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Our association with Russell Edson goes all the way back to FIELD #7 (Fall 1972), which featured five of his prose poems, among them "An Old Man's Son":

There was an old man who had a kite for a son, which he would let up into the air attached to a string, when he had need to be alone.

...And would watch this high bloom of himself, as something distant that will be close again...

Those weren't the only prose poems in that issue; we also had one by W. S. Merwin, two by Jean Valentine, and four by Erica Peditti (three translated by Stuart Friebert, one by Franz Wright). But everyone knew that if you wanted to talk about the prose poem in contemporary poetry, you began and ended with the strange, commanding genius of Edson. He was one of a kind, like Joseph Cornell or Charles Ives, a "pure product of America."

We continued to print Edson's work, including an important essay called "Portrait of the Writer as a Fat Man: Some Subjective Ideas or Notions on the Care & Feeding of Prose Poems" (#13, Fall 1975), and we eventually brought out, from Oberlin College Press, The Tunnel: Selected Poems (1994).

There was also a hilarious correspondence carried on between Stuart Friebert and Edson. Stuart would relate a few local events and Russell would respond with fantastic expansions and variations of them, clearly produced by the same restless and unorthodox imagination behind the poems. That correspondence appears to have been lost, but we continue to hope that it may turn up, somehow, someday.

Meanwhile, if you can get your hands on a copy of #43 (Fall 1990), you can see an Edson postcard. The front, a whaling scene, has been captioned in a way that completely misinterprets what is happening. The back, addressed to "Dear Editor Friebert," proposes we take on a 500-page manuscript at a dollar per word while twice getting our name wrong. It closes, "Please hurry, our authoress is very nervous. Perhaps you had better send a telegram. Our authoress is
nervous, she’s never published before.” Vintage stuff, and one more instance of the fruitful Edson/FIELD relationship.

The essays in this symposium illustrate the range and penetration of Edson’s work. There is much that is grotesque and even frightening in his prose poems, but there are also unexpected moments of tenderness and joy. Our essayists also testify to the affection and regard which Edson inspired in fellow writers. Together they constitute a salute to an old friend, gone but by no means forgotten.
THE FALL

There was a man who found two leaves and came indoors holding them out saying to his parents that he was a tree.

To which they said then go into the yard and do not grow in the living-room as your roots may ruin the carpet.

He said I was fooling I am not a tree and he dropped his leaves.

But his parents said look it is fall.
It’s really in some way everyone’s family. We have these troublesome dreams, and in the work of Edson, they enter the waking world, bringing along their sense of logic and meandering, changing narrative. And in them, the misunderstandings, desires, and poorly kept secrets play a game of hot potato through the family, or the lovers or the husband and wife, and we, reading, never know which character it’s going to blow up on. As a fellow student said when coming across Edson’s poetry (in the Longman anthology with the western American landscape on the cover) in college in the mid-80s, “So are we to laugh or what?” Exactly. And from that moment I’ve been hooked. In making these disconcerting dreams literal, in handing these twisted archetypes back to us, Edson forces us to face a confusion of tragedy and comedy. Is this funny? Is this horrible? It’s yes and yes, of course, as no one gets out of an Edson book unscathed.

Sons are rocks or anvils, or their heads are made of wood; they carry their fathers in sacks on their backs; they wish to marry cars or dally with the wallpaper; they can’t stop counting, and come between their parents. Lovers, likewise, are constantly and unintentionally at cross-purposes: one is imagining clouds while the other is imagining the act of sex, and they exchange monologues while thinking they’re communicating. And they are, in our general way of miscommunication and missed opportunities. In Edson’s poems, the books we open are blank, as we can’t read them, or else we’re afraid of the ape beside us that we’ll never understand, as we don’t really know what to do with difference, how to confront it, how to deal with its uncanny presence.

This achievement is all the more impressive when you consider Edson’s first book of these little case studies came out in 1964, and what an anomaly it seemed both in tone and theme, which, by that time, were both fully formed in his work. And the questions hovered for the rest of his career: What makes a life? How are we to proceed? In the end, it comes back to this family. The mother and the father. The child and the parent.

“The Fall,” from Edson’s second book What a Man Can See, is an early and excellent example of the knife-edge ambivalence and open
possibility in his work on the terror of belonging or not belonging. Edson’s trademark ambivalence and layering of archetypes begins with the title. It’s loaded with possibility. There’s the Biblical Fall as well as the season to consider. And the reader begins holding these in mind. Is this poem going to address one or both of them? Or is it going to be some other, some more pedestrian fall?

The poem opens with a man entering his parents’ house holding out two leaves and proclaiming himself to be a tree. It appears the poem is going to refer to the season. It’s going to be lightly humorous, in the way that people (children mostly) commonly play act such scenes. The first little joke is the fact that he’s a man doing this, and not a child. Ha, we can say, he’s being childlike and fun. But, more elementally, we have a man who has left the family home and has discovered something in the world. He brings it back home and tells his parents he’s been transformed by the experience.

What’s going to be the response from the parents? They say, “Then go into the yard and do not grow in the living-room as your roots may ruin the carpet.” In responding this way, the man’s parents are perhaps playing along with his pantomime, heightening the joke, but also, in absolutely accepting the transformation of their son, they have placed him in a new category, telling him he’s no longer welcome in the house, that he’s now a danger to the house, and that as he is now something else entirely, he must behave as that something else behaves, apart from the family.

The man’s declaration to his parents has backfired terribly, so he responds that “I was fooling I am not a tree,” and he drops his leaves. The joke the son was possibly playing and that the parents were possibly playing has gone too far, and pushed him into panicking, as the joke is now on him. The man hadn’t considered the consequences of his action, and his reaction, which is common in such situations, is to deny the fact that he’s been changed, as banishment is the most severe punishment a family can impose.

At this point the title comes back into play. What was simply a light, seasonal joke has become the familial acting out of the Fall from Grace, and the son is desperate to undo it, to get back into good graces, into belonging. But the parents are having none of it, saying more to each other than to him, “look it is fall.” There’s no undoing
it. Once you’ve left your parents’ house and returned saying you’ve been transformed, you’ve got to be ready for some pushback. And in this poem we get something of a worst-case scenario, one step away from chopping him up and putting him in the fireplace. There’s no going back for this family, no returning. You can’t undo fall, or The Fall.

The joke morphs as it travels through the poem, heightened in the middle by the panic of the son, and finally culminating in the lack of sensitivity (or the over-sensitivity) of the parents. But there’s this other joke, the dark joke where Edson is playing with the idea of power and torture, where these parents, seeing the son asserting his independence, call him on it, forcing him to denounce his independence, and then casting him out anyway. It’s a family version of Orwell’s *1984*, made into vaudeville.

One of Edson’s most profitable themes is how we want and strive to assert our independence and how, conversely, we want to belong. It’s the thing I feel more than anything else in his poetry, these twin desires. But concomitant with those desires are the assumptions people make about themselves and others, how those become the demands we place on others to conform, to behave. And the desires we have to love how we desire to love and to be loved. Are we wrong in our desires? Are others wrong in denying them? And there’s this thing about families, too, the need to be accepted and the need to establish one’s own identity, the pressure of the singular and the collective, as his characters, with their conceptions, their demands and compromises and their expected and unexpected consequences, deal with unfolding events.

The very idea of parents, the absurd quality of unfolding generations in an endless stream, continued from his first book to his last, where, in a late poem, it arrives as an old man who pukes metal and an old woman who pukes cloth, imagining they have, or possibly actually have, a son who pukes real puke. The strength of Edson’s work is the difficulty we have with other people, which mirrors the difficulty we have with ourselves. The inconclusiveness of this is important. It’s where he’s at his best, and if for this and nothing else, is why I find his work required reading.
THE OX

There was once a woman whose father over the years had become an ox.
She would hear him alone at night lowing in his room.

It was one day when she looked up into his face that she suddenly noticed the ox.
She cried, you're an ox!
And he began to moo with his great pink tongue hanging out of his mouth.

He would stand over his newspaper, turning the pages with his tongue, while he evacuated on the rug.
When this was brought to his attention he would low with sorrow, and slowly climb the stairs to his room, and there spend the night in mournful lowing.

***

A PERFORMANCE AT HOG THEATER

There was once a hog theater where hogs performed as men, had men been hogs.

One hog said, I will be a hog in a field which has found a mouse which is being eaten by the same hog which is in the field and which has found the mouse, which I am performing as my contribution to the performer's art.

Oh let's just be hogs, cried an old hog.

And so the hogs streamed out of the theater crying, only hogs, only hogs...
It’s seldom that a writer can so accurately declare the shape and extent of his domain, the limits of his sensibility, and be the absolute ruler of it. Edson does. I don’t care that he is a miniaturist, or how prose poem is defined. As a fabulist, he’s in good company—Kafka, obviously, in the stories and shorter pieces like “The Bucket Rider,” or the ficciones of Borges. You have the shorthand of parables in many literatures. You have the humorous and bawdy medieval fabliaux. You can add deliberate artifice to the Brothers Grimm’s love of the grotesque. And wouldn’t “The Ox” or “A Performance at Hog Theater” fit into a medieval bestiary?

These are not necessarily Edson’s antecedents. I’m just trying by association to describe a new taste. Edson would be at home writing a Where the Wild Things Are for grown-ups. Imagine “The Ox” as a cautionary tale, arranged one sentence per page with pictures like a children’s book. The popular children’s book Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus (Mo Willems) assumes a similar understanding between author and reader, a matrix—it’s the joke in a context of jokes—the inevitable is a good part of joke-telling. Or think of Punch and Judy—Edson often has the squawking voice of Punch—the prose poem format as a kind of puppet booth.

The poems in The Childhood of an Equestrian and The Clam Theater (both books were published in 1973) seem more finished (I won’t say are more coherent except as the term means that every element is directed to a single, though complex, meaning) than his earlier work. I like saying “purity of expression” in relation to these poems—they are so exact in their statement, so immediate, so inevitable and patterned in development, so direct and forceful. Re-define “purity.” Edson loves the muck, the physical, the indecent, the icky.

Edson wants to have a simple, almost a children’s story, delivery. Like Kafka, he wants the grotesque told deadpan, and best aloud. The sentences are short, declarative—you have to believe what is happening, and happenings form the little narratives. The content is, of course, outrageous. But you go along. It’s an easy sell.

I’m talking about Edson’s world in terms of narrative constructions and rhetorical devices. You also might analyze his poems as
you would the work of a figurative painter, perhaps one of the so-called naïve artists, or artists from the Art Brut collection of Jean Dubuffet. Or think of the world of Paul Klee. What are Edson’s motifs, images, the way he organizes a frame?

The story of “The Ox” is meant to be instructive. The daughter is a witness, as so many of our children will be when we age. Our children know what we are, firsthand. The father has become ox-like in his behavior, and behavior is Edson’s way to define his characters—his stories are all action. Do we become ox or hog, or have we always been this way in spirit, and now become this way physically—is this a habit of being, and now we only realize it as we express ourselves? What constitutes “ox-ness”?

The daughter looks into her father’s face (has she been avoiding this confrontation or is that the manner of the household?). Does the father become ox-like then only because of her examination—the point of that part of “Cinderella” when the Prince can’t recognize the woman to whom he is fitting a glass slipper until the slipper is actually on, and they exchange the formulae of address? I love the conventions of Edson’s story-telling, the recurring characters (like a child’s bestiary, an alphabet of animals book)—the old man, the monkey, the wife, the machines that go wrong. Was dentistry ever so misused? Eating is always chancy. In a matter-of-fact way, the body itself is always dropping parts. The unexpected is always expected. What writer is more delightfully goofy?

In Edson’s poems, the old people are generally grumpy, short-tempered and assertive. The father in “The Ox” is passive, but, as some old people might, he must delight in his shame. Is he at the age and condition when control is only what his human caretakers exercise? In the poem, the daughter, having witnessed, is never mentioned again. The father knows enough to turn the newspaper page with his tongue (a humorous version of a vestigial human action). Does he read or just stand over his newspaper to make use of it?

The father’s behavior is tolerated until he evacuates (a polite word) on the rug, and he must be punished like a child, sent to his room. Edson loves—and we, vicariously love—being naughty. Why is the father made aware of his animality now, even though he doesn’t talk but lows earlier? Is there a level of tolerance in the household,
and unsaid rules? Edson’s offensiveness implies so many unconsciously accepted conventions of etiquette. The father’s all-night lament is still human?

The animal changes in “A Performance at Hog Theater” are similar—one can’t help being an animal. The qualities are inherent, and oh, what a release when we give in! What are inherent traits, and what are adaptive responses? Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” lives like a bug/roach; finally, he physically becomes a bug/roach, and is not surprised, merely inconvenienced. He serves his life cycle and dies vaguely disappointed, is discarded. Physical changes here seem to suggest moral/spiritual changes. Gregor’s sister thrives, apparently into sexual maturity, a kind of smooth animal. His parents prosper. The hogs in this poem seem to gain power collectively. Is the old hog who interrupts and redirects the others just old, or impatient? Is he older and wiser, does he recognize the contradictions of being human, the folly of denying one’s self, one’s nature?

Edson enjoys the commonness of his material. These are hogs, farm animals, not the Disney pigs, not swine that are the morally-charged, appropriate packaging Jesus uses for demons in Matthew’s gospel, and are not Circe’s working material when Odysseus’s crew is indulged by her. The crew are reverting to what they are. Ovid’s account of the same episode has more detail when the crew become human again as Circe waves her wand; the crew’s animal characteristics seem to slide away. Edson doesn’t speculate; the changes are immediate.

Immediacy is the mark of Edson’s delivery. And life is not a conundrum that self-dramatization will solve. If you just respond to the immediate, instinct will guide you. Let yourself be seized by what you are? Consideration—the existential question—are we hogs pretending to be humans? Of course, the paradox is that one is progressively more human as one is caught up in the conundrum.

Edson says the theater is where “hogs performed as men, had men been hogs.” The theater is a condition. Does hog-behavior depend on association—do we need other hogs to reveal themselves? How is the title inclusive? Other group behavior? What are the questions we have to ask in order to find out what sort of world we’re in?
What are the layers of identity we have to assume in response? Isolate and display which characteristics? How to set up the charade, the theater? Whom do we join for a collective identity? How do we stand that? Both poems show Edson’s ability to concentrate the effects—the marvel is the simplicity of the poems. Let’s just be hogs!
COUNTING SHEEP

A scientist has a test tube full of sheep. He wonders if he should try to shrink a pasture for them.
They are like grains of rice.
He wonders if it is possible to shrink something out of existence.
He wonders if the sheep are aware of their tininess, if they have any sense of scale. Perhaps they think the test tube is a glass barn...
He wonders what he should do with them; they certainly have less meat and wool than ordinary sheep. Has he reduced their commercial value?
He wonders if they could be used as a substitute for rice, a sort of woolly rice...
He wonders if he shouldn’t rub them into a red paste between his fingers.
He wonders if they are breeding, or if any of them have died.
He puts them under a microscope, and falls asleep counting them...
A woman is trying to write about Russell Edson’s prose poems. She reads “Counting Sheep” and wonders if Russell Edson is a farmer-scientist. He sure knows his sheep!

She wonders if his mind is like a loading ramp. Here come more sheep. So many many sheep.

She wonders why her own mind is filling with sheep.

She wonders if Russell Edson’s prose poems know they’re prose poems, if they have any sense of how inimitable they are and perverse and true in their absurd true unshrinkable perversity.

She wonders if the prose poems are breeding and decides that at night, when the book closes, yes, they’re breeding.

She wonders if each prose poem holds a secret chamber inside of which a politician cries in his sleep. That is, she wonders if within each prose poem something very normal is happening.

She wonders if she could ever in a million years write a prose poem like Russell Edson’s, and so she immediately tries:

Father Cow and Mother Bull go for a walk in the forest. Father Bull is complaining. Oh Father Cow, says Mother Bull, Cover up your mouth. You’ll always be a cow, Father Cow, you have no right to complain. Anyway, it’s almost time to make new Mother Bulls to feed the revolution. But I’m only trying to advance understanding of our dying culture, cries Father Cow, as the culture’s dominant ideology follows Mother Bull and Father Cow into the slaughterhouse like a thirsty calf named Nadine.

The woman wonders why her attempts to imitate Russell Edson always fail. It’s impossible to write like Russell Edson unless you’re Russell Edson and sometimes not even then.
The woman puts the prose poems under a microscope and sees there are more than just sheep in there. There are cows. Don’t throw those cows around, you crazy sheep.

She wonders what would happen if the sheep started breeding with the cows. Will their offspring look like woolly cream?

The woman wonders if she should send Russell Edson a thank you note for reminding her that at least toads will never be born from her armpits. Thank you, Mr. Edson.

But no, she should not thank Mr. Edson. For he reminds her that terrible things will happen and are happening and those things cannot be explained or predicted. Terrible awful cruelties are committed. People split into parts and walk around stuck all over with jelly. Love dies on a piano’s lip. A walnut putters around in a garage and disappoints its parents.

But no, she should thank Mr. Edson because he makes her want to laugh sometimes. But it is strange laughter. Like the laughter attempted by a mouse suffocating in a holiday cheese ball. Like the laughter of a forlorn bale of hay.

The woman wonders if all the sheep nestled in her lap understand they’re inside a prose poem made of glass.

She wonders why she is suddenly being ignored not only by the sheep but also by the cows. Is it because they have discovered she does not contribute to a food group?

She wonders if she can squeeze out of the test tube while the sheep are counting themselves.

Those blurry clouds floating in from the distance. Are they the fingers of Russell Edson?

The woman wonders if she should stop counting now. There are so many Russell Edsons. Too many to count...
THE LIGHTED WINDOW

A lighted window floats through the night like a piece of paper in the wind.
I want to see into it. I want to climb through into its lighted room.
As I reach for it it slips through the trees. As I chase it it rolls and tumbles into the air and skitters on through the night...

***

THE PILOT

Up in a dirty window in a dark room is a star which an old man can see. He looks at it. He can see it. It is the star of the room; an electrical freckle that has fallen out of his head and gotten stuck in the dirt on the window.
He thinks he can steer by that star. He thinks he can use the back of a chair as a ship's wheel to pilot this room through the night.
He says to himself, brave Captain, are you afraid?
Yes, I am afraid; I am not so brave.
Be brave, my Captain.
And all night the old man steers his room through the dark...
Two poems by Russell Edson that are more “lyrical,” less “prosy,” than his other ones in which narrative and dialogue predominate and which often make the reader think of fables, parables and tall tales, except they are unlike any that they have ever read, since everything from literary genres and conventions to our notions of ourselves and the world we live in are subverted and satirized. The dramatic personae of these poems are by and large dunderheads of one kind or another, whether as members of squabbling families or while acting on their own. They have their prototypes in the grotesque realism of the comic strips of the early twentieth century. Like them, Edson’s poems are enemies of good taste, rejoicing in turning things on their heads, using startling transitions and juxtapositions, as well as dramatically simplified narrative. They take every opportunity to tamper with the appearances and behavior of everything and everyone, so that a mouse in one comic strip, for example, chases a cat, while a farmer in one of Edson’s poems struggles to lift a dead cow into heaven. Above all, they share an identical view of humanity and its conventions and established truths as a story of unmitigated and dangerous folly.

“The Lighted Window” is a different species of poem. It’s like a sleight of hand, a rabbit pulled out of a hat where before there was neither a hat nor a rabbit. A lit window floating through the night like a piece of paper lights a fuse in the head of the nameless narrator who takes that figure of speech literally and follows through to its outcome, fooling and consoling himself at the same time and dramatizing his own loneliness and wretchedness in the process. The poem feels like it was written quickly and with no premeditation, and most likely it was. As Frank O’Hara said, “You just go on your nerve. If someone is chasing you down the street with a knife, you just run.”

“The Pilot” makes me think of Robert Frost’s “An Old Man’s Winter Night” and other such poems about solitude and the dark night of the soul long familiar to readers of lyric poetry. Though it too begins with an image and the confusion whether what the narrator is seeing is a star in a dirty window or speck of light that had escaped his head, it pursues the comic possibilities of the situation not just
more interestingly but with a greater dramatic effect. Despite some funny stuff, this is a somber and heartbreaking poem.

What I admire about Edson's best poems is their light touch, their air of nonchalance that conceals their art, what Castiglione called *sprezzatura* and recommended as a remedy against the bane of affectation in his sixteenth-century *Book of the Courtier*. If it should happen that a finished poem is considered a piece of literature, Edson advised his readers, this is quite incidental to the writing. What makes us so fond of his prose poems is the way they thumb their nose at verse that is too willed and self-consciously significant. Coming to us in their deceptively simple packaging, the paragraph, as James Tate warned us, they manage to surprise us, seemingly against all odds, with their mystery and their beauty.
THE REALITY ARGUMENT: SOME BRIEF NOTES ON HOW THINGS COME TO EXIST, THE QUESTION OF RANDOM SELECTION AND/OR PURPOSEFUL MANUFACTURE, WITH A VIEW TOWARD FINDING THE "THEORY OF EVERYTHING"

Who has not awakened in the night wondering if the illness called childhood was not borne by an infestation of dolls? So let us speak of dolls, lead soldiers and teddy bears, Raggedy Anns and fist puppets, "mama" dolls and all the famous bedwetters...

Like most of us, most dolls are mass-produced. Raggedy Ann may look like a rural maiden, but even she has a secret agenda. It is the reality argument, the central theme of poetry. A seductive teddy bear teaches a child philosophy. Poetry comes later. And whether this is true or not, certainly I was going to be a writer, because that is what I have become.

What will be has already begun to exist before it does, otherwise it should never exist at all...

Sometimes a sacrifice is necessary to assure a harvest not yet planted. A C-section performed with a penknife on a cloth breast where a cotton heart is delivered on the stone altar of a child’s heart...

One day it was raining and a big sissy doll sitting by a window had tears on her cheeks. And this is how someone begins to understand that there might be more to the human heart than he first allowed. The problem is that one is always in danger of profundity...

A man invites dolls to his house for cookies and milk, with a bit of bourbon to take the edge off. Sue Ann, a big sissy doll dressed in pink and lace, and Raggedy Ann dressed as a rural maiden.

He locks the door and begins to undress them. Sue Ann reveals a huge delta of black thatch beginning at her navel and ending at her knees. Raggedy Ann’s is red yarn that starts just below her green nipples, and ends at her ankles...

What will be has already begun to exist before it does, otherwise it should never exist at all...
B.K. Fischer

SOME STRANGE CONJUNCTION

Edson’s oeuvre amplifies the counterfactual conditional: if X were otherwise, if X were not what it is, then it would Y. The statement is hypothetical, the prospect implausible, but the negation vividly presents the impossibility. If kangaroos had no tails, they would topple over—and we envision the cartoonish fall. Edson’s early poem “Dream Man” sets up and then unravels this characteristic syntax: “If somebody who loves you does not love you and there is very nothing to do like you will wind on Wednesday or apple as a cherry is as is an apple as a cherry.” So many Edson poems extend and dissolve this kind of syntactic logic that it might be considered an ambient aesthetic, a mode of counterfactual conditional poetic thinking: if human beings had no mores, if their oneiric longings and hungers, their cannibalisms and rapacities, punctured the conventions of ordinary domestic and social life, then these bizarre scenes, plots, and anecdotes would ensue.

Reading an Edson sentence is like taking hold of a 50 lb. line: the first clause bites hard, unspools fast, and drags the reader into whirlpools of what-could-not-possibly-be-the-case. Yet there is always an undertow, a counter-tension tugging at the implacable logic the syntax deploys. The world might be remade into syllogisms and fables, might be re-thought in rhetorical tricks, but neither word nor world can escape the burgeoning force of eros, what Whitman called the “procreant urge.” It swells up from under, breaches the taut continuity of the sentence, makes its presence known. Even as an Edson poem is pulled along by the “purposeful manufacture” of syntax (more on that phrase of Edson’s in a moment), carried along by deliberate and heady logical contortions, it is always on the verge of erupting with, or collapsing under, the body’s insistent erotic power. Logic versus libido. That tension—between sex and syntax, prose and progeniture—fuels the poems. In at least one place, Edson literalizes the tactic: “My father by some strange conjunction had mice for sons.” A strange conjunction—a grammatical coupling, a coincidence or happenstance, a conjoining of bodies—produces the odd offspring that populate an Edson poem.
Few writers have Edson's mastery of the sentence, its coils of potential energy. "Days became night as night became day in rhythmic lengthenings and shortenings," he writes "In All the Days of My Childhood," and the statement well describes his method, which produces a gallery of syntactic shapes:

In the nursery the wooden baby stares with wooden eyes into the last red of the setting sun, even as the darkness that forms in the east begins to join the shadows of the house; the darkness that rises out of the cellar, seeping out from under furniture, oozing from the cracks in the floor ... The shadow that suddenly collects in the corner of the nursery like the presence of something that was always there ... ("The Terrible Angel")

The deft extension of the subordinating conjunction "even as...," the independent clauses balanced by a semicolon, the fade-out of the ellipses—Edson prolongs the tension, staves off the arrival of "seeping" darkness, until he cannot, and the "oozing" subcurrent ruptures the syntactic surface tension. The dark energy—here not eros but its thanatotic cousins, paralysis and decay—is kept at bay for a while, but it eventually subsumes inhabitants and objects. The sentences sound matter-of-fact, indisputable, even as they collapse into paradox—the shadow force "suddenly collects" in our awareness, but it turns out it "was always there."

A telling case, almost ars poetica, occurs in "The Reality Argument: Some Brief Notes on How Things Come to Exist, the Question of Random Selection and/or Purposeful Manufacture, with a View Toward Finding the 'Theory of Everything.'" The poem opens with an interrogative elevation in pitch, and an immediate swerve from a "theory of everything" into the homespun particularity of dolls. The opening question provokes suspicion that "purposeful manufacture," controlled making—prose-poem making—will be unsettled by something else, something found in an eclectic assortment of anthropomorphic playthings with unnerving power. Totalizing theory comes right up against "Raggedy Anns and fist puppets, 'mama' dolls and all the famous bedwetters"—a world not
only manufactured but engendered. Reality, it seems, is girly, child-
ish, graphic, maternal, and corporeal. The ellipsis that ends the
opening paragraph marks a lacuna, a break in transmission, the
philosophical radio frequency disrupted by static, another energy.
Disrupted, that is, by desire.

The voice of “argument” then endeavors to regain control in the
form of a general claim: “Like most of us, dolls are mass-produced.”
It is an argument for kinship in commodity, and a witty insight, but
the comparison quickly reverses as the dolls take on the inner life
and stories we might normally ascribe to “us”—even Raggedy Ann
has “a secret agenda.” Then, jarringly, the first person poet-speaker
shows up, trafficking in tautology: “And whether this is true or not,
certainly I was going to be a writer, because that is what I have be-
come.” But we’ve already been thrown off the scent of reasoned au-
thority by “a seductive teddy bear.” “What will be has already
begun to exist” reads as an aphorism at the scene of a pre-Socratic
nursery rhyme.

What happens next: something like procreative force erupts in
an imaginative and symbolic arena—“A C-section.” The image of a
surgical birth, a manufactured birth, here a ritual operation on a doll
at the hands of a curious child, bespeaks both violence and whimsy.
Following this eruption, the syntax sputters again into ellipses, then
restarts itself, twice, in the service of launching a coherent narrative.
“One day it was raining” leads us into a vignette about a heartbro-
den doll, a story dismissed for its maudlin “profundity.” Then, with
the onrush of a direct declarative sentence, the poem turns.

Suddenly we find ourselves in a creepy seduction scene, on a
troubling edge of exploitation and consent—the host spiking the
milk, dolls joining the party, this time with their costumery assumed
as guise, as conscious sexual performance. The syntax marches on
with the resolute immediacy of a present-tense declarative sentence:
“He locks the door and begins to undress them.” The scene is less
about sexualizing the childlike than showing us that the sexual
creepiness was already there, exposing the erotic underbelly of in-
fantile jouissance.

Edson then takes things one outrageous step further, revealing
the actual underbelly: “Sue Ann reveals a huge delta of black thatch
beginning at her navel and ending at her knees.” What began as a “theory of everything” and a theory of poetry has ended in doll porn. “And this is how someone begins to understand,” the narrator contends, as the bawdy imagination takes over. Cognition, logic, exposition—all take us inexorably into unruly erotic exposure, into baser instincts and their elaboration: “Raggedy Ann’s is red yarn that starts just below her green nipples, and ends at her ankles.” Children’s dolls, of course, usually have neither pubic hair nor nipples. The analysis of being ends with an orgiastic fantasy of infantile fascination with the female body in supernatural “manufactured” color.

The scene cuts off abruptly (titillatingly). The poem clears its throat, regains composure, reminds us we were supposed to be philosophizing on the nature of existence. It concludes with its most convoluted and abstract syntax yet, as the thinking narrator registers both bafflement and insight: “What will be has already begun to exist before it does, otherwise it should never exist at all.” The syntax has led us, paragraph by paragraph, into the inescapable conclusion that creation implies procreation, even as coming into being implies coming into lust and languor, the imagination in all its fertile power. As Edson’s syntax extends and resists the dual forces of logic and libido, the counterfactual conditional starts to seem irrefutable. Wondering if not—if dolls were not innocent, if our designs on them were not chaste—gives way with palpable surety to the fabular performance of libidinal energy. If human beings did not succumb to eros, they would neither compose nor decompose.
LET US CONSIDER

Let us consider the farmer who makes his straw hat his sweetheart; or the old woman who makes a floor lamp her son; or the young woman who has set herself the task of scraping her shadow off a wall....

Let us consider the old woman who wore smoked cows' tongues for shoes and walked a meadow gathering cow chips in her apron; or a mirror grown dark with age that was given to a blind man who spent his nights looking into it, which saddened his mother, that her son should be so lost in vanity....

Let us consider the man who fried roses for his dinner, whose kitchen smelled like a burning rose garden; or the man who disguised himself as a moth and ate his overcoat, and for dessert served himself a chilled fedora....
CONSIDER THE OSTRICH

Would it help to think of contemporary poetry as a kind of un-amusement park? We could call it the Earnest Kingdom, in which every utterance is a sincere cry from the heart, where, at the end of every quaint, pre-fabricated street, we find a little epiphany. Here, on our left, is Confessionland, where all of our deepest secrets are revealed (beware the splashing of bodily fluids)! On our right, Identityland—a magical place where the poet matters more than the poem. If you take the Obvious Train to Social Justice Town, you’ll know (and agree with, or else!) the poems’ conclusions without having to read them—what a time-saver! I don’t recommend Conceptual Land—there’s nothing there—step through the gate and it dumps you out on the 405, headed back to Long Beach. And whatever you do, don’t take the elevator down to Surrealville, not unless you’re this tall, not unless, when the elevator finally arrives, you like it when the ostrich steps out.

That image—the elevator arrives, the little bell goes ding, there’s a momentary pause during which we’re filled with a slight, anxious expectation; then the doors slide open and the ostrich steps out, all clawed feet, impossible neck and astonished, ferocious eyes—that’s the closest thing to a universal metaphor for surrealism I’ve come up with so far. The little magic trick of the surrealist goes like this: here’s the natural, recognizable world—a boring place full of complacency and faculty meetings—but look, here’s something totally anachronistic to shake things up and make them interesting. Think of poor Gregor Samsa in his bedroom, antennae and hard, clumsy carapace and insectile angst. Poor Gregor, but no cockroach, no story—just a boring guy in a boring bedroom. The conflict—the tension—is with the nature of reality itself. These are obvious things, but in a discussion of Edson’s work, they may bear repeating.

So let us then consider “Let Us Consider,” which for me is an iconic piece, exemplary of Edson’s later work and just the kind of thing you’re likely to find in Surrealville, should you decide to visit. Edson’s thought of as a prose poet, and “Let Us Consider” certainly looks like a prose poem, stretching as it does from margin to margin. But rhythmically, “Let Us Consider” seems more lyrical than prosey
—at least if we think of prose as generally being rhythmically flat compared to verse. Each of the three stanzas/paragraphs (all ending in suggestive ellipses) charges out of the blocks trochaically—the rest, though, is a bouncy, cantering, sometimes stumbling salad of anapestic runs peppered with you name it—a dactyl here, a brief iambic burst there, and so on. There are only a couple of “prosey” moments in which more than two unstressed syllables appear in a row, which seems the result of awareness, if not overt intent. But who’s to say that brother Edson isn’t scanning every “line” (or whatever we’re calling the unit in a prose poem that starts at the left margin and ends at the right)? Not me!

The setting is an inspecific rural past. The tone leans toward formality, toward the instructive, even—think about this, and this, and this—leaning toward melancholy (the blind man and the mirror) leaning toward the absurd (the moth-man who eats his overcoat). And of course it’s the tone of the parable: consider the lilies, and so on. As in any good parable, logic and literal meaning evade us—one plus one equals bicycle. The point lies in the considering.

All of this is artfully done—Edson is a master, after all—but the real genius of the poem, aside from its wonderful cast and their obsessions (about whom more soon) lies in its use of first person plural. Oh, foxy Mr. Edson! He knows what he’s doing: by invoking “us” he makes the reader part of the club, then drags us all by the shirt collar off to Surrealville, unresisting, many wonders to behold. When Jesus tells us to consider this and that, he does so as one who already knows how the lesson ends, and what it all means—he does it as one apart. When Edson does it, it’s an invitation, not a command, and he invites us to consider along with him—he’s waiting for the elevator, too.

Let us also consider the surrealness of “Let Us Consider.” Back in his teaching days, Charles Wright used to say that we want poems that take us out and bring us back. The surrealist poem, at its best, takes us out and brings us back in an altered state, with live eels in our suitcase, the sensation, perhaps, of having stuck our tongues in a light socket. It’s hard to talk about surrealism in rational terms, when it’s the poet’s job to be irrational, to wreck the Obvious Train, blow up the pre-fab conclusions, and bring us to a place wholly made of
imagination. The un-logic of “Let Us Consider” works in pairings or triplings—a bit like a tasting menu, but instead of sauteed frogs’ legs paired with a nice chardonnay we get the farmer and his hat, the old woman and her lamp, the young woman and her shadow, the blind man and his mirror and his mother, and so on. There’s no person or object in the poem that’s inherently surreal, except maybe the shoes made of cows’ tongues—that’s as close as Edson gets, here, to a melted watch. The ostrich is in the juxtaposition—in the way that a normal, quotidian thing plus a normal, quotidian thing adds up to the absurd. A man is real, an overcoat is real, and a moth is real—but a man eating his overcoat in a moth suit? Not so much. Logic wants to know how the ostrich got on the elevator in the first place, but the question is moot. It’s there—now what do we do with it?

In that vein, it’s worth venturing out on the limb of meaning for a sentence or two—the question our students dread: “what the hell is this poem about?” Oh, easy for us metaphorical thinkers, perhaps, but never a done deal—our conclusions, no matter how firm, are almost never quite what the poet has in mind. Such is the nature of language; such are the limitations of shared consciousness (if it was easy, we’d be telepathic). For me, “Let Us Consider” is a poem of deep loneliness, of longing, of thwarted desire—the farmer longs for a sweetheart, the old woman for a son, the young woman perhaps for the opposite (leave me alone, shadow, and all that trails behind me!), the blind man for what’s in the mirror, the moth-man, voracious, un-cocooned, for some kind of transformation. We want what we can’t have; the thing we settle for—a lamp, a hat, a job at a regional comprehensive—is both comic and terribly sad. As always, when dealing with meaning, it’s possible—easy, even—to go too far, to put too fine a point on things. If it’s okay with you, I’m content to leave it at longing.

So, as we make our way from the twisting alleys of Surrealville back to the Earnest Kingdom’s broad and well-lighted streets, check your suitcases for eels, and be sure to gather up any parts of yourself that may have blown off during the light-socket attraction. And, if you’re still in the mood for pondering, ponder this: in the Earnest Kingdom, the talk is also of longing. But how did we get there? Did anyone eat their overcoat? Did anyone wear unusual shoes? Also, when you get to the elevator, try not to piss off the ostrich.
I have put the night-light on.
Don’t be afraid of the dark,
deep suck of the dark
like an ocean, I tell you
there is light in the ocean.

I have seen it, and one day
you will see it,
the phosphorescence of jellyfish
scattered across the tabletop
of the ocean, I have looked down
into the tropical dark and seen
needles of electric blue
tatting their neon in.

And in the Arctic, where
I have never been, there are
icebergs. Think of that light,
tons of it, hard light bobbing
in the black water,
you could dive and dive
and never get to the end of it.
DEMENTIA

Maybe the world has it. How quickly it forgot streetcars and the passenger pigeon as if they never were: The Cathar, the Carib, the fine Chinese lady tottering on tiny bejewelled feet, the virgins sacrificed to gods nobody remembers. Houses, streets, villages, lakes, mountains, a joke a traveler told in the pinwheel shade of a palm tree: Erase, erase, here is our planet lumbering on its axis, ready to pretend glaciers never happened.
Cait Weiss

CALABASAS

I grow up in the valley under porn
    stars, inside cars. Mom drives us to Sunset
    Boulevard to see whores. Every whore
has a mother. Soon Mom will tell me
    about 3ways on camera; about love
    notes from convicts; how a riding crop
feels. Feelings have valleys. Soon I will drink
    to have feelings. This man Fernando will be
    a shit saint; he will show me he hardly knows
this town at all. Where did saints go
    in the 90s? I will meet child welfare. They
    will pull me into trailers. Say neglect like a lash.
Patron saint? He’ll be silent. I’ll wear a gold cross
    in 1999. The gold cross will pink & poppy me
It’s a miracle to be born a vessel. We have so much
    rind to burn.
THE PROPHETS

My father sees God in the ocean. A hillside. The divine chucks itself on his surfboard.

Science unraveled the start of the world by noting all planets are drifting away.

At 15, I am all girl-flesh, no faith. O body. The globe of it expanding. New creases & out into space.

Science echoes the sprawl of a teen’s day / heart / god. My mother wakes in-patient from an overdose.

Slides out into space. I want. The boy who plays drums to begin to painfully love me.


Something *loss.* At 16, I have wounds on each wrist. Tiny stigma, stigmata. My mother comes to in a red room.

Feet bent back & she’s smiling. She comes to me in the beige leather front seat of her Honda.

She says: *I have a secret you can’t ever share.* All of life is the secret, & the porn, & the spheres she drives forward.

Chatroom lovers, knifepoint shoes, white-knuckle sober. As she unwinds, I fold inwards.

I fold inwards. O Earth, you are still young & keening. You do not yet know how to swallow the universe without tasting.
Mark Irwin

EVENTS MINIATURIZED, BUT ALWAYS PRESENT

—The stumbling, tripping. Last night we gazed at the Crab Nebula. When a star
dies we call its shock of Technicolor a supernova. Today a brute bumblebee
rumbles the wisteria’s lilac clouds. Today an infant and a zinnia. The one’s crying becomes the other’s vivid color. Today cumuli, lightning, then pollen floating on the pond like moments still spilling from the Big Bang. —Gush of water, laughter, a hiccup. The zinnia seeds resemble arrowheads. The tense of all verbs is really the same. Why didn’t I keep the letter sent before you died unopened?
LYME VECTOR (I)

A spade dug into my body.
I who wanted community
became a community, my tissues
the cold tongue of a nightjar.

I rubbed myself with cumin,
not because it would cure
but because I had no honey.
From the highway
I could hear every lorry,
every Magdalene, every hearse.

In the enclosure
I shepherded the first trillium
of the season with my voice.
I cut a lock of my hair
for the weaver’s black bouquet.

Here is where they stripped
the flesh from the bone.
Here is where they arrested
the immigrants, for trespassing.

I rubbed myself with cumin
not because it would cure,
but because I had no honey.

And the little girl
in her pink communion dress
hovers before the fountain,
trying on her reflection
in the war’s external veil—

the nymph to the body
it thinks will nourish it, warm
and rapt, multi-valved.
A slit in the nubile firmament.
Blonder, in the pharmacy
I buy magic creams and medicine.

What
To kill off.

But I cannot

Stop forgetting

The terrible black diamond
Of poverty.

A humming like metal in weather.
GUIDEBOOKS FOR THE DEAD (II)

Or the beginnings of deadly illness.

I exist only inside its murky frame.

Dirt, and dregs, filth and silt.

Mother’s red & silver suitcase
Filled with old lottery tickets and photographs.

Everything behind us
Is before us

Stretched out: an endless
Grey horizon.

What we don’t remember
Lives in us, forever.
The ancient Roman walls. Opus mixtum. Still some still. It still stands, like some dental prosthesis displaying an impression that has just been consumed by time. A washed off stone, a porous brick—here, no century has broken all its teeth, ground down its tongue. It is upright, grey on red, where hunger sticks in the throat and hours smell of migratory birds.

I still skip over names, as if they were stairs, clouds dripping through my hair, still still, tattooed beneath the liver, branded on the kidneys, stitched beneath the Adam’s apple, which renounces Paradise and devours, ah, devours.

A silent witness of how everything diminishes in abundance, of how in my body nostrils leak air and shoulders sink, of how, more and more, the body has collapsed as if whipped onward, onward, through ever smaller doors, a calculating rebel, a mangy revolutionary, a subversive for three bugs, a charlatan of a narrow slice of the world.

It still surpasses a gnat, is still faster than the leaves that fall on an August morning. Still, I say, still, with bones between screws and a gnawed-on wallet, with glassware in the mouth and a bladder filled with jewels. Still, I say, for thirty-six years it has left through the pores in the skin. Not sweat, but the contraction that comes without shots and trumpets, without biopsies and solemn ceremonies, quietly like the faded stamp on still another misplaced document.

Like bark, I fall off myself. I let a palisade grow around me to protect me from the barbarians. When I cough, a branched-out territory trembles like a tree. Still, the gold scarab gnaws. Its jaws have crushed stubbornness and misfortune. Its jaws, high in the trunk, have split my vocal chords. Its jaws in my jaws. Quickly, quickly, doctor sir, take an impression of the gap, extract the gold tooth from the babbling mouth of the dead before it cries out still. Hurry, dear doctor, as long as there’s still a little palate.

translated by Brian Henry and Urška Charney
Snakes for example when the heat
off the patio slate makes them lazy,
or some sluggish, deliberate fungus
or butter-fed heart operating just slightly
off-beat.

It’s a cheat
when it jumps out so fast you can’t
grimace, can’t think, only shriek:
Death! Death!

there in the right
lane, there on the ladder,
after the ice-crack, half down the stairs,
so unfair
to ambush with a club — how much
nicer, politer, are the well-mannered
amyloid spatters, those quietly shy
gray triglycerides, how very less
worried, less harried, your fate
and the stretch of its long, deep,
calculable
evenings of reason preceding
with no hurry to spell out or dwell on
their red-flagged conclusion.
MIDNIGHT

The problem with midnight is 
that it never rains then, 
even in spring when the old 
roots dig in 
or in summer when the tangled up 
woods get angry 
and the windows are all left stupidly open. 
At dinner, it softens the pane 
in a silk gray of mirrors 
or sometimes right before dawn 
low-lying clouds reconvene in a coven; 
lightning quivers and thunder 
shakes and echoes the timber. 
But night after night 
as the moon weeps the meridian 
and the soundless pendulum swings 
mid-point, 
at the light’s most mortal hour, 
it’s a drought, 
sere, sere, as a cotton-seed sprout. 
And you know, 
and you know, 
as you know your own soul, 
that that is not right.
MUSKOXEN

Flummox of insects
none of their nevermind,
Arctic shadowcaster cold
yeah and-ers, demure
as shag bookends undangered
and out of rut, muskoxen
portend time geologic,
stubby palanquin boulder marrow,
nose by nose qiviut borealis.
Nearby wolfy brouhaha
niptuck and slink, so
solidaritous pointy pinwheel, so
TTFN, brouhaha.
Muskoxen slow
it down, muskoxen take
one snowflake, epochtic,
one snowflake, epic,
one slowflake by one.
LONG DAY

The triumph of the day: that the old dog
made it 12 hours without peeing in the house,
success in her success at staying asleep,
certainly no success in the 12 hours ‘til I made it home,
because work, because work, because work,
work which kept me late and made me cry,
or nearly, because I can’t tell what should or shouldn’t
make me mad, what is or isn’t mine
to question, am I right, am I right to have said it,
she stayed asleep and didn’t wake to notice
that she had to pee, once you’ve thought about it you can’t
stop thinking about it, but if you haven’t
you can just dream, dream of running,
of finding the squirrel, of barking away
some old raccoon, of bringing home a stick,
a great big chewy stick, of getting to keep it.
A SENTENCE

A sentence never knows what will happen with it. It’s far from one word to another – the flesh of love for poets, for managers a tip. A mishap of grammar is an adventure like fragile classics. Suddenly something’s amiss: a word too much, too little. Initially, one thinks of one’s end as of the eternity of syntax — it gets lost along the way. A sentence is mortal. Listen to it again with an open mouth.
WE'RE LIVING FASTER

Too slow an exchange of oxygen.
We're living faster, with electronic progress.
Parasitically: the media
and what they switch on:
war or coitus as running images,
available anytime. Miscarriages
before the camera. Already half legend:
the daily paper, whenever we lay
it down and wide-spread dementia
twitterers, having become planetary.
Where aren't people shooting at one another?
Finally there's a loss of appetite
for too much eschatology.
It's possible to go on living nicely
as a vegetarian on figs and coffee: impatience
in the shadows for false diagnoses,
and a new taste
for utopia.

translated by Stuart Friebert
Tam Blaxter

STILLNESS IN THE PASSENGER SEAT AFTER THE IMPACT

We say *this is a river*

or *this is a coalmine* or *let us take*

*your hands and make you a steel bird* & yet

that’s not quite it, is it? Yet

a point comes when *sour words are a river*

or when *hands over hands thrust up taking*

*you out of yourself* taking

*up all the space and the seams blacken* yet

*as you are those things* —*that which the river*

*takes deep* — *& takes the river deeper yet*—
HAVING LEFT BY THE BACK DOOR

What is it to remember
a soured glance/the scraped arc of a key/how
the room tensed in on itself, became small

just then? (The clouds are all small
detail, like script from far off.) Remembering
is a bunch of keys: how to sculpt bone; how
to lose all sense of time; how
to become a breathless knot; how one small
thread unpicks the self. (O clouds, remind me
to remember how small this desire is.)
BACK

Into the bowed ship. Into the sideways click of the jaw. Into the granite of your downturned lip. Into brief repeating dryness on the tongue, into light back from windows. Into brief repeating dryness in the throat. Into the steam ineffectively sealed, into the scuttled hull into these listing neurons taking on water, into the bobbles on this cheap fabric into the scrape of your mouse across the room. Into the sodden ground accepting foundation concrete into morning looming & the night into the bite of hot water into light back from offwhite radiator into the hole in a shoulder split into the infinite size of the room into the same disfluencies taking it up into a place above and below into the body into which all is incorporated piece by piece into place
THINGS NOW REMIND US OF THINGS THEN

It starts small, like ice on the river must.
I read to you. You’re sitting down for it.
The sky too settles into its evening.
Discernment is kin to intimacy.
Littlest details matter: a small burn
to touch on my hand, a callus on yours.
Close up, I remind myself to look out,
to listen, near and far. A train; a steeple.
A metaphor responds to a need.
You were humming when I arrived.
We caught one another’s eye.
You let me know what you think, day’s end.
UNDERSTANDING AND DOING

—are two separate things, like light and warmth. March now. New snow. And, back at home, familiar intimacies make themselves felt. The lyric, the wisdom goes, is loss and longing; some of us have called the latter hope. A poem brought me to tears. Then, your note. It’s possible I had asked for too much. For a few days I had a view. Other lives. An island at some distance. I looked and looked. I cared and didn’t. I held the edge of the curtain—blue maybe—in my hand.
BETTER ALREADY (3)

How shall I tell you?
It’s an open secret, happiness.
All night, snow made a scene.
From the rooftop, the heron looked to see.
In the hard time, I make a conscious effort.
As luck would have it, I also know your need.
There is no other life; that much is clear.
I’m my little girl self. No one is fear.
The wind whistles so as not to be forgotten.
Come morning, come windblown.
Each evening when I'm done
(Brenda sorts blister-packs
of pastel pills into pop-up
trays, it's like a jewel box—
or no, more like the one dad kept
his flies for steelhead fishing
in), when I say, 'Goodnight, Bet,'
she tells me, 'Thanks for nothing.'

We're on The Third Floor now:
pat-a-cake not bridge games
kill time. Church visitors drop
off shade plants whose names
like me she almost remembers.
Wish I hadn't heard her shout
_Shut your face!_ at the nurse. Oh, Brenda, lock the box
before the bad words all fly out
and leave us only Grief.
First it didn’t sound like anything. Then it sounded like someone old getting slowly out of bed but the bed was very far away. Then it sounded like someone upstairs arranging linen in a closet in a 19th century house. The linen had been flapping in the wind and sun all day. It was tired but refreshed linen from a time of wholesome sleep patterns. Then it sounded like someone across the street dumping charcoal briquettes into an outdoor grill, and a twin-prop cargo plane was passing overhead, and one after one the wooden matches wouldn’t light. Then it sounded like someone had discovered an old duffel bag in the attic, and on the duffel bag was a name in stenciled black letters, a name of someone’s best friend who no one knows anymore. Then it sounded like someone was pulling a heavy wooden rowboat from a lake one evening in the Adirondacks. It was getting dragged up the shore until it was fully out of the water and the one dragging it fell back to finish a cigarette because it was still summer. Then it sounded like someone having an argument, a parent and a teenager next door, but then it sounded like they were remembering something funny and they were setting dishes on the table. Then it sounded like someone who had found where the mice were getting in, in the basement, but then the light bulb blew out and it sounded like someone trying to get out of the dark. Then it sounded like someone finding the stairs and taking each step carefully, someone who as a kid had kept a dog in the basement one night, when it wasn’t okay to keep a dog in the house. Then it sounded like someone lifting something very heavy, and then more people joining in to lift, lifting something heavy and broken like a garage door, and then it sounded like they’d finished and daylight was coming in where the door had been.
D. Nurkse

THE SURETY

She would bring me back from death:
she would ring all the bells,
knock on every door, and how many
would answer and try to detain her
with trivial questions, sports, weather,
—the dead are starved for conversation,
overly polite, ashamed of their gray teeth—but she would find the room in which I lie,
put her thin shoulder against the door,
at once it would open, she would be here,
here on this page, in this blank space,

soon it will be summer, the bees zooming
in straight lines, the children playing
in a maze they conjure on the sidewalk,
unable to relinquish it, blue seven,
red nine, paradise, the old men
sprawled on the stoop in dented hats
complaining of Poland: find me, heal me,
ransom me, pay my bond, later we’ll talk.
DUET FOR ECCLESIASTES AND DUTCH WEATHER

1.
The wind blows to the south and goes around to the north, round and round goes the wind, saith the Preacher.

But everybody’s talking this winter about the weather—prophets, wise guys, whiners, winners. Back home, they’ve named new species of storm and concocted snowy synonyms for Apocalypse, while the warmest winter in an eon is happening here in a language I can’t catch and that Google garbles:

This morning, one time shining in the east even the sun. In the west, the clouds, and by noon, the light may rain.

2.
Home is where the windswept heart was.

Here, it hopes to live within its means: no debts or debtors, no trespassing either way, and the squares on the tacked-up calendar pristine as Dutch windows. But what if the eye is still not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing, and what has been is what will be?

Each morning, when I hoist the heavy drapes, the high clear pane reframes the question in cobalt and a rush of North Sea cloud.

3.
Everything else in this city knows what to do: the trams clanging in perfect-pitch, the canals and their civilized water, the bijou bridges, the flock and veer of bikes, precise as swallows.
Even the hothouse blooms in buckets, hue by hue on the street corner. Even the lager in the café glass and the herring on thick ice at the fish stand.

Even the rumble of winter thunder. Even the hail throwing its hissy fit.

4. 
Last night draw the rains from Belgium. In the course of the night they left the country, though there is a new mood emerged along the west coast, from which

a shrike flies in with the wind to my skinny yard, skewers a mole in the fence-top flower box, and plucks its muscles out among the crocus.

My neighbor can see this, too, from her identical window, if she’s watching. Who is my neighbor? That woman who urged us as she kept the taxi waiting to employ all four of our front door locks.

5. 
The poor will always be among us, even in the rich museum. There, light singles out and saves a man with the battered gleam of a pewter cup, and soothes a ragged child with a tad of ochre and the crusty likeness of bread.

If others still hunger and thirst in this humane city, it’s impossible to see them. Though I have seen the naked—shades darker than the Dutch, and in glass stalls in the backside shadow of the oldest church.
6.

This, I heard a tourist tell her husband, stumped before the triptych, is The Annunciation. And this The Nativity. And this The Rest on the Flight to Europe.

And this is what I’ve come for: the gilt gone, and Flemish windows flung open to let in the light.

Behind each holy foreground, another tiny tour-de-force of reeds, swans, gleaners, horsemen, spires. Then an exhalation of white. Then indigo striding more and more boldly away from every earthly thing that painter knew.

7.

Next week have depressions eat mainly Scandinavia, while a high-pressure nuclear southwest of Ireland tries to keep the weather in our area—

but if I’m reading right between the isobar lines, it’s just to everything there is a season, etcetera: lows to the north, highs to the west, and in the middle of the night sometimes a moon so merciful it ransoms with silver every ripple, lock, and edge.

And sometimes a mood so black there is nothing in heaven for a streetlight to blot out.

8.

Big books on a small shelf, light from a wide window, and no phone, no promises to keep. Then a flier’s pushed through the mail slot: “Africa meets Amsterdam! Hijab meets hiphop! Since you’re our neighbors, we thought we’d invite you!”
Who else are my neighbors? Some I recognize from paintings: the cheeky maid at the check-out; the tavern drunk turned frizzled pothead; the lovesick girl on the tram frowning down at secrets sent in air and hidden in her cagey hand.

9.

*Spring weather remains steadfast. A weak depression in the immediate vicinity of the Netherlands grabs his stuff, and the temperature takes a walk.*

As do I, dodging locals sunning on every stretch of canalside brick that could conceivably be café. But this ain’t Paris: it’s big beer, all round.

No one frets the lavish heat might mean Antarctica is shrugging off its cold shoulder. They’ve flirted here with luxury and sea level for centuries—and got the dams, dikes, and Calvinism to prove it.

10.

You can’t count on good weather even at the Judgment. All that light in the east stirs up thick thunderheads, and not just beneath the Lord’s left hand above the horny hags of Hell: even the saved hurry out of graves to beat the downpour.

     But my favorite angel’s in no rush.

He escorts his handsome catch into a heavenly line, his hand firm on the other’s naked ass. Innocent? Hard to tell from his perfect face. Though he does gaze back, above the routed and raptured and over a feathery shoulder, to a past in which I seem to stand.
11.
Possible that there is a temporary gray morning.
The weather is tentative, characterized
by lots of cloud and rain (rain).

And I know how that feels,
the drab reviser in the brain fussing,
vanity, vanity, vanity of vanities....

Then I think of Clara Peeters.
Among her lush epitomes of lemon and slick fish,
she carved her name with paint onto a knifeblade.
And on a quiet inch of the Golden Age's
finest pewter lid, she caught her cloud-lit face.

12.
There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink
and find enjoyment in their toil.
Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

—Today we have to wait for the sun. Tomorrow the sun shines a lot,
but still mostly cloudy watery veil hurt by some fields
in the morning. The rest of the week taps the back of a very
different tune, making it ideal weather to tackle on a terrace—
or to douse the drapes, lug my duffle to the Luchthaven,
and head back home against the jet stream,
30,000 feet above the blue oblivion

and every possible April.
Claudia Serea

THE APARTMENT BUILDING IN THE SKY

The sky was blue,
and I was hanging white shirts
on the clothesline at the window
of the small studio
on the 9th floor.

It was windy.

The gray apartment building was moving in the wind,
anchored with steel cables
to the white cloud
passing over Berceni.

And pigeons were flying about.

Maybe the pigeons were not pigeons at all,
but someone else's shirts
stolen by the wind.

I've never lived that high up again.

I've never had to hang shirts again
flapping furiously in the wind,
wanting to escape my hands
and join the pigeons.

We were young,
living in the luminous sky.

You were reading the paper,
eating a slice of bread with jam.

I was at the window.

We were young.
CAPITAL

Where? Where?
Gull cries on the bridge.

The Potomac out there,
hidden in fog as planes

on instrument
head into National.

Ramp signs barely visible.
Pity the stranger

counting exits to DC.
Tractor trailers

and town cars snake
towards the landmark
dome. Faith-testing,
this human tangle

on wheels, coming
closer to the city

unknowable
as the blank rune.

We let our children go
into this fog.
A CATASTROPHE OF VIOLINS

I look through a window
at an old year.

Surely someone
should retrieve these instruments

for the poor. But no,
they hang here, articulate

as a mountain of shoes,
of hair, witnesses

in the box, swearing
to tell the world

nothing but the truth.
The room is as long

and wide as I imagined it.
I am a cantor

hungry for music
where there is none.
ICHIRŌ

sakura sakura
loveliest of all flowering trees
cherry boughs
cherry boughs

click click clock of wooden clogs
the click click clock of geta
I'm here beneath this parasol

o brother, where art thou?
are you in the movie hall?

come out, come out, wherever you are

o brother, where art thou?
are you in the bathhouse stall?

come out, come out, wherever you are

I'm here beneath this parasol
strolling past Golden Orchid Hall
petals fall
petals fall
the click click clock of geta
the click click clock of wooden clogs
are you at the wooden wall?

he's gone
he's gone

poor poor Ichirō gone AWOL
what tea is not bitter and strong?
what petals do not fall?
you roam the world to find them all

ikura ikura
how much how small

translated by Jennifer Feeley
I was trying to outrun a funeral I told the officer. The way death cuts you off and trails with lights on every act but he didn’t want to hear it and rightly chided my age — you’re old as my grandfather and drive like a kid. Thing is I really never was hurrying. That crepe all black and hat-flowered attended me, that radio signal shooting through sun and combinations, blue asphalt. I heard the lamentations, deep strife ferrying, souls in the water, Hammond organ oiled and ready to go with strains of how He walks with you, not the one in the boat, the one in the car black as night’s eye.
ROAD TRIP

One of us goes one way, the other the other. Well, says the wind, grass thinks so. Well, says the grass, a few grains whistle. I never thought I’d celebrate so fully out here where cows look past everything. I thought I saw what they see but that was someone looking back when I was feeling grass poke me in the back outside the Tulsa County Fairgrounds just after I’d gone through the windshield. She said, “Don’t go to sleep, honey,” and her blonde hair hung over me like a tent or a field. The grass moves singly with each passing. A few grains airborne whistle past. Whatever moon knows my name bends down to kiss me. I’m riding in its pulsing light just to get here.
Every floor slants like a trawler’s deck in a storm. Even sober I totter and veer down the hall.

The drapes are paisleyed with mildew. Black mold creeps in the crawl-space—bats cringe in the walls.

No part of this dump was ever level or plumb, but it’s mine—the whole stinking mess!

That’s my gilded chair in the fireplace, my crumbling chimney—my pipes and wires that dangle like St. Elmo’s guts.

You’d have to be crazy to stay here, my love, but still, here we are—

the old barn lit up in the night like a Bourbon Street whorehouse, like an asylum

after the inmates rise up and run naked, shrieking, free in the wild riot of primrose and aster

that once was immaculate lawn.
IF I COME BACK

I want to come back as a tree
that burns bright
in autumn,

maple out in the woods—
crimson throb
against the black

backdrop of pines—
sunrise
inside the sunrise

on a cold October morning
while someone like you
is out walking, maybe

missing a loved one,
maybe letting the dog
off her leash for awhile.
Afaa Michael Weaver

SPIRIT BOXING

It is the tightness in the gut when the load is heavy enough to knock me over backwards, turn me back on my heel until my ankle cracks

and I holler out Jesus, this Jesus of Joe Gans setting up for the next punch while taking in one that just made his soul wobble, the grunt

I make when the shift is young, my body a heavy meat on bones, conveyors not wired for compassion, trucks on deadlines, uncaring

pressure of a nation waiting to be washed, made clean, me looking into the eye of something like death, and I look up, throwing fifty pound boxes,

Jesus now John Henry pounding visions of what work is, the wish for black life to crumble, snap under all it is given, these three souls of spirit,

hands like hammers, a hammer like the word made holy, word echoing a scripture from inside the wise mind that knows men cannot be makers,

that in making we want to break each other, ache moving us to refuse to surrender to time in factories, catacombs feeding on the spirit.
FREIGHT TRAIN RETURNS FROM THE HOSPITAL

"...the hand of God has struck me."
—Job 19:21

Some who said they were his friends cried,
hung their heads over their sandwiches at lunch,
put money together to buy him an RCA color television because they figured it would be easy on his mind, him trying to pull it back together.

He came back, wasted away to thirty pounds less than his one hundred ninety-five lightness, shuffling along, chug a chug in the wee hours, a vampire on the graveyard shift, drinking the blood the moon sent down in white streams.

He took his hands, pulled his crooked fingers made crooked by crazy medicine so he could scrape old soap from machines made in Italy to churn the soap into thin lines to be cut, stamped with Camay, the sign of a nymph.

It was the year Bruce Lee died, the year when Asia gave him something stronger than crazy medicine, a Kungfu wisdom book to teach him what breaks folk and how they mend in the broken spaces of where we are

while the enemies of the broken ones laugh, add them to bags where they keep the names of the meek, people to be eaten and forgotten.
This hyperlink links to nowhere, this other to a clip of a chimp licking ants off a stick,

and my ship has hit the cliff and splintered—the innards of the sheep I slit offered up
to the wrong god. My download folder is full, and my joyous loyal friend, best comrade

in battle, who came to me first in worm-eaten elkskin and in the end dressed in suits

and pressed shirts of peach and lilac, is dead—speared through the neck. So I drop
to the dust of the municipal impound lot, punish it with my fists, claw holes in it,
yank out handfuls of my long hair and shove them in. The earth

will have me, have all of us. So have it. Where is the ringtone that hints of that?

Or the app for spring? Blooms bursting white and purple on the pastoral campus,
vast lawns are crossed by the radiant young, their hearts laid waste already or riled by desire,

ears plugged with buds that won’t blossom, heads bowed, a tribe of Helen Kellers
spelling words into their palms. In the brain, in a deep ravine, under the wine aisle

and bins of printer ink and bargain batteries, beyond the impassable murk, within

a locked tabernacle, circled by gauzy, waltzing angels, lies a hunk of chipped flint, an ancient blade. It waits, with heft still, and an edge.
Blest be the swallows, wallowing
   in air, and the official in the Musée d’Orsay
who gave me the green sticker to wear: *Droit
de Parole*. And homage to *Montjoies*—small mounds
of earth are all that’s left to mark the stops made
by the royal funeral cortèges traveling
   from Paris to Saint-Denis bearing memory’s chic
tabernacle of relic, *knick-knack paddywhack,*
   *give the dog a bone*, hinged like the thirteenth-century
*Vierge Ouvrante* statue of the nursing Virgin
that opens to reveal God holding Christ
   on the cross. Yesterday, I wondered whether
there was any of my mother’s fruitcake
   left in the freezer—then remembered that there is
no freezer, no house left to hold
the freezer—even though I never really
   liked fruitcake. In Courbet’s painting, deer browse
in velvet through the milieu of breeze, leisure
   exiles, sexier than we surmise behind their eerie
resumé of *lieu-dits*, place names
where lots was lost. *Ma joie? I’m off
   to Arezzo* to jot a note, the way Pierrot
called out to the moon, “*Prête moi ta plume
   pour écrire un mot.*” But the moon has not one
iota of *I ought to*, even with its waxing tab
of IOUs. Held by the sky as if
   newborn each night, it smiles a reply, “Go ahead:
in the name of Piero, of the family Francesca,
   and in accordance with the laws
of perspective, arrest me.”
NEBBIOLO

Gray patina covers the mature grapes like fog, the way breath from a mouth would bloom

on a mirror if the person were alive, if the s of exist still clouded exit or, as the British say,

Way Out. For the Greeks, utopia could mean both a good place and no place, just as mist

backs away so quietly you don’t even notice until it’s no longer there. How is it,

Augustine asked, that I remember forgetfulness? Wine, like history, is the work of time: what it was

in its original state, but also what time has made of it. And what’s missed is what the French call

personne—either no one or everyone. The three Fates never missed anyone: one spun the thread of life, one measured how long it should be, and one decided when to cut the thread with her shears, just as the vintner decides in late October when it’s time to snip the cord that dangles each cluster,
to release the scent of roses
and tar. I don't want hints
of roses, of lilies of
the valley, Coco Chanel told
her perfumer, said that instead
Chanel No. 5 should smell like a bouquet
of abstract flowers. At the end
of her life, she no longer
made sketches but cut fabric
right on the model, sometimes piercing
the skin of the woman, who had to stand
motionless for hours, smiling. At Chanel's
memorial mass in Paris, the models
in the front rows dressed in Chanel
and faux Chanel, placed
on the casket a spray of white
flowers arranged in the shape
of a tailor's shears.
To the silence of one who lets us keep dreaming.

In the bed prepared for me lay a wounded animal covered in blood, small as a bun, a lead pipe, a burst of wind, a glazed seashell, a spent shotgun shell, two fingers of a glove, an oil stain; no prison door, but yes, the taste of bitter resentment, a glazier's diamond, one hair, one day, a broken chair, a silkworm, the stolen object, an overcoat's chain, a tame green fly, a coral branch, a cobbler's nail, a wheel from a bus.

To offer a glass of water to a horseman hurtling by on a racetrack overrun by the crowd implies a complete lack of skill on both sides; Artine brought this epic drought to the minds to which she appeared.

Impatient, he was very well aware of the order of dreams which would haunt his brain from here on, mainly in love's domain whose all-consuming pursuits usually appeared at non-sexual times—assimilation unfolding in pitch-black dark, in greenhouses tightly closed.

Artine easily passes through the name of a town. Silence detaches sleep.

The items gathered and arranged under the name of nature-précise are part of the scene where erotic acts with fatal consequences—a daily epic—unfold each night. The hot imaginary worlds that circulate nonstop in the countryside during the harvest season give rise to unbearable loneliness, violent eyes in the one who wields destructive force. Still, for extraordinary times of upheaval it's best to completely rely on them.

The lethargic state preceding Artine provided the means for projecting startling impressions onto the screen of floating ruins: burning eiderdown cast into the bottomless depths of perpetually moving shadows.
Despite beasts and cyclones, Artine retained an endless freshness. On strolls, this was total transparency.

From the most active depression, Artine’s aggregate beauty may spring, but curious minds remain furious; neutral minds become extremely curious.

Artine’s apparitions went past the border of those countries of sleep where the for and the for are imbued with an equal and murderous violence. They evolved in the pleats of a burning silk planted with trees with leaves of ash.

Washed and refurbished, the horse-drawn carriage nearly always prevailed over the condo with saltpeter-papered walls and the never-ending evenings greeting Artine’s many mortal enemies. The dead-wood face was especially hard to take. The breathless race of two lovers at random along the highways became, all at once, enough entertainment to let it play out again in the open air.

Sometimes a clumsy movement caused a head other than mine to sink on Artine’s breast. The enormous sulfur block slowly burned away without smoke, presence in self and vibrating stillness.

The open book in Artine’s lap could only be read on overcast days. At irregular intervals, heroes would come to learn the afflictions about to befall them once more, the many and dreadful paths in which their faultless fate would enlist anew. Only concerned with Destiny, they mostly looked pleasant. They moved about slowly, were men of few words. They expressed their desires through broad, unpredictable movements of heads. What’s more, they seemed quite unaware of each other.

The poet has slain his model.

translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson

Translator’s note: Nature-précise plays on “nature morte” (still-life).
I. Prypiat Funfair

The locked Ferris wheel arcs against the horizon,

a honey fungus flexing its golden gills.

Suspended from petrified cogs,

the cars seed the ash trees below

with powdered rust. Beeswax capsules

loft through dead air like irradiated spores.

II. Worm Wood Forest

A plume of light leached sphagnum moss from the cold bark of the nuclear forest.

The oak groves steamed; the black alders flushed ginger. Hornbeams grew gigantic, roots and trunks coiling like double yolks.
Each thorny pine, each saxifrage
and small-flowered bitter,
was bulldozed and buried
in a vast fen grave.

The half-life soil
silvered
under its cargo
of nettled atoms;
a corncrake quarried
the fissured stream
for pike, its beak
a carpenter’s rasp.

III. The Pier

Patched barges sluice sideways
into the phosphorescent river,

their bellies black bison,
scabbed with radiation.

The barge captains evacuated
long ago, pressure-dazed, slipping

through the alienation zone
like wild boar. What remains, now:

cucumber shoots drilling
the greenhouse glass, storks

nesting in the melted reactor,
the schoolhouse a wreck of scalded textbooks,
everywhere the quivering taste
of pins, as if a hedgehog quilled with aluminum

had invaded the dusty samovars
of each sealed concrete tenement.

The barges wait some final passage
like latten ferries embedded in the River Styx.
No, there is a German word for beautiful sadness, my coach said in Ottawa, a little drunk at the hotel bar. Coming up with a different count each time for the bridges across the two rivers of his youth, near his little village two hours north of Berlin. It sounds like that word for flawed marble—in the Italian—that somehow makes the sculpture dearer. There was also a word for music dying into the hills—verschallen, verschollen, something like that.

A child at a nearby table was drawing the gallows for a game of Hangman. My coach’s knees ruined, as my father’s are, ACL & MCL surgery, the works, then the replacement. And where do they go after? Perhaps there is a grand migration of parts each spring. A lost island of limbs, kidneys & ligaments. A palazzo of cellos strung with tendons. Now the body begins upon the page, head, torso. I heard the Bach Suites once in Hamilton, down a street, I say, somewhere in the avenues. I ran around the block while Casals found the score in a Paris bookshop last century, & practiced for thirteen years before he performed it. While Rostropovich shook over his cello, playing the Suites by heart beside the Berlin Wall as it was torn down. The music followed itself through my memory, so I was again counting her ribs in the dark. Knowing there was a true answer & counting again, losing count. Then it stops, & it’s Hamilton again—red brick townhouses, slag heaps & steel mills, stale sour mash smell around Lakeport. Boxcars heaped with coal, graffiti-tagged, neon glyphs & moth wings. On the child’s page, a body hung by the neck. A jumble of letters. A number of blank spaces. My coach mumbling something about a team discount from a woman on Backpage.com, now too drunk to even remember the name of his city. While she returns
to the nameless dark. While the Skyway bridge arcs into the Hamilton sky across the Burlington Bay, alive in its light like the River of Heaven, while the night receives the music our silence makes, a sadness that finds its beauty in the body that is gone.
—The book of moonlight is not written yet / nor half begun...

Flame-limned shreds of leaf & wood drift on the air
from a wildfire two canyons over
as if the library of Alexandria were burning again,
a shroud of smoke
thrown across the stars. In a moonless backyard
I stoop to pick up clothes fallen from the line,
hands & knees, O Lord,
hand & knees—like the man who paced out the underworld,
if Dante’s right, though his name escapes me,
the circles there nowhere near
as perfect as grief’s, or joy’s—
in this city of cinders,
looking for little patches of dark a little darker than the grass—
only a glint of a letter here, there, as a name, a logo,
somehow picks up light in the lightless yard.

The wind hurries away, talking in its sleep,
stray syllables that must meet somewhere—

& somewhere, in a depth I have known
& cannot know,
sometime this week my unborn child
swallows for the first time, though I cannot remember
if there’s even a tongue yet.

I know that somewhere the moon breaches for air.

I know that my bones are the spines of nameless books,

& the pages of our flesh have begun to be recited
in the dark waters,

letters of sugars & proteins through the month-old blood,  

*tongue, thirst, sleep...*
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CHARLES SIMIC is a poet, essayist, and translator extraordinaire. A new book of poems, The Lunatic, and a book of his selected prose, The Life of
Images, were published by Ecco in April.

ALEŠ ŠTEGER has published six books of poetry, two novels, and two books of essays in Slovenian. The Book of Things, a volume of poetry translated by Brian Henry, appeared from BOA Editions in 2010 as a Lannan Foundation selection and won the 2011 Best Translated Book Award. Berlin, a book of lyric essays, appeared from Counterpath in 2015. BRIAN HENRY is the author of ten books of poetry, most recently Static & Snow (Black Ocean, 2015). He also translated Tomaž Šalamun's Woods and Chalices and Aleš Debeljak’s Smugglers. URŠKA CHARNEY’s translated books include The Collected Poems of Vlado Kreslin, The Golden Shower by Luka Novak, and a variety of works by Aleš Šteger.

LEE UPTON’S sixth collection of poetry, BOTTLE THE BOTTLES THE BOTTLES THE BOTTLES, recipient of the Open Book Award, appeared in May 2015 from the Cleveland State University Poetry Center. Her collection of short stories, The Tao of Humiliation, was selected as one of the best books of 2014 by Kirkus Reviews, received the BOA Short Fiction Award, and was a finalist for the Paterson Prize.

MARK WAGENAAR is the author of Voodoo Inverso and The Body Distances (University of Massachusetts Press, spring 2016), winner of the 2015 Juniper Prize for Poetry. He currently serves as the Jay C. and Ruth Halls Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing.


AFAA MICHAEL WEAVER’s twelfth collection of poetry, The Government of Nature, won the 2014 Kingsley Tufts Award. A native of Baltimore, he teaches at Simmons College and in the Drew University MFA program.

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XI XI (b. 1938) is among the first generation of writers to have grown up in Hong Kong and is considered one of the territory’s most important and prolific authors. She began writing poetry in the late 1950s and has published two poetry volumes, Stone Chimes (1982) and The Collected Poems of Xi Xi (2005), along with numerous novels and short fiction and essay collections. JENNIFER FEELEY’s translations of poetry and prose from Chinese to English have been published in various journals and collections. Not Written Words, her translations of poems by Xi Xi, is forthcoming from Zephyr Press.
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