEL, one of the leading poets in the Netherlands, is the author of four books of poetry, including Boom the Night (1994), Waterstudies (1999), and Color the Shadow (2004). His translator, ARTHUR SZE, is the author of eight books of poetry, including Quipu (Copper Canyon Press, 2005).

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lished by Other Press in 2005. His translator, MARILYN HACKER, is at work on a book-length collection of his poems.

LYNN POWELL's second collection of poetry is The Zones of Paradise (University of Akron Press, 2003). In 2007, she was awarded an NEA Poetry Fellowship.

DENNIS SCHMITZ's most recent book is The Truth Squad (Copper Canyon).

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ELLEN WEHLE teaches creative writing at West Chester University. She lives with her husband outside Philadelphia, where she is hoping to find the perfect Italian water ice.

NANCY WHITE's first book, Sun, Moon, Salt, won the Washington Prize. She teaches at Adirondack Community College.

Correction: We omitted a contributor's note in our last issue for J. W. MARSHALL, who won the 2007 FIELD Poetry prize for Meaning a Cloud, now available from Oberlin College Press.
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The Press also receives essential operating support from Oberlin College.
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