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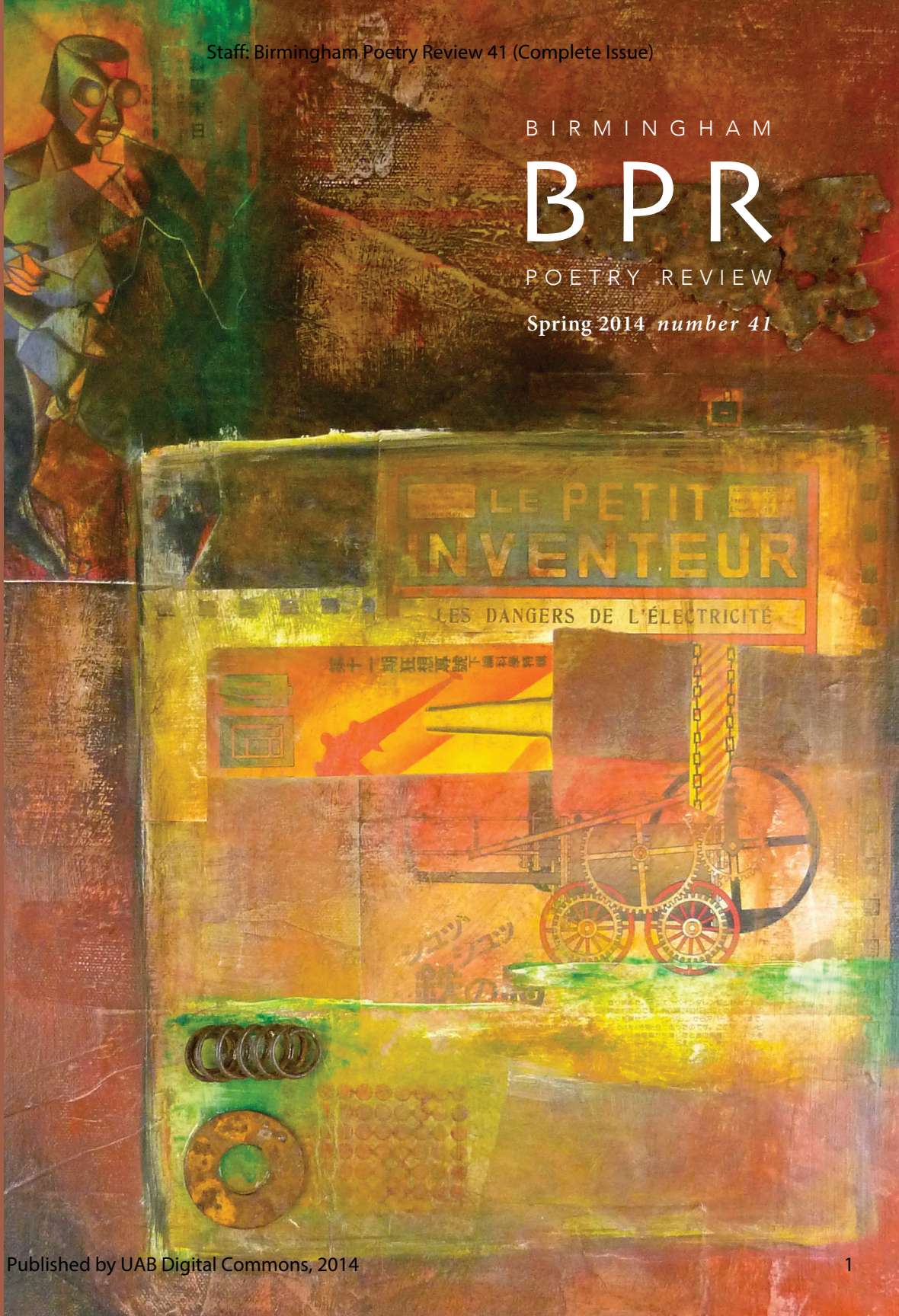

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Featured Poet

Andrew Hudgins

Andrew Hudgins

Andrew Hudgins has published nine books of poetry: *American Rendering: New and Selected Poems* (2010), *Shut Up, You're Fine!* (2009), *Ecstatic in the Poison* (2003), *Babylon in a Jar* (1998), *The Glass Hammer* (1995), *The Never-Ending* (1991), *After the Lost War* (1988), and *Saints and Strangers* (1985). His ninth book of poems, *A Clown at Midnight,* was published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in June 2013; at the same time *The Joker: A Memoir* was published by Simon and Schuster. *Shut Up, You're Fine!: Poems for Very, Very Bad Children*, was published by The Overlook Press in 2009, with illustrations by Barry Moser. Hudgins is also the author of two collection of literary essays published by the University of Michigan Press' Poets on Poetry Series: *The Glass Anvil (1997) and Diary of a Poem* (2011). His *James Agee: Selected Poems* was published by the Library of America in 2008. *Saints and Strangers* was one of three finalists for the 1985 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry; *After the Lost War* received the Poets' Prize in 1989, and *The Never-Ending* was one of five finalists for the National Book Award in 1991.

Hudgins graduated from Sidney Lanier High School and Huntingdon College in Montgomery before earning an MA in

English from the University of Alabama. In 1983, he completed his MFA at the University of Iowa.

Hudgins was a Guggenheim Fellow is 2004, as well as a Wallace Stegner fellow at Stanford University (1983–84) and the Alfred C. Hodder fellow at Princeton University (1989–90), and he has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1986, 1992) and the Ingram Merrill Foundation (1987).

Andrew Hudgins joined the faculty of Ohio State University in 2001 as a professor of English. He is currently Humanities Distinguished Professor in English. Prior to coming to Ohio State, Hudgins taught at the University of Cincinnati from 1985 to 2001, and in 1999 he was named Distinguished Research Professor. In 1996, he served as the Coal Royalty Professor of English at the University of Alabama. In 1999 and 2000 he was a Visiting Professor of Creative Writing in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University.

Mr. and Miss Bryce Hospital

Batman hugged her tall gaunt Robin to her hip,
but their torsos twisted away into a gnarled
asymmetric Y against a backdrop
of black capes. They held, held, held
a smile at least part grimace as tinfoil crowns
slipped sideways down their heads.

For thirty years I've remembered laughing at them
when I smiled their idiot rictus at cops who caught
me sleeping in my car, at men who gave me work
involving shovels, at women who'd stopped loving me
or whom I never loved.
God of that laughing moment,
have I ever laughed a blameless laugh? Have you?

Mona Tried to Tell Me

"Oh, baby, you're
beautiful," Mona
moaned and kissed me,
forcing her tongue
past mine as she
pulled me down.
"I love your tits,"
she whispered. My *tits?*
False awe suffused
her face as she worked
my chest like a child
with modeling clay.
She flung my legs
apart—I helped—
and smirking at her own
smirk, crooned,
"Baby, I'll bet
you're wet already.
Feel how much
you've made me want you,"
and she held my dick
as if it were her own
dick and I felt
how much she wanted me.
She slammed hard hips
against me and I,
juddering beneath her,
finished barely before
she rolled aside.
"Tell me you liked it."
Soft giggle. Loud,
fake snoring. "I liked it."

Backing Up

I'm gonna murder Edward Peterson.
Who's that?
Fucker invented the Bac-A-Larm.
The back whut…?
Shitass beeper that makes a racket
every time a goddamn truck backs up.

Hard not to think about digging his ass up
and killing him again when the garbage truck
beeps down your street at four A fucking M.

Got bumped by a backhoe once on a jobsite.
Almost killed me even with the beeper.

And isn't that my motherfucking point?
A goddamn diesel engine's loud enough.

You got a kind of garbage mouth today.
They should put Bac-A-Larm on you
so decent folks'll know you're coming.

Yeah, yeah. I know. At home, it's five damn bucks
in the fucking cuss jar every time I cuss
so I won't be a—whatcha call it?—bad
influence on the kids—a bad role model.

You're kinda like the golden goose of cussing,
ain't you?

Gwen's right, though. I'm working on it. I'm shamed
sometimes at how I talk around the kids,
but things get weird: we had to made a list.
Kiss my ass—cussing. That bites my ass—
cussing. But the dog bit me on the ass?

I'm not sure that really counts as cussing.
What else you gonna say? Bit my behind?
Don't matter, though. Ass is on the list.
So's effing, which is deliberately not cussing.
But you know what it means and so do I,
she says. It's now five dollars an effing eff.
Man's got to cuss. You don't just build a building,
you cuss it up, beam by goddamn beam.

What if it bit you on the dick?
What?

The dog. What if the dog bit you on the dick?

When I did something stupid, *Jesus wept*
is what my mama said, and now I say it.
I'm quoting scripture. Pay anyway, Gwen says.
Jesus wept. And Jesus wept some more.
I'm cussing all of us to Disney World.

Then you could cuss Snow White.
Damn straight, I could.

Missy

You remember Hamby's first wife's name?

Missy, I think it was. Short for Melissa?

I saw her dancing last night.

Man, she's dead.

That's right. Cancer of the pancreas.
Hamby's been posting pictures of her online,
kind of a memorial, I guess.

Good for him.

Nekkid pictures.

Naked?

I recognized his workshop. Snaps of her
sprawled on his Gold Wing, crotch pressed into the seat--
one high heel on the floor, the other pointing
up at the rafters.

It make you hot?

Hell yeah,

thank you for asking. Yes, it made me hot
to see a woman I once sat beside at lunch
stretched naked on a motorcycle seat—
Or over a table I've eat at, getting dicked.

No.

Yessir, buddy. A week before she died

I saw her tottering into MacDonald's,
turban-like thing on her head, bent over,
hurting, and I didn't recognize her till
I recognized the car—old Buick Regal
with one green door. And there's a shot of her
on top of him, bald from the chemo, mouth open,
getting there.
She was pale, with little—
what you call 'em?—eruptions on her face.

Making love to death is what I'd call it.
It sounds like something from a vampire movie,
but not a good one. I don't think I could do it.

Do what? You couldn't screw your dying wife?
Take a pill.

I think I'd have to, man.

Making love is always tougher than fucking.

Thank you, Mr. Wisdom. So you're saying
love fucks up fucking?

Yeah, I know,
but Hamby took the picture, him underneath
and looking up, dick in a dying woman
before the part where sex is only sex
and you finish no matter what. That love?

Once you're in love it's all love and all sex.

It worked like that you wouldn't need a pill
to fuck your dying wife. I think love

and fucking flip-flop back and forth so fast
you can't tell them apart.

Sometimes it's slow.
So slow you can't tell what you're doing.
You stop to think about it, it gets worse.

Thinking fucks 'em both up—love and fucking.

I don't know if I've ever been in love.

You know when you been fucked.

Been married twice,
and I was sure I was in love both times,
but if you aren't still with them was it love?

I done told you. Flip-flop. It was love
and now it's not. Flip—love. Flop—not. Next question?

It doesn't feel like it was ever love.

I walked eight miles to see a dead mule once.

Ain't done it.

Did damn done it. I was twelve
and me and Jimmy Lawton heard this mule'd
been left to rot out in somebody's field.
Looked at it for awhile and walked around it.
It wadn't stinking bad yet. Bloated though.
Poked it with a stick to feel how tight it was.
then walked back home.

Why you bring that up?

It was a long walk there, but a quick walk back.
Know why?

You'll tell me.

Because all the way back
we had a decomposing mule to talk about.

Missy got any tats I haven't seen?

I don't know what you've seen and what you ain't.

But even if I don't love them no more,
I'd like to think…

We'd all like to think that.
We'd all like to believe we'd think that way.

Fancy

Remember Bucky—what's his name?—McCullough?

Guy with a droopy eye? Smoked Parliaments?

Yeah, that's the moron. He was killed last night.
He was holding up Pink's Bar, down on Holt Road?

Been by it. Never stopped. The place looks rough.

Rough's right. He was leaving. He'd got it robbed—
got the twenties from the till, got a fifth
of Early Times stuck neck-first down his pants—
but he stopped and shot a bottle off the wall.

Shot a bottle off the wall?

Why'd he do that?

Because he is, or was, a stupid shit.
I don't know why he did it—just to do
what he'd seen done on TV probably.
So he could tell the story, I guess, and laugh.
But when he just *had* to stop and shoot that bottle,
he took his mind off what he was about,
and the clerk, old guy, pulled out a nine and jacked
three rounds into his chest—blasted his ass,
his already dead ass I'll point out,
half through the plate glass window onto the walk
beside the little put-a-quarter-in-it
blue rocking horse, and that's what you deserve
when you get fancy, because the clerk had spent
a lifetime dreaming of a chance to make
his sorry life into a hero's story.
It's fancy always fucks you in the ass.

Thanks. I'll remember that next time I'm lonely.

That's not funny.
I thought it was.
It's not.

No more faux finishes for you you're saying?

They pay for fancy, it's their damn fancy
and I'll buy my own bourbon with their cash.

Most interesting thing ole Bucky ever did,
I bet—almost robbing a liquor store.
Too bad we'll never hear him tell the story.

Bucky's a dope. He wouldn't tell it good
even if he was still alive to tell it.

Gambol in the Face of Death: An Interview with Andrew Hudgins

Robert W. Hill

HILL:

As both a "joker" and a "wit," you could no doubt explain how one who tells jokes from a huge store of experience—a library, if you will—is different from a "wit," one who invents humor and language constructs (as does a poet) from his library of all language and lived experience.

HUDGINS:

First, thank you for thinking of me as a wit. I like to have fun with words while teasing with friends and being teased, but I'm certainly not an aphorist who aspires to be included in *The Oxford Book of Witty Sayings*—not that I'd scorn such an honor if I lucked into it. For as long as I remember I've thought in anecdotes and analogies, and jokes are a subset of those categories, though I resort to jokes as analogs much more than most people. I think a lot about jokes, so it's natural to refer to them.

If jokes are like stand-up comedy, then wit is more like improv. Wit occasionally breaks through into something truly memorable; but most of us realize pretty early on that wit requires speed, and we develop certain tricks—often, for example, by quickly searching for a reversal of someone's comment or seeing from a different perspective, one that sheds an amusing light. Sometimes those reversals have real insight in them, sometimes they are merely entertaining word play, and sometimes they are duds. Sometimes you are already saying something when you realize it's a dud, and then you

have a quick window in which to try to salvage the wit. The result is often an even bigger dud—one that makes no sense or, worse, is offensive. I've spent a lot of time apologizing to people.

HILL:

Would you comment on the interplay of irony, from your contemporary perspective on *After the Lost War*, with its Lanier-voice, and the kind of self-reflexive, even (somewhat) self-deprecating humor we see in *The Joker* and such recent poems as "A Clown at Midnight" and "Fleeing Time?"

HUDGINS:

Lanier's voice, as I created it in *After the Lost War*, is mostly a modern voice, not a proper mid-nineteenth-century voice, and that allowed for a bit more humor than if I'd tried to be strictly true to the man and his time. Lately, I've allowed more and more humor into the poems. My concerns are primarily serious ones, and humor, unless it's calibrated precisely to the goals and tone of the poem, can easily take over and become the point, which makes the poem a joke and nothing more. My goal in "A Clown at Midnight" and "Fleeing Time" was to employ humor that is also part of the business of the poem. The clown poem meditates on the laughter of desperation and sorrow, and in "Fleeing Time" it's meant to mock, more or less affectionately, the anxiety and intensity of my younger self, who was, I imagine, not too different from many younger artists. I hope the poem honors the necessity of that rage while nodding at its limitations.

HILL:

Setting aside Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger (or maybe not), let's ponder other jesters and jokers—such as Yorick, Rigoletto, or Canio—all persons whose jokes are specifically, deeply intertwined with death. I am thinking here of lines

from *Hamlet* regarding Yorick (V. i): "Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning—quite chop-fall'n." Not to mention other serio-whimsical lines in the scene about "quiddities," and so on. It's a very specific "serious" I'm after here, to which you glancingly alluded earlier. And in *A Clown at Midnight*, so much explicit mortal grief is bound up with its special Hudginsesquian (?) humor: "my father's funeral / sermon made me prowl"; "Dead man, / dead man, dead man / my uncle was."

From the blowback-scattering scene in *The Big Lebowski,* scraping the edges of tastelessness, to the comically tumbled urn of ashes in *Meet the Parents*, most of us do work out some kind of nervous giggling in the face of death. But you're a poet—a real poet—who thinks and feels beyond these easy observations ("*Ridi, Pagliacci!…Ridi del duol, che t'avvelena il cor!*"). Your poems "turn" that "frosted dirt"—the grief and facile human compensation all slinging at us at once. So, how? How and why do you make the music and the images "gambol" in the face of mortality, Andrew?

HUDGINS:

Most of the jokers I know are pretty serious people, balked idealists who are so offended by logical cruxes, heartbreak, and the prospect of death that we have come to take a perverse delight in them. Here's a joke I've been thinking about lately:

> On the first day of third grade, Mrs. Porter, trying to get to know her students better, asks them what their daddies do.
>
> Jenny says, "My daddy is a policeman, and he catches bad people and keeps everyone safe."

"That's very nice, Jenny," says Mrs. Porter. "What does your daddy do, William?"

"My daddy is a doctor. He saves people's lives and makes them well."

"I'm glad to hear that, William. And you, Johnny, what does your daddy do?"

"My daddy's dead," says Johnny.

Mrs. Porter is taken aback, but quickly gathers herself, and gently asks, "Well, what did your daddy do before he died?"

"Turned blue and shat in his pants."

What's not to love about this horrible little mechanism made of words? We laugh because the boy's interpretation of "do" differs from the teacher's, but that surprise is jacked up considerably when the teacher's delicacy is met by the boy's matter-of-fact statement of the brute details.

Everything is a gambol in the face of death. Like Johnny, I knew from a very young age that I was going to die. A man in a pulpit told me that, and he and his successors reminded me of it regularly at least every other week. I spent night after night racked with terror, contemplating my own nonexistence and the vanishing of everyone I loved or didn't love, knew and didn't know. Though I am still not reconciled to the inevitable, I try to think of death as God's way of saying "Pay Attention!"

The one thing we are all going to "do" is die, and vanishingly close to one hundred percent of us are, like Pagliacci, going to suffer from broken hearts. So we might as well take his advice to himself and "Laugh for your love is broken. Laugh for the pain that poisons your heart."

HILL:

You always display a certain fearlessness regarding bawdy and racist jokes that you know mark the edges of "polite taste," but I wonder if you have similar fearlessness about other difficult or fearsome tasks in your poems. As you say in *The Joker*, "I was absorbing the warnings and prohibitions of these jokes" (229).

Put another way, do you ever enter into writing poems—or whole books of poems—knowing that "unacceptability" or "inexactness" or "failure" is a possibility? If so, how do you deal with such trepidations? Aside from the exigencies of "craft," are there poems you recall having struggled over—perhaps family subject matter or even metaphysical issues—before resolving the struggle or just plowing ahead to make yet another wonderful Hudgins poem?

Larry Rubin used to talk about how poets "cannibalize their lives," which always sounded to me kinda dangerous, though necessary. Oh, and I am not really talking about whether "the critics" will like your poetry or not; I mean you, the Poet Himself.

HUDGINS:

Here's a joke for you. Not new, but I'd forgotten it until it showed up in my mail last week:

> Siamese twins go into a bar in Canada one summer day and sit themselves down on a bar stool.
>
> One of them says to the bartender, "Don't mind us; we're joined at the hip. I'm John, he's Jim. Can you get us a couple of Molson Canadian beers, please?"
>
> The bartender, feeling slightly awkward, tries to make polite conversation while getting the beers. "Have you guys had any summer vacation time yet?"

"Off to England end of the month," says John. "We go to England every year, rent a car and drive for miles. Don't we, Jim?" Jim agrees.

"Ah, England !" says the bartender. "Wonderful country…the history, the beer, the culture…"

"Nah, we don't really like that History crap," says John. "We actually prefer a really cold Canadian beer; that's us—eh, Jim? And we can't stand some of the English. They can be so arrogant and rude to visitors sometimes."

"So why keep going to England ?" asks the bartender.

"It's the only chance Jim gets to drive."

I started to contradict you, Bob, and say that there's little dangerous about putting words on paper, especially compared to people who really go into physical danger—soldiers, firefighters, and cops, for instance. You are right, though. Words can damage the reader, the body politic, and humanity in general, as well as the writer. They can create, soothe, heal, or advance all of those entities, too.

But you are asking, I think, about my personal fears and braveries as a writer, and that's a harder thing to sort out for someone like me who is compulsively drawn to the borders of logic and emotion, the places where order breaks down and categories smear. Compulsion and courage are hardly the same thing. In fact, they may be near opposites. But of course I worry that readers will think me a redneck because I am drawn to think and write about violence, a racist because I write about racism, anti-religious because I write about the failures of the faithful and the discomfitures of faith. I also worry about the feelings and the privacy of people I write about, and how it's their bad luck to know a writer.

A few smart people have told me that I damage myself in the world personally and in my poetic reputation by revealing some of the things that I have in the work, but I mostly don't care. The things that I don't want to tell I don't tell. Every now and then naïve readers will coyly or insinuatingly tell me, "I've read your book," and look at me significantly as if they understand me in some profound way. I am no mystery to them. They have me down pat. As honest and true as I try to be, I'm always astounded by their confusion between me and the self I allow onto the page.

But yes, I do get apprehensive at times, especially when I'm trying to write about race and sex. Those subjects are so fraught that they sometimes keep the reader from seeing what you are saying about them. And judging from the way some readers on Amazon have reacted to *The Joker*—calling it juvenile, offensive, and an excuse to revel in racist jokes—maybe I should have been more frightened than I was about how readers would respond.

HILL:

Reading your work through these latest lenses, I see again the literary necessity of surprise, avoidance of cliché, the easily anticipated, and—because you are The Joker—that the same is true for jokes or poems. A well struck *non sequitur,* of course, can be funny ("RADIO!"—*The Joker*, ch. 11) and radically illuminating, but how is it possible to walk the lines, keep from lapsing into the mundane, banal, or truly nonsensical without maintaining some tethers to grasp in the (may I say?) more sophisticated communities of language? It was "Autumn's Author" that triggered this question, the illuminative effect of the surprise words "knob" and "cough."

Speaking of "versification," Poe writes in "The Philosophy of Composition," "My first object (as usual) was originality." Of course, it's more than novelty, but in these arts there must be some eruption and integration of the unexpected.

HUDGINS:

I know that originality is important historically, critically, and in the reader's experience of the poems, but it's not something I think about much. I figure if I can find fresh unclichéd language and write something true to my sensibility and obsessions, then originality will follow naturally enough, and if it doesn't follow naturally, what good is it?

In "Autumn's Author," I was playing with sounds—something I was doing a lot when I wrote the poems in *A Clown at Midnight*. When I was a young man, I scorned such mellifluence as cheap and easy ways of pleasing a reader. I loved the austere possibilities of blank verse, and I excised music like that. But as I've aged, my ear has become as debauched at Silvio Berlusconi, and I find myself reveling in an orgy of sound. When I was writing that poem and the ones that end with slant rhymes using the same consonants, I went to sleep repeating *the late, relate, delete, lot, slut, slate, slat, sleet, plate, platte*—or *food, fed, fade, feud, fired*. And the repetition was part pleasure, pure melopoeia, part chant, and part manic compulsion. A friend called those poems a modern and serious version of Skeltonics, and my hair stood on end for a moment before I registered he meant it as praise and not pejoratively, as most of us hear that term.

HILL:

A variation, please forgive me, of "Whom do you read?" Often, whom we read isn't directly applicable to what we write. In fact, as with some of those fictioneers who leapt onto the Hemingway or Faulkner or Carver or McCarthy style–wagon, or—God help them—those especially urgent young poets enthralled by what they thought they knew of Lorca (almost invariably only in translation)—such influences can be damaging, at least in the short term. So I wonder if you read, or have read, passels of writers (or types of writing) that you find, or found, helpful, informative, inspiring, influential, and so forth, and if you could also talk about

some of the dead ends that you, the poet, may have read your way into.

HUDGINS:

I have always urged my students to go ahead and be absolutely enthralled with a writer they love—almost in the root sense of being a slave to that poet's style. But if they come to me already in the thrall of Ted Hughes, which has happened a couple of times lately, I encourage them to read both the poets that Hughes loved—Blake, Shelley, Donne, and Eliot—as well as poets in very different modes—say, Bishop, Williams, Pound, or Marlowe. As for the voices that I was in thrall to, there are many. Shakespeare is a given, as are Yeats, Eliot, Donne, and Lowell.

As an undergrad, I loved James Dickey, excited by his Southern and masculine subject matter. I fairly quickly became dubious of him for those same reasons, as well as his rhetorical excesses and his easy primitivism. That led me to Donald Justice, Dylan Thomas, Hopkins, and Chaucer. In my first round of graduate schools, I was consumed with Charles Simic and Louise Glück—both wonderful poets and terrible models for me, as are Dickinson and Whitman, try as I might to make them good ones for my purposes. I was slower to give myself over to Robert Frost, and I still find myself in a constant battle with him. Hughes, Milosz, and Bishop, even Keats—among many others—never quite got under my skin as deeply as I'd hoped they would.

HILL:

With your comments on Dickey, you unwittingly tipped us right into my next questions. We are both born Alabamans (some say Alabamian, I know), though I was reared in Charlotte, so my question is about that "Southern Poet" thing. Of an older generation than yours, I have been most often immersed in the poetry of James Dickey, David Bottoms,

Betty Adcock, Robert Penn Warren, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Kathryn Kirkpatrick, and…well, you get the idea. What's your take on your "Southernness" as a poet? And, beyond the obvious subject matter and settings, I wonder to what extent your language, your music, is affected, consciously or otherwise, by the sounds of spoken Southern dialects. I wonder, too, about your sense of Dickey's "rhetorical excesses" as being consonant or not with the hyperbole and other rhetorical excesses common in the South—the good ole' boy and the Southern genteel, both so much a part of the Alabama world I know, even today.

HUDGINS:

The love of language and storytelling is one of the things I love about the South, but the hateful rhetoric we too often hear from preachers, politicians, and others is an ugly extension of that same impulse. Too many Southerners simply like the sounds of their own voices rising in a melopoeia that is all the more fun for the violence and hatred it revels in. Nuance makes for a quieter song. The Southern love of history too often starts with the gallantries of the Civil War and the resentments of Northern occupation, and ignores the two centuries of slavery that preceded and ultimately caused the Lost Cause to be blessedly lost. When I was a kid in class singing the *Battle Hymn of the Republic,* I mused resentfully on the fact that I, along with my classmates and everyone around us, were the grapes of wrath that a just God was trampling beneath his feet. The self-righteousness of the assertion still irks, but just a little reflection led to the inevitable conclusion that Julia Ward Howe and the Book of Isaiah were right: we *were* the grapes of wickedness over-filling the winepress, and it was justice that we were trampled underfoot—to indulge a spasm of excessive rhetoric my damn self. As you can hear, like many Southerners, I've heard a lot of preaching and done a lot of Bible reading, and they are integral parts of my writing, thinking, and talking. I try to write about this in "Steppingstone" in *A Clown in Midnight*.

"Steppingstone"

Home *(from Court Square Fountain—*
where affluent ghosts still importune
a taciturn
slave to entertain
them with a slow barbarous tune
in his auctioned baritone—
to Hank Williams's headstone
atop a skeleton
loose in a pristine
white suit and bearing a pristine
white Bible, to the black bloodstain
on Martin King's torn
white shirt and Jim Clark's baton,
which smashed black skulls to gelatin)
was home, at fifteen: brimstone
on Sunday morning, badminton
hot afternoons, and brimstone
again that night. Often,
as the preacher flailed the lectern,
the free grace I couldn't sustain
past lunch led to clandestine
speculation. Skeleton
and flesh, bone and protein
hold—or is it detain?—
my soul. Was my hometown
Montgomery's molten
sunlight or the internal nocturne
of my unformed soul? Was I torn
from time or was time torn
from me? Turn
on byzantine
turn, I entertain
possibilities still, and overturn
most. It's routine
now to call a hometown

a steppingstone—
and a greased, uncertain,
aleatory stone
at that. Metaphors attune
our ears to steppingstone,
as well a corner-, grind-, and millstone—
all obtain
and all also cartoon
history, which like a piston,
struck hard and often
that blood-dappled town
scrubbed with the acetone
of American inattention. Atone
me no atoning. We know the tune
and as we sing it, we attain
a slow, wanton,
and puritan
grace, grace can't contain.

HILL:

Do you exploit (in a good way, I mean) your religious experience in your poetry? How does it mesh with your sense of existential mystery? Or vice versa. In reaching after the matter of "mystery" in your poetry, I mean the kind of religious, or quasi-religious depths and tangents and "black holes" in our knowing. There is a sort we see in James Dickey, with his "religion of sticks and stones," or the specifically religious, as in David Bottoms and Claire Bateman, but I am assuming that you feel something unknowable scratching at the portals of knowledge, perhaps simply the mysteries of language as we try to discover who we are, or perhaps some recognition that much of what is most important is unsayable, inarticulable. I almost slipped into the phrase with which Joyce tormented us earnest students in the 1960s—"the ineluctable modality of the invisible." Any ideas about this slippery beast of the unknown and perhaps unknowable world that poets entertain?

HUDGINS:

I hope you can hear the attempt to express the ineffable at the end of "Steppingstone," where the song of atonement is both puritan and wanton, religious and secular, heartfelt and yet weary of atoning. When I first started to write poetry in high school, I was seventeen or eighteen and fancied myself an intellectual and an atheist, so I was shocked to find that everything I wrote was saturated in the language, rhythms, and imagery of the King James Bible; and my thinking was basically the Platonism of Paul's epistles. Everything and every expression was the falling short of an ideal. That is an emotional burden I have struggled with for much of my life.

When I was about ten, I learned that if I eagerly anticipated Christmas, my birthday, or a vacation, I was invariably disappointed. The Christmas cap guns were not the life-changing joys I'd hoped for; my birthday cake reused the half-burnt candles from my brother's birthday cake, and my gift was wrapped in the same creased paper that had wrapped his; and the trip to the beach ended in sunburn. Other people didn't seem to experience this same disappointment. If they did, they did not say so. The fault was clearly mine, and the problem was desire, which duped me into longing for an unattainable future. If I simply tried to take things as they came, I might be happier or at least less prone to disappointment. So I made a rule for myself: do not anticipate the future, don't think about it, and don't revel in the joys you hope for. Though I was not very good at sticking to the rule, I tried to, and that of course led to difficulties of its own. When adults asked me if I was excited about going to Boy Scout camp and I said, "Not really," I was seen as a sullen little kid who could not be pleased.

As a writer, I taught myself in my twenties to begin poems with no expectations and no clear idea of what I want to say. It was too disappointing to see what I'd actually written with eyes still fixed on what I'd hope to write. Instead,

I started with some ideas I wanted to think about, maybe some sounds I wanted to enjoy, and some images I wanted to explore for their possible meanings. That has worked better and led me to surprise myself and to find understandings deeper and richer than I began with. I try to follow the logic of the poem—and logic can mean many things in a poem—to the point where it breaks down or reaches beyond itself into the unknowable and unsayable, if that doesn't sound too hopelessly pretentious. Sometimes that unsayable is merely the poem acknowledging the limitations of its own saying, of course. We can say to language what Margaret tells Clyde's Water in Child 216: "Your water's wondrous deep." That's right before she drowns.

HILL:

Richard Bausch recently posted on Facebook the following notes on the creative process:

> We often think of creating as seeking some kind of higher consciousness, and I think this is a form of ego, even of self-indulgence. And it's only after the broken hours of thinking too much, trying to be smart, elegant, high-minded, witty, clever—when we learn that it's not there, not in any of those things, but in the UN-witting, the not-quite-there moments, the half-conscious gropings back, the accidental slippages of mind, almost like those seconds just before you drift off to sleep; that all that great thought and power we admire in the work of others is the product of the same mining-in-the-dark; and that good writing is good emulating, actually working the sounds you have loved, and being direct with what is coming to you from what feels like elsewhere.

When I saw this post, I was caught by our discussion of what is conscious and what is the not-yet-known in making poems. You are such a smart, critical reader—a learned analyst

of the nuances of jokes and poetry—and I wonder how you dodge the dangerous bullets of "ego," as Bausch indicates, without surrendering the self we admire and cherish in your work.

HUDGINS:

I'm sure Dick is right, for the types of post-Romantic writers he and I are. I don't think he is necessarily right about, say, Evelyn Waugh, Alexander Pope, or even James Merrill—just to toss out a few names.

I remember as a beginning poet writing and thinking as I wrote something along the lines of, "This poem is great, and everyone will see that it's great and kiss my ass at noon on Court Square." And I more frequently thought, "This is irredeemable shit, and you should crawl in a cave where no one will find you and kill yourself now." I recognized that each way of thinking was in its way as helpful as it was destructive. I needed to pump up my ego simply to go about the impossible work of writing poetry perfectly, and I also needed the ability to stand back and look at it critically, if not necessarily that critically.

Experience has taught me to push those voices aside as much as possible, and to write as well as I can without expectations. Dick is right about the useful clarities and just as useful confusions that come to us between waking and sleep—and in dreams. As writers we are almost always working at or past the boundaries of our understanding, and the ability to plumb those boundaries is learned behavior. For instance, even in high school I quickly learned that if ideas came to me as I lay awake at night I'd forget them by morning. So when I was in college I made a deal with my subconscious that I'd always turn on the light and write down the ideas it gave me, and that I wouldn't bitch if the brilliant ideas of the night before turned stupid in the light of day, or if I didn't understand what the hell I'd written down.[1]

1 Mr. Bausch has kindly permitted us to include his

HILL:

Working as you do with an excellent fiction writer—Erin McGraw—close at hand, what cross-fertilization do you see in your art, especially the effects of short story?

HUDGINS:

Not much really. Erin sees all my poems and comments on them, and I go through all her work at some point, fussing with sentences and narrative plausibility, but I don't think we have a lot of overt influence on the other's vision of the world. Perhaps we are in too much agreement to start with. I have thought a couple of times, though, of casting one of her scenes into blank verse, just to see what it would look like, but I've never done it.

HILL:

I am uneasy about asking you to designate, or anoint, some really good young poets you know—say those with only one book, or even good in the journals and on the verge of that first book—but I am curious if you see a promising new kind of poetry happening now: new voices, new themes, forms, sounds. Are these whippersnappers surprising you anywhere? What's productively different from what you knew as a twenty-something poet?

HUDGINS:

Perhaps my reading is too limited, but I honestly don't see anything that seems to me fundamentally different out

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comments from Facebook, along with this subsequent clarification: "I agree with Andrew entirely—I'm talking, in my post, about the initial stages. After you have SOMETHING, and with fiction writers it is often ANYTHING, then of course you have to try like hell to be so terribly smart that it is a little as though you ARE a stranger coming upon it, coldly, and with calculation, to heighten and sharpen everything" (1 Nov. 2013).

there—anything that is going to change the face of writing in America. But I am impressed by the technical skills of many younger writers working in received poetic forms, something I don't remember being the case when I was younger. I'm thinking of Ashley Anna McHugh, Dan Groves, Stephen Kampa, Josh Mehigan, Danny Anderson, and Caki Wilkinson.

HILL:

David Bottoms likes to say that poets are "Emily" when they're young and "Walt" when they're old. What changes have you seen in your own poems—not books, but poems—as you have worked the mines of lyric, narrative, sequences, long and short poems. Do you ever set yourself formal tasks such as "I am going to make a crowd of one-page poems that will belie the tendency of established poets to grow garrulous?"

Of course, looking at recent books by Charles Wright, Gregory Orr, and W.S. Merwin, we can see that the tendency is not universal. Maybe another way to ask this is: "Andrew, how do you decide when to 'abandon' your poem—not to the drafting drawer, but to the public? To what extent is the satisfying of form (not necessarily predetermined) part of your decision?"

HUDGINS:

That's close to an imponderable question, I think. Not that it can't be pondered productively—I'm just not sure if it can be answered definitively—and students ask me all the time how to tell when a poem is done. We all learn from reading a lot and from studying books like Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure* how poems *sound* complete and when a narrative has reached a moment of at least temporary finality—weddings, marriages, deaths. But I can very easily imagine Grendel's grandmother coming back to terrorize the Danes after Beowulf has returned home, or Horatio marrying Ophelia's

unmentioned sister unhappily and being a bad governor of Denmark despite a fine start to his reign. Or even something as clearly complete as "Ozymandias" being merely the proem to a long narrative about Ramses's reign, the prologue to a Popian disquisition on vanity, or veering into a Christian sermon about the need to embrace the immortal soul and not passing earthly glory.

Ned Balbo

A Jester's Truth: Faith, Humor, and Vision in the Poetry of Andrew Hudgins

This year, Andrew Hudgins published two books: *The Joker: A Memoir,* released by Simon & Schuster with all the fanfare a major publisher can offer, and *A Clown at Midnight,* Hudgins' ninth book of poetry, on Mariner, a Houghton Mifflin imprint. Their titles signal Hudgins' intent: to explore the operations of that delicate verbal mechanism—the joke—as well as its deeper sources in the human psyche. The decision is a gutsy one. Hudgins is a Baby Boomer, the Baptist son of an Air Force captain and a housewife from Georgia; a so-called "military brat," he grew up mostly in the South, and found that joking was one way of fitting in. He is also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, an incisive critic and essayist, and a distinguished poet whose work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Poetry*, and *The New Yorker*. Still, Hudgins remains an iconoclast: he must tell the truth as he sees it, consequences be damned, turning his lens on brutal truth as well as beauty. He himself is aware of this. Of the title poem of *American Rendering*, his 2010 New and Selected volume, Hudgins says the following—"I look at one massacre spiraling out to the next massacre and then the next along the nineteenth century Southwest frontier"—and a subsequent remark sheds light on all his work: "[W]e have a responsibility not only to ameliorate [violence] as much as possible but to understand it and grieve it" (*The Writer's Chronicle*, May/Summer 2013; interview conducted by Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum). Hudgins may call himself a joker, but his character as a poet is shaped by conscience and compassion; the light is brighter because he dares to look at darkness.

It may be that such a writer needs humor to survive—to drive away the shadows that threaten our fallen world. In an interview with Nick Norwood included in Hudgins' prose collection *The Glass Anvil*, the poet observes that it's "fun to play" with language, "fun to feel words resist chaos, insist on their arbitrary and hallowed connection to the world and to meaning." Hudgins' insight is revealing: it is the author's will that "insists" on meaning, despite nihilism's threat: the fear that nothing matters, the fear of "chaos." Both humor, and poetry, defend us from this fear, one that Randall Jarrell, in his essay "The Other Frost," articulates as follows: there is "evil in the world…It's so; and there's nothing you can do about it; and if there were, would *you* ever do it?" Jarrell was writing of Frost's dark masterpieces, poems like "Directive" or "Home Burial," but the question applies just as well to Hudgins:

What would *he* ever do—in response to "evil," or whatever we call the darkness in human experience? Hudgins' answer is clear: write poetry and tell jokes, to reassert perspective, to find meaning in despair—and that's what he does in these new books, one in prose, the other in verse. Recounting jokes that soar or fail, he explores laughter's sudden grace, enacting the vital joys that jokes and poetry offer.

Jokes have always had a place in Hudgins' poetry, and he is a writer who understands their common ground. Neither a joke nor a poem can succeed unless each part serves the whole; the mechanism of words must be well made, perfectly paced. Surprise is crucial; however planned, the effects must seem spontaneous. "Mary Magdalene's Left Foot," from *Saints and Strangers*, Hudgins' debut, shows the influence of joke structure. Hudgins recalls the claims of a news article that this relic of Christ's companion has turned up, an artifact that readers find "encased in antique gold / and pedestrian prose, apart / from the rest of her imaginably lush lost body." The zeugma here calls the relic's integrity into question; the rest of the sentence reverses our expectation of cliché—an *un*imaginably lush lost body—to suggest that the speaker has probably spent some time imagining what her body was like. (Hudgins is one of our few poets who admit

to masturbation: see *The Never-Ending's* "Heat Lightning in a Time of Drought" or "His Imaginary Friend" in *Shut Up, You're Fine*, Hudgins' collection of dark light verse.) The poem ends with a twist both revelatory and funny: when Magdalene kissed "each suppurating wound that swelled [Christ's] flesh," she knew

> that it was God's clear flesh beneath
> its human dying. And that is more than you or I
> will ever know of where we place our lips.

In *The Joker*, Hudgins writes, "Laughter isn't demonic, but the result of our human double vision. We see both the perfect world we desire and the flawed one we live in. Believers and unbelievers live in different flawed worlds and conceive different perfections." Hudgins, however, lives in both—just as Frost did, as Mark Van Doren observed long ago in *The Atlantic Monthly*: "Like any other distinguished person, Frost lives in two worlds at once: this one, and another one which only makes it [i.e., the earth] more attractive" ("Robert Frost's America"). Hudgins, too, loves the world in which we live—its elements, its grime, its physicality—and this love finds expression in his humor. In "Mary Magdalene's Left Foot," the poet's closure melds the poignancy of Magdalene's ministrations with the urgency of a mother warning her son about STDs. Both readings are fully convincing and fully simultaneous, just as we'd expect from a master poet and joke-teller. As the memoir puts it, jokes "illuminate how we think and the often irresolvable contradictions our lives are built on. The laughter they draw from us both expresses our sorrow at our inconsistency and soothes it." Here, too, is sorrow evident: the anguish of the rational believer who seeks to glimpse the divine in flesh.

Some of Hudgins' poems refer explicitly to jokes, drawing from them parables of human behavior. An obvious example is "Heat Lightning in a Time of Drought," originally published in *The Never-Ending,* which offers one of the "Little Moron" jokes the memoir mentions: divorced from his first

wife, the speaker recalls a joke about the cuckolded dimwit who catches his mate in flagrante delicto, then holds a gun to his own head, threatening, "*Don't laugh— / you're next*." The speaker muses, "It is the wisest joke I know because / the heart's a violent muscle, opening / and closing." As a poet, Hudgins' heart is mostly open; the joke serves as a failed attempt to distance the speaker from painful experience—a failure that the poet planned. The tactic shows ambivalence at art's attempt to master pain: pain resides in memory, and memory is precious—indeed, it makes us who we are. In "Heat Lightning," the Little Moron joke breaks the tension before we encounter painful truths: "Each happy memory leads me to a sad one." Life's "irresolvable contradictions" are part of memory's fabric. Both the poem's speaker and the joke's protagonist share a self-destructive impulse, though art offers the consolation that not everything is meaningless; the joke consoles us with the laughter it provokes. Jokes are "toys made out of words," Hudgins observes in his memoir; only the human knack for letting words deceive us—the "unrealities of language"—allows the Little Moron's threat to seem, fleetingly, possible—and, therefore, funny when we realize it's not.

Less funny and far more awkward are the racist jokes that Hudgins catalogues: they are evidence of divisions that the poet unflinchingly confronts, relics of an earlier era that hasn't yet released its hold. At times, Hudgins laments the very jokes that make him laugh, aware that laughter may be misread as endorsement of a racist view. (Chris Rock and Louis C.K. have it easy: our culture expects comedians to tell the truth through humor while skewering all parties and political correctness. Poets? Not so much.) In *The Joker*, Hudgins reminds us that racism is often generational, tracing the slow walk toward enlightenment through his grandmother's example. She is the starting point, the "angriest person [Hudgins has] ever known who wasn't actually unhinged," and her rage boils with racism. That Hudgins can also say, "I loved her," is testament to the bonds of family, the connections that take root long before we are old enough to think.

As far back as *The Glass Hammer*, Hudgins' fourth book, we meet this larger-than-life, snuff-chewing, epithet-spewing figure, a woman who'd lick "her rough right thumb and order me, *Come here*" before wiping off some smudge or fleck of dirt, her spit smelling of "lipstick and tobacco" ("Grandmother's Spit"). In "At Work," she expounds sarcastically on what to call African Americans—"Oh, negroes, nigras, colored, black—my God!"—before approving the most offensive word. In his memoir, Hudgins says, "My Grandmomma's racism was the pigheaded racism of the old school—staunch, unrepentant, and all the more ferocious as it saw history turning against it." In both new and older poems, Hudgins explores this historical turn, appalled by the hate he encounters, yet empathizing (up to a point) with those whose words he finds repellent: despite their hate, the result of history and culture, they are also human beings: angry, misguided, flawed, destructive.

A prime example is "Magic Button," also from *The Glass Hammer*, which describes an uncle's repugnant fantasy of erasing all African Americans from existence. He tries to turn the speaker into an ally, hoping he'll drop his guard and admit that, yes, deep down, he'd like to push the "magic button," too. The uncle tries to soothe the speaker's scruples—"'Nope. They wouldn't die. They'd disappear'"—then goes on to repeat the question: "…I'm only asking whether you'd press the button/if nobody'd know, nobody'd see. I would…" In poems like "Magic Button" or "At Work," Hudgins reports those taboo conversations designed to be heard by one race only, exposing their ugliness and hate, but social class is his subject, too: both grandmother and uncle are on the wrong side of history, their racism closely tied to their upbringing and the past.

Of course, Hudgins is acutely aware of the price paid by so many on the right side of history: with still-simmering outrage, "The Names of the Lost," a rare Hudgins villanelle in *American Rendering*, elegizes the 1964 murder of three civil rights workers by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: "The murderers, old men now, still walk the town. / The nights burned all night long that Freedom Summer. / Ask Andrew

Goodman, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner." Racist jokes are different from the verbal toys that enchanted Hudgins in childhood, as Hudgins points out in *The Joker*: "Racial humor, like most humor, tries to draw you into its world, but it has two worlds. One is the world of the absurd, the illogical, the disjunctive, the incongruous—the world of jokes. But the other is the world of racial superiority, and superiority, according to Aristotle, is the realm in which jokes thrive, the smart mocking the stupid, the strong the weak, the attractive the ugly, the white the black." Because no reasonable person today can accept a power structure based on race, not even within a joke's transient confines, Hudgins writes, "I think we are seeing the death throes and we are hearing the epitaph being written" for racist jokes. In his poems on race, however, Hudgins chooses the harder road: he shows racists as real people—damaged, angry, or misguided—daring us to turn the scrutiny on ourselves.

Robert Frost, too, sometime employed ethnic or racial stereotypes—I think of the wince-inducing "A Case for Jefferson" (with its references to "Marxian Muscovite" and "Russian Jew") or "The Discovery of the Madeiras," with its tale-within-a-tale of enslaved lovers who fall ill and are tossed overboard before contagion can spread: but this couple are murder ballad stock figures, not characters. When his light verse combined ethnic stereotypes with sexual content, Frost suppressed it; such poems didn't accord with his carefully tended image of the wise, drolly witty Farmer-Poet. Hudgins, by contrast, has trouble suppressing anything: as he admits in *The Joker*, "[W]hen people think I'm a vulgarian, I'll do my damnedest to prove them right. Freud would call this impulse a minor manifestation of the death wish. Edgar Allan Poe more resonantly termed it 'the imp of the perverse.'"

This very imp is on display in Frost's "Pride of Ancestry," a poem Frost never included in his books. According to Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson in their 1972 selection, *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, the poet was disappointed that editor Louis Untermeyer found Frost's off-color poems "'not only blasphemous and bawdy but unprintable.'"

Its polished language aside, "Pride of Ancestry" is as politically incorrect as one of Louis C.K.'s monologues. The first stanza sets the tone:

> The Deacon's wife was a bit desirish
> And liked her sex relations wild,
> So she lay with one of the shanty Irish
> And he begat the Deacon's child.

Along with these anti-Irish stereotypes, humanity's foibles have their moment: fear of women's sexuality, the pleasures of deception, humiliation of the cuckold, the absurdity of sex. Anti-Catholic sentiment? Check. Self-deception and narcissism? Check: for "pride of ancestry," we discover, is a family's pride in its own adulterous ancestor—the Deacon's wife—who brought an Irishman's genes into their bloodline:

> Her portrait hangs in the family gallery
> And a family of nobodies likes to think
> That their descent from such a calorie
> Accounts for their genius and love of drink.

At least they have an excuse!—or, more precisely, a myth of family origin. Clearly, the world of "Pride of Ancestry" and that of Hudgins' sense of humor overlap. At the same time, left out of *American Rendering* but still a point of pride with their author (and many readers) are the poems of Andrew Hudgins' *Shut Up, You're Fine: Instructive Poetry for Very, Very Bad Children* (2009). Included are "The Schlitz Malt Liquor Bull," "Dead Things I Have Seen," "We Buried the Cat But the Dog Dug Her Up" and, inevitably, "The Thumping of the Bed." The collection offers surprise, misdirection, the breaking of taboos—in short, the imp that we find in Frost's "Pride of Ancestry." Presented as a book for children, *Shut Up, You're Fine* offers sex, death, and the hypocrisies that surround us; the "bad children" of its subtitle are Hudgins' grown-up readers. Hudgins knows that jokes "are often—some would say always—intricately bound up with power."

He's right: Frost's "shanty" Irishman is funny, in part, because he upends the power dynamic: a presumably pompous Deacon fails to satisfy his wife, distracted, perhaps, by the next world's promise. Or the wife, expected to serve, asserts her will at his expense. Readers join in on the joke, laughing at a "family of nobodies," till they reflect on some of the branches in their own family tree. Frost pokes fun at pretension, reminding us that even high birth originates in sex, and that hypocrites turn even scandal into a source of pride.

In general, Frost and Hudgins favor darker insights; they forestall despair through humor, tolerance, and faith. That doesn't mean any of these come easily. Indeed, Hudgins' struggle with faith underlies some of *The Joker's* most perceptive passages, and some of Hudgins' most powerful poems. "Mary Magdalene's Left Foot" deftly captures that struggle, but so do many others in Hudgins' canon: "Praying Drunk," "Communion in the Asylum," "Rain," "The God of Frenzies," "The Beatitudes"—there are too many to list here. "The Hereafter" (from 1988's *After the Lost War,* Hudgins' book of dramatic monologues on Confederate soldier and Georgia poet Sidney Lanier) catalogues the afterlife in several versions, invoking skepticism and faith in equal measure: "Some people as they die grow fierce, afraid. / They see a bright light, offer frantic prayers, / and try to climb them, like Jacob's ladder, up/to heaven…." Others, self-righteously pious, imagine a heaven absurdly specific: "They'll talk / of how they'll finally learn to play the flute / and speak good French." The poet's imp resists restraint before Lanier, or Hudgins, offers,

> For so long I have thought of us as nails
> God drives into the oak floor of this world,
> it's hard to comprehend the hammer turned
> to claw me out. I'm joking, mostly. I love
> the possibilities—not one or two
> but all of them…

The joke is absorbed by Hudgins' existential question: are we just nails pummeled by God, wrenched out and discarded,

bent and broken? Is God our loving father or the hammer that pounds us senseless? The poet's joke is deadly serious, yet he turns from darkness to a more generous view, accepting multiple visions of heaven even as he seeks his own. In *The Joker*, Hudgins explores the appeal of religious jokes, showing how they expose the limitations of dogma.

> Christianity, like all religions, offers meaning. Jokes home in on the disordered places where meaning fails. They are drawn to chaos but they are terrified of it too because they cannot NOT see where meaning breaks down. Once they find those inconsistencies and breakdowns, they play with them…. Their attraction to chaos can be satanic delight or a godly attempt to heal by cauterizing a wound…. They are suspicious of systems of thought and enamored of the anomalies in them, but mostly they are content to mock, not destroy, those spindly systems.

Another way to look at Hudgins' viewpoint is that such jokes simultaneously submit religious belief to reason and unreason: faith's supernatural and least credible tenets ("credible" as measured by everyday experience) are made to collide with all-too-human failings and/or language's "unrealities"; the result is a "cauterizing" nonsense. One of Hudgins' best jokes in this vein (and it should be mentioned that he is a joke collector, not a joke inventor: he reports what he has heard) involves Christ who, in the midst of his crucifixion, summons Peter to the cross; the Apostle must endure the Roman soldiers' beatings three times before he reaches Him. We've all known merciless authority, so the Apostle seems quite comic. He doesn't say, "I can't come, it's too dangerous," but simply endures the beatings—because of faith, and because whatever Christ must have to say is worth it. Unfortunately, the joke's punchline—I won't give it away here—isn't the call that Peter, or we, expect. The Apostle's faith, rather than regenerative, is as blind and pointless as our own might seem in our darkest moments—yet we react with laughter, not

despair. Hudgins' religious poems and religious jokes involve, at times, the "thrill of blasphemy" he admits to in *The Joker*, but they also reject unreasoning faith in the search for something better: a way to believe despite faith's lapses of fact or logic.

A Clown at Midnight, Hudgins' new book of poetry, offers a renewed approach and new textures that enrich long-held concerns. "Suddenly Adult" confronts Hudgins' lifelong struggle with faith through rhyme and alliteration that is almost obsessive—unusual for a poet whose command of plain speech is a hallmark.

> When I was young, God,
> young, too, angered
> easily and he glared
> as I malingered
> in innocence, and swaggered
> its dancehalls….

Here, Hudgins' slant rhymes cascade down the page almost as if the end-words are changing into new words: "God" will rhyme with "tangoed" and "glued" but also "good" and "goad"; "gored" with "butterfingered," "safeguard," and "laggard." The effect is mesmerizing and powerful—as if language itself is escaping the author's grasp yet carrying truths that it understands and reveals in its strange music. We invent God as we find language in a world only as old as we are; but "Father Hopkins" and "[George] Herbert," poet-priests, remind us the Word is sacred and that its fluid transformations are proof of its magic: the power of prayer. (Angry at God or not, the speaker talks to Him and about Him.) In the McFadyen-Ketchum interview, Hudgins explains, "For decades, I avoided rhyme, almost viscerally repulsed by it….To my young ear, the janglyness of it clashed with the serious business of the poem, making the stories seem trivial and mocking and distorting the serious efforts of the poem to think." The poems of *Shut Up, You're Fine* turned Hudgins back to rhyme since, "[f]or the humor to work, light verse needs to strike the gong

right in the middle, not on the edges," and he began to "apply it to serious poems," mixing slant and exact rhymes to achieve new effects. *Ecstatic in the Poison* (2003) signals this trend through its extensive use of Emily Dickinson's hymn meter and rhyme scheme in poems such as "In," "Behemoth and Leviathan," or "The Chinaberry Trees."

One consequence of this release from plainness has been to widen Hudgins' vision to include poems of surreal strangeness—a fascinating development for a poet whose past work has been so vividly realistic, so rooted in the body and the world. *American Rendering*'s "Mother" is an example in the sense that surrealism fuses with language-play: dream-like transitions place the speaker at an "appealingly dilapidated pond" where fish, flowers, and birds keep changing— "dissolving / and resolving in aureate metamorphoses, golden fish to golden flower, / flower to fish"; the final underwater figure is "Mother, never surfacing" who "lap[s] the pool like an Olympian." *A Clown at Midnight* sends us underwater, too—this time with the Magi, caught on "[d]eep-sea cameras":

> …The magi, cradling
> enameled caskets,
> rock woodenly over horses
> mincing up the vertiginous
> tilt of an obsidian trench.
> They do not speak. They merely
> flow with the glacial undulations
> of gilt-harnessed geldings and
> the mercurial surge
> of underwater current…

Effects in "The Return of the Magi" include internal or end-rhyme ("undulations," "stones"), assonance ("stones," "robes"), lots of alliteration ("green," "grainy," "glacial," "gilt," "geldings"), all of which lend the poem an aural density we'd expect of Wallace Stevens—unusual for Hudgins. The poem's surrealism resonates: the Magi rise up through the depths of—what? A real ocean? Our collective unconscious or shared

history? Eons old, they do not rush; ancient as statues or memory itself, "From long immersion, they've turned / to verdigris… / their hands and faces verdigris as they ascend / from black to black-green water." The vision doesn't require a gloss to strike the chords of similar ghost visions that lurk between sleep and waking, between meaninglessness and revelation. Hudgins' rich language and sharp eye capture "the same apocalyptic / languor with which they left," evoking Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" just enough to add a further unsettling element to this return.

Still, Hudgins has always been a poet of deep intelligence; his explorations of dreams or the semi-rational are striking but not defining. More characteristic are those poems that, whatever their overall mode, convey some narrative. Two excellent recent poems—one in *American Rendering*, the other in *A Clown at Midnight*—touch on childlessness: specifically, the absence of a daughter. In *The Joker*, Hudgins reminds us that he grew up in a household shadowed by death—one reason that the escape of jokes held such attraction. His parents, "secretly grieving," had lost a daughter before he was born. In his grandmother's account, Hudgins writes, "[m]y parents could not talk about [my sister]…. Her death in a car accident, my mother at the wheel, was a wound too raw for words to touch." This silence, meant as protection but which served instead to teach "sorrow and fear," has its counterpart in the dark places (interior and exterior) that inhabit Hudgins' poems but perhaps also in Hudgins' poems for a nonexistent daughter.

"My Daughter," the first of *American Rendering*'s new poems, is no homage to Weldon Kees. Whether the speaker is a dream-version of Hudgins or a homeless man "[s]creened from sleet by carpet remnants," he is haunted by the family he dreams into existence one night and outlives except for "a daughter—a teacher—and her two children, / one damaged." The poem is a heartbreaking hall of mirrors: he wakes the next day only to revisit this daughter nightly, claiming that he now has the means to buy "Teresa" "the help she needs"; but the dream-daughter fades, her flawed child in the speaker's

arms, as the waking world intrudes and the lullaby fails: "I serenade her. 'O unhushable baby, hush.'" More powerful in its concision and directness is *A Clown at Midnight*'s "Foresworn" whose speaker refuses to rationalize childlessness; instead, he accepts what, in retrospect, he recognizes as a choice: "Not twenty now or twelve, / no girl-child remembers pink / plush monsters awaiting her / as she harnessed sensibility." More poignant examples follow, the daughter half-appearing through what she never did or felt, till the poem resolves in stoic acceptance:

> …With two wives,
> I have foresworn thee, daughter,
> and your thrilling materiality
> in the flesh's rage. In me
> no father pines for your
> embodiment, and my true daughter's
> too composed to cry out
> for incarnation and its cares.

The daughter who never was must have a father who never was: the speaker whose words bring her, fleetingly, to life. To foreswear fatherhood invokes possibilities never to be resolved. To speak of incarnation's "cares" is to admit its joys as well: these, too, the speaker has foresworn. Though simpler and much shorter, "Foresworn" is kin to Frost's "Home Burial," inspired in part by the loss of his firstborn son, as well as that of his nephew. As the dialogue reaches its pitch, Amy, the wife, declares,

> '…The nearest friends can go
> With anyone to death, comes so far short
> They might as well not try to go at all….
> Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
> But before one is in it, their minds are turned
> And making the best of their way back to life
> And living people, and things they understand.
> But the world's evil…'

The epitaph on Robert Frost's tombstone, the last line of his poem "The Lesson for Today"—"I had a lover's quarrel with the world"—fits Hudgins here and now: at times, the world seems evil, as Frost's Amy declares, but it's the only world we have. "Foresworn" interrogates that world at an existential level, meditating on the self and our immediate creators—parents who are or might have been—while reflecting on how we change with what we bring—or fail to bring—into existence.

The new book's title quotes Lon Chaney, Sr.—silent film actor and "the Man of a Thousand Faces"— and the title poem's full epigraph—"The essence of true horror is a clown at midnight"— reflects the range of Hudgins' performance: the slide from gaiety to despair, and every point between. As a poet, Hudgins has never been a clown—he's too smart for that—though he lets humor enter poems that feature human frailties, those that address the deepest darkness, and those where bitterness gives way to compassion in search of grace. And he identifies with the archetype, at least when it serves his purpose: as the poet observes of his own joking, "…I want something from you—laughter—and to make you laugh I have to juggle subjects that make you laugh."

It's not surprising, therefore, that Hudgins picks up a thread he introduced in *Ecstatic in the Poison*'s "A Joke Walks into a Bar" and extends it in several new poems, exploring humor as explicit subject and, in some cases, personifying the joke. "The Humor Institute" presents a think tank's sense of mission, seeking to organize and decide for all what's funny and what's not: "We'll help plan suitable retirement dinners— / no morbid jokes and no unseemly glee." But without the anarchic impulse, is humor even possible? Hudgins, clearly, doesn't think so, as the Institute sets down rules: "No drunken dancing through the woods at night. / Such revelries pose long-term complications // with group morale and, thus, the bottom line." By contrast, *A Clown at Midnight*'s opening poem, "A Joke Is Washed Up on a Desert Island," offers *all* jokes rolled into a single character: every imp or impulse bent on shattering pretension. The joke is conscious, charged with

life, a deliberately stilted allegory, yet the joke's key questions echo the memoir:

> …What angry hope / or compulsive mania
>
> flung him on the judgment of friends
> and strangers: a laugh or silence?
> He'd never paused to mull things over,
> and though thinking's a nuisance,
>
> it's time to think….

The poem proceeds through a sea of puns hilarious, contrived, offensive—exactly like many favorite jokes: Bob, the "armless, legless man/bobbing in the spray," Natalie Wood "washing…ashore," the naked island beauties of a thousand dirty jokes. Yet the joke's realization is both Hudgins' and our own:

> And all at once he gets it:
>
> the human cost of laughter. It pains him.
> The people he's offended,
> they're human, unlike him, a concept
> he'd never comprehended—

This epiphany—that laughter may exert a human cost—mirrors Hudgins' remarks in prose: "Jokes delight us by making us nervous and then relieving the nervous tension…. Jokers make us anxious because they want something from us." But sometimes jokes go wrong, and every joker knows that "the moment between the last words of the joke and the laugh, if there is a laugh, is a fraught and complicated expanse of time." Recalling his fondness for tasteless jokes, Hudgins remarks, "I was at the age when I was beginning to see in myself the power to harm awfully and the power to be harmed awfully." This double-edged power, shared by jokes and art,

is one that Hudgins explores fruitfully when he combines both in his poems.

To write a memoir in the context of a love for jokes—many potentially offensive—is a risk that few poets would undertake. To release, simultaneously, a compelling book of poetry focused on humor but not itself light verse is rarer still. Hudgins' imp of the perverse is working overtime, the poet's audacity undimmed—and this is all to the good. Contemporary poetry isn't noted for its sense of humor, as David Yezzi points out in a recent *New Criterion*. According to Yezzi, "poetry has become so docile, so domesticated, it's like a spayed housecat lolling in a warm patch of sun. Most poets choose to play it safe, combining a few approved modes in a variety of unexceptional ways." Later, he observes, "What poetry today sorely wants, then, is more bile: the realism, humor, and intensity occasioned by the satiric impulse. It's what Shakespeare might have thought of as 'the bitter fool.'" Yezzi is right, though Hudgins isn't bitter: in discussing jesters in *The Joker*, he observes,

> In medieval and Renaissance courts, jesters softened with humor truths forbidden to those without official license to amuse the monarch. But a successful jester needed tact and a discerning alertness to the king's mood.

Far more than a jester, Hudgins entertains his "monarchs"—i.e., his readers—through poems both serious and funny, invoking his wit or a joke's structure in service of some purpose. His "tact" and "discerning alertness" are second to none, though as Hudgins admits, boundaries attract him, and giving offense remains a risk for anyone willing to speak the truth. Hudgins' poems are among the dark glories of contemporary poetry, rooted in real-life experience, compassion for those discarded, a productive tension between faith and reason, acute intelligence, and skepticism of

pretension; they are beautifully written, technically masterful, wide-ranging in tone and subject.

Long ago, in *The Atlantic*, Mark Van Doren summed up Frost's vision in words that resonate for readers of Andrew Hudgins:

> [Frost's] vision is the comic vision that doubts even itself.…The comic genius ignores nothing that seems true, however inconvenient it may be for something else that seems as true.…The choice of Frost is clear. His humor, an indispensable thing in any great poet, is in his case the sign that he has decided to see everything that he can see…One couldn't say half as much if one were tragic.

More recently, in "Robinson, Frost, and Jeffers, and the New Narrative Poetry," Mark Jarman describes the matter and means that Frost and Hudgins share: use of the blank verse line, "simple language" that "fall[s] out along the blank verse arrangement as Frost would have had it," the way a "subject's life has taken shape in the speaker's own"—"a provisional quality," Jarman calls it. Most important, Jarman sees in Hudgins "the Frost who trusted the narrative and the mystery of the story to which he might not be able to draw a conclusion." In resorting to humor, Hudgins goes further than Frost dared in an era that discourages the satiric impulse in poetry; he looks more deeply and directly at America's racial divide and is committed to exploring, in contemporary form, the same evils, and transient grace, that Frost encountered in human nature. A regional poet of the South, as Frost was of New England, Hudgins is widely conversant in a Biblical and literary tradition not limited to region; instead, like Frost, he is a world-class poet whose work speaks to every reader even as it conjures a particular time or place. The very benefits of the time we live in—a pluralistic poetic landscape, less centralized critical authority, a diversity of poets of wide-ranging schools and styles—may obscure Hudgins' achievements, but

his work will last. Allowing for the difference in time and place, his body of work already equals and may surpass that of Frost; I can think of no other poet who takes such risks in ways that matter—in tone, thought, and subject—while submitting himself to such rigor of conscience, observation, and style. Indeed, Randall Jarrell's remarks on Frost in "To the Laodiceans" apply equally well to hudgins:

"Frost's best poetry—and there is a great deal of it, at once wonderfully different and wonderfully alike—deserves the attention, submission, and astonished awe that real art always requires of us."

In "Swordfish," one of *A Clown at Midnight*'s vivid vignettes, a neighbor tells the speaker's girlfriend "she was a pretty lady,/a real pretty lady. She looked like a dream./One day she'd make a real man really happy." The speaker responds with "three hard flat laughs." But don't be fooled. The neighbor wants to sleep with the girlfriend, using the joke to disguise his intent while humiliating the speaker: the friend's blush confirms his guilt, and the girlfriend opens her eyes, "her azure eyelids shimmering with jade." In the joke, we see so much: the operations of the human heart, desire, and betrayal, and a poet who plays the fool in service of the truth he tells, his language simple yet controlled, and deeply moving.

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Amy Arthur

Witness

I drove on mountain roads so long that night
the world split off into one dark bend
always slinking past my pool of light
and a wisp of me behind the wheel to tend

to what there was to see, which wasn't much:
the fireworks emporiums, a sign
here and there—*hell is real* and such,
cows clumped, trees cartooned by kudzu vine

until, as in a dream, this: spun
my way, a jeep just flipped, its smashed glass
glinting, passengers crawling out stunned.
Cicadas writhing up from warm dirt in May,

I thought, and so I slowed then drove on by.
Fine, I tell myself, thinking back, *they were fine*.

Amy Arthur

Letter to the Elders, 1724

> *"The work being finished, Mrs. Duston laid hold of the long black hair of the warriours, and the women, and the children, and took all their ten scalps….[S]he and her companions came safe home, and received the bounty on the dead Indians, besides liberal presents from private gentlemen, and fifty pounds from the Governour of Maryland."*
>
> —Nathaniel Hawthorne,
> "The Duston Family"

I am Thankful for my Captivity,
for the blurred edges of night.
God made his Word Comfortable to me.

My newborn broken on an apple tree,
I desire to be Thankful that I was born in a Land of Light.
I am Thankful for my Captivity.

Thou hast given me the necks of mine enemies,
the hatchet untended so I might—
God made his Word Comfortable to me.

If the Son therefore shall make you free—
what I did was done in his sight.
I am Thankful for my Captivity.

I have hidden from holy company,
but it's late, I'm weary, his table is my right.
God made his Word Comfortable to me.

The Lord is good, O taste and see.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
I am Thankful for my Captivity.
God made his Word Comfortable to me.

Amy Arthur

Trespasses

Forgive us our trespasses, the cloudless night
we parked our cars and walked your drive
till clamshell tapered off
to mud then sand then wave alive
in rough moonshine, hard-edged gray and white.

Forgive us our brazenness, our lingering
on the empty palm of your slab; it's true
we made ourselves at home,
lay back to hear the water chew
the upturned limbs of empty pilings.

Forgive our wandering minds the living room
they furnished there with easy chairs
and fancy rugs and lamps
and you, drawn home to climb the stairs
bewildered, drift through all we dared presume.

Who is there to forgive or not forgive
for what the storm there washed away?
No one. Forgive us, then.
We tried your grief but didn't stay,
our own loss, somehow, still the more impressive.

Amy Arthur

Stormy Lullaby

I'll stay up, honey, go to sleep.
Don't dream of puddles shoulder-deep

or breezes blowing out the stars,
or crawfish mounds as big as cars,

gators waddling up the street—
don't dream at all unless it's sweet.

Though trash cans tumble, pine trees shrug,
the plywood on your window's snug.

The sandbags tucked in at the door
will nudge the surge back towards the shore.

If cats know one thing, what they know
is how to hide where wind won't blow.

The frogs are singing, babydoll.
The rain will come, so let it fall.

Shelia Black

Paicambu Cemetery

So many of us: blind girl with tin
can, man with elephantiasis,
his leg a familiar monster. Across
the street from our house, the
high gates of the municipal cemetery.
Every weekend, the family
parties—thick sheaves of gladioli,
sinister sweetness. I perched on a
hollow in a wall, faint bleaching
in yellow stone where a saint's likeness
had been. Arms that were not there,
a reaching out, *a beseeching*.
A woman fell, rending the black net
of her hat. She was beautiful and
this mattered. Sunlight passing over me
as over the jacaranda. The graphite-colored
ants carried on their slow migrations, eating
whatever was in their path. Orchids
dangled white and crimson. Inside,
a city of child-sized houses.
I put my ear to the wall, tried to hear
the dead. Heard nothing, and then
a slow creaking, unleashing, the
way stories begin.

Shelia Black

Dark Emerald

I understood when I saw the tree
ghost-green in the gray mesa—I was on my
way to the Rio Puerco where there
is never any reason to stop, though I did.
I wanted to let go of a box of dust.
I wanted to let go of my tired formulations.
I believed the sky would teach me something,
but what kind of something—
that was never clear. I had a vision of a woman
whose flesh melted away in sheets, whose
eyes burned inward until they were blue as
New Mexico sky. Somehow I knew this
meant she could no longer see. And that tree.
I touched the window of the car as though
it were the same as touching its rough bark,
the impossibly furred leaves. My sad
bones making circles through the air—that
I would keep moving & despite everything.

Bruce Bond

The Irrevocable

And as he spoke of the great illusion
out of which a world appears, I thought
of something my mom said about pain,
how it is the one god we cannot doubt,
and so for her poor body's sake, I asked
the guy, please, sir, can you spare a hand,
and he agreed, cutting through his wrist
as he continued, deep in theory, blind
with light, and so I asked for his eyes,
who wouldn't, which he gave, without a break
in the stride of talk, although his body
left us, bone by bone, and all went dark,
his chair, his voice, his oracle, and me
nodding, a child of what I could not see.

Bruce Bond

Widow

And I came to a lake in the wilderness
and knelt to drink, where the face I lost
hung like a fish just beneath the surface,
and I asked him, what is it like to ghost
the in-between, beneath the stars that fall
the way black lace falls to make a phantom
of its host. What is it to be that veil,
to blanket the mirror like a miner's lung,
its glass of smoke, so what we see becomes
a clarity of no one atop our shoulders.
What, I asked, and the lakeshore answered,
what I asked. And it went on like that,
the odd prodigal of my voice come back
to sleep. Then a wind unmirrored the lake.
Then I knelt a little deeper. And I drank.

Kimberly Bruss

The Conversation

In the pasture is buried a pair of leather driving gloves
a man received from his sons for Father's Day.
It started as a joke: a farmer with gloves stitched

and adorned like porcelain. A pickup truck with rusted wheel wells.
Roads given a single letter as a name. And leather gloves
for a man with only seven fingers. Because the joke is funny

and funny until it's not. And one afternoon the farmer, dry gin
down in his mouth, digs a hole in the property's panhandle
and throws the gloves in. The high heat of summer

makes the leather sweat and the farmer's goats
will dig them up if only to smell them, startled
to find something so familiar in the earth's dark recesses.

Kimberly Bruss

This Thing We Do

Winter love is sharper
than any other kind. Lying in bed,
supine and choking on fever,
my mother props me with her rough hands
and slathers mentholated cream on my back
and chest, two dots beneath my nostrils.
Then the red medicine poured into the cap
and pressed against my lower lip,
only a moment's hesitation because we waste
neither time nor resources in this family.
Like biting into a beating heart,
the medicine pumps into my mouth
tasting of the sickness inside me.
She pinches closed my nose and tells me:
Keep it down, baby.
Let it work on you.

Kimberly Bruss

[sic]

The gentlemen's club up the block from my apartment
plays Nina Simone to the nighttime sidewalk
but no one is ever outside because gentlemen
only loiter indoors. When I'm talking
with my mother, she calls the women inside
loose and thinks the gentlemen are their *pimps*
but, then again, she still calls me a *girl* sometimes,
usually in the morning. She says veranda like this:
veranda. *Let's have coffee on the veranda*, though
it's really just a tree-stained porch with no railings
and greening floorboards. We listen to Nina Simone
as she drifts into the yard: *Sea lion woman* she wails.
Sea line woman, C-line woman, see line woman,
see lyin' woman, she lyin' woman.

Kimberly Bruss

Obedience

One time, he had me sit in his dark apartment and close my eyes for four minutes.

I had been to his place above the barbershop only a few times before and I wanted to pillage. He smelled warm wood, burnt cinnamon. I wanted to know where he kept his mail, his floss, his pants. I wanted to map his apartment, charter it, stick my flag in the terrain of his bed.

But he made me sit down on a folding chair in the middle of his kitchen in the dimming light, said in a tobacco-stained voice *Close your eyes*, and there was no question whether I would or not.

My eyes shut tight, he moved out of my reach whenever I tried to touch him, leaving me foolish and small. But it was important for me to know him like that, to know who he was in the dark.

During those four minutes,
he rusted me in a gentle way,
blinding me just long enough
to make me need him.

During those four minutes, he
had me completely and I
would have licked sugar cubes
out of the palm of his hand.

During those four minutes, I
was quiet but he was quieter
and I never knew where he
was or what he was doing
or what he was feeling and
then I didn't know what I was
feeling.

I don't know what he did
during those four minutes,
but it changed me and even
now, without him, I can say
that it was beautiful—a bag of
sugar split and spilling on the
cold kitchen floor.

Catherine Champion

Forgetting the Libyan Sea

Like a sun shattered into glints on the water's surface,
they dispel: the slated mollusk shell, your hands in surf.

Remembering the sea is like morning light seeping
through shut blinds, shadowed amethyst in a room's

corner where night still lives. What time of day was it?
The sun was angled from the west. I remember fatigue,

how the waves recoiled, sepia-toned behind the lenses
of my sunglasses. And you walked towards the brink

of sky, terse and nautical while the horizon backed away
from you, while the sea sounded itself from one endlessness

to another. Home was fathoms behind me, scattering
into the windblown sands, the southern coast of Crete.

Evening followed you to shore. What time of day was it?
The moon was rising, large and red with sun's last flare.

And the tide backed away from me, the saline air held
us both away from sleep, your voice low and approaching,

singing *I'm back, I'm back where I belong*. How long
would I have stayed? Morning seeps through the blinds.

Like a sun shattered into glints on the water's surface,
this all dispels: your hands in surf, unearthing shells.

Tony Crunk

Triptych: Pietà

Lamentation

Mother

the night
in which you

bore me

was
too deep

like death

so deep
like

a mirror

there
is no

other side

Transfiguration

If the flesh
is salt

and mercury
the soul

then why
do the bones

go on keening—

die
thee well

die thee well

—why is god
still shining

in my breast?

Lamentation

Mother

I have given
birth to you

to the orphan
you bore in me

my body
emptied

grows stronger
in its nothingness

and knowing
nothing

can rise
from this place

I rise

Trista Edwards

Birthday Dress

I put it on today, let it slide
over my head, drape my body.
And although it's not my birthday

I feel the currency of this fabric
as it deposits static on my skin,
its thick cotton a scab I pick

steadily. I feel the overwhelming,
snug fit of long years. I feel old.
I've come to anticipate

the annual mending of this
story—the birthday you presented
a dress. Blue, the color you wished

my eyes were. That day we basked
on the rocks, a small pond
in the backdrop. I closed my eyes and you

drew the heavy outline of blue
flowers in the dirt. My dress dipping
over the edge into the pond, a snake

scaling a distant ridge then disappearing
into the water. I wish I could remember
what you said when I opened my eyes.

Rebecca Foust

Droit du Vassal

Take me, says this long, languid lick
of limestone and slate-roof house

corseted by a whalebone-thin fence
anyone could unlace

or shinny over onto the lush lawn.
Inside, the living room light

(curtains left loose and undrawn)
precisely at dusk, clicks on.

At the gate, ten bundles of newsprint
lie where thrown,

their lips peeping from plastic
and swollen with rain.

All of it whispering—*go ahead—go*—
no one at home to say no.

Eamon Grennan

At Shannon (September 2007)

Glancing through the glass dividing us these young men and women in camouflage
drift into the duty-free chattering in small groups laughing together walking
spry in their healthy American bodies as outside the dull west-of-Ireland grey-
green day lightens while they stand by phones and finger-flick through
little pocket notebooks dial and wait then enter into low-voiced talk their backs
to the world or staring out at us who stare in at them these smiling young
with guns who pause for a quick last time-out here in the middle of the journey.

Eamon Grennan

Fullness

O*verflowing with life* says Socrates in Valery which could be said too
of my old neighbour who stands on his own worn threshold
to tell me how the newspapers have piled up on him unread since March
while one rusted bucket and a rusty wheelbarrow shape a still life
on grass cattle-cropped and *green to the very door* and could be said too
of his brindle-cow in calf whose carried creature I can see softly
pulsing in tune and time to its mother's ruminative chewing.

Eamon Grennan

Morning Light

It's on the flat ladder of light the cat refuses to come in on
that morning happens this morning with small shadows
of birds printing images fleet as their flight on it and it's
because he hears mouth-music of morning as mourning music
that there's little to do except see where the sycamore leaves
are doing the jig called *Ticklewind* and infant holly tree leaves
glisten in stiff-pointed speckle-green polished bronze
as if cast by Rodin sometime between *Thought* and *Kisses*.

Eamon Grennan

Things in the Vicinity

White football of the moon going gradually transparent
or the lake stilled to a frozen simulacrum of itself
or the ruddy light on Leiter Hill falling into its own reflection
or slashes of sudden morning flung from Duchruach
onto the trunks of these sycamores
or it is the lightning wings of chaffinches
squabbling over breadcrumbs
or dew glistening on grassblades
or the fact that one minute in the life of the world
this autumn morning is as Cézanne says
going by! paint it as is! that makes me bend again to
the page my live and accidental hand is shadowing.

Sarah Gridley

Liquidity

Unstopperable light.

I have never stopped in Sandusky but know what the name remembers:
water in water pools. Where does the time go. Like anyone
I wonder this. I should be clear as I can about where the time goes.

This is the time of year when supermarkets begin to put out ornamental cabbages.
I like ritual, but the idea of ornamental cabbages is opaque to me,
opaque to the point of grubbiness.

Yesterday afternoon, sunlight stood one tree out
inside the woods. I wish for things in addition to water
to take on the clear shimmer of water.

Benjamin Grossberg

"Well, Shaniqua's Taking Her Time"

Unless the cashier is wearing a name tag,
you're a racist.

A man who reaches age forty, still single?
Certainly, there's a reason

though it may not be obvious
even to him, the walls of the head

becoming increasingly thick,
some batting, some fiberglass wadding

accumulating within the skull
making that space—the circular

library of consciousness—
increasingly less penetrable.

And there your homunculus sits,
feet up on the desk in the center,

boots crossed on the leather blotter,
leafing through an old *OK!* magazine.

The walls are lined with dusty books
and a ladder on railings

that he sometimes uses to ride
the arc of the room. He sure is

a handsome fella. I love his beard,
the white streak in it—aging, no dye.

He's like a garden gnome, but sexy.
There's a knock on the door:

it's me. I'm standing next to you
on line, where the cashier has started

ringing our purchases,
but let's imagine my homunculus

has come by for a powwow.
Couldn't that happen

if we lay ear to ear on a flat surface?
Knock, knock, I say. I'm forty, too,

and want to love you. *Knock, knock*.
This homunculus walks into

another head, and he sits down
in the chair usually reserved

for the secretary taking dictation,
or for interviewees, who sit up

especially straight in their best
business suits. *Who's there?*

your homunculus says from his desk
where he lights up a fat cigar.

Or maybe I don't get that far,
maybe he says it from behind

the door, which he cracks
a little, when I knock. I don't

know; I've never been in there
to see. *Knock, knock*, I say.

And I say also,
who's there? I say it twice because

I really want to know.
Then I thank the cashier.

"Let's go home," I tell you,
"and eat." Let's go home, I think,

and try to make it through one night
without fighting.

Joseph Harrison

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Kid

There they were in the basement, the whole troop
Of Cub Scouts, including his brothers,
Instructed by attending mothers
In projects spread out on the Ping-Pong table
Right at eye level (he was five
And out of the loop),
Where he could, barely, see
A jumbled activity
He was unable
To join line up and come alive,
As each initiate was shown
How to fold a *Reader's Digest* into a cone,
Which soon, spray-painted green
Then sprinkled with glitter and cotton strands
(And just like that somebody's life expands:
Was this the coolest thing he'd seen?),
Emerged from their clumsy hands
A Christmas tree.
What strange, imagined lands,
What inner sea

Right then conceived their dark geography
And left the issued world behind,
Their black maps rising in his mind?
What territories, perilous and wild,
Whose powers would demand oblation,
Then came to be,
In firmaments apart,
The regions of his heart?
The scheming child
(Always beyond representation)

Had a vague notion what to do:
He made, with cotton balls and Elmer's glue,
A shapeless pile of gloop
Proudly affixing to the floor
Off in a corner behind the basement door.
So what he wasn't in the group?
He'd seen what life was for
And made a start.
This thing was his, and more:
It was his art.

Rita Ann Higgins

Shades of Truth

for RMCC

"Better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunk Christian."

—Herman Melville

I might write a poem today,
a watertight poem
where words may dovetail
or even do a handstand.
It could have people in it—
or the dead fox
I saw on the way to Costelloe Lodge,
or the man and donkey
I saw on the way back.
It could have miles of sea and seagulls in it,
Galway seagulls,
unfussy, they go straight for the juggler.
It could have a tablecloth
from The White Star Line in it.

It could have Nantucket in it.
It could have The Spouter Inn in it.
It could have Ishmael and Queequeg
wrapped twice around each other
in a bed made from whalebone and sweat.

But if I add the sailor and harpooner
locked in a loving embrace
all the pitch long night—
with the harpooner's breath
hot on Ishmael's ear—

it will be different then,
the whole tale will be damned,
tossed asunder
in maelstrom, skylark and yaw.

Ron Houchin

Glass Marbles

Each time I won one of those spheres
The color of river water,
I felt the joy of holding a small world.
There were flaws and swirls
Of continents and fissures of rivers.

Each glassie was perfect in its difference
From others, just as we were. All
Aggies, Cat eyes, steelies, and
Common Solids were perfect
By dint of manufacturing only.

When I knelt just outside
The game circle, like a small god
Outside a *primum mobile,*
To knock certain planets
From their orbits, I aimed at glassies.

They wore no makeup, no mask,
Held the beauty of
The imperfectly handmade
For this small, close
Game of the hand.

Tom C. Hunley

Reverend Timothy Lovejoy

Brothers-uh and Sisters-uh, *Life in Hell*
was the original title of today's sermon,
after a comic strip by our creator,
Matt Groening, who, in his benevolent wisdom,
conceived the entire Simpson family, each named
after members of his own family, except for the boy,
whose name is, of course, an anagram for *Brat*.
The son of a Mennonite minister, our creator
is himself an agnostic, which I can understand.
I'm not sure I believe in myself either, to tell you the truth.

There's Something About the Virgin Mary
was the next title I considered for this message,
but I must confess that my belief in monotheism
has been shaken, Christians. Did you know that Matt
Groening only penned four episodes of *The Simpsons?*
So it appears that Apu and his 700 million fellow Hindus
may be correct, friends, that there are many creators.
Sorry, Lenny and Carl, but there's still no goddess
with a thousand boobs-uh. I don't know what I know
any more, except that I love my model trains and my Helen,
who could have been a model, and my little Jessica,
despite rumors that she stole from the collection plate.
I also know that even if there is more than one god-uh,
none of us is one. Any of us could be written off this show
like Maude Flanders. I felt so bad for Ned that I regretted
having my dog do his dirty sinful business in Ned's yard-uh.

I finally landed on the title *What C. Montgomery Burns*
and Lisa Simpson Did. Let us recall how Mr. Burns
proclaimed himself "The New God," how he told his workers

You may now praise me as the Almighty and how his robe
then went up in flames. Let us also recall that fateful All Hallow's Eve
when Lisa created a tiny world whose inhabitants built
a graven image of her. *Shouldn't you people be groveling?*
And bring me some shoes. Nice ones, she said.
Although there are many creators, I implore you, above all,
not to worship the poet, who swears he will free us
with his free verse. Free verse? Verse won't set you free.
Only the truth will set you free. That's in the Good Book.
Somewhere towards the back.

Richard Jackson

Jacob's Fear

I have lived too long as a prisoner of clouds.
They float like clothes strung over the barbed wire
from one of your camps, a story that has no words.
I don't even know if these dreams are my own.
What I know is based on what is not there: a shadow
behind a wavering curtain in a fifth-floor walk-up,
a mirror filled with disbelief, the dark spaces
between stars. What is it that any of us fights with
except what betrays us, and what betrays us is
what we are. My own sons knew nothing but revenge
for their sister and wiped out a town. There is a shame
that is the hidden face of the world. It is all betrayal.
All we can do is limp through history. Every bone is
a kind of crutch. After a while I became only a few words
scribbled to mean whatever you want them to mean.
Sometimes I believe the only truths worth reading are
spray-painted on overpasses and the rocky sides of hills.
The afternoon walks through fields like a farmer whose
crops have failed. This is not what you wanted to hear,
and frankly, you need a kind of stage manager to keep
all this straight. I too once thought our dreams escaped
to inhabit other souls when we died. I too thought that
the bodies at Babi Yar, arranged so efficiently so as not
to have to dig too deep, was a moment, a displaced
fragment of history. One time I knew exactly what to do.
One time I thought it was just God's punishment
the way your preachers justify bombings and tornadoes,
or the gassing of whole Syrian or Kurdish villages,
as something deserved. How perverse to excuse
one nightmare with another. Who would want that God?
Now I am just tired of revenge. Why should our words be

indictments, our lives summarized on police blotters?
Time is tired of being time. What does the fish think
as it leaves the water, and the insect at that very moment?
Does it matter that this is the only mystery worth knowing?
Each millennium the planets create a new geometry of the sky.
The question is, will any of this change us. Will it stop
the stars from turning their backs on us? Once, back then,
they changed my name, but I left a shadow there. Now
I am afraid our dreams wait, quivering, hanging from skies
like those bats infected with fungus in caves we can't explore.

Richard Jackson

The Rest

Walter Butts, in memoriam

Restless sky. A moon leaning over like a prayer.
Its pond's reflection revealing more and more.
There's a nest waiting for a bird, or a leaf waiting
for a tree.
Meanwhile you've stepped into your own
unexpected, unexplored world. The eyes adjust
to the darkness and see what no one else can see.

Anaxagoras thought the whole cosmos was a single
mind. There are a dozen white dwarfs surrounded
by graveyards of stars waiting in our own galaxy
to blindside us.

Today they found two fingers and
a tooth stolen in the 18th century from Galileo's
tomb to put on display. They rest there like planets
or stars he forgot to catalogue. If only we could bribe
the clock.

The wind is angry. Light jabs at the shadows.
The sparrow that took refuge on my screen porch can't
get out. Its idea is to turn itself into an angel.
In 1789
Herschel described the heavens as the Garden of Eden.
It was, he knew, a world where the eye could never rest.

Now the sky has abandoned its clouds. Hardly anyone
I know believes in God.

Sometimes the rain freezes
so high up in the atmosphere it never touches earth,
but it is still raining above us. To have a belief
doesn't mean to have a reason. Mangrove leaves
collect salt and fall off, saving the rest of the tree.

Any consolation we have is the dream of another
consolation. A road waiting for a traveler.

Every death
drifts through the heart like cries from invisible
galaxies.

The stars have turned their backs on us. You've
left, now, simply because the sky has fallen asleep.

Katharine Johnsen

Impression

In the foreground, a couple,
my grandparents,
her poised smile countering
the seriousness of their gazes.

Behind them: the car—one of his Fords,
pulled into the driveway; and the trees
separating her mother's house
from the one next door. Perhaps

he didn't hear the photographer's call
for stillness—lips parted as if he
just spoke, what did he say to make
her smile?—chatting as they waited

for the shutter. Pull the photograph closer
and notice first the strange lines ribbing
her face: the swirl of a thumbprint, its contrast
heightened against her fair complexion.

Follow it—across their buttoned coats,
the house, the trees behind them—
back to the developer, who pressed
just a bit too hard as he handled

the negative, bathed it in solution,
hung the print on a line to dry.
He lingers—his impression lasting
on the film, large as they are.

Troy Jollimore

Syllabus of Errors

You will first treat of the restricted light,
then, having achieved full adequacy
in this, of the free light, and finally, after
many exercises and much
disciplined contemplation, you will treat
of the light of luminous bodies.
Only then will you be ready
to make a study of love, of the void
that precipitates longing, of the soft tissues
that compose the kissing organs in humans,
the slow, cold fire these organs encompass.
Young women, their hearts. Passion, the diverse
expressions of and the obstructions thereto.
Whence comes the construction of children, then children,
the neglect and abandonment of. Having mastered
this, you will next turn to the pursuit
of competence in the fields of cartography,
of argumentation, of the imitation of beasts,
and of archery. As it comes to the arrow
in midair that the bow is the only
home it will ever really know,
and that it does not love the target at all,
so the seeds of delayed understanding
will come to you, drifting softly from some
high branch or low cloud to lodge in your hair,
on a Tuesday morning, perhaps. Whence come tears.
Whence comes the tuning of faint melodies
voiced by devices of ancient assembly.
Whence the correction of orbits, the rotation
of the eyes or of songbirds when the one
draws the other after. Why a prick

to the syrinx may still the heart of a man.
Whence frenzy by virtue of illness. Whence envy.
Whence shame. Whence trembling. Whence sleep. A figure
to show whence comes the semen. Whence urine.
Whence milk. Thunderbolts, their fatal capacity.
Joy, the various simulacra of.
Of the habits of men. Of ceaseless sobbing.

Troy Jollimore

Ars Poetica

I'm not in very much pain these days
is a terrible way to start a poem
because the poet's pain is what puts the asses
in the seats, it's the half-nude neon
lady on the sign outside
the strip club, it's the guy with the big
yellow twirling arrow outside the furniture
store, and without the poet's pain,
what do you have? Some pretty words
about barn swallows and oleanders,
some standard verses re: lovely lakes
and the midnight water laps softly, peace
sneaking up behind you on tender cat pads,
etc., etc.… The poet's pain
is his bread and butter, his keys to the kingdom,
his ace in the hole. It's what you take away
from him when it's the last act and you really
want to grind his pathetic rhyme-spitting face
in the gravel. It's what the world has gifted
him, and damn him if he won't carry it
out of the kitchen on a big
precariously balanced silver platter, furiously
steaming. No one needs, or wants, or should
be asked to tolerate a happy poet.
I'm feeling fine, the therapy is going well
are words that should never appear
in a poem. The game cannot be won
and will be called on account of darkness.
Our rhymes whack away at the world like hatchets
thrown into a dead wet stump. No wonder
so many people keep dying, what

with all the elegies we keep writing.
Let's take a break, some suggest. Yes,
but poetry makes nothing happen, and so
can hardly be blamed for this. Would
that this were true. Would that people would stop
beginning sentences that aren't questions
with the word 'would.' You might as well just
wear a billboard around your neck that says
I'm a poet, come fondle my sensitive soul,
lick my barbaric yawp, for I know
what the songs have promised me. Actually,
I never found out what the songs had intended
to promise me. I only know
that I never received it. Was someone supposed
to take me aside at some point and whisper it
into my ear? Or write it on
the underside of a cup of coffee
that got served to me somewhere? Is there still
a chance that this might happen?
Tell the gods, tell the singers of songs,
tell the ghosts that I'm ready.

Jenna Kilic

White Fire

for the astronomer, G.S.

"Take my name," you say—"but not right now."
I laugh. We're drunk. This is your third proposal
like this. I want to say, *sure,* in that way you find
ambivalent. A *yes* would sober up
your stare. Instead, I let the silence build,
stroke your arm and brush away the thought.
You cut through, whisper in my ear,
"J.S."
"I like the sound of that," I say.
You say, "I love making love to you." A year ago
we called it *fucking;* six months later, *sex*;
now, *love.* I tell you, "Our language measures more
than you give it credit for. It lives beyond
space-time." You don't respond, but your smile asks,
"Why do poets always appropriate
astronomical terminology
they never understand?"
"Metaphor,"
I say, "explains the inexplicable."

When you fall asleep, I'm greeted by a fear
I've never known before. There are no words
between us now. It's snowing harder. In spring
you called me, *Wife.* You were drunk, and I
drunk enough to let the context fall
where language couldn't measure love. Black hole
pulled it away, but now the flakes light up—
white fire, an expulsion of stars. Wake up. Argue.
Tell me things you know
I can't explain.
Stay, and help me make my metaphors.

David Kirby

The Irritating Professor

I'm giving my grad-school report on Henry James's use
of the word "foreshortening" and glance up to see if
my professor is open-jawed at my delivery, my casual
if erudite approach to a thorny problem, or at least smiling
and nodding as I lay out what is, to my mind, a hypothesis
that is or at least will be one of the major contributions
to twenty-first century literary theory, but no, he's holding

his pen up and looking out the window and opening
and closing one eye at a time and making objects jump
from left to right and back again: now the bell tower's
to the side of the admin building and now it isn't.
Now the squirrel's on the branch and now it's in
the bird's nest—think how mad the bird will be!
Oh, look, a cloud in the shape of either Beethoven's head

or the coastline of Equatorial Guinea. Now Beethoven's head
is on a pedestal and now it's floating out over the ocean.
And here's Equatorial Guinea where it should be, between
Cameroon and Gabon, and now it's all the way across
the Atlantic between French Guiana (no relation)
and Surinam. In fact, it looks better there. Maybe Equatorial
Guinea should be in South America; probably its human

rights record would improve or at least not get any worse.
Well, it couldn't get any worse. And why shouldn't
Beethoven's head be on somebody else's shoulders,
like Mahler's or Philip Glass's, or nobody's shoulders
at all? Why shouldn't it be atop the Empire State Building
or maybe the Grand Lisboa Hotel in Macau, one of
the ugliest buildings in the world—ha, ha! Then it wouldn't

be so ugly, and then maybe the people who stay there
would want to stay longer and spend more money
in the bar. My professor is really irritating me. Then again,
I'm probably boring him. But my fellow grad students
don't seem bored; they're sticking their lower lips out
and looking sideways and nodding the way people do
when they are thinking or simulating thought. Maybe

I'm not as smart as I think I am. Nah, that couldn't be it.
What would I be doing in grad school if I weren't
pretty damned smart! On the other hand, some of
my fellow students don't seem all that bright. They're
sloggers, really, just stack rats—spend enough time
in the library and master the *MLA Style Sheet* and maybe
you don't have to be all that brilliant. So if they're

agreeing with me, who's the dummy here? It'll be years
before anyone knows whether my hypothesis will be
a major contribution to twenty-first century literary theory
or not. By then either I'll have had an excellent career
or a mediocre one or a downright disgraceful one
shot through with scandal, marred by lousy teaching
evaluations and the inability to publish anything

beyond an occasional letter in the local newspaper
grousing about student parties in my neighborhood
and the evils of college football. And my professor will
be dead by then. At the moment, though, he's right:
we don't know how things are going to turn out,
so why not fool around with them, have some fun,
for Christ's sake? One day we'll all be dead—well, they say.

Len Krisak

Rondeau: Vico's Revenge

"What goes around will come around" is more
Than just a saying, dear. The night you swore
You'd leave me standing in that dark surround,
That empty parking lot, we ran aground
Together—shipwrecked on a single shore.

And you abandoned us. You thought for sure
That somewhere else you had been spoken for,
And love abounding waited—till you found
What goes around

Will come around. And what you'd thought a door
Was only ajar. Left lonely (and poor),
Your story came knocking; I heard no sound.
For I was free, and you, my dear, were bound—
Bound for far less than glory. What's in store?
What goes around.

Quinn Lewis

Midnight

We come back to the hour that divides
again and again, that splits the dark
like a bone-tooth comb. The other girl-kind

do not know we can slip onto either side
of the meridian. A trill,
"It's *mezzanotte!*" We must rise

with our two hearts, blue eyes, red hair. We,
striga, we, witchweed, must smash their porcelain
vine, set like a child's tea service, on riverbanks

and railroad beds. They have it all mapped out,
each berry strung like tea-stained pearls passed
down from their mothers. We are forgotten

at slumber parties, for fear we'd come shrieking in:
blocking out the moon, knotting their hair, stealing
their breath while they sleep. Our tongues hang,

rough as cats', dripping iron from blood.
They refuse to remember the day we rose from our bed
at the slightest pad-drop of a tennis ball.

We blinked in the sun, stepped out with our rackets.
We wanted to play.
They believed we had confused ourselves with morning.

Joanne Lowery

A Whale of Love

I lived like an island, John Donne
au contraire, blue blue everywhere,
adrift on a raft cobbled
from spars, the view all horizon.

Suddenly alongside, a huge shadow rose
and spewed ideas in a shower
from earth's largest head.
They made sense sparkling midair,
rinsing me in ambergris and stink.
Forgive me for being enamored.

One sideways eye glared with what I presumed
was passion, Jonah long gone
from his gut. I tried to get swallowed
but never made it past smile and tongue.

You're a fluke! he declared, smacking
the waves. Stop blubbering! Puns
bobbed like castoffs, oceanic junk.
I rocked in his wake. But even
the largest mammal ends up a speck
with heart an inch too small, love
miles away, out of sight, rescue sunk.

Michael Marberry

Lineage

How can this word be robbed of its weight? I am
a white man and come from a long line of racists,
whom I love, abhorrently. My name: a question
on God, a woad hill with soon-to-be-blue fabrics.
I miss the days of language. (But there is no room
here for the kind and inside voices of literature—
only isocheims and kudzu lungs filled to the brim
with choke, various maladies.) I don't want to die.
I don't want to be sad anymore, even as the earth
reveals to me this ancient irony: No one survives
the future. We must lose the places we love most;
we cannot help it. And for all this, there is a quiet
resignation: perfect as water, its logarithmic ripples,
or the sight of corolla growing in a deep, black bowl.

John McKernan

Birthday Presents

Buddy Holly confirmed me At least twice

Huge spools of air and vast tubes of sunlight

Abandoned by their owners on many golf courses

Mean girls with soft lips to help me learn silence

I learned Morse code from Babe Ruth

It could have been the Buddha talking from a vodka bottle

Floating in the Saddle Creek mescaline ditch

I made my first confession to Santa Claus

Superman baptized me Probably in a gravel quarry

Daniel Boone kept sending smoke signals saying

Hunger I highly recommend more hunger

And the cold bones of that skinny kid one winter

Lying in a sleeping bag on a cot in Zero Forest

Boy Scout winter blizzard Omaha weekend campout

Staring across a wide field of snow with crows

Ice cracking into the shape of a green canvas tent

I didn't move until I was starving Starving

Zachariah McVicker

Anamnesis on the Susquehanna

River's shore, dusk time, not yet the hour
of gnat cloud. Bone puzzle of a mallard
in the shallows. With sticks, we disinter
the bleached skin-girders of the drowned

and arrange, what we can, of a skeleton
on the sand. Limbs missing, a whole wing
drug off in the torrent. Yet what's gone
can't obscure the form of the remaining—

we know what we have here. The sodden down
still clings to the bones it knew—I was mistaken.
In the cold water of the brain, even memory decays.

Yet I still have this image skeleton,
the bones' ossein, a damp-feather black pigment:
effigies for remembrance, tinder for flames.

Robert Miltner

apple tree in bloom

after Gustave Caillebotte

the satyr walks as easily as a bee legging pollen a whited path transects the horizon tiles

rouge the farm house roofline & the stone cider mill: pippins to russets to

cloche to pigeonnette & look: an estate is a plan as strict

as a scripture there is no inkwash design black streaming its shadow

as if it's dark tattoo nor action painting nor watercolor blur nor black & white photo

transcriptions of the provincial road down which that satire

of a centaur leather jacketed & goat-legged & chrome-horsed ending idleness with the deft

touch of a cutpurse took Eurydice on his BMW motorcycle sound storm & dust cumulus & then silence so stark that no birds sang thus

Orpheus was left lost down the fence-lined espaliered lane of the red-roofed domain wandering the distance in obscure movie camera moves panning the grove's rows zooming & jump-cutting perspectives luring

Orpheus into a known canvas yet he's as uncertain as the roots snaking under the copse reaching up to dreamed transubstantial light thick as touches of paint brushed on blossoming boughs once the French doors greened open to him arms wide & wanton & waiting once the bridal path was flower petal & narcissus once the gravel walk was well-swept as a good translation

Mary Moore

Eating the Eighteenth-Century Still Life

The world shows its hand all at once, a spill
of tangerines, mangoes, nectarines,
to the table's wheat- and earth-hued grain,
which ripples the receiving. Even
the straw-gold cornucopia's a sign
of plenitude. We are meant to think:
fruit trees breed for our delight.

Looking, I swallow orbs of orange
and peach-blush red, puckered
stem holes, oblation of rounded line
to rounder things. Eating, I fill out.
The caught light anoints my arms
in swaths; I'm oiled and muscled,
cut like circus strong men.
There's no need for stealth, only strength
and health: the world is ripe for my taking.

Even the birds think ripe thoughts,
round bodied, embowered like fruit.
Magnified, the paint strokes V'd
symmetrically make feathers
like miniature pines. Each small bird
is nearly a landscape! Such orderly
coats of gloss and reverie.

Mary Moore

Woman Seated on Stairs

Gray oxides of sky, leaf-toothed moon,
Venus's star fritillary white on a notched edge:
you influence it all, the stairs and the door,
the slope to the West, your silhouette
refusing to drown in things. One dimension
is undisclosed. The fourth is resistance
to sidewalks and mortuary columns, and the pure
sense of being singular but more, an aura,
as if skin were the phantom
and jumpy translucence
of flame. It loosely bounds you,
integrating around the spine:
the flexible ivory from which flesh and wish
radiate. You are these incongruent
vectors, the dicey idea of being human, no omen
the painter might hint at, no dominion.
The behavior of muscle, bone, tendon,
like the young birch on the slope in wind bends
the language of skin, distinguishes.

Mary Moore

The Digger

Alameda

Use the tools of boat riggings, faint bells, the clink and ca-chink
of metal fittings, wuffle of furled sails (though who can dig
with such light gear?), and the tiers of teal-gray pine, needles

arrayed in bundles like stars; enter the hills no higher than barrows
where smooth boulders, hunched like the backs of diggers, breach
the soil (though what is buried there but roots, sand eels, the blind,

moon-eyed tubers?); drink in the wild orchid that roots at the foot
of the stairs like a cup of thick cream, the petals inked with lavender
whiskers, beaded with eyelets of early morning mist; imagine:

catbird, brown here like pine mazda, and the one stingray you saw
or supposed, ghost of a triangle, muscling bayward through the keels.

Jeff Newberry

South Georgia: Late October

The wind's
rigid as
need
for fall's
sleep

teeth rot.
knit bone.
the cold,
numb
of year's

Spired pines
90 degrees. I
ache
fade:
end.

Brent Newsom

Saint Gerard

Thirty-Eight Weeks

I help her on with the gown, a cotton curtain,
paisley print fringed with ties and metal snaps
but no armholes or back, nothing we feel safe
calling a neckline. Her lips move as if in prayer.
I wrap the gown around her, press the rivets home,
then bow the ties behind. This looks like love.

A sudden cramping after we made love.
Her labor starting? No. Now she's certain.
It's not her time. She wants to go back home.
I drove us here. She starts to cry, and I snap
at her: *It's too late to leave.* On the wall, a prayer
to Saint Gerard, patron of the pregnant, for safe

delivery. I mumble maxims: *better safe*
and so on. My fear for the child has trumped my love
for her. Lying down, she trembles like cornered prey.
Though we're alone, we draw the striped curtain.
A nurse enters. A latex glove snaps
against a wrist, and two lubed fingers home

in on her cervix, press toward the child's home
these past nine months. She grimaces. I'm safe,
seated beside the bed. I watch, and she snaps
her head away, to hide the face I love.
Something's descended, a heavy, opaque curtain
of silence hanging between us. I read the prayer

on the wall and recall, she asked me to pray
an hour ago, while we were still at home.
I said I would. Then a magician's curtain
closed, and *poof!*—just smoke and lights. A heist; a safe
emptied of compassion. An inside job. What's love
if not the patience to pray? Guilt's whip snaps

at my back. *Mea culpa*. How I wish I could snap
my fingers, be back on our saggy couch, and pray:
God of peace, make mine a patient love,
and free from fear. She turns. Her eyes plead, *Home*.
The nurse agrees. Mother and child are sound, safe.
I exhale, then help her dress, draw back the curtain.

At home, my penance of final touches: the nursery's curtains,
safety plugs, old frames prepared for new snapshots.
And this: to pray that I might learn, and relearn, love.

Paul Pickering

Viewing Kandinsky's *Improvisation No. 27*

I am looking into the Kandinsky at the Met
and the woman I love is nudging me
to move along. *All I see is a broken fence,* she says,
maybe a clock face. She prefers Vermeer,
but will humor me. She asks,
Did you lose something in there?
And for a second I'm nineteen again.
It's the year I wiped the mirrors clean,
mopped the tiled bathroom floor,
and emptied wastebaskets that held
the secretary's yogurt cups
and shredded office notes.
My then girlfriend and I were hunkered
in the examination room (lights out
because the windows faced Broad Street).
We'd been drinking vodka in the dark. Drunk kids,
we'd stripped our shirts and fumbled with
the ultrasound machine. On the monitor,
the heart looked like a circus act
where inside each chambered beat
a firebreather blew the ephemeral bloom.
All night we touched each other, felt for passages
through palm and tongue and teeth
while the whole room glowed in something like firelight.
Firelight, I say. *This wild landscape of colors*
and blurred bodies makes me think of firelight.
And when I turn to scan the crowd
of patrons mingling, I sense that carnival
heat pulsing just beneath our skin,
wavering with each indrawn breath,
and flashing like an ember spark
that launches every now and then.

Stephen Priest translating *Gergen Manstoff*

Newsstand in Winter

The papers cost the same
each day
whatever

the headline.
I've forsaken

my sex.
The jaywalkers' umbrellas:
crow-darkened elms.

Stephen Priest translating *Gergen Manstoff*

Ode to My Landlady

Days spent
reciting
the names of paints
in old Sears catalogs,

the TV on, brutish,
her soap operas
like cathedrals for the blind.

Stephen Priest translating *Gergen Manstoff*

Romantic Notions

Summers ago,
some boy
wrote you

a poem

in rocks
beneath your window;
it stays there,

hidden under grass,
waiting
for the lawn mower's touch.

Stephen Priest translating *Gergen Manstoff*

Studies in Postmodernism

Clonazepam Sunday,
cigarette,
Internet-dawdle.

The squirrels
place their shells
on my stoop
for safekeeping.

Stephen Priest translating Gergen Manstoff

I Am the Salieri of Myself and Other Observations

I know the Old Masters
from bio-films:
wax-dappled lips,
bodice-fluent fingers—

yet uglier than us,
unpracticed
at whitening
their teeth.

Melissa Range

Fortunes of Men

after the Old English poem

When a youngun's born,
only God, the Anointer, knows
what the winters have in store:

the Lord is on him like a duck
on a Junebug; the Lord tracks her
like a trained coonhound

and orders fate and fortune
just as it pleases him to do.
To each he gives a dram:

one will wring enough of chickens' necks
to get to where she hates
the smell of chicken and dumplings.

One will work the dirt; one will punch
a timecard; one will be too agitated
to hold down any job for long.

It is one's doom to get switched
all through life. (The Measurer makes
trees bear switches in their seasons.)

Another will rev his Dodge
around the lake of a Saturday night,
lit up on Old Crow,

but will never wreck, never run
some innocent off the road;
that lucky one will fall

into the yard and pass out
safely in the grass that God,
The Sower, made to be his bed.

A certain one mixes Xanax and methadone;
his veins shake him to a youthful death,
and his mother forgets for a moment

her husband's dealings with some skank,
her slide into the yellow Camaro
of some high-school boy;

her own name is weary to her.
One must wear the badge,
must kick in the doors

of pot-growers and meth-heads;
and one must get his door kicked in.
So has the Enforcer planned it,

to whom men must give thanks.
A certain one must get a job
(the only job for miles around,

as the Lord, the Overseer,
ordains) dynamiting
mountains to get at the coal;

another one must use the coal
to heat her stove; another one
must use the coal to heat

her curling iron. A certain one
gets rich converting cheap land,
pure water, cheap labor into rayon.

One must fix a supper every night;
and one must give the supper away
to them worse off just down the pike.

One is good at figures; one is good
at nailing boards; one is good
at telling tales; one is good

at meanness; one is good
at taking rednecks for a ride;
one is good at doing without.

Must one sing of this? One must:
to a certain one is given the harp,
which like the sword does not depart

from this land; and that one must
praise God for the sorrow
he creates. So the mighty Lord,

the Regulator, deals out to all
across the surface of the earth—
and also in these hills, which he makes

to crumble, as befits his notions,
and his plenty, and his mercies,
which one cannot resist, but does.

Melissa Range

A Skiff of Snow

Not a boatload but a sift that barely sticks—
the flour sloughed from a rolling pin,
flakes scarce as skiffs in a landlocked state.

In the ballads brought over
with the Scots, women pine for word
of a lover or a son put out to sea,

a skiff of song scabbing the ground
beneath the willow when they're buried,
beneath the ocean when they're not.

My father on a ladder doesn't sing;
he cusses, banging boards
onto the wind-scrapped barn,

roof half off, wood give out, sky
spitting snow, salvaging
his daddy's daddy's daddy's work—

and before him, even, a man
who didn't row, he walked here
(when this was barely Tennessee)

from New Jersey, and before that,
his father drifted in from Holland,
England, Germany, or France

(the family trees disagree
about which accent
got mangled into mine).

When I left my mountain home to hitch
to cities, I became a hick,
my skiff of twang scuffing the air,

breaking on scoffers' ears like ships
busting on rocks. My granddaddy,
on a job in Cincinnati, drinking up

his paycheck, heard "You must be one of them
hillbillies" soon as he opened his mouth
to ask the baseball score;

he replied, "They is two kinds of people
in this world, hillbillies and sons
of bitches—so what does that make you?"

Then he slugged the feller one,
or got slugged, depending
on who's telling it.

"It's a-skiffin'," we say,
to mean there's not much,
there won't be much, and it'll be gone

in two shakes. It's untelling
where it goes. It's untelling
who'll tell it once it's gone.

Rachel Richardson

The Mime

The lamp-lit living room is strewn
with impersonations, too: a cardboard house,
its doors ajar, a baby doll strapped in
to her chair, half-erased dogs and rabbits
chalked onto a child's-height easel.
Each day she rearticulates the world,
crawls in and out of her small shelter
punctured with stars. Across the room
our little tree twinkles on its metal stand,
adorned with two real nests, abandoned,
and a dozen colorful felt birds, to replace them.

Rachel Richardson

Cathedral

On a snowy rise
bright with silence,
the wet, heavy branches
of pines newly clothed in snow
and no tracks yet
from animal or vehicle,
with that cottony closeness
of the frigid air
undisturbed, that
palace made of lace,
of ice, and nothing
and no one, and no road
even remaining
but the path between trees to wend
the way deeper into quiet
and the whiteness
complete, blinding
—I corkscrewed,
spun, came to rest
in a drift.

This is what might
be called luck, or youth.
I sat watching
the weightless flakes
blow from the burdened trees.
Praise nothing.
This fullness.

Shane Seely

Forest Cemetery

I would say *clearing*
but the woods don't clear—
just a huddle of old stones
stumped like dead teeth
among the pines. Where
a tree has come over—storm
strike, plague beetle, lean
wind—brambles crowd
the stone. The carved
faces are long since
worn: lichen, simple
weather, perhaps once
the fingers of a mourner.
He must have lived
nearby—he and his
family must have hauled
the pine-plank coffin here
and left it in the picked hole,
what the rough ground gave
for the occasion. Then back
to the clear-cut hillside,
to the stripped log,
to the choked streams
feeding the mills. And now
this copse of stone, hunched
on ground the forest has retaken,
this celebration of forgetting.

Austin Segrest

Lookout Mountain

As you drive down the valley, Lookout Mountain
crests, a green wall-wave gathering you
into the fact of her death: the cemetery
tucked under the bluff, the plaque's precision
blocked in caps, a neatness to it all
she might have liked. And maybe this
is why you're brushing off ants, ripping grass
the mower missed, or winding a stray
whip of weed-eater cable around your fist.
Good steward, good son, you were a good son.
Now let the lines unravel. Let her name
survive its saying. A motorcade
passes, graves reflected down the long
hearse window. You're already someone else.

Austin Segrest

Meet the Beatles

Just what that something is the "Oh yeah, you"
John says she's got the hand he wants to hold
and which part of love because he can, he must
he hides with his guitar the kind of man
he begs to be the words inside her mouth
when my mother set the needle rooting down
into the raunch to beat time out of need
there wasn't a one of her girlfriends "Oh yeah, you"
clapping, bangs, hips the syncopated drums
who didn't come at once to understand
her record player and books and piles of records
the hand he wants to hold when my mother
set the needle and, on cue with the strum
the words inside her mouth began to rhyme
there wasn't a one of her girlfriends gathered round
to hear the news her long frame rooting down
into the raunch where rock and roll began
with the first "Oh yeah, you" that happiness
he hides with his guitar there wasn't a one
of her girlfriends gathered round her record player
and books and piles of records who didn't come
when he begs to be her man to rhyme her body
with the strum the double backbeat drums
to understand just what that something is
John says she's got the kind of man he means
clapping, bangs, hips where rock and roll began
to beat time out of need need out of time

Eric Smith

The Arsonist's Lament

If like fire I could lash the fields
and climb the crowns of pines
to test the air with my tongue,
would the soot-stunned dream
of me, one who rewrites the dark
codices in the libraries of flame?
Or will I bed down in the horn
of a ram, quiet as the moth's
applause? I hum to the wires
in the walls of an empty room
that once ached with ardor.
Memories, banked in ash, persist,
abandoned to the rain's erasures.
I will never be the man who worries
the earth with furrows. I burn
like those who spell the hidden names
of kerosene in the yellow grasses.
For I have watched the world emerge
from a ductile seed, have seen the men
who raise their sons in fists of smoke
and stamp on the sky dark alphabets
full of syllables so raw they sting
the throat. I lift myself to that song.

Matthew Buckley Smith

Last Call at the Conference Hotel

At two they were still married
To others asleep back home.
Their talk stayed small and varied—
Her plans, his aging Greek tome.

They knew enough to keep shy
Of a nightcap in her suite,
Enough not to say goodbye
Or what year they might next meet.

She pulled away from his side
Just one of her sun-bright hairs
And laughed a last time, or tried,
And carried herself upstairs.

As she went he turned to look
At his hands and raised no wave
And found the place in his book
He'd half-forgotten to save:

So a man roped to a mast
By his oarsmen and his choice
Aches to return when he's passed
The final, pitiless voice,

And sirens forget the sweet
Nothing as soon as it's sung,
And all one cannot repeat
Halters the heart with the tongue.

Matthew Buckley Smith

Elegy Without Consolation

When you are very old and I am dead
And silence fills the pages of our bed

And strangers wear the things I used to fold
And neither sons nor sleep can blunt the cold,

When every hour a different faucet leaks
And somebody keeps moving the antiques

And days collect on windowsills and years
And what is yours of beauty disappears,

When you extend your hand to find at dawn
The names for watch and keys and wallet gone

And all the lines that litter every page
Are hieroglyphics from another age,

Take time to linger on the white below
The words of comfort others seem to know.

R.T. Smith

Johnson and the Birds

Was it that brilliant buffoon
Samuel Johnson who said
that to be tired of birds
is to be tired of life? Maybe,
and I admit I'm now weary
of their society—coo and warble,
peck and flutter, civil wars
at the feeder and scalloped bath,
coups and conspiracies, thirst,
the quick flinch, the skitter
and flutter off if a squirrel
gets curious or the wind
gusts above a whisper.
Tedious, inconsequential—
time I returned to the real
work of human mortality
and my morning book,
but just as I'm ready to shift
my desk from the window
and face the sunlit wall,
I notice the jay hen casual
and preening, yet vigilant
in the wintering rose of Sharon's
high limbs while her two chicks
pick at the sunflower husks
for a morsel of seed heart,
agile and fanatical, but not yet
canny about the hawk's call
or the first sweep of his sharp-

winged shadow and lethal
claws. And after all, it was
interest in *London* Johnson set
as the measure of life force
and curiosity, and not the petty
rebellions among the swifts
and chickadees, the red-bellied
woodpeckers, crows and juncos,
cardinals, wrens and the rest
of my tenants whose fates
daily quicken me even against
my appetite and inclination,
whose tiny eyes animate
my meditations. I admit:
it's an addiction, but what if
each bird heart's little hammer
falls on the anvil of morning
as the hammer of God?
I wouldn't want to miss it.

R.T. Smith

Sports News

When the morning's first foursome
teed off in a hovering mist,
they never expected to find
lashed between two cedar trees
in the dogleg rough a Porta-Potty

blue as the sky they could not quite
see, nor did they guess—all this
in Raynell, Arkansas, Ridgecrest
Country Club, Ladies Day—
some enterprising soul had been cooking

up meth, shake-and-bake style, with no
interest in slice or hook,
striking the Titleist in the sweet spot
or getting on the green in two.
What bright bulb in rust-gut society

had imagined this location and endeavor
a good match and brought his cold
tablets and liter jugs with their
Dr Pepper stickers out here
by starlight? He'd commenced to mix

a recipe for wonky bliss or blindness
or the risk of death on a golf
course, which Mrs. Tyler Latham,
who finished the round two under,
told this reporter would be "one sorry

way to leave the universe." By noon,
town police had collared a T-John
Neighbors, who swiftly confessed
that the setup was his, the abandoned
school bus he'd used for weeks recently

gone up in flames. And he also claimed
responsibility for the redwing
blackbirds who fell en masse
all over the county last winter.
It was fumes, he said, from a potent batch,

though authorities are skeptical and refuse
to press charges concerning that case.
Meanwhile, the bomb crew has
"disarmed" the potent brew,
holding as evidence those crystals reckless

misfits crave and have lately come to call "ice."
"It takes all sorts," said Mrs. Latham,
who seems worldly and shrewd
and told me "off the record" Maker's
Mark is a wiser answer for travail and pain.

She winked, as if guessing I already knew,
but it's all a mystery to me, though the fog
is gone, debris cleared, course
lovely now, the sky as golfers prefer,
a heavenly, birdless blue.

"Ice?" What's the next miserable bliss,
I wonder, for our mad race
to conjure and pine for and pursue?

R.T. Smith

A Change of Heart

Sunday night a widow in Winslow, Arkansas
came home to find an owl's fully detailed
profile printed on her patio door as clear
as a photographic plate, and it startled her—

wings spanned wide and outsized eyes,
the feathers almost impossibly articulate.
The silhouette, she said, was akin to a ghost,
though she was a disbeliever, and there

in the flickery kitchen florescence, she fell.
Living solitary, she lay there for a while,
dreaming the many trials of her earlier life,
including previous encounters with the floor.

Owls, especially horned ones, as the ears
identified hers, may wear a protective powder
on their feathers, and since their wondrous
eyes can't see glass, they'll do this on occasion,

crash haphazard, as if blind, and leave
an image so precise you expect it to scream.
It's best to string some beads or shells across
a wide window, but seldom are the birds

badly damaged. Even if stunned, casualties
are rare. The woman, however, bruised her
hip and was laid up a spell, at first bewildered,
then coming to terms with the flight

of a predator most likely out hunting until
that spectral threshold rushed up and struck
him down. The victim, Elise Pell, presently
recovering at her sister's condo, says she's

reading about all manner of creatures who fill
the air above us, ravenous and stealthy,
rumored messengers of death. She declares
such visitations can hardly be pure chance.

In fact, this incident has made her a believer,
as the face in the glass was ominously familiar
though absent from our realm some seven years,
a husband with goggle eyes and a quick fist.

An animal, she says, is always just a beast,
but a human man can be a monster.

Pimone Triplett

Soul-Speak

Listen, all I'd use is your body
clock-flesh
geared with the small hurts
labeled shapely

has the know-how
I don't know how would ask
to be housed
would abbreviate all for sake of

whole
calls to mind archive the woman's
entry-exit point
hospital light hospitality

would embrace
the situations
the hours moving past you
as someone waving

from a car you'd like to be driving so
pilot me
wager sell deal me in for years for yours
will muscle up

the ironies will sting out the sincerities
can conjure
any image try it on odd coat
accidental

all buttons can look for a moral
in the matter
the skin you cut in nets of right
and wrong

fling or inherit tell me how long
can I
borrow your pay how far march
first in

this parade before your second third
fourth fleeting
thought as you enter and I go with
you into

a cave marked culture inside a hill
called effort
endure in your name the reductions
shrine temple cathedral

radio song doctor's couch also empire is
an example
mincing perception to piecemeal and
the names I'd not

abjure spirit psyche the self contractions
consciousness
chemistry have been this hungry I'd say
for an age why

do you run my scurries, my cowardly leapers
all alone,
all along the look of atoms at a leaf edge
let me saddle the points

of view for you
my charioteer brittle rider where
shall we
live where can you let us live

Kara van de Graaf

Spyglass

If I press its metal ring to my face,
the lid of my eye opens like a door.

Fingers scoped around the body
I make grow thinner and thinner,

a funnel punctuated with vertebrae
of brass. I want to find them

on the shore, my left eye squinted
dormant, blind stone at the center

of a plum. In the lens they look
small, like children herding together

in the schoolyard, setting up imaginary
house. I watch them gather invisible

things: one a clay pot, a fistful
of feathers. One his palms together

to cup a mound of seeds. I wonder
if they can feel my eyes touching them

like a brier pricking the flesh, or
the splinter-tip of an arrow in the body

of a bird, the wing that stops catching
air and lets the earth pull it back.

Cody Walker

Third Trimester

Dusk; inscrutable sky. A kid high-fives
a Honda
antenna.
The near end, Love, of our practice-run lives.

Cody Walker

Origin Song

for Zia Rosenwaike Walker

Littlest Walker, can't even crawl—
Cost us a shilling at the shopping mall—
Came with a rattle, came with a shake—
Banana espresso—wide awake…

Stashed in a treetop, fashioned to fall—
Summons the cops with a pelican call—
Sunlight's a goner, moon's on the make—
Mistakes our Zia for Veronica Lake…

Cody Walker

In Two Hundred Years

Zia
will be a
what?
Awful thought:
we've wrought
a time bomb; a gust of wind; an eventual no-see-um.
Carpe diem.

Michael Walsh

Town Cows

Like oversized rabbits, they jump
their fences for the streets, stopping traffic
with their one message. They sack
curb gardens, munch tulips
to nubs. Chased, they bolt
like deer. Calm, they let
total strangers stroke their ears.
Raising their tails like spigots,
they shit on everyone's sidewalks.
At night it's just the same. We find them
lurking in backyards, gulping irises, their heads
in the raised beds like troughs, their tails
swinging, starting a rumpus.

Joshua Weiner

The Firm

Among the firm, a questioning believer.

In the question, ten thousand sands.

In the burning sands, a human eye.

Ripped-out eye, breath of the panther.

In the panther's breath, a black piano.

In the piano, fast moving waters.

In the water, one who can't who won't believe.

Inside the refusal, a budding tree.

The tree you climb, the lower limbs.

But you see them up higher, firm in the sway.

Will you ever be / long
in their company?

Marjorie Welish

Cardiac

Come heartaches
Bitter breast-care

reap aches bitterly bin carefully bitten care hear weight weights weighted breast your weight you are heavily upon me you have taken all space and time come heart whose arch you acquire

at half mast
the four-color

intellect

Forethought

I like you but would like you better without this weight upon me you usurp all of me you employer of help of my heart at the helm of my heart

enervating scrap
scraped another just weight a just weight

to translate flight all of it on shoulders the thesaurus treasury care to breast dour roving
undertaken by others heed loose change

dear to harrow
hello compounded

with probable epilogue and lures and who knows knots enabling another reader seaworthy
the full story more if only to change our reading of the red yellow blue we knew

gloves to engulf
coloring self from rival expulsion

let me do all the waiting as those posts dwell to contour a heart bin in the wind of acedia
wherein much existence many essays

so that:

discontent
something like poor paste

and chance

Mike White

Snow Globe

Nothing that rough god
could do about the snow

but move it from place
to place.

We nursed our coughs inside
the country church
and watched the weather.

Spring always seeming
right around the corner,

if only
there were a corner.

Chelsea Woodard

Folk Tale

for Nonny Hogrogian

In the story, I remember a hungry young fox
rendered in pastels. He has stolen
from a strict-mannered woman in town, his tail's been cut off, his lot
cast to repay her: stomach still swollen

with her Guernsey cow's milk, his head hung
as he trudges the sad route she has mapped
for him. In the story, I remember bright sun
glaring, the fox, hunched and tailless, his tongue lolling, lapping

at air, his shame-path dry and sorrowful.
And reading, I knew the author had lived
in our house—rust-colored shutters, fall-
wormed, rattling rose hips, frost, pewter-halled air.

And in the book, every page held a trade: a pail
bartered for rare lazuli beads, a brown-speckled egg
for milled grain, straw for the mule pulling
the plow. And I knew that each time, the fox begged

for their pity—a sack of clean down, a gold coin, a gift—
and that he'd at last made it back, the cold pail
handle clenched in his teeth, milk sloshing the step
of the stern woman's house. And I pictured the blood-matted tail

handed back to him, dragged over our slab-granite walk,
        smelled the freezing ground
swelling—stumbled with apples, damp now, half-rotten—
        the author's fingers rust-smudged from the work,

mine smeared with the chalk dust we found
        decades later on baseboards and rimed sills of doors—
the fine powder set into skin, each tenuous history
        heart-learned, unwritten.

Chelsea Woodard

Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting

Artemisia Gentileschi, 1638–39

To say that painting is a woman, buxom
and green-clad, neck in shade—that she
is hunched and square-faced, graced
with large, muscular hands, thick-wristed,
her massive, tilting figure set
back in a corner, dimly-lit, her narrow brush
pointed above the picture we can't see—

to say her art's hulking and awkward, flawed
from stiffened bristles, umber-caked
palette knives, poor light—that it lacks
daintiness or fine lines, shapes idealized,
gossamer-draped or chaise-reclined—
that it favors instead the full dark brows
and unkempt head, grim skies, back rooms, straw beds—

to say I've lied to you, claiming I've learned
distrust of symbols, scales shrunken
to fit, glares tempered by ornate frames,
angles widened and rounded out—
those foregrounds prop-ridden and fixed
as parquet floors, as marble steps worn
smooth by jet-lagged crowds, breath-held

minutes shaken off like snow fallen
on dry sleeves, champagne held to the lips
but never drunk. There is a restlessness
I've found, a company that's stuck
in cool dark rooms and galleries—
in the taffeta-pressed torso
of her likeness, bent, strong-boned, plain-dressed—

to say I've loved you even in artifice—
museums' preservation glass, the brush
or months-dry page, the dust-rimmed heft
of a keepsake box—its cypress distance ticking
at my view just as you start in me, just as I summon
snow-deep mornings we strung maple trees with tin pails,
dipping our fingers in them, tasting the spring.

Stefanie Wortman

Sinatra and the *Ordre de la Santé Publique*

His soul a park where a gentleman's songs
are tuned to assignations on well-kept walks,
where girls play elegant tennis. What belongs
less to this scene than recollected flocks
of sick kids eager to mouth the syllables
to all his tunes? They knew the words, but more,
they knew arrangements. He saw their gullible
faces go tense with love for him before
he sang the line *The very thought of you*…
which caught the air and balanced on a boy's
cleft upper lip like a soap bubble. Frank knew
a good deed when he did one. The joy
already gone when de Gaulle's minister
affixed the chevalier's ribbon to his collar.

Reviews

The Use of the World

by Dan Albergotti

Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 2013. $12.00 (pa.)

If we were to consider Dan Albergotti's book title *The Use of the World* and then note the initial poem's title "Apology in Advance"; subsequent poem titles: "Invocation," "Chapter One, Verse One," "God," "What Everyone Knows," "Days Spent in One of the Other Worlds," and "No Beginning"; and the closing poem's title "Years and Years and Years Later," before reading, that reader might think that he would be embarking on a life journey or a sort of *Pilgrim's Progress* quest through faith for glory. However, other titles in the Table of Contents evoke more playful possibilities: "Christina Sestina," "These Be Hectoring Large-Scale Verses," and "Couplet Found Wedged in the Doorway Between Two Worlds" are titles that suggest an irreverent levity. The truth lies somewhere between the two possibilities; Albergotti's book certainly includes a journey, but the journey is not dour or droll. The journey he takes us on in *The Use of the World,* feels, in the end, quietly mind-bending.

Though Albergotti's initial poem is titled "Apology in Advance," it reads as if it could have been titled "Apologetics in Advance"; in other words, the poem could be a polemic for the author's doctrine, beliefs, or position—or simply for writing. Or, actually, Albergotti may be taking an offensive stance, thereby placing the reader in a defensive position, which is in one sense a reader's position at the crack of any new book's spine—expectant, vulnerable, often even malleable. Albergotti begins the poem in a conversational *in medias res:* "I tried to do it in one voice. // We've been over this before" (1–2). He then proceeds to juxtapose images of his mother's cross-stitched sampler of colonial Williamsburg framed "[a]s flat and even / as the layer of dust that collected / on the top of that frame, on top / of her glossy coffin's lid" (8–11). The poem closes as it begins, with two end-stopped, double-spaced lines: "It made a sort of sense. // It was not

this world" (12–13). Wait, what just happened? We may feel a little snafued. Albergotti sucked us in: we thought we knew this speaker's trajectory, knew the weary, plaqued hand-sewing on the wall, and knew the dead mother, but now I do not understand what world these images *are* in. It doesn't make sense to me—yet.

"Chapter One, Verse One" is a longer poem that references the first verse of the New Testament, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The poem's straightforward-looking, short-lined rhyming quatrains belie their nascent message:

> In the beginning was the world,
> and it called for a word
> with each great crashing wave,
> each still, stiffened bird. (17–20)

Then Albergotti's speaker becomes even more morose:

> In the end the word
> was only a sound,
> a sound no one hears
> beneath grass or mound.
>
> You can still hear it now,
> endless echoes of *no*.
> And still blows the sand,
> still falls the snow. (25–32)

We might even hear a tinge of Dickinsonian despair: "When everything that ticked—has stopped—/ And space stares—all around" (17–18) although Albergotti creates his own echo, as well. A poem about beginnings, in particular referencing the incarnation of Christ, turns out to be a sinuous treatise on mortality. He uses the rhyming quatrain in a subtle way, to titillate and perhaps even reprimand us—just a bit—and brings us to a place where we know this: It is this "world" that uses us and leaves us with "endless echoes of *no.*"

Albergotti also includes a longer poem, "Days Spent in One of the Other Worlds," comprising twelve twelve-lined poems. We could consider these individual poems as irregular variations of the sonnet—like the twelve-line sonnets some Renaissance poets crafted,—and the poem "Days Spent in One of the Other Worlds" could be construed as a variant of the sonnet sequence. And if, in fact, Albergotti is pushing against the bounds of form, he does make nice use of the tradition of the sonnet sequence as a "uniquely deprivileged space," as described by the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry,* which also states, "The sonnet sequence can be as much a political and economic as a literary construction in a formally determined, publicly accessible medium…. One that enables [the readers] to think through emotional, philosophical, or religious issues." This seems to be, in fact, what Albergotti is doing. In the first of his little songs, "Arrival in One of the Other Worlds," Albergotti introduces the world's "old, / blind king—gray hair, no eyes—" who reaches out to feel the speaker's face (4–6) and who has journeyed to this world inhabited by the king's priests, his "minister of Death and Destruction," and the king's beautiful, young daughter, as well as spiders and ants. Throughout the sequence, the speaker searches for a world, but seems to discover, rather, truth—or at least an absence of double-speak and hypocrisy. The poem "How to Know I Am Alive in One of the Other Worlds" articulates the interaction of the speaker and the king's daughter and contains crisp language that aptly describes the pain of being lost and alone and *dirty*:

She said I cannot speak to you with her eyes and extended her finger toward my face. But before touching me, she brought that finger down to crush a spider crawling between us on the stone. Last night, as we lay on her hard bed, side by side and staring above, she traced her fingernail again and again around my nipple. I did not know she had entered me until I felt the soft tickle of her nail on my filthy, throbbing heart. (7–12)

In the short poem "December 25, 2005," Albergotti achieves remarkable impact and makes a catastrophic event hit closer to home.

> The day feeling short, in the Hubble's distant stare,
> the pale light of new galaxies' faint glare.
> A dead Sri Lankan's orphaned son
> with eyes as blank as stone.
> Like everyone,
> alone. (9–14)

In a self-prescribed form of increasing (to hexameter) then decreasing iambs (something like a wave?) and an *aa*, *bb*, *cc, dd, ee, fa, fa,* rhyme scheme, Albergotti manages, without being maudlin, both to remember and bring current a horrific natural disaster.

Admirably, in *The Use of the World,* Albergotti makes a meaningful effort to write about the quotidian *and* the life changing—about faith, doubt, and religion. And he faces these daunting subjects without having any notion of or interest in self-aggrandizement. His speaker is a traveler, as we all are, and so we accompany the wayfarer on his journey and do it gladly. Though I am not sure that I have inhabited or will ever inhabit each of Albergotti's worlds, *The Use of the World* leaves me pondering the sentiment in "Couplet Found Wedged in the Doorway Between Two Worlds":

> But really, there's no other world, no king.
> You want a song? Then teach yourself to sing.

In the end, it seems that for Albergotti and the reader he leads, the world is what each one chooses to make it.

—Shelly Cato

Little Murders Everywhere

by Rebecca Morgan Frank.

Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Poetry, 2012. 67 pp. €12.00. (pa.)

Chord Box

by Elizabeth Lindsey Rogers

Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2013. 99 pp. $16.00. (pa.)

Praise Nothing

by Joshua Robbins

Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2013. 65 pp. $16.00. (pa.)

I recently heard someone define poetry as the thinking mind bodied forth, and this lovely definition returned to mind often as I read Rebecca Morgan Frank's debut collection *Little Murders Everywhere.* Frank isn't so much interested in the divisions between mind and body as she is in the way that the knowledge of each complements, and is incomplete without, the other. Her collection begins with "Song of the Rattling Pipes":

> Sometimes the house around her sings back,
> oil heat clanking against the steel
> in low industrial tones—a workers' march,
> a miners' rag, muffled mutinies.
>
> She answers, words drumming
> their way into the plumbing
> of her body, her veins a vessel for song,
> blood-coursed vowels, consonance.

Sometimes Frank explores unexpected unions in our lives—say, the way the sound of forced hot water can inspire a metaphysical experience. At other times, the pleasure the poet takes in playing with sounds is an overtly physical pleasure, as in "Mire," which begins: "Hail the world of the head: / bucket-heavy, / a hollow swamp," and closes:

> Genderless marshlands,
> tender minerals:
> the earth
> recreates inside of us,
> multiplying misdemeanors
> and falls.
>
> While skin moves around it all
> like a worn down puppet,
> language tricks
> to explain it.
>
> And still, thoughts
> (rubber boots) (a boat)
> make their moves.

There is a lush and almost luxurious attention to sound in these poems: they beg to be read out loud. Words trick, or fool us, but there is also a sexual connotation here that suggests the fickleness of language and reminds us of the ever-shifting dynamic between experience and our attempts to articulate it. Most poets would agree that language is a dynamic, probably even organic, entity, but Frank pursues this stance with a particularly clear-eyed hunger and longing.

At other times, Frank is master of the witty beginning. The lyric quality of her verse cools a little, and she takes a more rhetorical stance. "Go ahead, reinvent the wheel," begins "Wheels." The poem "Little Murders Everywhere" starts: "As for me, I was merely an accessory: / I raised the ax and chopped the frozen squirrel in thirds." Or look at "An Everyday Disaster," which commences: "The moment I fell through

the floor / I wasn't even thinking of you." The seriousness with which Frank approaches her writing is evident in her craftsmanship; the humor reveals her awareness that sometimes taking things too seriously can be as dangerous as not taking them seriously enough.

Frank's humor also tempers the realization that many of her speakers are alone or fighting with loneliness. One of the most beautiful elements of this collection is the way the speakers continually craft a presence from the absence of others. "Celestial Mechanics" begins:

> I have been betrayed by gravity;
> it does not connect me to anything.
>
> Sometimes I am floating in a tower, unreachable.
> My hands pressed cold against the glass.

The voice, possibly belonging to an inanimate object, expresses a terrifying sense of aloneness: the opening lines can be read to mean the speaker is floating in space but also that the speaker is right here on earth, but no means of connection are available. "Even the Galaxies" makes the experience even more explicit:

> The world is in love without me.
> I'm not sure how I missed it,
>
> the day when the daffodils swooned
> over the recycling bin
>
> and the dump truck married
> the smallest house on our block.

Frank's speakers have a way of being honest yet ruefully funny. Despite their disappointments, one gets a sense that they can't seem to help falling in love anyway.

Although there are many excellent love poems in this collection, Frank is also a poet who explores other themes of

society and culture. Her third and final section is the most "worldly" in this way, and the poem "After Vietnam" reveals the same compassionate and questioning eye. Here it is in its entirety:

> Didn't you lose your boyhood here
> along the ditch, once,
> where monkey flowers gild the roadside?
> Didn't it spill into the fields and bloom?
> The river moved towards your footsteps.
> This was not like catfish eyes
> staring back at you in solitude, the trophy
> of a long day's catch. These were green frogs
> as small as your thumbnail.
> There was nowhere else to walk
> but on thousands of heartbeats.

In Frank's collection, more mistakes and missed opportunities arise than sins and transgressions. Yet Frank's poem, "For the Sin of Foolishness," one in a series of sin poems, closes with an ambiguous invocation, which feels like a contemporary take on some of the passions of Dickinson:

> Oh Love, we whisper from the streets—
> make me a follower, make me care for no other
> but you: the enemy, the savior, the absent
> plea, the adored and ageless fallacy.

If Frank's collection is physical and sensual, Elizabeth Lindsey Rogers' debut collection is more contained and forthrightly autobiographical. The first section of *Chord Box* intertwines a musical and sexual awakening, which is also sobered by experiences of abuse. Just who has suffered the abuse is ambiguous, but the dates in the poems' titles suggest the speaker's teacher, so there is an interesting tension in the way that music both provides a sanctuary from abuse while also providing a more ambiguous space in which a teacher falls for an underage student who becomes her lover. In "Prelude for

Open Strings: 2000," the music teacher tells the speaker to:

> *give us an E*. For elementary, but
>
> also for the potential for eminence
> and elegance, and for Elizabeth.
>
> It was evident: you had visions
> for me.

The poems that track the evolution of love between student and teacher are very moving: many of us remain grateful for teachers who saw something in us long before we did. For the student in "p—i—m—a: 2001," even the teacher's name is invested with an almost mythic lyrical quality:

> Your signature was *T*
>
> with a tail, nothing else seen
> except the dot of *i*, hovering above
> an ink line—like some wild note
> broken off the melody.

In the second section of Rogers' collection, the speakers assert a growing independence, a distance that allows for reflection as well as honors and questions elements of a more youthful if not entirely innocent time. "Echo" seems to address the pull and push of an emergent sense of self, one that has a greater perspective on the results of an engagement with a powerful, if sometimes overwhelming, mentor:

> To turn back at the hill, or wall—
> all dogs will come home.
> all sons arrive, their pockets torn.
>
> A mirror: Narcissus drinks
> blue ink from the stream
> and cannot leave. I love you

I love you since to imitate
is a pattern learned, call for
yes again: a voice is made

by doubling.

The hill and the mirror are ways of looking back, as is to have the words "I love you" returned. At the same time, the learned pattern brings facility and freedom, and the poem is an enactment of that freedom.

The poem "New Garden" muses on our capacity for love and generosity; there is a snake in this garden, too, but it is a thing of beauty and motion, more instinct than anything else. The poem ends:

A snake is a thing without a left lung.
Long ago, it was surrendered
for the sake of moving forward.

And had we given ours,
would we have more room
for our apple hearts, so pent-up in rib?

A woman told me this:
to come of age is to recognize
the myths we were taught.

In this poem, one sees that Rogers not only recognizes the myths of her youth, but is writing fresh myths, anew.

Rogers' final section finds the poet in China, further from home but perhaps all the more comfortable in the world. "At the Bathhouse" playfully reports from the front lines of being publically naked in a foreign country: "Learn shame: bare your American ass / to a room of Chinese women. 'So big!' My friends giggle." The poem ends with the speaker being scrubbed in a position she says she wouldn't feel comfortable letting a lover view her in, yet we are invited to gaze at her via the poem:

My breasts sweat into plastic.
        Under her mitted hand,
I flinch. Dead skin pills
        like a cheap sweater.
There's that tepid
        shock, the bucket's
final pour. 'Now flip,' she says,
        slaps the small of me.

We get the sense that the speaker in these poems has turned to face the world. We see in "Length," the penultimate poem in the book, just how grateful she is for it:

in warmth, the woman
is pulling noodles, pale

threads of the cosmos—
this, our twisted lunch.

And everything I see
is larger than I thought.

And everything I've asked for
and more, I've been given.

If Frank and Rogers turn the deficits of love and surplices of desire into language that loves or wants to love us back, Joshua Robbins' poems often seem to say *not so fast.* The central questions of Robbins' first book *Praise Nothing* are moral ones of engagement, and the poems are full of absence, remnants, ashes. These poems don't preach, but they often remind us of the degree to which we are condemned.

The first section of Robbins' collection explores the fragile legacies among generations of men. In "Heaven As Nothing but Distance," the speaker recounts an afternoon with his preaching-from-a-milk-crate grandfather as they watch gulls peck at something indeterminate along an urban beach:

A drowning victim, maybe.
A vagrant. And though we were

unable to see what was there,
when he put his hand in mine
I could not even begin to count
all the things I wished to believe in.

And that is how it would be
if what I remembered was as true
as the waves landing, but now
there is only the lungless

hot breath of L.A. on my cheek.

This unreliable memory is among the more tender moments in the book, yet the emptiness it conveys is an early expression of the book's often-unshakable alienation. In "Less Than Ash" the speaker charts the complicated feelings that arise after the death of a father:

behind the sanctuary, I wrote out
and diagrammed my sins. How I'd lied.

Said I'd miss him. That I could hear him
singing with all those called home.

Then, with no water to put it out
and wanting nothing more, nothing less

than ash, I held the paper, prayed
for a flame, struck the match.

There's a nice turn in this poem, where we are led to believe the speaker has lit the list on fire but regretted it, and possibly regretted some of the missed connections with his father, only to find out that that wasn't what he wanted at all.

In "Swing Low," the chatter of birds in the morning provokes the speaker's desirous awareness of "how stupid they are," while:

> This morning, more news of the same:
> planes, body counts, incendiary clouds,
> and a city burned alive as it slept.
> But what can I say of war?
> The Midwestern clouds roll in with their sweaty air,
> the sun rises rust tinged, and I go on
> watching a few drab birds flit for seed in the spray
> of sprinklers switching on.

Occasionally, Robbins' speakers seem to get caught up in a particularly first-world kind of angst: a probably legitimate, if often unspecific, sense of guilt that can sometimes circumscribe vision or imagination. The speaker's question about war doesn't have much effect—not because it's wrong, but because it's obviously so right.

The poem "Collateral" is one of the most arresting poems in the collection. As in many poems in the book, someone is punishing or being punished or both. The speaker watches a neighbor beat an injured stray dog to death. The poem closes with the moment just after the scene ends:

> as if this world had never been
> more pure, that the rasped October
>
> breeze through the birch trees on our street
> meant nothing, saw nothing, could say
>
> nothing. There was only silence,
> then a clang of wood on concrete
>
> and, somewhere, the dead leaves stirring.

These poems unflinchingly engage matters from the unpleasant to the tragic. The silence is rarely cathartic and the

pureness is always without innocence, perhaps because there is always another addict, errant father, or place where one hurt man is hurting another.

Yet, occasionally Robbins' speakers allow themselves a chance to see in the world around us something almost redemptive, as in "Blue Spark":

> Outside, the city's turbines
> churned the river's darkness white.
>
> Now, summer rain
> on oil-stained driveways, backed-up gutters,
> the low river's drift.
>
> Lightening spikes. I inhale the night:
> lawn mist. Insect char. Beyond
> the clouds, the electric moon.

As Auden pointed out, poems are always infinitely more important than anything a reviewer can say about them, and Robbins is a vigilant poet, unwilling to forget that always someone somewhere is suffering. It is interesting to note the different ways that these first collections explore themes of alienation, abuse, family, loneliness, and, of course, love. All three are the work of thoughtful, inventive writers. All three work to find ways of surprising us, even in the depths of despair or darkness, as life often does.

—Jessica Murray

Naming the Dead

by Robert Collins.

Mineral Bluff: Future Cycle Press, 2012. 102 pp. $15.95 (pa.) $3.99 (Kindle)

Memory, Shakespeare writes, is the warder of the brain, its steward, or curator of how our minds selectively, and with sudden surprise, calls up images, moments, or good friends from our pasts, often provoking the recall of powerful emotions. *Naming the Dead* by Robert Collins is a collection of poems that operates as if cast figures in a laminated box, photographs in an album, or images on a touchscreen, each telling of people and events from a life lived and reflected upon, a sort of catalogue of those who have mattered in his life. "Tis in my memory lock'd, / And you yourself shall keep the key of it," Ophelia says, and for Collins, this book is what turns the tumblers. While a first reading might suggest this a collection of elegies, they read more like verse memoirs tinged in nostalgia, of the wanting to return home to those moments and people who have come, over time, to give shape and meaning to the poet's life. How else, despite their passing, can they be kept alive?

In the opening poem of the book, "Those Who Have Vanished," Collins states the core question of the collection:

> I think of those I've loved
> and thought I knew and lost.
> How we got so far apart
> we couldn't find a way back
> remains a mystery to me.

Unraveling the mystery of physical and emotional distance exposes the epistemological heart of the book, pointing out the thread that strings these poems together. The figure in "The Editor of Dreams" is emblematic of how the mind edits and selects memories, "clipping and splicing each frame / before passing the reels / to the sleepy projectionist," even if

the effect in viewing the film is emotionally difficult when "Spools of over-exposures / you're not yet ready to view / unfurl on the cutting-room floor." Such tumbling to the floor is echoed in "Stroke," a poem for his grandmother who lies slumped in a bed, with

> a word almost forming on your lips
> like a faint tapping
> through sixty feet of coal.

Isn't that an image for a poet, words trapped inside, trying to rise to the surface?

This is a recurring motif in *Naming the Dead*: not just saying the unsayable in poetry, but what remains, if sayable, too long unsaid. This is well expressed by the speaker in "Catch;" as the father and his grown son begin to hurl the ball progressively harder, the son begins to understand that this is as much a metaphor as it is an act in which he will

> curse this game of saying nothing
> neither one of us can win,
> wind up and fling the ball back,
> the curve you wouldn't teach me
> to throw breaking in the dirt,
> bouncing past you into the dark.

If the rhythm of playing catch mimics an equal dialogue between people, then the increasing speed and sting in the ball glove point to the rising of the "old anger at how we've failed…to be what the other wanted," the unspoken wound at the heart of their relationship that is played out through a pantomime, yet never expressed and thus forever unresolved. Similarly, in "Neverlost," Collins, visiting a friend succumbing to pancreatic cancer, quarrels with himself about "What's left that we haven't said / already or tried to write to one another," as if trapped words, once surfaced and spoken in address to the 'quiet desperation,' might turn into magical incantations against the inevitability of the situation. But this

was a lesson learned earlier, in the memoir title poem, "Naming the Dead," set during the Vietnam War when Collins and others at Xavier University protested, "Red faced, sputtering with rage," believing that words are capable of changing the course of history, as if:

> uttering the names of total strangers
> in any order might bring peace
> and resurrect the dead.

Of course, such protests against the Vietnam War contributed to a public awareness and an eventual withdrawal of troops, a peace of sorts, proving in a small way that perhaps Percy Shelley was correct in his assertion that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, yet still, the dead, though named, were not resurrected. From that formative memory, Collins evolves toward a personal negotiation with the self, as the poems in this book name and resurrect those who have died or drifted away, but who recur as spirits, ghosts, as one of several invisible or disappeared figures who occur in varying degrees of presence: Adena Indians in Marietta, Ohio ("Via Sacra"); unnamed extras from old films with "the entire cast dead already" ("Extras"); the magician's assistant who disappears during a magic trick, falsely believing "it was all an illusion / and he'd surely bring me back" ("The Magician's Assistant"); the invisible men a boy placed on base, playing baseball by himself, as he "tried to drive myself in" with "long fly balls" ("Invisible Runner"); listening to "the unheard cheers / of thousands [he] invented" while he practiced jump shots alone on the playground" ("The Jump Shot"); or Carol Shelley, a "walking victim/ of the 60's," who died from self-immolation ("Casualty").

Life seems to be lived in a shadow between the light of knowledge and the dark of uncertainty in these poems of mystery and wonder, of revelation and reflection. Yet by the act of writing, as an epistemological endeavor, and by the act of naming, not merely as a tally but as evocation, Robert Collins reaches back through his life, reconnecting with his past,

grasping the threads he uses to weave the tapestry of his life, of what was and yet, paradoxically, always will be. What he evokes for himself, and for us vicariously, is memory—and its necessary role in molding a meaningful life—as it curates the pieces from the permanent collection of the museum of our minds.

"I had to learn to put things into words" the author states in "Not Using My Last Wish," and it is through this finding the right words, Flaubert's *mots justes,* that he is able to name the dead—life moments and friends—back into the foreground of memory where, as he says in "The Bar in the Lobby of the Peabody Hotel," he can be "in love once more with the spinning world / I've always just wanted to be part of." Naming the Dead by Robert Collins is a moving and intricate collection of poems that take us all to the heart of how the relationships in our lives shape who we are and how we interact with the world. In an era in which some poets can only look into the future through performance or mere word play, Robert Collins leaves us with wise and reflective poems that offer us the gift of how to sift through our life experiences for the meaningful memories with which we can better understand the complex world as the context in which we discover our own selves.

—Robert Miltner

Waiting for St. Brendan

by David McLoghlin

Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Poetry, 2012. €12.00 (pa.)

David McLoghlin's debut collection *Waiting for St. Brendan* proves strong on first reading and grows richer—as it reveals more and more linkages among its subtly-interwoven themes of alienation, betrayal, abuse, and belonging—with each subsequent rereading. The three-part collection is arranged thematically, opening with a series of vibrant poems about place and estrangement. The speaker of these poems looks for meaning among the places he visits and the figures he meets; in an early poem, the speaker encounters Lazarus (a figure for second chances and broken lives) of whom he says: "he will teach me how to live."

The first part contains poems which are set in countries including America, India, Ireland, Norway, and Spain, and they contain allusions to several others. This random collection of place names calls to mind the title figure's mythic voyage to the Isle of the Blessed, in which the saint is said to have searched for the Garden of Eden and landed on an lush, green island, which was discovered to be a sea monster. This ambitious conceit is alluded to in the book's epigraph from Jeremiah—"but thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest"—and resembles the book's structure itself, in which the source of violence is concealed between the opening and closing sections which focus on meditations of travel.

The poet's sensitive musical ear is powerfully displayed in the opening section, where the poems are rhetorically baroque, inward-looking, and taut with imagery, and his complex metaphors unfold, slow and origami-like, often across multiple stanzas. Among the most beguiling poems in this section is "Two Dancers, Flamenco," which opens with a brief, deceptively-plain description of a dancer; soon, one of McLoghlin's insouciant, arresting metaphors—"with her eyes / and hammering palms / she is forging a scimitar" —reveals

the scene's deadly secret. The subsequent lines are worth quoting as an example of the poet's associative skill, which is heightened when an innocent, playful scene turns suddenly serious:

> A surge within the spine; hot rain;
> a slow roll of fire;
> lips muttering an invocation
> on the edge of the precipice.
> And she is not herself
> in the final coming-to-rest:
>
> standing with one arm outstretched
> and a face pale as bone,
> she is Judith, smiling the cruel
> inscrutable smile of victory,
> throwing us a challenge.
> One we are about to accept.

Eros tinged with menace, an uncertain threat. These themes, introduced here with lyrical gusto and tempered by ironic distance, resurface in the book's second section, which addresses its difficult subject matter through the lens of a first-person speaker who, it becomes clear, has been abused: the speaker who in the first and second sections of the book is searching for meaning in places far from home and trying to find himself in his native Ireland, respectively.

One of McLoghlin's strengths lies in dramatizing the tension that emerges from scenes in which two cultures collide. The book's first-section poems such as "Buskers on the Madrid Metro," "The Irish College at Salamanca," "Norwegian Cameo," and "Waiting for St. Brendan," the collection's title poem, among others, use this strategy to good effect. In the latter poem the speaker begins to trace the origins of his alienation from himself, a difficult journey that the book's second section dwells on in detail. The title poem's speaker muses: "An Elementary school was my National School. / I learnt the names of minor presidents: / their history before

my own. I learnt inflection / listening to mockery."

In "Norwegian Cameo," the poet's astonishingly clear sight is revealed through his description of an old woman's liver-spotted hand, on which she wears "a ring holding shards of flint and iron," emblems of the country over which the plane banks. The poem ends with a line that might not work without such careful attention to emblems; there, the speaker extends the metaphor of the country to the speaker's eyes which "were the longship, / and they were unself-pitying, / and clear." (Much like McLoghlin himself, the reader can't help thinking.) Clearly, this is not your usual workshop poem, whose participants might well prohibit, or at least scoff at, metaphors about eyes as longships. However, moments such as this are compelling reading when grounded in the canny detail the poet provides, and they appear frequently in the collection.

While the first section ends—and the third section begins—with poems set in Sandymount Strand (a third poem set there appears in the first section), the lines just mentioned could provide a bridge from the themes of foreignness and place to the second section's overarching concern about childhood abuse. Several of the poems in this section—"And You Had Walked on Water," "To a Predator," "Did the Others Witness?" and "Cleaner Wrasse"— utilize a common conceit, the ocean and its predators, to explore the issue of molestation and plumb the depths to which human beings can sink. Rather than opt for a plainer voice, as past poets mining personal veins have done (a few early Confessional poets come to mind), McLoghlin brings his elegant, fastidious lyricism to bear on this most wrenching of subjects, showing that subtlety rather than directness—or in Dickinsonian terms, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant"—still wins the day.

"To a Predator" seems one of the most realized poems of this group, though many of the others are nearly as impressive. In it, what appears to be a shark is soon revealed—by careful deployment of detail, as well as by the placement of the poem within a group—as the secretive, "efficient" hunter of children:

You were efficient
at getting what you wanted;
but so patient,
sensing young prey a mile off
as if tasting the electrical field
of living things.

Here, the metaphor is apt. The shark as child molester trailing a retinue of small fish, remora or wrasses, which in this scenario are his other victims, the ones the speaker did not know about, who says "I thought I was your only one…. You held us / in separate chambers / of water."

The poems in this second—literally central—section of the collection contain no shortage of equally heartbreaking lines. In "Did the Others Witness?" a poem which resists quoting piecemeal by virtue of its having been written in snatches of conversation, liberally sprinkled with quotes and hyphens, is a brief *tour de force,* in which the poet (one might choose not to use the term "speaker" here, because each phrase is quoted) interrogates the nagging question of how much other people knew or sensed or guessed at about an unspecified abuse of a child by a "rough educator," likened to a great white shark. The unattributed, quoted phrases—mundane, self-protective, evasive—serve to heighten the tension by loosening the poem from its specific subject, highlighting the universality of the language used by the those on the periphery, on the outside looking in, as it were, and as such, the poem works as both a cautionary tale and a cultural document. A number of poems in this collection contain sections that I could have quoted here to show the richness and variety of the subjects McLoghlin treats, and with his characteristic sensitivity, strength, and grace. This is a necessary book, one well worth reading and returning to.

—Eric Bliman

Her Familiars

by Jane Satterfield

Denver: Elixir Press, 2013. $17.00 (pa.)

Jane Satterfield's third book of poems, *Her Familiars,* bears as an epigraph the *OED* entry for the term "familiar," which has been used to refer to deputies during the Inquisition, intimate friends, and animal spirits reputedly favored by witches, to list a few usages. What seems at first glance like a random and disconnected set of corollary definitions becomes in the hands of this talented poet and essayist the strands of an argument about war, community, identity, love, and the struggles of women through history with the (social, political, sexual) constraints of their time, not least our own. What deepens the irony of the conceit is that the poet's heritage, American and British, which is reflected in poems set on both sides of the Atlantic, gives rise to a speaker who is particularly sensitive to the everyday weirdness that is often ignored by those too familiar with the culture or the society in which it occurs.

Her poems' speakers—including the poet herself—are often those with the temperament and wisdom to see the comedy, drama, and tension that inheres in seemingly ordinary events. Such poems as "On Valentine's Day I Pick up My Wedding Dress," "How to Be a Domestic Goddess," and "Why I Won't Attend My Sister-in-Law's 'For Your Pleasure' Party" take their titles' conceits and run—full sprint, full stretch—with them. Indeed, few poets are capable of revealing such everyday moments as the dangerous, the hilarious, or the all-too-familiar continents that they are. The speaker of the latter poem, who knows enough to want to not know too much, exemplifies this:

> I'd rather burn
> in hell or a hot slow shower
> than in the shame of knowing
> the pleasures my brother does or doesn't provide—
> So, if my refusal makes me a prude, then say it—

I wouldn't have lasted a second
in the Tudor court given over
to gossip & systems of spies.

The collection includes two long sequences, "Collapse: A Fugue," which is set mainly in America, and "Clarice Cliff Considers Leaving Edwards Street," which recounts a lesser-known potter's acquisition of her own flat in England, a move which an epigraph tells us represented "the height of daring" in 1936. The first of these poems, a meditation on failed endeavors and the collapse of colonies, riffs on the disappearance of the Roanoke colonists, Jamestown, a Greenland settlement, the recent (and still mysterious) collapse of bee colonies, and ends with a meditation on the Irish famine. Since the poem is a fugue, any attempt to selectively quote from it is doomed to omit the resonances, codas, and echoed lines which the poet has deftly interwoven throughout the sections, yet a snippet from the first section may provide a glimpse of the poet's aims and materials (which include texts drawn from or inspired by, as her notes tell us, "sources and voices" as diverse as Plath, Stevens, half a shelf of history books, an article on bee disappearance, and musicians and groups such as OutKast, The Rolling Stones, Robyn Hitchcock, Lucinda Williams, and Loudon Wainwright):

How like

a legend, the lost soul
last spotted in an airport
parking lot, locating a *self*—much missed—via
the Internet…Polyphonic, the mind &
its many trails. Possible, then,

to track them all? The possibilities'
exquisite range? Mind
as mash-up. No—as landscape. Or history
as mash-up, ground we walk &
everywhere—graves.

Satterfield is as comfortable with free verse as she is as with formal poetry. Like Plath whom she quotes in "We Leave the Beaches for the Tourists," cites as a source twice in her notes, and conjures as a ghost in one of the collection's final poems, Satterfield moves between strict and open forms as the mood and the subject suit her.

The use she makes of her literary forbears is not idle, or gratuitous, or merely scholarly. Among the other literary figures that she borrows from or uses as inspiration for her haunted poems are Wilfred Owen, Charlotte Bronte, Billy Collins (the more-than-usually somber Collins of the poem "The Names", his 9-11 poem), Larry Levis, and Hafiz. Yet along with—and often beside—the literary names that appear here, you will find a villanelle about Princess Diana, a poem about a hair-stylist appointment that refers to "Posh and Becks" and *American Idol*, a sestina that's not too stodgy to mention AC/DC's *Back in Black*, and these are only a few pop culture references that add startling lines of color to this poet's broad palette. Like the subject of her final sequence, the ceramicist, Clarice Cliff, Satterfield seems to gravitate naturally to the "bizarre ware" of poetry, which revels in the dynamic, not the serene, composition.

The placement of poems within this spacious, attractive book is worth noting. A poem about terminal cancer titled "Family of Strangers," which recounts the poet's memories of the day she drove Deborah Tall to a reading and picked up her (heartbreakingly understated) "quick prescription," is followed by a humorous one about the well-meaning yet misguided industry of cancer-benefit "merch," which captures the "frat boy lingo" and sloganeering of the charitable organization from which the poem draws its title: "Save the Ta-Tas." Its opening is enough to entice any reader to continue:

> Save us, Lord, from the frat boy lingo,
> the throwers-of-girls-against-the-wall,
>
> the stop and chat at the gym
> during cobra or downward-facing dog,

the "I'm sorry, you look-
so-familiar, was it 8 a.m.
first-year Latin class?

The collection is packed with such disarming, witty, and searing juxtapositions. To use the above two poems as an example, the latter, an ostensibly funny poem, gains a layer of seriousness by its proximity to its elegiac precursor. Similarly transformative placement occurs in the book a number of times, yet rather than coming to seem predictable or forced, most of the time these juxtapositions happen (they keep the reader just off-balance-enough to entice) by tilting the previous poem's topic at an acute angle to reveal another side of it. Such attentive organization seems to testify that the book was put together with care and patience. (Satterfield's previous book of poems, *Assignation at Vanishing Point,* was published in 2003; her first, *Shepherdess with an Automatic*, was published in 2000.)

While the collection coheres extremely well and contains much exceptional writing, a small minority of the mid-length poems in this collection have sections which feel as if the speaker is spinning her wheels or giving away too much (such as the long, italicized portion of "Reading Billy Collins' 'The Names' with My Daughter," which, for speech, feels embellished or too long to be completely credible) and some of her poems' openings struggle to overcome their own inertia. Yet such moments are decidedly a small minority in this incisive, insightful, and highly entertaining collection.

—*Eric Bliman*

House Under the Moon

By Michael Sowder

Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2012. $15.95. (pa.)

If Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman were alive today, they would be seeking out Michael Sowder to know his latest work, and what he's been finding in their writings. We can discover this ourselves easily enough by opening his recent (second) collection, *House Under the Moon,* a book destined to affect what we think about American poetry.

Following his first prize-winning book, *The Empty Boat*, this new collection more definitely reaches out in a mystical journey that entails all that such journeys can be about—an earlier, ragged sensual life; divorce; being in love; love itself; marriage; creating and raising children; extensive reading in Eastern and Western mysticism; and his incredible mystical perceptions themselves. Incidents of Sowder's life come now like hammer strokes in a great manifesto of self, while the practical life of being a family is played off against Sowder's preoccupation with the Divine (the "Beloved," sometimes "You," ineluctably associated with the feminine). As we can't resist his poetic perceptions that inform his mystical statements, so he can't resist them either, and they go on through the book. It is to be tantalized by a holy life and come so close to living it that he *does*, in every last delicate line—an American living out the legacy of a greater American Dream, feeling it and knowing it from all sources, not only for himself, but for us. Every poem is a challenge in living, with nothing left unexamined. Sowder has a habit of focusing so clearly he has no choice (because he hankers for it) but to seek the Divine everywhere, especially in himself. *House Under the Moon* is both a book of marvelous poems and how a poet discovers the mystical way. Though Sowder can't be in the monastic life itself, he stays close to it in his family, wherever they and he go.

Through it all, Sowder is a human being subject to all that humans experience—doubt, uncertainty, rage, anger, fear,

love, loss—and from these near-tragic events, he emerges, sometimes scalded. Through his poems everything becomes the reader's vision, too, and we feel the brilliance of his perceptions as soon as we read his lines. It is hard not to be being moved by their intensity and tone.

Central to the book is the distinction between the "Beloved" (Divine) and "beloved," "my love" (referring to his wife). Though they appear separately in "My Beloved's Eyes" and "Shoveling Snow," (a poem of inimitable tenderness and love for his wife), he sometimes leaps across the gulf and makes a dramatic account of his Beloved, as in "When I First Pulled Onto the Highway of Love," where the Beloved is identified in ordinary terms so personal, readers can feel the proximity of the Divine, reminding us of Donne and Herbert, earlier masters of such juxtapositions.

Another way of regarding Sowder's mystical journey is the thirteen poems describing his sons, Aidan and Kellen, from Aidan's pre-birth (15, 18) and "Aidan Looks at the Moon," to Kellen's apotheosis in dazzling sunlit grass ("Kellen, First April"). They sometimes appear together, as in their final show, "Handing Down Apple Branches," helping their father by sawing wood (and sending the reader back to the earlier poem "What He Left," Sowder's beautiful reminiscence of his own father). The scariest poem in the book occurs when two Dobermans, "lithe as leopards, / tearing up the dust," (59) threaten Sowder and the boys as they reach the ridge of a canyon, provoking unanswerable questions from the boys about death and the afterlife, and leaving the reader at the end with the chilling image of the doe's "white bones" "like teeth / in the mouth of the canyon"(60). Pages later, an eerie silence pervades the darkness in the house where the boys and Sowder await his wife whom he's just rescued from an accident on the highway ("Delicate").

Not a writer of rhymes but of strategic alliteration and stunning metaphors, Sowder has produced along with these an original sixty-line sestina-like alteration of repeated lines in a hilarious birthday poem, a serious example of his prosody ("Dinner and a Movie"(74–76).

But for Sowder, another matter, the landscape, is absolutely essential. The click of his mental shutter that produces so many scenes of natural surroundings forms the base of his ascending verses. Likewise, he needs the 135 other referents of all sorts in these forty-four poems—including the West itself—to express the ever-expanding quality of his imagination. Like a burnt-out St. Augustine, here confessing "the middle way ain't straight," (19) he's thrown everything out of his closet to seek the Unknown and find Love. We adore this move. Much has been written about the Buddha's last journey, but this is far from Sowder's last. We reach out to him. In poems of pure vision ("Into Darkness," "Ever Since," "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin Cut-up") *he* reaches to us and also writes his own koan-like noble truth, "It takes time, my son, to learn to break a fall by letting go of what you want"(53). And when God wakes up in us (as God in the poem can), and we find ourselves "looking out the irises / of every stranger's eyes" (37), we, too, will know the truth.

The great poem of hope he writes at the end, "After the Sun" (after the sun and earth are gone), catching us like the ending of Whitman's *Song of Myself*, explodes with shining metaphors and an echo of the Buddha's laughing once more. The poem completes all Sowder has said earlier about his Beloved and his search for the Divine.

The T.S. Eliot Prize for Sowder's first book reminds us it was Eliot who said the poet emerges with knowledge of the poetry of the past as well as the present. Here, in these poems so cognizant of past sources and present needs in the world of family and spiritual enlightenment, Michael Sowder has made another noble, original, and even more graceful contribution to the present out of that past.

—Theodore Haddin

The Lost Boys

by Daniel Groves

Athens: University of Georgia Press (The *VQR* Poetry Series), 2010. $16.95 (pa.)

The Lost Boys, Daniel Groves' debut collection, surprises the reader with delicately-crafted verse that often feels improvised. As playful and modern a poet as any at work today, he nevertheless opts for restrained form—by paying attention to traditional metrical patterns, many of the poems create *new* rhythms. Supporting these rhythms are some of the most innovative rhymes in contemporary writing. In "Novella," for example, Groves rhymes "passes by" with "pacify," "occasion" with "contagion," "1968" with "asphyxiate," and "pathos" with "pesos." One can almost find a new poem by reading the end words alone because so many associations arise between them. Groves' technical finesse, however, is not his work's most important quality: sincere emotion is what ultimately drives Groves' best poetry.

Perhaps the finest shorter poem in the book is "A Dog's Life." Here, Groves takes on a seemingly cliché subject—saying goodbye to a pet—but defies the reader's expectations through precise diction:

> A stay of execution: one last day,
> your day, old Everydog, then, as they say,
> or as we say, (a new trick to avoid
> finalities implicit in *destroyed*),
> you have to be *put down*, or *put to sleep*—

In the first line, Groves sets up a melancholic tone that juxtaposes the tender wit later appearing throughout the rest of the piece. Then the name "Everydog" implies that the speaker's dog might as well be the reader's own, thereby adding universality to the voice, which yearns to discover meaning through word choice. Italicizing words like *"destroyed"* and phrases such as *"put to sleep"* further emphasizes the

differences in connotation within the words the speaker uses to describe death. So "finalities [are] implicit in *destroyed*," whereas phrases like *"put to sleep"* act as defense mechanisms against these inevitabilities, confirming, in turn, a greater human sadness.

The same human sadness that Groves conveys in response to death and change thrives within art itself. In part ten of "The Lost Boys"—the book's magnum opus—Groves writes, "…hopes it all, / if he just stuck to art, / could, in a word, repair a broken heart. / But That Girl was broken-up as well…." The rhyme of "art" and "heart" clarifies how truly important art is to the speaker; he needs it to survive. Likewise, he needs "That Girl" because she too has deeply internalized problems, which may allow him to relate to her, in turn gaining a better understanding of himself.

Unfortunately, by the poem's end, the speaker reveals that "she up and bought the pharmacy"—at this point, the reader may sympathize even more with "That Girl" than with the speaker, since the implication is that she's on the verge of an actual drug overdose.

However, the reader soon realizes that the speaker remains the most poignant figure in the poem because he can't just off himself like "That Girl" can. Instead, he has to continue living a life that depends upon a hopeful commitment to art despite the constant fear that this art may never heal anything; in other words, Groves seems to be playing with the ironic idea of the artist who is enslaved by what may potentially free him.

Further along in "The Lost Boys" sequence, the speaker in part twenty-six—"The Remote"—finds himself immersed in pop culture via the shows and commercials that populate the television screen. He eventually attempts to swap his attention to literature—"*The Great Divorce*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, / *A Wilde Omnibus*…"—but, in the end, he's satisfied with watching *Ernest Goes to Camp*. On the surface, the reader may assume that the more immediate media, such as television, acts as a distraction against the speaker's literary life, which

most likely requires greater investment. The ending, however, suggests that the gap between high and low art may not be so large as it seems. Sometimes, the speaker loses interest in one or the other; at other times, the speaker *gains* interest in one or the other, so it's almost as if Groves has placed pop culture and literature on the same playing field. *Ernest Goes to Camp* might win the speaker's current attention, but the books always remain in the back of his head, calling to be read; the reader feels confident that the speaker will read a book if he will just turn off the TV. But it's valid to point out that the speaker *is* "content" to watch *Earnest,* whereas he remains nervous in regards to the books. This is not to say that the speaker isn't well-read; the problem may be that the speaker is *too* well-read, causing him to seek an escape from an overintake of knowledge; in short, with television, he may not have to think as much, but at least he's safe from the possibly overbearing truths that infuse the literature on the shelf.

In the third-to-last poem in the collection, "So Long," the tone is elegiac, reflective:

> …you are beyond forgiving me.
> If there were something to take away, a keepsake
> you meant for me…you meant for me to take
> this stance for so long: objectivity,
> distance. Now, six-feet even—fathomless, skin-deep—
> our distance is the only thing we keep.

The last line here seals the poem with a mood of loss and abandonment, but it also manages to simultaneously move toward a healing process. At least the speaker keeps *something* from the person who has passed away. "Distance" isn't what the speaker wishes he'd ended up with, but it "is the only thing [they] keep," so he has to make use of it somehow. The voice feels quite removed throughout the poem. Perhaps, the writing process itself is what allows the speaker to use this objectivity that he has been given. Even if that's the case, the reader isn't completely convinced that the trade-off is worth it, so the poem remains heartbreaking.

Daniel Groves' *The Lost Boys* is a challenging read that pays off; through inventive syntax and diction, the poems often reach unexpected conclusions. A poem describing a mundane task like photocopying may become a profound meditation on art and the self. Another poem about riding a seesaw may reveal a basic truth about human nature. Groves' speakers are intellectual yet relatable, witty yet vulnerable. Unlike much of the prose-like, ego-driven verse being written today, Groves' poetry is deeply philosophical, emotional, musical, and humorous all at once, heightened through formal restraint.

—*Jason Walker*

War Reporter

by Dan O'Brien

Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2013. $18. (pa.)

At its core, *War Reporter*, Dan O'Brien's debut collection, reveals the twisted and chaotic kinship of personal and political conflicts, and, therefore, how individuals might influence global matters. O'Brien's collection, then, is a transfiguration of his award-winning play, *The Body of an American*, from script to verse. The volume chronicles the Canadian photojournalist Paul Watson as he faces private anxieties and insecurities through his work as a war reporter, eventually snapping the controversial photographs of an American soldier discovered dead and desecrated in the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu. This image won Watson a Pulitzer, but the photo, the experience, and the soldier would forever haunt him as he traveled the world documenting war and genocide from the trenches. O'Brien discovers Watson in the 2000s and is drawn to the enigmatic war reporter, ultimately seeking him out through correspondences and a life-changing meeting in the Canadian High Arctic. Their relationship fosters self-exploration for each man, prompting Watson to designate O'Brien as "my confessor" and "my friend." If Paul and Dan are to find redemption or absolution, it seems their best chance to fight their wars is together through conversation and friendship. To solve the problem of where war lives, *War Reporter* leans on the words of Albert Camus—that it lives in each of us; furthermore, as Watson states in O'Brien's introductory note, "If we can solve that conflict within ourselves then maybe we'll be able to rid the world of war." O'Brien proves capable of sustaining such penetrating verse. Rather than taking us to the mountaintop to dwell in mystery, O'Brien deftly puts our feet on the ground so that we might more clearly see the face and body of war for ourselves, be it privately or communally—the bewilderment, the distrust, the violence, the surprising interrelationships, the elusive truth, and, hopefully, the empathy needed to amend.

The volume begins in the middle of the action, at the most crucial point of Watson's narrative, when Watson takes the picture of an American soldier's corpse that was dragged and beaten by Somalis in October of 1993. "The War Reporter Paul Watson Hears the Voice" sets the tone and the tension of the entire volume as Watson confronts the dead American and hears him say, "*If you do this, / I will own you forever*" (O'Brien's emphasis), to which Watson replies, "I'm sorry / but I have to." With this interior conversation, and with the weight of guilt bearing upon Watson's words, we realize the haunting implications of the soldier's voice. The visceral imagery of the scene pulls us kicking and screaming into the chaos of the Somalis swarming the smoldering Black Hawk helicopter and the American soldier:

> I took his
> picture. While they were beating his body
> and cheering. Some spitting. Some kid wearing
> a chopper crewman's goggles, face screwed up
> in rapturous glee while giving the dead man
> the finger. An old man's raising his cane
> like a club and thudding it down against
> the dead flesh.

One note from this passage is the obvious celebration of the Somalis. Watson, as we discover throughout the volume, is racked with guilt that his photographs may have had a hand in extremist propaganda—that warlords or terrorists could use it as a victory over Western power. Simultaneously, Watson is just as skeptical of Western disinformation, especially the Pentagon's denial of his reportage. Disseminating this elusive truth is an anxiety that Watson carries with him throughout the verse, even as he confronts the dead soldier's family in Arizona.

O'Brien skillfully sustains multiple juxtapositions throughout the narrative regarding the dissemination of information, censorship, and the "truth," which isn't always

popular with politicians or even the media. "The War Reporter Paul Watson on Censorship" is less straightforward than its title suggests, but, nonetheless, provides us with both insight into dissemination and censorship, and a sense of Paul's interiority as he took his infamous photograph. O'Brien quickly puts us in the car with Paul moments after he snapped a picture of the American soldier's naked body. But by the second line of the fifteen-line poem, we are already in a memory of Paul with another photographer, Andrew Stawicki, in the Sudan. Stawicki photographs a boy playing "along / the river's bloody spine," and an embedded dialogue commences: "That's going to be / a beautiful picture. They won't print it. / Why not? The kid's dick is showing!" The very next lines employ a signature O'Brien treatment: the italicized line that signals a transition, sometimes of speakers, but as is the case here, of space and time. The memory is now complete, and we return to Paul in the car facing the Somali mob in 1993:

> Open
> *the door! Open it!* This time I frame out
> everything shameful. Except the woman
> slapping the corpse with a flattened tin can
> and the boy shoveling his face through the mob
> to laugh at us.

Through the use of memory, timely transitions, terse language, and lucid imagery, O'Brien sets the stage for a deceptively simple poem, one which gives us narrative detail and character insight, but, also, through the broken syntax and truncated sentences, grants us a moment to breathe before then emphasizing the irony of media hypocrisy and censorship. This poem resonates because it challenges us to confront our cultural norms and insecurities: how is the image of genitalia taboo while an image of bloodshed is accepted and preferred? What does this conflict say about a society that chooses to filter out some disturbances while allowing others in? The dichotomy of private (sex) and public (violence) is, evidently, very much at the heart of the matter.

O'Brien's formal treatments highlight the poetry and perfectly echo the subject matter so that the combined effect is a palpable yet balanced blend of concentration, disorientation, and claustrophobia, as if we are in the car with Watson the day of his photograph in 1993. Most noticeable are the anaphoric titles; these lend a tone of steady frankness—the kind that would be needed to manage anxiety one day at a time, one memory at a time. Superfluous, ornate titles would have been inappropriate for poems about war, anxiety, and uncomfortable truths, and O'Brien titles, some bleeding, instill a sense of propriety to the subject matter. The poems themselves are structured in blocks with a dramatic monologue spine, yet many poems, like "The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Poet Make a Plan," quickly become polyphonic through O'Brien's shifting italics and dialogue that is mostly discernible through semantics rather than punctuation:

> It's the sort of thing
> everybody has. And nothing compared
> to the unspeakable acts of cruelty
> you've seen, Paul. *Let's meet up in the Arctic*
> *in 24-hour darkness, Dan.*

"The War Reporter Paul Watson Chases the Lion of Panjshir" is a gorgeous poem full of intertextuality with Persian poetry, unexpected political alliances, and witty imagery of treadmills "for battling / insurgent love handles" and Taliban cleaning guns while watching *Baywatch;* however, we also see a poignant moment captured through disjointed dialogue between Paul and the "warrior-poet" Massoud before the latter's assassination: "Switch / on your camera, says Massoud. Explosions / make night of this world."

As the poetry continues the search for absolution through the dramatic monologue backbone, we see O'Brien mingling biography, journalism, and correspondences, with deeply personal and extra-personal themes: the soldier's voice haunting Paul, Paul's struggles with PTSD and depersonalization (an overlooked by-product of a war photographer's enduring

tunnel-vision), the unconventional and often self-destructive lifestyle of risk-taking war reporters, and Dan's own ghost, the haunting refrain of his father's words—"There are things you do not know!" (42). The catalyst of the poetry is, however, the relationship between Paul and Dan as it follows them from strangers to admirers to friends, and we see this in the divide between echoing poems, such as "The War Reporter Paul Watson and the Poet Try to Have Fun" and, half a book later, "The Poet and the War Reporter Paul Watson Go for a Sleigh Ride." Only a few times throughout the book does the polyphony of voices and transference appear to bottleneck the narrative. However, during these moments, the sense of the work is never lost, only smudged a bit to encourage the reader's own investigative skills. For instance, "The Poet Hears the Voice" is a pivotal poem introducing O'Brien as a character; but, if the reader knows to listen to Watson's 2007 NPR interview, then this poem opens up and the reader gains an immediate sense of O'Brien's organization method.

Appropriately, *War Reporter* travels through time and space, from Canada to Somalia to Afghanistan to Wisconsin to Los Angeles and beyond, but always feels grounded amid the confusion; we never feel as if the speakers are untrustworthy or the narrative is out of touch. Fundamentally, what holds the poetry together is the successful bonding of earnest dialogue and compelling imagery. So much of O'Brien's verse hinges on this union that without it the poetry would be flat and uninspiring, yet it is anything but. "The War Reporter Paul Watson Attends a Stoning" is one of the more graphic yet brooding poems of the volume particularly because of the movement from imagery to dialogue:

> The judges are angry
> At what I still regret: Why did you not
> take pictures? Because you wanted me to.
> Because this time I did not want the world
> to see.

O'Brien is undoubtedly invested in this story and the truth behind it, and wants it told—not only told, but also felt. *War Reporter* can be an unsettling read because it confronts humanity and war in a way many of us are not accustomed to, and, in doing so, it rightfully precipitates our own re-evaluations of history's recent wars. O'Brien has crafted a debut collection that is as unforgettable as it is important. His verse is full of urgency and acuity, but is never above his subject. I think we can all look forward to O'Brien's future poetry and expect the same artistry, engagement, and integrity as displayed in *War Reporter*.

—*John Saad*

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