The Alembic
The Alembic
PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

The Alembic

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On the cover: Tree of Knowledge by Brian D. Cohen

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virgil Suarez</td>
<td>San Lazaro’s Procession</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan G. Van Cleave</td>
<td>Enlightened One</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wallace Stevens as Metaphor</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rane Arroyo</td>
<td>The Book of Reinaldo vs. the Rat Poison</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Smith</td>
<td>Outside The Bronx House of Detention</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ashland</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Troubadors of The Late Twentieth Century</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Betrayed, La Reve, Dizzy Gillespie</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In The Valley of Too Much Rain</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip Cymble</td>
<td>Bureau</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Lunin Perel</td>
<td>Laps</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Sanders</td>
<td>Winter Borough</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Shore</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Z. Niditch</td>
<td>Judy At The Punchbowl</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie A. Cox</td>
<td>Perorations</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lois Marie Harrod</td>
<td>The Heart at Midnight</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Story, Wyoming</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Trail from School House Park</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morton Marcus</td>
<td>In Praise of Toilets</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Moment After</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quartet in A Minor Key</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy Kealey</td>
<td>Visitor</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apparitions</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Art &amp; Photography</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly Glyder</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Untitled</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik Aho</td>
<td>Heavy Snow Cloud</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full Summer</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corcomroc Abbey</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincetown Pier, Dusk</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ostrobothnia</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Old Victorian</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Dusk Clouds</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
San Lazaro’s Procession

It started at dusk or early that morning
in Havana (or it was dusk) by the time
the people moved through our neighborhood,

many dressed in white, those on their knees
already bloodied and scarred, others sunk
into their crutches, the absence of limb

obvious, pant leg folded and tucked
at the knee. All broken, damaged somehow
in this life, intent on kept promises. All

on their way to the El Ricon de San Lazaro,
up on the hill, so far from where these people
had started their pilgrimages, to see

that old leper in loin cloth, surrounded
by his three faithful dogs which lick
and heal his festering wounds, the saint

the Catholic church doesn’t recognize,
say it is only myth—but what about these
devotees, moving through on pure will.

My parents brought me to the side of the street
from where people in Calabazar stood
and watched the procession of the sick

and infirmed, not unlike the rest of us,
penitent of sins, expectant that a kept promise
could set them on the right path to freedom.
I was never taken to the place where they say people left their offerings: casts, crutches, hair, medicines for bad hearts, bad teeth, flowers—left there at the altar by people who claimed some certain healing took place in their lives, and they merely walked away, healed, new. I was a child in the awe of such searches of spirit to a Cuban saint whose charm I would never understand, but so many, unlike me, so lifted by faith and trust, moved by their beliefs, came through so much hardship, determined in their passing—bent on this idea left to them, they made the journey to the little hilltop sanctuary in the dark of their land, of my childhood.

So many people passed to leave some mark, some token, like this poem, an amulet left as a gift in the shrine of such yearning.
RYAN G. VANCLEAVE

Enlightened One

Walking along a path something like the trek from Diego to Vegas, only not so much of that creepy saguaro, I found myself pushing past a wall of purple hanging vines. There I saw the Buddha in all his migrant pragmatism, cauterizing his eyes with a stick soaked in acid. *I am sterilizing the world*, he said. *This is my commentary on love.*

We sat and discussed the nature of suffering through our silence, listening only to the sound of far-off rain.
Wallace Stevens as Metaphor

He never feels the same way twice about the poem of life, black violets on riverbanks, the solitude of cataracts.

Think of him as a colorless man sitting in a forest, reverberations of river noise and savage wind twisting among the universal space between leaves. He seeks power, light, influence over the miraculous and obscure,

he wants to light the highest candle with his imagination. Out of this same forest, out of patient syllables, we make a rendezvous at a vital boundary with him to fly round clouds and cattle skulls, to fly round and round.
1. Now that he has mailed off his suicide note to friends and enemies, he can relax. 2. It is so strange to look at his apartment in such disorder and to feel as if he might burst into laughter. 3. Yes, *burst* is the word, for surely flower buds burst into a landscape, for Spring is a violence. 4. The space heater glows like a Cyclops in heat. 5. He watches the red for a while, and tries to notice how long it takes before he gets bored. 6. There is so much that he didn’t know about himself, about his body. 7. He sits in each chair in his apartment and becomes overwhelmed by their differences under his thin ass that he goes to his bed to be comforted by the familiar. 8. His blankets smell of him. 9. Is that what he really smells like? 10. He doesn’t want to read a book and he is tired of always reading the palms of his trembling hands. 11. Thank God that he isn’t in love at the moment for then Time might regain its importance in what little life is dripping through his veins. Time might have a hostage with a first name. 12. One of his few regrets is that he has never really understood even one thief’s heart, that most thieves are actually very practical dreamers. 13. He fantasizes that someone is breaking into his place and that he tells the burglar that he is the last human he will ever see. 14. God, he is going to miss his eyes. 15. He counts his toes ten times until the numbers come to have meaning. 16. His toes look like family pets that are unknowingly being raised for distant holiday meals. 17. Is everything a tragedy? 18. The Greeks had their Satyr plays. 19. He could drink rum while singing along to the *West Side Story* soundtrack as some kind of ironic gesture, but with his death so close the absence of an audience gains importance. 20. He admires the beauty of his night table’s curving legs, Cleopatra as a quadruplet. 21. The last thing he wants to do is think about his Life, but Life is cruel enough to be visible at the most inconvenient times. 22. He farts because he has taken too many deep breaths. 23. Amazing how the seams of one’s underwear are so undervalued. 24. He stares into an apple that he bit just yesterday, and now looks like a
wound surrounded by red skin. 25. He is done with eating. 26. He wishes he had been crazy enough to rename himself—rebaptize himself with one of those million bottles of champagne that had been bought in his honor—so that he might recklessly exit this world as John-the-Beloved-Jr., or as something equally spectacular. 27. Which of his friends or enemies would be the first to open up his suicide note? 28. Who are his friends and enemies? 29. Has he truly been anyone’s friend? 30. He stares at a canceled postage stamp and it looks like a poem written nervously by some mad eunuch. 31. He opens the window, the only window in his bedroom. 32. It is above his head, and as far as it has been reported, it still remains in that apartment. 33. The air is like a hat, only more pure, and less susceptible to being shaped by any passing head. 34. He smells mud from blocks away. 35. He wonders how long it will take before rain seeps into his bones. 36. Not yet, he tells himself, but soon enough. 37. His Cubs cap looks ridiculous against his blue jeans nailed into the bedroom wall. 38. While he is not to leave a son or daughter behind, the semblance of a scarecrow hanging on a nail, instead of a Christ, makes him laugh aloud. 39. He wonders if the excitement he is feeling is a symptom of the rat poison and so he counts his heartbeats as if they were roses paid for by someone else, a long-awaited stranger. 40. Consistency is rather Gothic in our quantum science society, although once our deaths cancel out our privileges as living citizen, why then consistency is reduced into a retrospective show, a photo album, a story or two, a drunk tale, a happening long happened. 41. He grabs a nearby envelope, licks it until spit covers his face like some renaissance beard. 42. He seals air inside that envelope, letter to himself in the grave. 43. He smells it. 44. He crushes it into a white flower and throws it out through the opened window so that it might have the chance to root outside of his consciousness. 45. How has he become so literary? 46. He tries to imagine that Christ is smothering him against His holy chest. 47. Gasping, he lays still, only to learn that lightbulbs sing to themselves all the time, all that time. 48. Why is he without a mother or a father? 49. He sings along with the lightbulb. 50. He feels such tremendous joy knowing that he won’t live to pay the electric bill. 51. He thinks he should be dead by now, but he has never been very fortu-
nate. 52. Not yet, he says aloud. 53. Does the Russian nyet mean not yet?
54. He tries pissing but to see his sex is to bring back memories not quite
distant enough to be pleasant or overwhelmingly positive. 53. What is self
control about? 56. He looks closely at the scar on his inside right thigh. 57.
Either it has grown smaller or else he has grown beyond his old pains. 58. He
starts to wonder just then what his jacket might do without him, his body, his
stink. 59. Stink is a garden without a gardener. 60. He drinks rum and can’t
stop himself from playing the West Side Story soundtrack until it becomes too
painful to think about thinking and not thinking. 61. He never has returned the
library book, In the Palaces of Memory. 62. He has to forget his life. 63. The
rat poison has graciously offered him no other choice. 64. Choices he had
made were always underpinned by someone else’s ideas of normality. 65.
Trying to find someone to blame by name makes him sleepy. 66. Certainly his
sleeping has something to do with forgetting that he himself will never com­
prehend the universe even as it simultaneously comprehends him. 67. He con­
centrates on his neck’s strange pleasure from pressing against the zebra-striped
pillows. 68. A neighbor’s phone rings and rings. 69. He listens to it as if some
angel is writing him a love letter of sound. 70. He wonders if his body is really
transforming food into shit even as he is dying. 71. He feels the urge to order
pizza from every pizzeria in the phone book and laughs at the image of seeing
millions of pizza men and women trying to knock down his door while wearing
a halo of the works: garlic, mushrooms, tomatoes, green peppers, extra cheese,
pineapple and spinach. 72. Maybe he should have shaved himself with a straight
razor. 73. Maybe he has; he feels his chin in order to confirm the past. 74. He
waits for the rat poison to ride up his brain stem as if a flower bud pushing into
a rainy morning and by waiting he learns that his body is exceptionally good at
keeping secrets from him. 75. He is still more alive than dead. 76. Is he still
himself? 77. He hopes the little puckers who found him pretentious while living
will be up to their noses in the shit he is leaving behind. 78. Sincerity gives the
impression that one must have manners that require one to be in a tuxedo. 79.
are so ugly and unlovable. 81. A mosquito died in a cup of coffee he has not
finished because he doesn’t want to take the edge off his rum. 82. He does nothing for many seconds. 83. He doesn’t feel good. 84. Is that a sign that Death will possess him soon enough? 85. He reaches for more rum—damn you coffee—even though he doesn’t want to romanticize these last moments. 86. He touches his sex but it has died long before the rest of him has. 87. A picture of a naked man in the East wall embarrasses him with its effusive engineering wonders. 88. The naked man’s head is turned toward something out of the frame, out of the room, out of the city, out of the world, out of history. 89. The nude’s left arm looks like a pincher far from the sea, tragic evolutionist. 90. The photo doesn’t smell of anything, but he does. 91. He can’t stop coughing. 93. He cups his balls because the ache in them is an old puberty. 94. He bends over. 95. He wears the body of his birth to the burning grave of his head. 96. He had imagined that this whole business would have been quicker and much more silent. 97. He lays on the floor, spreads his arms and legs and seeks mercy like that given to furniture by ghosts. 98. The cold floor soaks into his bones. 98. He looks up into heaven’s crotch. 99. He has never taken a good look at the ceiling before. 100. It is an uncarved tombstone, an eternity of whiteness, blank.
there's a movement in the air to find the pressure points
of the body with these hands,
these elongated fingers of point counterpoint
from the squad cars's police band
squawk and annunciation—
those irrational numbers and your name.
On another man-held radio
the *sturm und drang* of the *Yo Baby, Yo Baby, Yo*
over the crosshatched and liquid crystal exhibition
of the fluctuating powers to soothe, to be roughed up. The radio's
uplifted like an iron lung, and listen, from inside
the deep-breathing clients and prying the bars apart
with their voices of aggravated assault, grand theft auto, homicide
third degree. And listen, this music we receive
we send on the all black keyboard of sharps and flats,
the chromatics of crimes in progress,
the harmonics of passionate acts.
Was I too talkative about the afterlife
in the low, black hills of anthracite?

Glib from living and not living
there in the unforgiving

shale, I idled and swerved
looking for it around the next curve

the white line to the white fire,
the two-lane, one road empire.

Centralia was a candle blown out
that still fumed and flamed, doubt

made miraculous and Pennsylvania
was occupied like Lithuania

by some axis, now invisible, global,
some acid snow, some terror in survival.

“Practice Random Acts of Kindness”
the billboards have no other business

but the mystic public services
while the marquees of the churches

are the menus for meat and potatoes
for the next life. Their ogees
are a blue the sky will never be.
They can’t afford their guilt. Mercy

is a shocked horse steaming
in a field of snow, dreaming

of winter-stop and what was that?
That god weight on my back?

A wish is a filly—a luxury
made necessary through a dull fury

like a song the unionist
used to sing, under the breath, of justice:

Feed me the heart of the owner.
Make me a living by wonder.
BRUCE SMITH

Troubadors of the Late Twentieth Century

A. said the feeling has a name —
when the beloved, the ex, calls from New York
or Prague or from beyond the grave via autumn
in New England. It's as if the flame
takes the tree, the overstory and nests, and the low chemical
heaven like a paper doused in kerosene
and in that instant our breath goes up with it
and the fumes are our brooding.

B. said the pressure of the ionosphere
with its charged particles and the stratosphere
with its zero weather comes down and crushes the lungs
as if the weights hung upside down
in Gaudi's model for the cathedral —
the buttress and span — were hung
from the stomach and the balls.

C. who is tired of thinking about things
— and not touching the greasy pig itself —
said the tongue in the light socket.
He remembers the fist, the palm,
the two fingers of the rock, paper, scissors —
the frisk and slap —
the covering, the breaking, the keen
against the blunt. It felt like his wool sheered
to the skin, the skin nicked. The blood flushes
from his face — the opposite of a blush, the opposite
of an erection — when he thinks of her.
Half what you make of it and half
envy and fear and the rest luminous
Monday to Friday buying a lottery ticket
and a coffee to go while the taste
in your mouth is ash but you remember
fire. You remember the face of the one
you loved: big brow and lip, the furred
temples you oiled as you did the faces of the ones
you loved while you were loving the one you love.
Sometimes the names slip away.
But it’s not forgetfulness as much as being
absorbed. Endear, enchant, cheat, each heartbeat
a betrayal of a pledged second before.
You love the past tense and the ghost —
the revenant with hips and collarbones,
with green eyes and those wrists.

The water from your mouth
to hers. The first time blue and seduce,
the next repetition revelation. She loves you
back as she looks for the bread knife or another.
And yes, you wrote bad checks, but the extravagant
number of zeroes stands for the unbounded
cipher of your love as does the singing
of the Song of Songs to both, and the same flowers
beheaded on her behalf also liquidated for another:
It was La Reve, the nodding lily with the dark
leaves whose name is dream, a red illuminated
by an oily sunset, sepals and petals curved
backwards like necks
arched until they touched the stem.
Then he's driving the 205 Bridge crossed by jets and government work. It's late December, as he pulls in stations from Vancouver and whale song from the islands, faithless in his frequencies in the dark. He gets a faint signal relayed from New York. It's Dizzy playing beyond his death the bop Latin brash sweetness -- like water from lover's mouth. He pulls it in. It's him and the absence of him in the anvil and stirrup of the inner ear, the anvil forging a wheel as if for the first time and the stirrup he puts his foot in presses his instep against it and it takes him away somewhere.
In the Valley of Too Much Rain

She's falling in the huge V
chosen death by hanging
in the valley of too much rain
after the crushing limbo of death row,
all the cells brimming and falling
through the trap door
at the constant rate of gravity
a greased rope around his hooded neck
and light which slows as the universe
dropped into the air
expands in the valley of too much rain.
a slow erotic choke
Arms do what arms do
  crushing the wind pipe, gasping
holding and letting go, falling
  from all the weight.
In the valley of too much rain
  He wants to grab the noose
falling and flailing hands and wave
  before it tightens too much
goodbye but not before the clench
  and not an instant sooner
unclench as if rising for a breath
  no breath, and he comes as if
held under water, the air
finally fucking nothing
soaked from too much rain
finally everything
falling then reaching for a body,
  Ex: -felon or -lover, broken
anything, a limb in the dark green world
    man who would die—
    to stop the falling in the valley
    anything to be another body
    of too much rain and then still
    with the heaviness, the weight
    falling, then finding wings.
PHILLIP CRYMBLE

Bureau

For Jean

Fighting past stacks of old unanswered letters, near empty bottles of sherry kept for company that never came, faded photographs thumbed and stiffed; fighting past the final dust I manage to feel after all the slow and bending weight of accumulation, the casualty of death.
JANE LUNIN PEREL

Laps

For Chard and Carla

Water is its own
mantra. Breathe
in. Breathe
out. It accepts all into it.
A marriage bed from which
you emerge at least cleansed.
Just say the number of the lap
you’re swimming. Say it over and
over and it dissolves like desire. Air
escapes from us each day, but at least we
can still swim and ask in the name of water
to live again as the body encases its
own fire that too has its own
mantra that sounds
like air ringing its
own hands then
screaming, but water’s
mantra is silk over rocks and
moss beds. Breathe in. Breathe
out. Owls’ wings over bone.
TONY SANDERS

Winter Borough

The days of mutual admiration come and go
and come again replete with fulsome asides
so that everybody looks more than numinous
in a kind of electric, Christmas-ornament way.

Just as holidays give way to mass nutation,
so they snap to with a start at a dropped fork
or a flute tapped to clear the air for the toast.
Sometimes it feels as if uniformed members

of a parade band are gathered in the distance
where blue barricades are up to tame a crowd,
but the trouble with such a laudable inkling is
the way the streets are afterward when brooms

push paper, and once in a while, a child’s glove.
There must be some kind of allegory in play,
but that sort of thing’s dropped out of fashion
and sits nodding out at home dreaming of return.

There are those hell-bent on waxing nostalgic
who must be treated with a modicum of grace
given that their condition is always progressive.
Remember that for them there’s no way back.

But not to dwell on the negative, the grand idea
of the marching band high-stepping up the avenue
again surges to the forefront of consciousness
like a kid needling past adults to see the parade.

Meanwhile the streets simply wait to be mended
by a change in weather, another mood sidling in
from the west with the promise of crafty lather
to take from the view the presence of hard edges.

To think: a simoom spreads its breath
over the mons-like dunes of the Arabian desert
and gradually the terrain turns into a close relative
of its former self albeit recognizable to Bedouins.

And yet, there’s no need for the bank of tv’s
tuned to the weather channel in the storm window
making the planet look like a hi-tech brain scan
of a patient just diagnosed with a malignant tumor.

The feeling “we’re all in this together” comes
and goes like packs of taxis roaming “off-duty”
through neighborhoods with cinder buildings
now too tired-looking to have any personality.

Even holidays have lost much of their sheen,
the pennants are lengthening their frown lines
from being furled and unfurled so many times,
the balloons barely holding out against slow leaks.

Mercifully, any side street leads to the water.
There is still something restorative about the edge
of a river and its unceremonious procession,
even if the weather has deteriorated into fine rain.

It has everything to do with the putting of hands
on the railing to marvel at the river’s insouciance.
But sometimes a moment of solitude has a halo
that fades into the distance without waving goodbye.
There's always a pause between ebb and flow.

The ocean that's been reading to you is quiet, as though a page has been torn from the book just as the narrative approaches the crisis point. It has something to do with bluffs and dunes, the cosmic reordering of life based on the tides pulling you in or away from the safety of the shore. The calligraphy of seaweed on the page of sand spells out nothing in particular but bears a tone as distinctive and mysterious as the moire affect of shallow water sliding across your bare feet.

Once again the ocean has sent an internal memo that the molecules read in a hurry and then destroy. And yet, there are other ways it makes contact, such as the slowed-down Morse code of waves breaking over the rotting pilons of a ruined pier, where at this point everything seems placid, even those perched seagulls awaiting their signs. It still feels that the harbingers are washing up, though on the other side of the island at high tide, so that when you get there the sand is smooth, according to the ritual of giving and taking away. On one hand, nature is vying for your attention, calling you over, putting its arm on your shoulder as if about to whisper to you a well-kept secret, and you, yourself, wanting such, stare out to sea with the hope and dread of someone in the past on the widow's walk watching for her husband. Still, there is no message out where the shoals
roil the dark water into an illegible, foamy script
so tantalizing since it is impossible to decipher
the briny line that never says the same thing twice.

There is some consolation in the radiant sun
so constant across your bare shoulders and back,
so thorough in its study of the grainy carpet
over which you traverse in the throes of thought.
The mixture of sun and salt makes you feel
that if you sat down with the right frame of mind
you could be turned into something as light
and porous as a chip of balsam found in the sand.

Any yet, how the sun always focuses on you
as it does everybody else at one time or another,
not to dry you out as though you were a piece
of papyrus on which it wished to write a letter,
a list of aspirations and failures for posterity
after thinking long and hard about its double life,
but, rather, to work up the nerve to touch you,
only to change its mind and make a gentle retreat.

You end where you begin, gazing with curiosity
at the abandoned lighthouse at the end of the jetty
which appears to have an interpretation of the sea,
but keeps to itself now that it’s officially retired.
The gulls glide over the surface in slow motion
as they do every afternoon in hungry reconnaissance
at an hour when the water is like wet newspaper
too far gone for someone to read, and the tide starts in.
Judy at the Punchbowl

It was a Tuesday night
Judy Garland (alone)
with her hurt smile
enters the Punchbowl
a gay club in
red light
an off eve
only when Cardinal Cushing,
without his scarlet robe,
arries “in disguise”
was there a greater splash
from the shins
of these wise guys
complimenting each other
for their closet space
between a hot date
in this June’s tingle
in the dead beat 50’s

a speech ban in Boston
and Judy rapping
out of jazz and gisim
when someone kissed you
behind your back
and it could have been
the men in blue
who blew you
out of good taste
for the dick
or district attorney
downtown
on his Murphy bed
to pull in their lawful quota
of these backdoor fairies
leaving a tremulous
chorus of Peter Pans
on your way out
to the Broadway Marquee de Sade
to eat a deer burger
with greens
and uncut red meat
left over
from the parochial wife beater
and the Babylonian harlot
who prepared it
for the last supper
1.
I've had to come at hunger with an ax.
I break open this way,
cracking through black surface
ice, hacking my way down
the glacial layers. It's no easier
waiting the winter out; under sun,
the melted water shatters
over and over, a river rattling
chainlinks of light.

2.
She collapsed against me
to sleep hard, to play fast
regardless of my handicap
in any game. Eight months.
The bedsprings pierced like barbs.

3.
She said she could only enter love
a whole person. I may have
crawled in on dirty knees. Still,
I gathered the whole of me
until my own heat
splintered the storm window
to these several jagged voices.
The spirit breaks this way:
first, smoke
unfisting silently,
a nest of hatching spiders.
and if the whole house burns,
it goes down singing.
4.
If a tattered spirit makes me half a person, so be it. It'll likely happen again next time.
She knew that the heart could beat removed from its body, even a bit cut from its bolt would pulse in saline, but what if her own, now beating as if it would somersault her ribs, trembled or worse, blipped like a circus clown down a banana peel, then stopped. Who would thump her back to dignity, this man snoring beside her, his own harlequin sniggering in his throat?

Didn’t men with apple bodies get heart attacks, and hadn’t he gained more weight? Well, she would have to love him, but not just now. Now she must wait until her own heartthrob thundered down. Maybe a glass
of milk. Maybe a dull mystery.
Maybe something she could listen
to, something innocuous,

Venus, the Bringer of Peace from
_The Planets_, something to put the
old ticker back in its case.
First your forehead wet from walking in the fog
and then the sky breaking below me
as if I am flying the floor of clouds
and below the map begins its buckle.

I see the rough places where rain gulleys
and the wet green circles where antelope feed
on the farmer’s wheat—all this you know
and do not know as I know and do not know

my body below the magpie’s wing.
So you are surprised when I return
to your mouth and deer—four, five, six—

leap the gravel road, brown
hummingbirds skitter in the horsemint
and the mist is still lifting.
If she had looked at a map before she started, she would have seen that where she wanted to get was farther than her body could carry, but she had no mentor who told her to start at the trail head, not at the bottom of the road and no benefactor to give her the four-wheel drive that would carry her, surely but slowly over the rocky ground. So she began plodding, and it was interesting, wide vistas of mountains some peter or john had named after himself, snow still on the summit even in July. The backs of her legs were sunburnt, and she took pictures to prove that she had been there alone by propping her camera on a rock.

On the way up she met no
one, but found one empty beer can and at the point where the trail entered the Cloud Peak Wilderness, a half-filled water bottle behind a log. She wondered if that person had been man or woman. Surely, she was not the only lonely woman she knew, and she had seen men from time to time on other trails, ones who had frightened her with their brief nods and camouflage, stories of hikers shot or bludgeoned on perfectly respectable peaks. These summits did not interest her.

But she did think of leaving her body up there, up among the yarrow and little yellow flowers for which she had no name. It was always her body that bothered her, the way it would never go as far as she desired.
Stoically dignified, a toilet faces the prospects of eternity with as much composure as the full-jowled bust of a Roman senator.

I knew a boy who fell in love with a toilet. He thought it was the head of a pelican, and would crawl into the bathroom to put his arms around its neck while laying a hot cheek against its cool jaw.

At first the boy’s mother kept the area around the toilet fastidiously clean, but eventually she had to call in psychiatrists and other experts, all to no avail.

One morning, amid splitting floorboards and tearing walls, the toilet raised its wings, and, with a creaking of pipes and plumbing, carried the boy, still clinging to its neck, into the sky.

The mother immediately turned into a statue. She would have been all right if her husband had taken her in his arms. But he stood in the middle of the wreckage, dressed only in boxer shorts and garters, holding the morning newspaper like a drooping wing at his side, and wondered if his insurance policy would cover the damage.

Sometime that week or next, two towns over, a little girl, who had just read a fairy tale about the miraculous transformation of a prince, realized her toilet resembled a frog.
When Saint Francis delivered
his sermon to the birds,
finch and swallow, sparrow,
magpie, crow and hawk,
one-hundred-fifty or more,
crowded around him
in the field, perched
on rock and stubble, beaks
closed, seeming to listen,
while the medieval town,
with its domes and towers,
like a bloated bird no longer
able to fly, squatted
on the hillside above.

As he spoke, was the saint aware
of those small hammering hearts
enclosed in their feathery cages?
Did he hear that beating
through the church bells and breezes
rolling from the distance,
or was he so enraptured
with his own or God's words
that he failed to appreciate
the eloquence of that silent
circle surrounding him?

I like to think of that moment
when he finished, still full
of wonder at the words
speaking through him:
Was he startled when,
in a dither of feathers, throats
cchanneling madrigals
of different melodies,
the birds took flight?

It must have been like
waking in the middle
of a heavenly choir,
or having the rosary
you’ve been contemplatively
counting in a side chapel
cy from your fingers
through the open window,
the beads blossoming
from a barrage of feathers
into brilliant baubles
of sound, coruscations
of choral splendor
that were a confusion
of audial and visual
delight—an intoxication
as maddening as jewels
of different colors
on the throats and fingers of solid, rosy women,
all singing as they walked
and worked in separate rooms,
the jewels on their bodies
 glittering in the firelight
of a smoky, heavy-timbered
house somewhere in the depths
of that medieval city
squatting silent and somber
on the hillside above.
They knew Robert Schumann was mad
and had to be locked in an asylum
when every sound he heard
was “transformed into music . . .
with instruments of splendid resonance
never heard on earth before . . . .”
That was on February 15th, 1854.
On the night of the seventeenth
the composer wandered about Dusseldorf,
eyes raised as he listened
to the angelic music struck
from wagon wheels and horseshoes,
from boot soles slapping cobblestones,
from passersby clearing their throats,
bickering, kissing, sighing.

By the twenty-first, the music had turned
into a coven of shrieking witches
and he was afraid he would hurt
his children and his beloved Clara.
On the twenty-seventh, he ran without shoes
into the rain and leaped
from a bridge into the Rhine.
The townspeople fished him out
and led him home, his hands
hiding his face, as they muttered
wasn’t he ashamed, and with
such a fine family too,

come, come, Herr Schumann,
you must get hold of yourself.

Two years later, he died in his sleep at a private asylum in Endenich, after days of striding around his room in arm-waving arguments with unseen spirits.

In the end, Clara (whom he hardly recognized but who remembered that once “he put his arm around me: and not for all earthly treasure would I exchange that embrace”), his precious Clara, had to observe him through a closed window.

2. Clara

After Robert Schumann went mad and died in the asylum, Clara, then thirty-seven and a renowned pianist, toured Europe playing his music for the remainder of her life.

She never remarried.

I always see her in her later years, a small German woman seated before the crouching black beast of her husband’s madness:

Every night for forty years the beast would feed from the frail but determined Clara’s hands, squatting before her as she tickled and stroked it, teased and coaxed it
to murmur and chortle, growl and roar
those sounds that made her beloved Robert,
whom the beast had swallowed whole,
live again, as she tapped at its teeth
and eased from under its glossy shell
the sounds of the lover she remembered,
who could be touched only in this way,
although she never understood
that neither beast nor lover
could exist without the other.

3. Brahms

Brahms caught a chill from which he never recovered
at Clara Schumann’s funeral outside Frankfurt
on a gray day in 1896. He had loved her
even when Robert was still alive, had loved her
for more than forty years, ever since he was twenty,
a love that Clara, still enamored with her long-dead Robert,
reciprocated with friendship and professional encouragement.

That day Brahms the bachelor, the corpulent composer,
turned toward his own death from Clara’s grave
because hope was now behind him, because his music—
suddenly a sack of fighting cats—was also behind him.
The doctor said, *Cancer of the liver*, but from that gray day
at the cemetery, the chill that shook him
as he stood at Clara’s graveside, the shiver
that passed like a hand over his entire body,
ever seemed to depart. Within the year,
he took to his bed. On April 2nd, 1897,
he lay unconscious all day with his face to the wall.
On April 3rd, he turned over with a shudder and died.

4. The Housekeeper

The woman who nursed Brahms in his last years is usually referred to as his housekeeper. After all, she wrote no music and played no instrument: of what importance was her name?

For twenty-five years she looked after the composer: washed his socks, prepared his meals, and emptied his cigar stubs from his ashtrays, while he thought only of Clara.

This housekeeper remained with Brahms to the end, feeding him soups and changing his bedclothes. The only talent she seemed to possess was unconditional devotion. We know her name was Celestine Truxa, but no one saw fit to record the manner of her death.
She tried to reach him but her voice was lost in rushing water. He continued on, lacking sight, but without fear. Once he half-turned, hearing a faint whisper of “I want, I want...” but continued further from where she called. He named the trees with her whisper, he thought he knew they used her voice sometimes when he was young and sure of all he knew. Now walking with her light in him like blood he wanted nothing but for everything that would remind him of her honesty.
JOY KEALEY

Apparitions

I remember the tarnished stars
and broken wings
tasting wine with you, our
midnight fairytales
you counted rose petals for me
I gave you water because
I thought you were thirsty
and wanted to keep you
because I thought you could
save me
you’re gone and
the vase on my table is full of
stems and the smell
of old violets
and I’m here, drawing black circles
and reinventing myself
with fire and snowfall, watching
your dead violets crumble to cinders
and disappear in filtered light
and the more I look at
the flame of a candle the more
I want to take everything back
ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

Kimberly Glyder
Erik Aho
Brian D. Cohen
KIMBERLY GLYDER

Untitled
KIMBERLY GLYDER

Untitled
KIMBERLY GLYDER

Untitled
KIMBERLY GLYDER

Untitled
ERIK AHO

Heavy Snow Cloud
ERIK AHO

Full Summer
ERIK AHO

Corcomroc Abbey
ERIK AHO

Provincetown Pier, Dusk
ERIK AHO

Ostrobothnia
ERIK AHO

Low Dusk Clouds
Gulf Memo

Tell me the way to the wedding
Tell me the way to the war,
Tell me the needle you're threading
I won't raise my voice anymore.

And tell me what axe you are grinding
Where the boy on bivouac believes.
What reed you are unwinding
For the girl in her bed who grieves.

While behind a derrick's girder
He watches the sinking sun.
He asks what he'll do for murder
And what he will do for fun.

Will you read him the ways of war
His Miranda rights in sin,
Will you tell him what to ignore
When he studies your discipline?

He dozes off—but he shakes
In a dream that he is the one
Death finds aliced and wakes
Just as the night is done.

Tell me what boats go ashore:
Riding the oil-dimmed tide.
Red streamers and black in store
For the boy with a pain in his side.

And tell me where they are heading
Tonight; now tell me the score.
Tell me the way to their wedding
I won't raise my voice anymore.
BRIAN D. COHEN

Train Wreck
My Father out of the Wind

My father comes to me as a little bit of dust swirling in the wind. He no longer slumps when he walks or scrapes his heels on the pavement as he lugs his two beaten canvas grips. He is no longer anxious and tired, stretching his hairy arms toward the ceiling and crumpling into a loud slumber in his chair. He has survived yet another Egypt and a thousand Pharoahs. He comes to me as a little bit of dust that flares in the wind like a swarm of locusts. I see his bearded face, born in the time of Isaac, streaked with tears. He has survived the gnashing of teeth, the punishing blows, the hammering hoofs that pound the desert floor, the violent diasporas. I hear him rising with the ferocity of a hyena, a gleam of light in its yellow eyes as it crunches the neck bones of its prey. He swirls in the air above the yellow wildflowers in the shadow of the mountain—a little bit of dust, some words to the wise, an exhortation to the wicked, a new covenant, and his legend grows mighty on the tongues of strangers.
DEBRA ESTRELLA

The Old Man: A Neighbor

You built a maze of vines
from window frames and
pieces of a fence we threw away.

You gave us grapes that smelled
like irises and tasted like
they didn’t come from the store.

You were selective
and gave to friends only
what you knew only they could appreciate.

Our name deceived you
and my grandfather’s mumbled chove and sol
made you think we understood
the grapes and the sounds.
When Brian knocked on the door, Joyce jumped from her chair in a panic. Her husband, Louis, had trouble falling asleep at night, so she rushed to answer it before Brian knocked again and awakened him. Reading glasses shot off her nose and struck her chest where they hung from a chain. Of course, it was Brian. He always knocked hard and slid his side against the door. Twelve years old, the son of the superintendent, Brian seemed much younger to her; probably because he was an albino.  

“What is it, Brian?” she whispered anxiously, opening the door.  
“I wanna show you something. Hurry!”  
“Shhh. Louis is asleep.”  
“Come on! You’ll miss it!”  
“What is it?”  

Never expect an answer to that question, she thought. She’d asked it many times only to follow him through the condominium complex to the recesses of the redwood pool shed, the game room, or the garage where the restored Studebaker was parked. Once it had been to see Mrs. Becker’s bra that he streched across the pingpong table like a net. Another time, to watch two green crickets mating.  

But it was dark out and she was tired and ready for bed. It had been a trying day with Louis. First, he wouldn’t go out for some fresh air. “Fresh air. Who needs fresh air!” he’d said with his mimicking voice, the one she’d hated in the old days when they could have equal fights. Then he wouldn’t eat the dinner she’d cooked. Baked chicken with potatoes and carrots. The skin removed. Everything low fat and as the doctor had directed. All of this was aggravated by the night before. He had refused to turn off CNN. She’d struggled to block out news of the Ebola virus in Zaire, the closing of Pennsylvania Avenue to detonating trucks. The clock had read 2:00 am. “I can’t sleep. I’m still watching it,” he’d said. She could get up, turn it off and there would, of course, be nothing he could do.  

These thoughts were common lately. She knew it. Ones in which she defied her immobile husband with enormous pleasure and the fantasies troubled
her. In one she left him in the bathtub, say, an extra half hour when he com­
plained about the water temperature which she could never get quite right. Or
she had a van service whisk him straight to the barber when he pronounced
only she could cut his hair.

How then could she explain her compassion the last time she caught
him struggling to pull up his pants. He had been a tall, big-boned man. An
administrator at the city college for some thirty years. Once a year a handful of
graduating students came over for a curry dish he’d cook himself. He had
enjoyed lengthy squash games and reading political biographies on a Central
Park bench. And now retired to this? She felt the urge to protect him, to wrap
her arms around his shrinking frame as she might have done when their daugh­
ter, Carol, was young and scraped her knee on a subway grate.

“Let me help you, Lou,” she would say, reaching for the waist of his
pants.

He’d look up, embarrassed to be caught, and say, “I’ll ask when I
need your help.”

Now here stood Brian with his little albino demands. She hated her­
self for thinking this. How cruel, cruel. She should follow him. She should
indulge his wishes because life had dealt him a pitiless blow, one colorless and
pale, and she had seen it hit her husband, too, reducing him to a bedridden
tyrant. No, I don’t mean that. She must, she told herself, be patient.

Joyce slid her feet into the gardening clogs she kept beside the door.
Each unit in the complex came with a five-by-seven plot for gardening and
though she had never gardened before, she took to it with a special kind of
vengeance. She learned about dirts, mulches, and fertilizers. She bought a
wicker work basket from a gardener’s catalog which she’d filled with little
wooden-handled tools she had no idea how to use—hoe-knife, cultivator,
dibble, and trowel.

She didn’t close the door all the way, intending to make it quick. The
concrete walk sounded beneath her clogs. It was dark out. She followed the
cap of pure white hair. Every once in a while Brian glanced over his shoulder
to make sure she was still there, his pale eyes like two pieces of chalk.
Outside, the vast desert sky stretched above, giving her a feeling of vertigo if she stared at it for too long. She still wasn’t used to this sky and longed for tall buildings to anchor her. She and Louis had moved here to Palm Desert, California from Manhattan for the warm, arid weather his doctor recommended. Years of things had been packed in boxes and moved to a place that made them look shabby in the intense light. Their collection of city landscape paintings suddenly looked dreary and old fashioned. Louis’s large, leather chair sagged beneath the tall windows.

This part of the country was unknown to her. On the map, the region had stretched brown and vast, like a remote outback. They had chosen Palm Desert because it was not far from Los Angeles, where their daughter now lived. The first week they arrived, Carol drove in from L.A. and took Joyce to every market, pharmacy, shoe repair shop, and movie theater in town. She remembered that week as a dizzy blur of storefronts and blanched scenery, her daughter like a breathless tour guide working the crowd.

Late fall, she remembered, and the sun had still beamed hotly. Indian summer, she’d been told. The thermometer rarely dipped below ninety degrees. Hot winds had electrified her skirt and splayed her gray hair like a starfish across her forehead. Pavement shimmered. She’d felt like an image on overexposed film, the stark light revealing how she’d let herself go: unplucked eyebrows, the dry skin around her mouth solidifying into wrinkles.

It was a strange thing to transport a life in a gamble for more. The doctor had said many in his condition thrived in this climate for as much as five years.

“Thrive?” Louis had said, skeptically, always sensitive to words. He and Joyce had avoided the warm weather locations. “The silver zones,” he liked to call them. Upon retirement it would have been a bicycle trip through China rather than winters in Florida.

“He’s declining,” Joyce had told Carol over the phone just before they decided to move. Nearly forty years of accumulation in the closets and drawers. Matchbooks, like travel diaries, would fall out of corners, listing where they had been and where they had wished to go.
“Is it worth it?” Carol had asked. Meaning, will he really get three to five years more?

Carol had adjusted well to her new life on the west coast. In three years she had been promoted to junior partner, her New York resolve impressing the firm. She had made friends. She had traded some of her rigor for a new fluidity, yet she still had the knack for the naked question.

“You’d uproot your entire life,” she’d said. “Friends, neighborhood, doctors—your routine. Are you sure, Mom?”

What Joyce knew she’d miss were people on the street. It would be different from New York. In the city Joyce often made conversation with strangers. They would talk about anything: the weather, food, local news. Once, engrossed in a conversation with a German tourist, she had missed her train stop.

Surprisingly, though, what she’d already missed most was no longer there to leave. The texture rather than the fabric. The way things were done rather than the actual things. She missed the cheerful, efficient way Louis unfolded the card table rather than the weekly bridge game with Don and Beryl. The eager way his hands riffled through the Sunday Times, not the thick newspaper they hauled to the Polish diner as part of their weekly ritual. She missed the mornings of bumping into his large body in their small kitchen, a nuisance she now understood as a tactile pleasure.

So it was Palm Desert or the removal of a small hope, and Joyce chose the former though she nearly cried when the movers came for the boxes, when their friends said their goodbyes veiled in comforting phrases that promised unexpected visits and amusing letters.

Joyce took Louis for a stroll while Carol opened the late-to-arrive boxes crammed in their new condominium.

“An expansive golf course view,” the real estate agent had said eagerly, as if their condominium windows would open onto a God-given landscape. Odd little rock and cactus gardens ornamented the complex. She couldn’t get used to seeing cactus in a garden; they were ugly, prickly things that belonged to a desert. Then, she reminded herself, she now lived in the desert.
“Strange,” she said to Louis, “to think before irrigation this desert would have been uninhabitable.”

Though she wasn’t sure it was truly inhabitable now but was determined to put a cheerful face on it.

Across the walk they watched their contemporaries cruise the rolling emerald hills in bermuda shorts and pastel-colored golf carts. Neither of them played golf.

Louis sat in his wheelchair, dressed in the clothes she’d helped him into that morning—a pair of khaki slacks and a navy blue sweater she now feared was too hot. His chin was still strong and sure. His wavy, gray hair had a way of framing his ear that still managed to arouse her.

“When I go,” Louis had said, his mouth pulled to one side the way he did to tell jokes, “you should get out of here.”

It was then she felt the first urge to push his wheelchair into the sand pit. We’ve come all this way and this is all the hope you can muster? The idea of defying him, of imagining him face down in the sand gave her a sudden moment of relief. Since they’d moved an alarming variety of these fantasies had given her relief. But she stamped them down. Stamp, stamp. How cruel. How cruel. Wracked with guilt, she would spend an extra half hour planting the goldfinks she’d kept waiting in their symmetrical plastic containers. She had read in a gardening book: Ordinary garden soil and full sun. Rich soil is to be avoided.

“Where are we going, Brian?”

He threaded her down the narrow walk toward the golf course. “Williamson’s back,” he called over his shoulder, shooting a finger at the lighted window across the walk. He knew the complex like the veins peering through the translucent skin of his hands. Comings and goings. The place his little fiefdom, she thought with mounting resentment.

“He collects things,” Brian said. “Butterflies with gnarly wings. Rusted corkscrews. I’ll show you sometime if you want.”

How did we all end up here? she wondered. This odd assortment? This eclectic bunch? Brian’s family had moved from Pennsylvania a year before
Louis and I had. Brian’s parents shared the job of superintendent for the complex, which meant that his mother, who seemed to have more business sense, dealt with the finances and his father tended repairs.

The first time she met Brian, she was standing outside the Spanish-tiled condominiums, grocery bags hanging from her arms. Several boys circled around him, hassling Brian about his baseball cap. He always wore it in the daytime, pulling it conspicuously low to shield his pink eyes so he appeared to walk with his nose hooked to a bill. Emblazoned with the Pirates insignia, his pure white hair peeked out along the cap’s edges.

One large boy yanked the cap off his head, mimicking Brian’s discomfort in the sun. The boy withered to the ground. “I’m melting! I’m melting!” he taunted.

Brian groped again and again for the cap, fumbling like an injured bird. He reached like Louis did now for a glass of water on the nightstand, determined yet weak. Then he stepped back when his eyes were hit by the bright stroke of sun.

“Give him the cap back!” she yelled. “Give it to him now!”

The grocery bags slid from her arms. She ran across the wide, empty street waving her hands as if shooing flies. The boys chuckled. They pinched Brian’s hot, white cheek, then tossed the cap into a cactus garden and swaggered away, bouncing and laughing, calling back, “The albino’s got a bodyguard. Look at that! Wee-hee! Better bring grandma to school tomorrow.”

Brian strained to pluck his cap out of the cactus. He pricked his arm, finally drew the cap out, then slapped it across his knee to shake out any needles.

“Are you all right!” she asked.

He regarded her with a flushed, impatient look. The chagrin of the weak, Joyce thought. His t-shirt was bunched up in the middle so his white stomach glared in the hot sun.

“What’re you doing here?” he said.

She collected herself and gestured toward his cap, hanging like a fallen bird in his hand.
“I don’t need your help,” he said, hurling the cap into the center of the street. “You can have it if you want.” And then he ran.

Linked from that moment on, she thought now, following his bright, capless hair in the darkness, by his confusion after that humiliating afternoon. Shame and anger, she knew—her husband waving her away when she rushed to help him out of bed—were unidentified friends. Later, Brian came to her door, the cap returned to his hands, to begin the first day of their new friendship. He took her that day to see Mrs. Goldenbaum’s cross-eyed tabby cat. His role, from then on, would be to amuse her, to find things worthy of her attention.

Or had it been his amusement with what he could get her to do?

He was a peculiar child with a never ending supply of fascinations. Why am I doing this? I’m tired and it’s late. No more walks to his little show-and-tells, she decided. No more caterpillars or rusted corkscrews.

Brian stopped and whirled around on his toes. The path light shone down on his head so his hair glowed white-blue.

“Wanna know where we’re going?” he teased. He spun back around and continued walking.

“Yes, I would.” She stopped, hands on her waist.

“Just a little more,” she pleaded, crouching and tugging on his pants at the knees.

Then, to keep her amused, he rubbed his palms together just below his nose, occasionally flicking at them with his strakly red tongue. His eyes darted back and forth.

“What am I?” he asked.

“Heaven knows,” she said, a grin rising that she was powerless to control. This odd boy. Yes, it was why she liked him so much.

“A fly!” he said, whirling back around.

She followed him over a grassy knoll then down to a cement drainage ditch that cut across the golf course like a scar. He straddled the ditch, his two sneakers hobbling its sides. Joyce wasn’t about to attempt the ditch in her clogs, so she walked beside it, watching Brian bounce from side to side, his pace quickening, eyes lowered to the cement.
She began to enjoy the walk. The air finally cooled and tall palm trees fanned in the breeze. The grass felt soft and smelled sweet beneath her. She heard Brian’s quick, short breaths keeping rhythm with his feet.

*Sweet, clever boy.* She was suddenly glad to follow him. Se remembered the time, several weeks after the boys had harrassed him, when she’d come home to find Brian crouched beneath the coffee table in her living room.

“We’re playing hide-‘n-seek,” he’d whispered.

She looked toward the hallway, confused. She had half-anticipated Louis to walk into the room. “Let’s go see a show,” he might have said. Or “Guess who I ran into on the train?” Deep down she knew it wasn’t true—his condition had worsened—yet for that moment she had a child’s freedom from the hard facts.

“You’re under the coffee table!” Louis called from his bed.

Brian rolled out, gripping his sides. “Ahh,” he said. “No fair. You heard her!”

“All’s fair!” Louis’s voice had rung through the hall.

As they approached a curve in the ditch, Brian kicked a stone that ricocheted off the cement. *So white.* Why his parents had moved to the desert, she could not understand. Watching him scuttle around the complex in mid-afternoon, his pale skin exposed to the hot, white glare, she had often been inspired to buy him a decent hat, one with a good broad brim. Louis had laughed. “He won’t wear that kind of hat, Joyce.”

“Why not?”

“The kids wear baseball caps.”

She knew he was right. The world worked according to a skewed justice she tried to resist. Why should an albino boy suffer beneath a penetrating sun? Or, for that matter, why should they have moved to a desert so she could watch her husband slowly die?

Brian stopped, feet planted firmly in the ditch, and lifted his face to listen for something in the distance. Joyce watched his pale eyes, his iridescent skin so lovely and opaque in the night. She felt an ache in her weak ankle and was about to invite him home for ice cream when she heard something whimper—
an animal or a small child.

Brian took off down the ditch. “Hurry!” he yelled. “Look what I found!”

She jerked forward, alarmed by the sound. A small form moved in jagged
circles on the other side of the ditch. It whimpered and growled. It cast itself
sideways, attempted to run, then flopped onto its side and rolled, its body a
tight knot.

“How’d he get out!” Brian shouted.

She strained her eyes to make out the form. A small dog appeared to be
captured on its tail, circling madly. Grass flew. The dog yanked its body around
and around until it collapsed, a panting bundle, dark eyes still with fright.

Brian climbed out of the ditch and moved toward the dog.

“Don’t get near it Brian,” she called. “It might bite.”

“He won’t bite.”

“He’s caught on something.”

“His own tail!” he yelled, excitedly. He picked up the dog, a twisting ball
of white fur. Then he rolled it into the cement ditch. The dog bounced off its
left hind quarters. It yelped and writhed harder, ricocheting against the ditch,
bounding off one side, rolling to the other. Brian’s excitement grew.

“Look! Look!” he yelled. “A pinball!”

He moved toward the ditch, and Joyce suddenly understood that this
kid—so delighted by the dog’s distress—was the same boy often surrounded
by stronger kids, poking and kicking him on the ground.

“Get away!” she shouted.

She slid after him, losing one clog in the ditch. Before Brian grabbed the
dog, she smacked his arm away with one quick stroke. She was surprised by
her strength, feeling the sting in the palm of her hand.

She reached for the dog. Her fingers searched for the place where it was
captured until she found the piece of fishing wire knotted around the tail. The
dog yelped. She quickly followed the wire to the collar and then slipped the
small knot off the link. The dog sprang from her arms, freed, and scrambled
out of the ditch. The wire flailed behind it. She watched the dog run across the
golf course—hot, white, and quick—toward the street, until her eyes could
LINDA FEYDER

no longer track him in the dark.

Her angry face turned on Brian who sat sullenly on the edge of the ditch. His eyes were strained red. He scraped his sneaker against the cement.

"Don’t you leave," she said, groping for her clog that lay upside down at the bottom of the ditch. "I want to have a word with you."

She heard more scraping on cement. She rose just as he fled, his sneakers flashing in a bold white streak headed for the stucco walk.

"Brian!" she called. She felt the urge to run after him, to shake him with the force of her indignation until he came to understand. She grappled with these feelings as she watched him run farther and farther away, beyond her grasp. And then he disappeared.

Joyce crawled out of the ditch and stood to catch her breath. She wiped the lap of her skirt, though there was no dirt on it. She looked behind her in the direction the dog had run, then in front, and felt the expanse of the foreign landscape around her. If Brian came to her door tomorrow, what would she tell him? That she was surprised by him when the anger she felt was slowly fading?

"I should get back," she said to herself, realizing that she was standing in the middle of a golf course at night. With one clog in her hand, she hobbled across the grass like a child pretending to limp, feeling, as she went, the dull pleasure of imbalance. She would check on Louis, she thought, then go to her garden, where she'd turn on the porch light and cut the California Lilacs whose exact gardening instructions were somehow reassuring: Should be pruned hard in spring before new growth appears.
Auction at the Former
Northern Michigan Asylum

Drawn by the energy the insane
have imparted to whatever they touched,
buyers bid as if for a Matisse or Monet,
while they stare at the high mesh
windows a spider couldn’t squeeze through,
shudder at being trapped by schemes
of greedy relatives, or a husband
with no patience for a wife
with notions of independence
in the Victorian Age of submission.

They bid on the microscope and wheelchair,
perhaps imagining a weak old woman
too tired to be crazy any longer,
perambulated about the grounds;
or on the fever-inducing chamber
its wet heat leaching out madness,
while the patient begged to be released;
or on the electroshock machine,
still redolent of the ozone blast
when the poor crazed creature
shook as if with St. Vitus Dance.

Bidders listen for shrieks echoing
from a century ago, run hands
along its switches and dials,
its inquisitorial hum too powerful
ever to be totally silent.
AMY THOMAS

At the Marché

Noon’s heat steaming through the tent,
bottles sweating in colors of ice . . .

Golden reflections of wine
on the white veneer-like puddles of sunlight

jiggle as hips bump the tables, then dart
off the edge when I pick up my glass

and you raise yours to toast:
the crystal clink in air crowded

with voices, laughter, is the point
of decision, you know--; glance off

and have lost, but look, taste, give,
and—listen: the wet-rock spill

of buckets-full of oyster shells—
glistening, open, pearly, empty.
Call to Watch Hill—Crows & Rain

Up at six a.m. in this strange place
and hiking to a campground phone to find
what I already know is true—with dread

face pressed against the booth’s glass wall, “he’s dead”
a voice across eight thousand miles of wire,
cable, satellite, through air, my face

in the glass doesn’t crumble where I trace
the world from the receiver and I’m blind
to crows and rain—as their noise crowds my head.
On the pedestrian mall, in the city of a man whose bed
you stayed in, stretched out in, wallowed in for weeks,
you imagine he could walk through that door here,
the jewelers door, looking for a gift for wife and daughter—
and even though you know he is three thousand miles away,
you see him fingering amethyst or emerald,

though you hate the domestic in a lover,
the way years ago, even the sight of a man’s hands
could kill your desire cold. You loved the rough play
of muscles in the forearm. Now the hands intrigue you:
the long fingernail tracing a red line up your leg
because you’d bitten and he thought you liked pain.

Which is the hammer and which the anvil?

Now you are nearly happy to know you are on his ground, a spy.
These green hills going to fall, your memory is virulent;
you catch it like a flu, nuse it. Melancholy snuggles up
and gives me more comfort than any presence might.
Remember the spot of blood on the nightgown, the whiff of Fracas,
a snatch of Mingus from a window.

He won’t come through that door, his slow amble promising
the slow trace of lips on your belly.
You’re safe to make the fiction of your life,
to love the one you love the most: your want, your longing.
I take my cousin to the beach
because it’s summer and she’s eight.
I float in the gold lakewater
and remind myself to breathe
as I watch her dive for another handstand,
her feet waving above the surface like beige tentacles.

We discover that we both like
sand between our toes,
and we discuss the very lively mouse
that she discovered in my Dodge
earlier this morning.

We eat apples in the sand
“The stem will tell you the letter
of the name of who you’ll marry.”
We both get D’s.
I don’t know any D’s, I say,
but on the next handstand she pops up
streaming with silver, and looks,
in case Derek, from her class,
is watching.

But he is eight, too, and jumping
off his father’s shoulders.

I see how everyone is touching.
My cousin flips herself off my knees
into the inverted pyramids of light
coming from the bottom sand,
and we both sink into algae:
the two Kittredge girls,
waiting to dive.
It started with a woman
in a glib cave, purply dark;
she had hair of black velvet wire
and long sedated eyes—
half-mast they broke on jagged lash
like emerald waves unearthing ebony.

Her taste reminded me of rusted gold
or the sound leaf dew makes
on the moss’ tongue,
of rusted gold
spun to dirt-blond thread
and woven to a
welcome mat that warms
the threshold
to the sound leaf dew makes
on the whorehouse window sill,

where hangs a fuschia rose
crying
upside-down.

Its eye swells,
fleshy jaws
clasp the moss’ tongue.
Thought Soliloquy of a Drunken Doorman

I

catch-22
"Ha-choo!"
The point of my existence:
"Oh, how do you do?"

It's sad.
Grabbing brass
so others can
warm ass
and sip
martinis for two.

"Say lad,
Your eyes are mad."
He looks kind
of like the guy from
Dr. Who.

II

it's funny
how everyone's in such
a rush.

what's at the end of the race?
perhaps a chest, perhaps a rag.
perhaps a creased and folded paper bag.
maybe I should join in,
reach return before they do,
unlock some secret box
hiding immaculate paradox
and the cure for chicken pox.

but instead
I’m standing here like I do every day,
in my tacky polyester coat
with lines on it
and a puffy plumed hat
that makes me look like a fucking bird!
maybe that’s just what they’re looking at.

“Copley Place, sir?
Right around the corner my good man.
A church beneath the moon,
A library up against the sun.

Thank you kind, good sir!”
a tip, a tap, a toc, a tic.
good for a nip a’ gin.
soothes the mind, warms the chin.

and there he goes.
back to the race, back to his lane.

where are all the rickety walks?
the senseless struts, the knobby knees?
everybody’s pacing by in lapels
large and small:
three-button, two-button, no buttons!
with paisley, striped, and solid scarves
that drape from flabby necks like supple knives.

III

the times are often when I desire to know
no one,

so I follow a lanky topcoat shadow
crowned with long, nappy hair
to the waterfront’s marrow,
where grey gulls loop languidly o’er the pier,

and suck upon a soury smoke,
whose glowing eye in turn sucks life from me.

nearby I see
a lonely seabird land atop a grody barnacle barge.

His beak is wet from pecking oyster shells,
and his wings are crisp
like seaweed washed upon the shore.
But his eyes are sad: so long, they’re shaped like bells.

And together we bow our heads to the back of the sea.
And twist of sunset floats upon its rim
like a fancy drink,
and the clouds have grown purple
upon the close of the noon.

a gurgling dusk is oranging the sea
and the sky spews every blue.
so while these colors last,
better digested by the hungry moon
and the sea turns cold and black,
I imagine myself someplace else,
like in the chamber of a wizard-whore,
who offers forth both reverie and wish
from a cum-stained cloak which is torn.

but as I gaze into a goblet of blue wine
and watch the bubbling ripples clear,
I catch my own reflection, haggard and horse,
as if staring into a shiny glass door,

and end up back here.

IV

you.
yes, you!
staring back
beyond the blue.
your eyes are mad,
their pupils swirl
in two’s of two!

your happiness has become
a commodity,
like pork rinds,
powdered juice drinks,
or cheap plastic silverware.
but when you’re buried
this far down,
o what is one to do?
“Good evening, sir!
‘Tis but that time,
For happy hour
At the bar!”

it’s sad
grabbing brass
so others can
warm ass
and sip
martinis for two.
Upon Meeting Lester Strong

Hopped the commuter rail out of West Concord
You got on at Kendall Green in a herringbone topcoat
And perfect hair save a tiny bald spot strangely close to your neck.
    In North Station I strode next to you within
A jungle of rushing footsteps and Styrofoam coffee cups
And finally I said, “So what’s the news today?” to which
You smiled, “I don’t know yet.” So we spoke
About the President and his girls till you passed along your way.
    I know you’re not incredibly famous.
I know you’re not a speaker for generations.
But I’ve some questions of you anyway
Since there seemed to be a lot you did not say.

    Like why this universal orgy?
Lester Strong why is financial serpentry the new copulation
Of the masses? When I go to the bank
And deposit $87 why can’t I take out $5 the next day?
I’m tired of their stilted rhetoric.
Lester why do they trust their stupid computers
More than they trust themselves?
When the weatherman at your news station says it’s going to be
    Very cloudy why can’t he say something cool like,
   “The Prudential Tower will be puncturing the giant
    belly of the overcast monster!”
I’ve been thinking a lot about this I just don’t think it’s right.
And you can tell him to cancel the winter—I don’t care
How much fun it is to sign the snow in piss when you’re drunk.

    I know you’re not my therapist.
    I know you’ve no inclinations to be.
But I’ll watch your news program from now on because you’re a nice man.
But why does the garbage talk to me?
Why can't the bums in the street just leave me alone?
When I go to the supermarket why must I always get in line
Behind a sheephead who insists on arguing for 12 minutes over 12 cents?
Lester Strong kindly if you please will you?
I want a sharper silence.
Make me impotent to the world around me I'm sexually frustrated anyway.

My ideas feel pressured and swelled like when I used to get high.
Lester why can't I love those whom I love?
Lester why can't I trust those whom I trust?

I know you're not my therapist nor
Have any inclinations of me but I feel
But I feel much like a patron in a doorman's uniform
or a little girl who just spilled cupcake cream
all over her dress before a family photograph
and dreads the inevitable reprimand of
a mother in Lee Press-On Nails.

And Lester Strong is it not correct that we could do everything the right Way, gear ourselves toward changing the world
Fan our kings with ferns read them pornography bathe them in silk
And you'd still be feeding us their apple cores?
He follows, seeing the way trees fall away from her, thinking *recessions of birches*, thinking *a bit of bark carefully peeled might make fine paper*. It's not that she loves him or will not survive the way he labels the arc of her hand rising to brush a moth from his face even before the moth startles. They walk a path someone else has cleared. Pine needles knit to form what is not a carpet. She hums privately. When they reach a hollow place, she removes her blouse and lies down, knowing leaves will catch in her hair like something unfinished and that he will not remove them.
PAULA McLAIN

Efficiency

I was dreaming the tone
before a kiss. My mouth was twice the size
lipsticked, unmistakable. Then morning
ruined everything, birdsong fractured as a plate
no charming hostess would leave in the hutch.

If I could wade out of my pillow
I wouldn’t need these magazines.

If I had a man I could stop answering
every quiz with all of the above. I could forsake
morning altogether and the violin swell
that has become my afternoon.
Bliss would be pity uncomposed.
These simple knots left to the weather.

I wouldn’t need a man if I could summon
sufficient tragedy, devise a plot to leave myself
at the altar. The pipe organ would do all the sobbing;
the congregation could save their hankies
for airplanes and origami swans.

I’d be in the anteroom, all froth
and panic, my hair a stiff meringue.
I’d harass the daisies until one finally swore love,
while miles away on unfragile asphalt
my true future, my groom, would be dismantling speed
and shine, letting ashes blow back
onto the upholstery, forgetting.
The Religious Figure of Importance

When it was time for the Religious Figure to enter a room, a charge of excitement always crackled ahead of him, as if it was God entering that room. Sometimes the Figure would deny the existence or necessity of this phenomenon with a spate of good humor. But God’s movements were never so certain as those of the Figure’s, so His became the standard of reference.
I.
The buses roar by
like yesterday,
but yesterday
was different.
The people board
and exit like yesterday
when it is not.

II.
Some observe the planes
silently raising their bulk
in slow motion, muscling gravity
to support their unlikely grace.
The people waiting remain calm.

Elsewhere, giant computers
run routes and times
through program algorithms.
Certain things happen again and again.
Tiny lights blink on and off,
showing the machine thinking.
A printer prints the results.

In the concourse windows, new people
notice or overlook the climbing aircraft.

III.
On the train
you see all the city
in amalgam.
Everyone pays the same price,
and when some leave
more get on
without a pause.
Few speak and it is quiet.
The schedule keeps ticking
and the buildings keep coming.
Whatever Gigi wants, Gigi gets. This time it’s the day-flying, cyanide-filled moth, Urania ripheus, infamous for copulating with different species. “Ugh! Yuk! There’s a bug, squash it,” I tease, not wanting to burst from my hammock-cocoon. I wanted to help, but had promised our host, René, that I’d clean the poison frog garden. But then I remembered this aphorism: “Universal hostility and fear toward a species are the products of ignorance.” I also remembered Gigi’s promise of a juicy love-bite to be given beneath a huge banana tree near the forking paths... Long-curved leaves the size of scimitars, bright green spikes of plantains, and a white-skinned woman, her bare breast barely the size of serpent eggs, her dark eyebrows alert, like two facing centipedes. I’m adjusting my loincloth, then waving my butterfly net made from a clothes hanger and the thinnest of Gigi’s panties. “Leaping lepidoptera. I got one.” Two ear-sized wings fringed with golden hair, its underside red and veined like a tiny heart. Drip drop, drip drop. Then naked we lie beneath our banana tree, bold as two mottled stink bugs. I hold the moth between my fingers, then let go. “Erotic things occur in the rain,” Gigi whispers, about to sink her teeth into my neck.
They were looking for “The New Vagina Girl.” It wasn’t like it sounded, Mr. Cold-Under-the-Collar explained. Just two weeks, some light chores, smile a lot. Hadn’t we heard this before, Gigi? Men, men, men, this one with a head as hard and hairless as a hand grenade, driven by that great snow-coned breast threatening to spill its heat into the city. Oh where, oh where is my Gigi today? I sing, watching blurred pornographic movies on late-night TV. Sometimes I look out the window, see men in dark blue suits and crewcuts stumbling out of clubs. I consider seppuku with a Ginsu knife, shove miniature sushi rolls into each ear, then finally drift into a saki-induced sleep... In the morning, breakfast arrives: a piece of bluefin tuna dressed with lotus seed paste and...what? It’s a message, gentle reader: “I have tasted salt water from the dimples of Gigi’s back. Meet us at midnight on the roof of Mitsukoshi’s...” Nighttime, a few helicopters passing overhead, the city cloaked in neon, Gigi and Mr. Cold-Under-the-Collar no more than fifty feet away. She’s done up like a geisha, reciting poetry, banging a sick tune on a funny-looking banjo. But she can’t fool me. “Liberty for all!” I shout, charging her bodyguard, a bald, sumo wrestler, who’s squatting as if to give birth.
Icebergs the size of great ships melting in a blue fiord; large stones undisturbed for centuries; white-haired grandmothers in a hot spring, their heads bobbing like the flared nostrils of hippopotami in a river thousands of miles away. Permanence. Eskimo strength, suckled by the blood of Eric the Red. You hear that, Gigi? Permanence. Predictability—like the small, stoic potatoes this cold earth gives up. And tough, like these grandmothers who won’t leave earth when they die; instead expire on arctic boulders, where caught by moonlight, they flap like a catch of capelin. In the morning, just a pack of seals breathing heavily in a shine of water as black as love. And so why are we here? Everyone together: Because in Notre Dame, Gigi made a pass at her wrist with a razor and called me her quasi-Quasimodo, displaying a cracked picture to prove it. I blamed it on a little French girl’s behind and two fish swimming in opposite directions. But, by God, I took responsibility . . . I’m on my way to her cabin, carrying a bottle of Australian wine and a bag of Cheetos, my boots battling a moat of invisible tundra vegetation. Gigi’s in a lamp-lit window, pounding brown dough into phallic shapes, then massaging them with a cube of white butter. “Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white,” I sigh, which somehow consoles me, and also the fact that Greenland has no trees. Nowhere for an anxious lover to hang himself. No trees, few vegetables, just rocks. Permanence. Stick-to-itiveness. And so I leave, dragging my long tale of sins behind me. Later, I cover myself with seal skins, read out loud in my canvas cot. It’s a little book of love poems, one box-shaped, like a window, through which a sandy coast appears, tall cypresses swaying like showgirls, beckoning.

On Bastille Day in Notre Dame, Gigi parted her thickly painted lips and whispered to an astonished art historian, “I love to watch naked men play.”

I tell you, it’s comments like that that drive men crazy.
In the old days, the Largo was the center of the world. Today, it is only a crossroads, with houses all around and a road that leads to the village. The wind blows through the beech trees and the foliage rustles in the light breeze, with the dust swirling and falling on the deserted ground. Not a soul. Life has moved to the other side of the village.

The train killed the Largo. I suppose that above the noise of its iron wheels the men live on. Senhor Palma Branco, tall, hardened, surrounded by respect. The three Montenegro brothers, big-shouldered and serious. Feeble and cranky Badina. Estroina, drunk, arms crossed, with a knife in his fist. Ma Raca, grinding his teeth, always angry with everyone. Master Sobral, the farmer of Alba Grande, planted firmly in the middle of the Largo, serene and brave. Ui Cotovio, ruffian, with a curl on his forehead. Acacio, the big drunk Acacio, taking pictures, his body bent under the big black cloth. And there, at the top of the street, really thin, a man I never knew who appeared there suddenly on the corner, looking towards the Largo full of surprise.

Back then, the lush beech trees shook their branches wildly; they were part of all of the grand events. Under their shade, the brave fought each other; next to the trunk of one beech tree, Antonio Valorim, feared by men and loved by women, fell dead.

It was the center of the village. Travelers would appear by stage-coach and relate current events. It was by means of the Largo that people communicated with the world. In the absence of newspapers, it was also there that people invented what seemed like the truth. Time passed, and this invented thing came to be the truth. Nothing could destroy this truth: for it had come from the Largo. In this way, the Largo was the center of the world.

Whoever ruled the Largo, ruled the entire village. The most intelligent and knowledgeable went down there and gave instruction to the villagers. The brave rose up in the middle of the Largo and challenged the villagers, bending
them to their will. The stumbling drunks, who didn’t care for the whole world, laughed at the villagers for getting worked up; they couldn’t care less. They stumbled and fell on their faces. Desperate from sadness, they fell in the white dust of the Largo. It was a place where men felt important in all that life had given, whether they were tough guys, intelligent ones, or happy ones.

The men of the village would come down to the Largo and speak as equals with the masters of masonry and blacksmithing. And likewise with the business owners, the peasants, the employees of the council. Likewise, as equals, with the migrant workers, those mysterious and arrogant vagabonds. It was a place of men without class distinction: old men, who never tipped their hats to anyone and only took their hats off to go to bed.

It was also the best school for children. They learned skills by listening to the skilled masters and watching their serious expressions. Or they learned to be tough guys, drunks, or vagabonds. Whatever they learned had to do with life. The Largo was full of life, adventure, tragedy. It was full of great flashes of intelligence. It was certain that the child who learned all this would turn out a poet, and a sad one because he couldn’t always remain a child learning about the grand and mysterious life of the Largo.

The house was for the women.

Behind the houses, hidden from the street, they combed their tresses, long like horses’ tails. They worked in the shade of the backyard, under the grapevines. They made the food and the beds—they lived only for the men. And they waited submissively for them.

They couldn’t go alone to the street because they were women. A man of the family accompanied them always. They would visit friends, and the men would leave them at the door and would go into whatever store was close-by, waiting for them to finish so they could bring them home. They went to Mass, and the men wouldn’t go beyond the churchyard. They didn’t enter the homes where they were obliged to take their hats off. They were men who, no matter what, ruled the Largo.

The train came and changed the village. The stores filled up with tools that had only been sold to blacksmiths and carpenters before. Business devel-
oped and a factory was built. The workshops failed, the blacksmiths were reduced to factory workers, the stone masons were called stone cutters and were also reduced to workers. The police appeared, taking the place of those who had formerly kept the peace, and the tough guys were arrested. The women cut their hair, painted their lips and go out alone. Now, the men tip their hats, make great sweeping bows and shake hands every hour. They go to Mass with the women, spend evenings in the Club, and no longer go down to the Largo. Only the drunks and the migrant workers spend time there on Sunday afternoons.

Today, news arrives on the same day, coming from all over the world. It is heard in all the stores and the many cafes that have opened in the village. The radios scream everything that happens on the land and sea, in the air, and in the depths of the oceans. The world is everywhere, replacing the small and intimate for everything. If anything happens in any region, they immediately know about it and take part in it. No one is unaware of what is going on in the world any longer. And something is happening in the world, something terrible and desirable is happening everywhere. No one remains detached; all are interested.

The village has become divided. Every cafe has its own customers, according to their condition in life. The Largo that belonged to everyone, and where what was known was only what certain people wanted them to know, has died. The men are separated in respect to their interests and needs. They listen to their radios, read their newspapers, and discuss. And, more each day, there is the sense that something is happening.

The children are also divided: they only play with children of the same background; they stop at the doors of cafes that their parents or older siblings frequent. Now, the Largo is the whole wide world. It is there that the men, women, and children are. In the other Largo, there are only drunks and bad migrants—and those that don’t want to believe that everything has changed. It is certain that no one pays attention to these men and this Largo now.

The great beech trees still border the Largo like in the old days and, in their shade, Joao Gadunha still insists on continuing the tradition. But nothing
is as it was before. Everyone mocks him and dismisses him.

Joao Gadunha, a drunkard, speaks of Lisbon, where he’s never been. Everything about him, his gestures and solemn way of speaking, is a bad, ready imitation of men that he had listened to when he was young.

“Great city, Lisbon!” he says. “There are people and more people, streets filled with folks, like in the market!”

Gadunha supposes that even in Lisbon there are still largos and men like those he had known, there, in that Largo surrounded by old beech trees. His voice resounds, animated:

“Do you want to know? One afternoon, when I was in the Largo do Rossio...”

“In the Largo do Rossio?”

“Yes, boy!” affirmed Gadunha raising his head, full of importance. “I was in the Largo do Rossio watching the movement. People going downtown, families going uptown, a world full of people, and I saw it all. In the middle of this I noticed a guy watching me out of the corner of his eye. Here is a thief, I thought. What if he were! . . . He was approaching, as if he didn’t want a thing, and put his hand in my jacket pocket. But I was expecting it. I jumped to the side and, pow, I threw a punch to his chin: the guy stumbled, hit his head against a eucalyptus tree, and fell senseless to the ground.”

These last words of Gadunha’s received a roar of laughter.

“A eucalyptus?”

With that one detail, he had ruined a very beautiful story. In the old days everyone would have listened quietly. Now, they all know everything and laugh. But Gadunha insists. He says yes, that he had been there in the Largo do Rossio, there in Lisbon.

“Did you ever see a largo without eucalyptus, or beech trees, or any other trees?” he asks disoriented.

They all move away, laughing.

Joao Gadunha remains alone and sad. His eyes well up with water, alcohol makes him cry. He clasps the beech trees, embracing them, and speaks to them affectionately. He presses them against his chest, as if he were trying to
bring back the past. And his crying moistens the worn trunk of the beech tree.

It is dying out like the Largo. Sundays are even more painful for the ailing Largo. Everyone goes to the cafes, the movies, or into the countryside. The Largo remains deserted under the foliage of the silent beech trees.

It is on those days, late in the afternoon, that old Ranito leaves the tavern grinding his teeth. Long ago, he was a master artisan; he was important and respected. Today, he is so poor and worthless that he doesn’t know how many kids he has. He only knows how to get drunk. Small and feeble, the wine transforms him. He stands up straight, raises his club and, without bending his knees, with only a stomp of his feet, jumps into the air and beats the dust of the Largo three times before coming back to the ground. He raises his head and shouts, giddily:

“If there is a daredevil in this place, let him jump here!”

But now there aren’t any tough guys left in the Largo. Now there is nobody at all. Ranito looks around, stupefied.

His vision gets cloudy, he grinds his teeth:

“Ah life, life!...”

He whirls his club above his head. He walks around the deserted Largo, angrily kicking the ground. With his belt loose, he goes on challenging men that are now dead.

Until he is weary in this unequal fight. The club falls from his hands and he becomes worn out, unbalanced. Stumbling, he leans forward and falls. He has to fall, the Largo has already died; he doesn’t want to, but he has to fall. Heavily drunk and in disgrace, he falls conquered.

A cloud of dust lifts, then falls slowly and sad. It falls on the tattered Ranito and covers him.

He can’t see any longer that the Largo is the world outside of this circle of withered beech trees. This vast world where something, terrible and desirable, is happening.
Robinson Crusoe’s discovery of the strange footprint on the beach evokes discomfort, ambivalence, and uneasiness. To whom does this footprint belong, how has it arrived here, could it be mine? At the same time, the footprint represents something beside oneself and demands an acknowledgment of otherness. As an exile or castaway, Crusoe is also a creator and a master, a writer and a colonist who, in the absence of others, invents his own miniature culture. His world is largely a linguistically created one — his island remains bare and lifeless until he writes. Michael Seidel argues that Robinson Crusoe “proliferates meaning from its island exile: linguistic, temporal, psychological, spiritual, political. Crusoe himself participates in and encourages the process, reading and misreading the nature of his experience, supplanting his adventure by creating other versions of it that, in narrative terms, never happened.” In this way, Crusoe’s journal supersedes the reality of the island: the landscape by itself cannot be seen or recorded, and is instead replaced by Crusoe’s moral and tactical narratives. There is little cause to doubt that Defoe’s intent in creating the character of Crusoe was to illustrate the domineering British imperial ideology, and his protagonist’s writing represents his transgression against the island. Crusoe follows in the footsteps of his culture by pursuing his desired property; he is not entirely stripped of the past, for the shipwreck (a recurrent symbol of human community) provides the instruments which enable him to write. At the same time, however, Crusoe’s writing depends upon solitude as his condition of exile. The footstep he sees becomes that of his personal history-yet-to-be as much as it is a trace of another’s presence.

One of Elizabeth Bishop’s finest poems from the 1976 collection Geography III, “Crusoe in England,” explicitly confronts the figure of Robinson Crusoe. For Bishop, addressing the figure of Crusoe entails engaging in a multifaceted critique of the idea of self and other, as well as an evaluation of one’s personal identity and position within a culture. At the core of this process is the struggle to attain a lyric identity, separate but inseparable, from the poet’s identity. Acknowledgment of the other, or the different, composes a post-colonial ethics; within the poem, admission of the other is acquired and defined by the demands of lyricism. Bishop once wrote, “A poem should be made about making things in a pinch — and how sad it looks when the emer-
gency is over.” Her creative endeavor in the development of the poem is akin to Crusoe’s attempt to construct reality upon his island — every castaway must generate a new language or be profoundly and doubly exiled.

As stated by Gregory Orr in his essay on the Postconfessional Lyric, “Crusoe in England” may be read simultaneously as an “elegy for a lost lover and dramatization of the primary themes of her personality, including such painful issues as her sense of abandonment, her alcoholism, and her homosexuality.” The poem, narrated by a Crusoe bereft of his island and his beloved companion Friday, uncannily portrays the poet’s profound bereavements, and by description of Crusoe’s continued existence, suggests Bishop’s survival. One of the means of survival, for Bishop, requires assuming antithetical masks which retreat from outright identification with the characters within poems. Her reticence to autobiographically express intimacy suggests Bishop’s unease with confessionalism as a means of distilling life into art, and explores the varying impasses of uncertainty. Removal of the self, a method sometimes characteristic of post-confessional poetry, is a means of protecting the self by distinguishing personal identity from the constructed ego within a poem. As a woman and a lesbian, she would be placed outside of Crusoe’s domain, but the way in which she identifies with the character reflects the subtle ability of the poem to address issues within the life of the poet without becoming a coded personal story. Even analyzed in the absence of autobiographical content, “Crusoe in England” describes the conditions of exile or solitude as a poignant critique of English culture.

To confront or question or impersonate Crusoe, who stands at the center of discourse regarding property and subjectivity, then requires interrogation of his culture and language. “Crusoe in England” portrays a Crusoe who is at the end of his various journeys, home again in England. What is significant is that in the absence of the marvels he witnessed abroad, he has become a castaway in his own country. Exile in England is yet another form of confinement and solitude. While Crusoe in England can read newspaper reports of an island being born somewhere not far away, his island has long ago been constructed. With a long history of establishment, England’s nationhood is
consequently resistant to any change which might alter or destroy its created order. In reference to this new island, he says: “They named it. But my poor island’s still/ un-rediscovered, un-renameable./ None of the books has ever got it right” (ll. 8—10). Bishop’s position, as she identifies with Crusoe, is like his island. Feelings of solitude are often the result of being misunderstood or misinterpreted, and the longer faulty perceptions are maintained the more difficult it is to recognize the errors. Such may have been the case for the poet who, as an orphan moved from home to home.

As Crusoe describes the island on which he had once lived, we begin to see how that island is parasitic to the old world, England, from which he came. In lines 29—33, he describes the environment of the discovered island: “My island seemed to be/ a sort of cloud-dump. All the hemisphere’s/ left-over clouds arrived and hung/ above the craters — their parched throats/ were hot to touch.” Crusoe, though far from home, does not really experience the absence of its climate, because it has been effectively reproduced in the new place. Unfortunately, the rain clouds and fog are not the most cheerful reminder of England, for “sometimes the whole place hissed” (35). His pondering of the cause for the great amount of rain on the island and the persistent hissing (of turtles? of lava?) is answered by the realization that the man is in a way creating his environment from his past culture, replete with endless rain and hissing teakettles. We sense that at first this new world is an unwelcome exile for him because he expresses a longing for the comforts of home “And I’d have given years, or taken a few,/ for any sort of kettle, of course” (38-39). Crusoe is the émigré of a great imperial power which, despite its size, commands a tremendous influence over other places, and this may account for his initial feelings of the inferiority of the new world. Thus, his worried discourse on being a giant. In time, had he maintained the attitude of superiority, Crusoe would have been terribly disturbed by the comparative size of the new world “I couldn’t bear to think what size/ the goats and turtles were” (22-23), thus adding to his suffering the vertigo of losing a sense of scale.

However, when the distinction between the two islands becomes blurred, Crusoe realizes the solitude he experiences in both places. Waterspouts and
glass chimneys are “Beautiful, yes, but not much company” (54). To combat loneliness, Crusoe must make a home of the new place, although his only experience of home is England where material culture is an equivalently poor substitute for the isolation which plagues him. As a result, in the absence of a sympathetic confidant, Crusoe gives in to self-pity. He asks himself, “Do I deserve this? I suppose I must. / I wouldn’t be here otherwise. Was there a moment when I actually chose this? / I don’t remember, but there could have been” (56-59). Such questions are the grounds for rationalization of the self-pitying individual. Reluctance to accept responsibility for one’s state of being is familiar to the human condition. Thus, Crusoe’s legs dangle “familiarly over a crater’s edge.” He is accustomed to feeling sorry for himself, and this inclination certainly will not be altered in a new and even more isolated environment. Bishop endows Crusoe with a credo that demonstrates his simultaneously misanthropic and optimistic resignation to this situation: “Pity should begin at home.” So the more pity I felt, the more I felt at home” (63-64). The resonant irony of this statement presents a view of the self that may be extended to a perception of the other. To clarify, while it is possible for the castaway to criticize the tendency towards self-pity in another, he may be less willing to admit that he is guilty of the same fault. Crusoe’s forthright assessment of his own feelings reveals responsibility for his present state, as well as a link to the other. Acknowledging his occasional desire to become drunk on his own tears may provide Crusoe with greater sympathy towards individuals whose sufferings he cannot understand. Crusoe’s contemplation of this difficulty enables him to affirm that there was a “moment when I actually chose this.” As a representative of the individual, the exile is free to regret that choice, or can adopt Crusoe’s twisted home-making and turn self-pity into an anathema for home-sickness.

Bishop suggests that the modern response to such an ultimatum is to adopt that sense of isolation into the world view. Evidence of this may be found in Crusoe’s description of his new world as a collection of singularities. Noah crowded his ark with two of each animal, but Crusoe seems to be
content with oneness and segregation, saying "there was one of it and one of me" (67). This new world is a multitude of isolated creatures and provides an interesting contrast to home in England. Crusoe experienced loneliness at home among fellow Englishmen who shared his traits and practices, and now that he really is alone, he does not have any real difficulty recreating these conditions. Again, we witness Crusoe's distorted perception in mistaking snail shells for beds of irises (73, 75). The physical reality of the new world assumes the qualities of the old one in Crusoe's effort to impose his cultural acquaintance into a strange place.

Particularly interesting is the description of the dark red berry, which introduces a Dionysian characteristic to the island. From these berries, Crusoe concocts a dizzying relief from the torments of his isolated soul. "I'd drink/ the awful, fizzy, stinging stuff/ that went straight to my head/ and play my home­made flute/... and, dizzy, whoop and dance among the goats./ Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?" (79-82, 84-85). Through intoxication, Crusoe has found a way out of self pity, even if it is only a concealment. We cannot, however, escape the thought that bacchanalia requires a bit more than one drunken exile, and the positive lasting effects of such revelry are severely limited. He delights in the fact that his relief is home-made, but this relief is deceptive, considering the fact that his sense of isolation is also home-made: begun in England and re-established upon the new island. In European culture, particularly in England, social drinking tends to be more acceptable and widespread. Crusoe asserts that we are all home-made, a product of our environment, but we cannot, as Frost said, "Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." The reason for this is that even more basic and essential than the island industry of alcoholic relief is the "miserable philosophy" that may be the assertion that an individual can create his own environment, even when he experiences a pervading powerlessness. Crusoe makes his own wine in an attempt to lessen his isolation. This passage seems to speak directly to Bishop's own struggle with alcoholism, and relates the tendency to drink to the very feelings of isolation which drinking aims to undo. As we discover in the next
few lines, the Englishman may in a similar way try to ameliorate his own igno-
rance by engaging in a restless search for knowledge or answers. It is the
place of the skeptic to criticize such goals, but we may question the sensibility
of believing it possible to acquire conclusive knowledge of a certain area. The
true Englishman, Crusoe longs to be well-schooled in something. “Why didn’t
I know enough of something?/ Greek drama or astronomy?/ . . . The bliss of
what?/ One of the first things that I did/ when I got back was look it up” (91-
92, 97-99). Knowledge can, in a sense, unite knowledgeable people. At the
same time, however, lack of knowledge may cause an individual to feel iso-
lated, just as Crusoe does, longing for mastery of some subject which would
be acceptable to the learned people of England. Crusoe experiences the limi-
tations of his knowledge, for during his exile on the island, his cultural knowl-
edge breaks down and provides less and less solace.

Significantly, he locates this failure in himself, and the line of poetry which
he cannot finish is of Wordsworth, the great English Romantic poet. European
Romanticism, here embodied in a line from “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”
celebrates the vision of a transcendent nature, but is decidedly rejected by
Bishop. The Wordsworthian sublime of the solitary figure contemplating na-
ture cannot be appealed to as an answer to this loneliness. Crusoe’s repres-
sion of the word “solitude” to complete the quotation represents his rejection
of this condition which Wordsworth praises. The “bliss of solitude,” by now a
cliché describing the condition of the poet, is not available to Crusoe or Bishop
as a workable ethic of being. Thus, past knowledge or tradition will not avail,
instead becoming the “miserable philosophy” fruitlessly followed by Crusoe
with the individual self trapped in the center.

Crusoe’s nightmare seems to be a compound dream. In part, he fears
being a passive observer of continuous movement or change, and with this
comes the confusion of identities and the failure to form distinctions between
things. Consequently, he is approaching a state where he has tremendous
difficulty identifying himself, let alone trying to make sense of the world around
him. Language blurs and collapses into nonsensical cacophony: “Baa, baa,
baa and shriek, shriek, shriek,/ baa...shriek... baa... I still can't shake/ them from my ears” (104-106). “Goats and guano” become indistinguishable from one another, just as the noise of the sheep and gulls buffeting Crusoe's ears at this moment in the narrative.

This melding of sounds prompted by recollection of his dreams lyrically corresponds to the sense of claustrophobia latent in his earlier account of the compounded glittering of waves and sky (25-27).

The elements of this world seem to be rapidly closing in on Crusoe, and even the most rudimentary methods of catalogue seem impossible, for distinction based upon colors is restricted: “The goats were white, so were the gulls,/ and both too tame, or else they thought/ I was a goat, too, or a gull” (101-103).

At the same time, the dichotomy of civilized and wild, human and other begins to break down — Crusoe implicitly wonders what his status will be if all that he considers wild views him, if at all, as similar to itself.

Further evidence of this problem is found in the scene where it seems that Crusoe is being reprimanded by a goat on Mount Despair, the volcano which he has christened after his own condition. The confrontation of a world that does not correspond to his categories of distinction places Crusoe at an abyss. He complains, the whole island “got on my nerves” (110).

In his inability to judge reality in an objective and accurate way, Crusoe reaches the height of his confusion. Even the known fantasy of dreams becomes questionable, and Crusoe comes to confuse a baby’s throat with a baby goat.

The island is simultaneously protean and stable, and even Crusoe’s judgment is called into doubt by his observance that the lava folds “prove/ to be” more turtles. The reported sensory perception has created an ambiguity that is not easily answered: the “folds of lava, running out to sea” hiss, as do the turtles, but because Crusoe’s reality is so largely self-constructed, we wonder if it is the hissing or the folds of lava that prove to be turtles. Even the observer cannot decide for sure.
The anamorphic qualities of dreams and their representation in reality create shapes that transform into other shapes, so that perfect registration between object and perception or object and name is an impossible and infinite task.

We sense that Crusoe is not particularly happy with his role in defining existence upon this island, particularly when he says, "I got so tired of the very colors! / One day I dyed a baby goat bright red/ with my red berries, just to see/ something a little different. / And then his mother wouldn’t recognize him" (124-128). This strange act of amusement suggests the tendency of western culture, and notably imperialist England, to transform its colonial holdings so that the people are no longer recognizable by the cultural practices and distinctions of their ancestors. Even in Ireland, the desire to conceal the Irish in the individual led to the near-demise of the traditional Gaelic language, as well as the creation of an Irish ascendency class which seemed more English than Irish. The motive may be to boost feelings of superiority and influence, though one cannot ignore the fact that a young creature that is unrecognizable to its mother will probably perish.

As punishment for playing with the natural state of things, Crusoe is responsible for giving a name to reality. This is the other half of his disturbing compound dream — the disturbing thought of what lies beyond his knowledge or influence.

He remarks, "I'd have/ nightmares of other islands/ stretching away from mine, infinities/ of islands, islands spawning islands,/ ...knowing that I had to live on each and every one, eventually,/ for ages, registering their flora,/ their fauna, their geography" (133-136, 138-141). The world is an endless stretch of islands before him, and because eternity is at his disposal, he must move from each one, not naming, but "registering" what he sees. This infinity of islands is a sign of Creation, and the speaker's fearful prospect of dry and endless registration cannot be alleviated by a seemingly opposite measure, the rampant spawning of islands. Crusoe is not imagining himself as Adam or Orpheus, but as a servant to the natural world and creation. Such an idea is an interesting turning of the tables of the nature of imperialism, for we are more
apt to acknowledge colonization as the subjection of a native people to the will of the larger power. Explorers travel to a new world not merely to catalogue its resources, but to determine which ones may be utilized to turn a profit. If this is an allegory of Bishop’s life, the fear of the poet lapsing into merely cataloguing the sights on an endless sensory holiday would seem a likely reading of the passage. It is not movement or travel that then is questionable, but the dream of it—the endless chains of descriptions that threaten to overtake the writing and transform it to mere registration. Bishop’s Crusoe is an ironic Columbus who is unable to fully see the New World. The designs of Crusoe’s knowledge (created by his experience in England) cannot accommodate the designs of the New World. Hence, he has the nightmare of an infinity of registration, until the entrance of Friday to relieve Crusoe of the burden of his solitude.

Friday arrives for no reason other than to save Crusoe from his solitude, an ironic inversion of Defoe’s narrative of Friday’s rescue from the cannibals by Crusoe “Accounts of that have everything all wrong” (144). Bishop’s Crusoe corrects the accounts and thereby revises his own character. No longer is he the ideal of a pragmatic, self-directed, and masculine tradition, but someone who is self-indulgent and vulnerable. Friday fills the gap which is causing Crusoe’s anguish in a way that only the other can. Crusoe depends upon Friday, and though the man was Crusoe’s subject, he could not have survived without the companionship of Friday. Indeed, Bishop suggests that survival without love or eros is a dry and meaningless survival. Though the repetition of the phrase “Friday was nice” (145-146) conveys the self-evident limitations of Crusoe’s language, it also implies Crusoe’s longing and memories of their love. Crusoe here avoids the conspicuous language of confession, as Bishop did in her poetry. Instead, Bishop and Crusoe shift to a mode of recollection that does not force complete confession—in a sense, language is unable to calculate that loss. The poet provides a tracing of Crusoe’s memory here and demonstrates the parallel movements of remembering and desiring.

The movement of remembering causes Crusoe to exclaim “If only he had been a woman!” (147). Like Defoe’s Crusoe, Bishop’s castaway is intent
on reproduction; in this poem, however, Crusoe is trapped within his singularity. To combat this in light of his feelings, Crusoe blurs Friday, substituting the traditional masculine adjective “handsome” for the conventional feminine adjective “pretty” to describe him. Crusoe’s ambiguous rendering of gender occurs as he remembers watching Friday: “He’d pet the baby goats sometimes,/ and race with them, or carry one around.—Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body” (150-152). He has becomes the tacit voyeur and Friday the object of his desiring eye. However, when in his exile to England, Crusoe reveals his lack of a language to describe his love of Friday. While this must also be read as Bishop’s struggle to write of her love for Lota, her lifelong companion, and the reticence to write of herself, it is moreover reflective of the resistance to admit eros into the play of language. Bishop astutely and tragically depicts Crusoe, against his desires, succumbing to the pressures of a normative language in his description of the man who has meant the world to the lonely castaway. As a result, Friday loses any other identity he had in Crusoe’s view and becomes simply and essentially “a pretty body.”

When Crusoe’s exile upon this island becomes bearable, due to the presence of his friend Friday, he interrupts or maintains the secret of this Dionysian moment (no longer parodied as in his first celebration of the dark red berry) with the arrival of a ship that is to transport them to England. The single sentence, “And then one day they came and took us off” (153), serves as an epitaph.

To return to England is to re-enter history and ultimately death.

The idyll is broken, and the island’s immortalization as a place of play and autonomous time is replaced by history. Artifacts such as the flute cannot be carried from this island, because they are home-made, provisional, and fragile. The knife which was once the very center of Crusoe’s material culture, both for food getting and as a potential weapon, is now separated from the context which made it meaningful. He reflects: “The knife there on the shelf—/ it reeked of meaning like a crucifix./ It lived.../Now it won’t look at me at all./ The living soul has dribbled away” (161-163, 168-169). Bishop, with uncharacteristic vitriol compares the knife to a crucifix. The effect of this swift
simile is to throw Christian culture into bold relief by suggesting that a common knife can be, in the right cultural circumstance, as rich with meaning as a crucifix.

While the representational and nostalgic value of objects is not entirely lost to Crusoe, he is unable to see the use of things anymore, either the artifacts of his own island culture or the culture and paraphernalia that make up England. In the final stanza of the poem, Crusoe catalogues a list of samples from the material culture of the island, saying “The local museum’s asked me to leave everything to them” (171-172). The artifacts of Crusoe’s culture — the flute, the knife, the shriveled shoes, the goatskin trousers, the parasol — are now removed from meaningful context, catalogued, described, and effectually entombed in the mortuary of ethnographers, the museum. “How can anyone want such things?” he asks.

Bishop recognizes that we love our material culture, but these objects only have meaning within a larger context, and only love can raise and sustain the whole clumsy edifice. Nostalgia, retrospective ethnography, objects with meaning, simple sense, all finally require this ingredient. Without the affections, we become, like Crusoe, able to make meanings, but unable to find things meaningful “the parasol that took me such a time/ remembering the way the ribs should go./ It will still work but, folded up,/ looks like a plucked and skinny fowl” (176-179). In the new world, Bishop’s Crusoe remains trapped within himself and within the culture he is ostensibly exiled from. He seeks to appropriate the island metaphorically, transforming the island’s qualities into the familiar items of his own, distant culture. The drifts of snail shells are irises, turtles lumbering tea kettles, waterspouts company that won’t stay, gulls in flight are likened to the oaks of his natal landscapes. Crusoe even names the island’s features after his own image, notably the volcano Mont d’Espoir. The new world was seen and heard in the likenesses of the old world, thus hope was indeed turned to despair.

Significantly, when Crusoe returns to England and the world that he knew, his account again reveals his failure to control. Crusoe has realized that England is also an island and not the whole world: “Now I live here, another
island, that doesn’t seem like one, but who decides?” (154-155). The arbitrariness of culture produces a fatiguing sort of plenitude, and for Crusoe, England is just boring. He remarks, “My blood was full of them; my brain/bred islands. But that archipelago/ has petered out. I’m old./ I’m bored, too, drinking my real tea,/ surrounded by uninteresting lumber” (156-160). Now, both cultures seem unreal to Crusoe. At times, he spoke as if the island world was dramatized for his own pleasure and amusement. Back in England, however, Crusoe discovers that his home-made island artifacts were more vivid than the dreary familiar objects of the English civilization. Even so, this is like comparing nullities — both worlds have been eviscerated of substance and meaning, for these qualities seemed to be held together by the existence of Friday only.

For Crusoe, Friday was the native prince of meaning, making his exile endurable by proving that he was not entirely alone in the world. Despite his ability to create his own world, Crusoe has failed to control death. “Friday, my dear Friday” has died of measles, leaving Crusoe with only himself in an exilic state in his own homeland. In this way, Crusoe demonstrates an important truth about the definition of culture and material objects. As said by William Blake, “There is nothing more sacred than to place another before you” — the erotic strategy of post-confessionalism. Affection and identification with the other is what endows material culture with significant meaning, but now that Friday is gone, Crusoe’s memory serves as an emotional reminder of this lesson, in place of the beloved.

In the schoolbook catechism that prefaces Geography III, the question, “In what direction from the center of the picture is the Island?” first receives the seemingly conclusive answer, “North.” The series of unanswered questions that dizzily concludes the child’s first geography lesson, however, only escalates into confusion and doubt. The reason for this is that the child being examined through these lessons persists in identifying the center of this world as a place called “home.” However, when the answers provided by this vantage point become less conclusive the reader soon discovers how fragile, inconclusive and contingent that view is. This is similar to the revelation of
Crusoe in England. The figure of Crusoe delineates exclusion and hierarchy, yet from this allegorical position, Bishop acutely registers the pressures against the soul, as well as the necessity of the other.

"Crusoe in England" is a powerful meditation on the constructed self, in which Elizabeth Bishop identifies the complexities of making a home and being made by a home.

While one such as Crusoe may feel confident in his ability to determine his own destiny or create his own world, it is his identification with humanity in the person of Friday which enables him to move beyond self-pity and appreciate the resonance of even the briefest moments of certitude and love.

—Talia Danesi

Snake and Bake: The Poetics of Ray Gonzalez

Ray Gonzalez’s new book, The Heat of Arrivals, is devoted to place, to a landscape of snakes, scorpions, and lizards where references to tortillas, clay, and campesinos working in 115 degree heat are commonplace. It is, however, a border place where Latin American and North American cultural references are mingled, where dreams and events are consubstantial, and where animals come bearing messages (or appear as messages) to humans who can only ignore them at peril. Everything is alive, everything signifies in Gonzalez’s work. In three sections that treat, respectively, myth, snakes, and family, Gonzalez describes a world which opens itself into continuous propositions of meaning.

Throughout these poems, characters are often introduced in conjunction with talismanic animals. In “Watering My Chinese Elm,” a grey moth startled from the grass by hosed water, connects the speaker, the tree, and “green leaves for deciphering truths” in its awkward flight. Another poem, “In the Time of the Scorpion,” begins, “I found the scorpion near my foot/ and knew it was time to die.” For the listener, for the poet in tune with the landscape,
each living thing is a messenger. In “Salamander,” the speaker waits for a salamander on the window screen “to open its mouth/ so I can quit thinking it is an omen.” But, in Gonzalez’s world, it is an omen, like all presences, even the ghosts that the speaker of “Sueno de Mexico” can smell. He asks us to participate in a hypersensitive stillness, a kind of prayer during which truth, embodied in worldly shapes, reveals itself to us.

Those who ignore the symbolic importance of animals and plants come to bad ends throughout the collection. The railroad crew foreman in “The Sustenance” who spits onto the ground the rattlesnake meat he has been served will die soon after of a heart attack. The hibernating rattlers dynamited from their dens in “The Snake in Winter” become, in a metaphoric switch,

the thousand blind faces

of people we loved and left,
memories flying

as fleshy projectiles
humming and spraying

their names over
our wet, bloody heads.

Dreams and visions play a major role in Gonzalez’s poetics. In “The Eagles in the Ashes,” “five giant eagles rise out of” a pile of ash near the speaker’s grandmother’s house. Though he wants to return to this house where he grew up, he cannot. The eagles walk one by one into the house, but the speaker is left outside, sifting “ashes through my fingers,” unable to open the gate. Without proposing a clear morning, the poem leaves the reader with a disturbing, haunting image and that feeling so common to dreams of a mysterious inability to perform some ordinary physical task, like walking or entering a house. That the eagles are spirits, that the ash represents the grandmother’s
death, that the house is the house of the past that no one returns to: all these are possible. But the ultimate significance of the images, of the poem, is indecipherable. Like the speaker, the readers are brought to the threshold of meaning, but we are not carried across. We can only guess at what lies on the other side. Similarly, in “Pollen Paintings,” a boy learns to read the augur of pollen trails in the sand. It is his

...father who told him pollen and petals
are the honeyed eyes that will help him see
what is going to happen to him

Technically, Gonzalez employs a wide variety of formal and prosodic devices. He has poems built of unrhymed couplets, homages in titled sections, stanzas that march, in subsequent lines, from the left margin inward. In one of the poems from the second section, “The Rattle,” notice how he uses caesura and a shifting margin to enact, and force on us, the nervous glancing right and left for the rattlesnake which is heard but not seen:

I hear it often
look down to search for the instrument
of the hand and the wrist,
the rattle of warning,
instrument of the foot and the body.

I hear it again,
erect drum hidden in mesquite,
a rapid ear song for those
who step the other way,
chant for the wrong reason.

I hear it in my breath,
see the cut-off rattle drying in the sun,
REVIEWS & ESSAYS

a snake bent to the fate
of the one who was bitten
to inherit the dance.

I hear it across the miles
of arid land
listen for the shaking
to interpret one footstep
set down the harvested plain.

I don’t want it
to go away, wait to see
how close I get to
the transparent years of rattle
containing every third eye
I closed and put away.

Ray Gonzalez’s poems are rich and dreamy, like heat wavering from a tin roof. “The heat of Arrivals,” a term that comes up in “Homage to Lucian Blaga” and in the title poem with its Lorca-like rhythms and circles of image, describes on one hand the desert landscape inhabited by people and animals, and on the other hand the poems themselves, with their flush of meaning and feeling. His inspired pantheistic vision startles us into a fresh perception of the world. After reading The Heat of Arrivals, readers will be likelier to see in an owl’s eyes, the blink of a god, to hear a familiar river as a chant, and to feel inside themselves the spirit of the word. It is, fundamentally, a holy book.

—Forrest Gander
Human Rights by Joseph Lease. Zoland Books, 384 Huron Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138. 72 pages; paper, $13.00

“These days have no revelation: still, they keep us inside fullness of being, where we locate many gift suggestions.” This cynical moment in Joseph Lease’s breathtaking new book of lyric poems and prose is a testament to this poet’s awareness of living in the world as simulacrum, where value is too often mimicry of value, profit-motive never far behind. But as a whole Human Rights has much bigger fish to fry. This is a book with its eyes wide open, and it is such testimonies from the fallen world that make its contrasting evocations of spiritual mystery, historical legacy, and indeed, the beauty and accuracy of the language itself resonate dead-on.

Incorporating in different order some of the best work from his first collection, The Room (Alef Books), with new poems, Human Rights is that rare thing: a realized poetic BOOK. To be sure, there are many individually superb poems. But Human Rights also has a novelist's sense of pacing. The first poem, “Michael Kohlhaas,” is richly impressionistic in its reimagining of Kleist’s protagonist’s repeated burning of a town:

the first time he burned the town
it fell like a grove of
giant chrysanthemums

the second time he burned the town
green stagnant water
came between his teeth

the third time he burned the town
his fingers were filled with
white chrysanthemums

But this poem achieves its full significance at the end of the book’s third
REVIEWS & ESSAYS

section, a world removed, in the tortured contemporary voice of “Sitting on a Wall Outside Harvard Law School”:

But don’t feel free to imagine... don’t try to speak for another person... that’s not your right... but you must... you are here. A family walks by and you think, It would cost so much money to clothe all those children. You try to imagine what lovemaking felt like to a fifteenth-century German peasant.

As it attempts to ascertain what is human and constant in the shifting po-mo world of choices and equivocations, at issue for Lease as well are the paradoxes and supreme difficulties of any act of speech which sets words to paper—for instance, from what tenable position can the statement, “don’t try to speak for another person... that’s not your right,” be issued without immediately reflecting back upon the speaker of the poem doing just that? “If I could avoid it / I would never tell you anything,” reads “Michael Kohlhaas.” There is no avoiding it— “but you must... you are here.” Still, at the same time, the potentially paralyzing horror once we choose to speak / write:

I am too simple, I flatten
These words and these seconds

Destroyed by my voice, a fraud
Talking into the heat.

These lines appear in “The Room,” which might best be termed the confessional poem of a decentered subjectivity—its authority is not the self but the intersubjective act of writing, and the shifting field of such authority, the questions it raises, the multiplicity of “I”s, are reflected in the poem’s composition itself: it alternates between prose and verse lines and between self-reflection and the mirrors passing by a seeming center in contact with others in the world, with memory, and with history. Again, no statement can rest easily
in its own authority:

I talk to Jane (safe Jane) . . .
I start to think, “Oh,
all they’re doing is ego-
airing: everyone at this party
is just saying, I do this
I do that, I
sleep with her, I
sleep with him,
I’m going to be this,
I’m going to be that.”

These lines cannot help but also implicate the speaker’s observation itself as being yet another act of self-promotion, another witty party observation designed to reflect well on its deliverer — a level of meaning of which the poem is entirely cognizant (as quotation marks help make clear). That these lines come in horror rather than self-congratulation is clear by the poem’s next section:

I need to look closely at what I’ve become at this moment. Well, I have eight legs and an exoskeleton, my eyes are livid taupe, and in each mandible I hold a tiny, screaming baby.

“I” resonates both consistent self, echoing other I constructions in the poem, and a radically multiple signifier refracting in every direction; “I” both inflates and ridicules itself. In an earlier poem we read, “I’m a bottle of Downy fabric softener,” intentionally glib and substanceless, about as far away from this image as can be imagined.

In the book’s final section, movement outward comes through involvement with the legacy of Jewish history, most notably in “Slivovitz,” which like “The Room” is a collage of verse lines and prose. Lease is very conscious of writing about a subject, the Holocaust and its aftermath, to which no writer can do justice, to which no justice in the larger sense can be done, which at the
same time mocks and dwarfs our present. One can lament the passing of time, of the old rituals which we presuppose once gave life meaning we are now denied—“there is no ritual slaughter in this mall, no chickens are being killed in the sacred way”—but on the other hand there is no guarantee that the result won’t be “parody, the redemption / we deserve.” This last phrase repeats in the first part of the poem, as if to call every creative act in the wake of this history hollow. Yet it is not simply the creative act which is hollow -- the world itself seems hollow: “When was the sun / the real sun? -- and seems, paradoxically, to call for a creative act, to be redeemed.

If there is no escaping this paradox, we are ourselves put in the position of the victim of political torture: “now pick / a card. Wrong again.” But the end of the poem—like the roadrunner in the cartoon zooming through the rock on which is painted a tunnel—breaks through the seeming impasse: “Actually I own the future, I sunbathe / in it, I write it down.”

There exists, at root, this confidence throughout Human Rights, this belief in the poem itself, in writing itself, in beauty. No one can truly speak truth. Such speech, when it does exist, is woefully inadequate to represent history, ourselves to one another, or even ourselves to ourselves. Human Rights reminds us that this may be why we have poetry to begin with. Lease’s poems have a sureness made of words, which stun, surround, gleam and disturb—the result is an altogether excellent book.

—Ted Pelton


With amazing purpose and subtlety poet Mary Karr in this, her third collection of poems, steers the reader through open-ended desire—sexual desire, desire for companionship, for healing, to evade death—leading toward a conscious reawakening of the senses. She concludes the book with her essay “Against Decoration,” which first appeared in Parnassus several years ago. Anyone who delights in “neo-formalist stuff” should avoid this piece,
since, as the title indicates, she rails against it. Karr wants substance—emotion—and narrative clarity in the poems she reads, which she finds lacking in a good deal of the contemporary poetry being written. This is what we are invited to find in her own.

In the poem “Viper Rum,” which opens this book, we find just this. Immediately recognizable is its narrative quality. As with most of these poems, it relates a story with clear characters in a given situation. There is a healthy amount of sensory description to be found as well, such as the “tiny vine serpent / like a single strand of luminous-green linguini,” or the following:

Outside,

the moon was a smoky disk, the path to my hut
loaded with white magnolia petals,
so every step sent out a fragrant mist

that wound up filling my circular
thatched hut—the flowers’ flesh
got mashed in my boot soles.

This not only functions to present a clear picture to the reader, enabling us to enter the poem easily, so to speak, but it serves to dramatize the narrator’s acute perceptions which are vitally important when viewed against her past as she presents it. Her thoughts “naturally” slip from the scene of the poem to a past when she “drank, alone nights at the kitchen sink,” had a “marriage choked to death” and “eyes scalded of sight, staring out / at the warped and vacant world.” She was, in essence, senseless. She states this explicitly in the final poem, “Chosen Blindness,” where

I was blind to flowers for one thing.
Picture a meadow stitched with dandelion,
those seed stalks whose tall white heads
 REVIEWS & ESSAYS

poke up like ancestral ghosts
(pale auroras of wisdom), but profligate,
the fluff shot through with brown seeds

do not another might follow. I never saw it,
just fixed on my own death. . .

It is implied then, in both poems, because of the vivid imagery, that she has undergone a change of some sort, pulling her out of her past stupor. The point is not merely that she has improved her situation, but the unidentified cause for such: “What plucked me from that fate / can’t yet be named,” (my emphasis). Naming is knowing, at least in our culture; it is limiting, indicating what a thing is not. Because that narrator cannot, I cannot yet know the cause of what I assume to be a meaningful transformation. So, perhaps out of curiosity I am driven to plunge further into this book, into this void of what “cannot yet be named,” hoping that by Viper Rum’s end I’ll have some clearer notion of the force (or forces) that drives this and other of its narrators. But she has yet further to go to move beyond “those last years.” She is still in the process of transition.

This in-between state, the process of becoming, resounds throughout the book, most notably in “Limbo: Altered States.” Here the narrator is literally, physically between states—she is on an airplane going to see her son. As in “Viper Rum,” the sight of liquor sets off remembrance of her alcoholic past. What she misses of that time is “How little I asked of myself then—to suck / the next breath, suffer the next heave.” It is often a nihilistic life these narrators have moved past, or are moving past. Clearly she has not quite recovered, if one can ever completely do so. It is in the process that people truly come to know themselves. Many of these poems seem to suggest that this process is open-ended. As in the closing poem, “Chosen Blindness,” she says “That’s what human bodies do, keep / breathing, no matter the venom their brains manufacture.” Progress of some sort is made though. The narrator of “Limbo,” who previously found solace in her self-destructive life, is now able to do so.
within a healthier context. As her plane is descending toward the gray graveyard of cars, a stick figure becomes my son in royal blue cap flapping his arms as if to rise. Thank god for our place in this forest of forms, for the gravitas that draws me back to him, and for how lightly lightly I touch down.

The rhythm of "lightly" repeated and indented serves to reinforce the experience of the plane landing, but gives it a gentle quality in contrast to the tumultuous existence she apparently once lived. Karr's narrators are not always able to name either what they are departing from or what they are becoming. In "Domestic Ruins": "What then will I stare back at? What toward?" So, while she does look toward moving on, the exact goal is unnameable.

The sense of hope is found in much of Viper Rum, often in the face of self destruction or death and suicide. Death itself is something to deal with, to accept, one's own and that of others. With a Stoic resolve she keeps her desires and anxieties in check. She says, "I practiced the stillness of a soul / awaiting birth" ("Limbo: Altered States"). Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus both are invoked in this struggle to tame the passions: "For help I read Aurelius, / that Stoic emperor who composed / fine Meditations in his battle tent" ("The Last of the Brooding Miserables"). Not a classical Stoicism, but a Christian Stoicism is what this narrator calls upon, as, later in that same piece, she says,

Lord, let me enter now your world, my face, dip deep in the gloves of these hands formed to sow or reap or stroke a living face.

Karr manages to pull Christ into many of these poems, as well, to look
REVIEWS & ESSAYS

to for hope. In “Christ’s Passion,” she contemplates whether he will “rise again or not, I can only hope.” He is a model of perfect suffering that Karr would have us rethink. Since “we’re trained to his suffering” (my emphasis), and probably tend to think less of it, we should “Think of all we don’t see / in an instant,” which Christ did. His anguish is therefore magnified, but our resolve to maintain hope is strengthened, too. Similarly, though secularly, in another poem, when trying to mail a letter to a friend who is dying of cancer, she “wished hard / for a white mail truck, and just then, from nowhere, one came puttering up” against the near-impossible odds of “chest-deep” snow (“The Century’s Worst Blizzard”). We are urged to trust some force beyond our control that sees through the difficult times. Despite their odds, it becomes easy to admire these narrators for their sheer determination, if for no other reason. In “Chosen Blindness,” the final poem, Karr acknowledges that

we struggle

to match up our voices, hold the beat,
find the pattern emerging, feel the light
that glows in our chests, keep it going.”

Struggle itself is the driving force in many of these narrators’ lives.
The addition of the Afterword to this collection of poems, despite its merits as an essay, seems oddly placed. Ultimately, it offsets the weight of the poems. Certainly Karr is no stranger to writing in prose, but I would rather have seen this in a collection with other of her essays. In it she laments “the highbrow doily-making that passes for art today.” In poets such as James Merrill (his later work), John Hollander, Amy Clampitt, and others she finds an alarming lack of narrative clarity and an absence of emotion. In order for a poem to have “relevance to human experience” it must have these qualities. She returns over and again to Wallace Stevens, that great master of the imagination, as well as to Eliot, Yeats, and Heaney for examples of twentieth-century poetry at its best. While praising the neo-formalist aim for “a revival of rich language and a literary history all but ignored since the free-verse revolu-
tion.” Karr “abhor[s] its current practice as the source of perhaps the most emotionally vacant work ever written.” Strong charges. But Karr demonstrates the ability to invoke strong emotions in her own poems, guided by the narrative data she finds missing in others. *Viper Rum* remains a strong book, divided as I feel it is, with both parts—poems and essay—equally praiseworthy.

—Michael Kerns
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