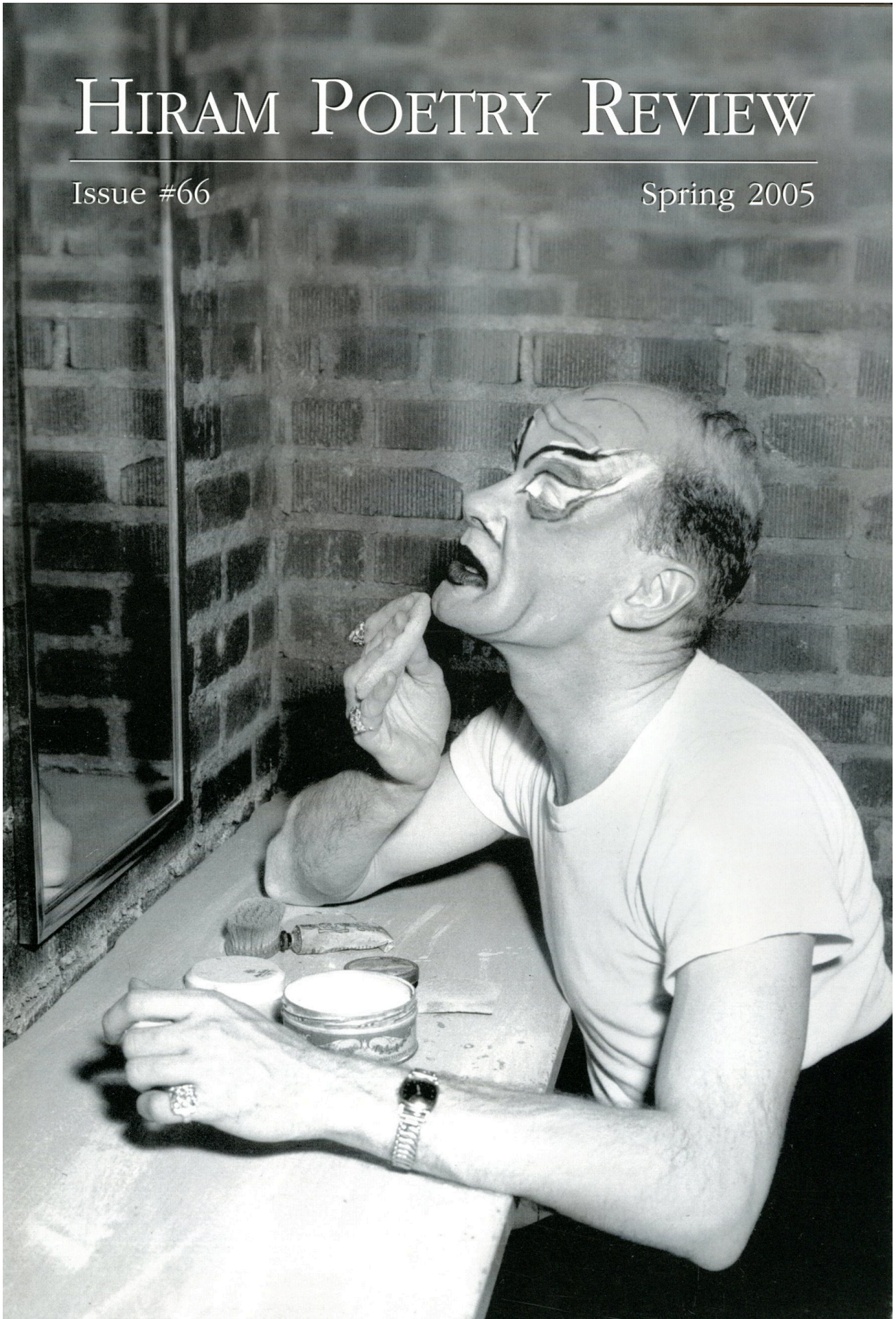


# HIRAM POETRY REVIEW

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Issue #66

Spring 2005









# THE HIRAM POETRY REVIEW



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## **THE HIRAM POETRY REVIEW**

Issue No. 66

Spring 2005

*Editor:* Willard Greenwood

*Editorial Assistants:* Nicole Richmond and Jessica Hammack

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## *Editor's Note*

2005 marks the thirty-ninth year of continuous publication for the *HPR*. In this, my fourth year as editor, I am just beginning to understand the significance of contributing to the legacy of one of the oldest American literary journals that is solely devoted to publishing original poetry and reviews of contemporary poets. The *HPR* owes its success to many individuals and institutions, but I would like to extend a special thanks to the Ohio Arts Council for their support in publishing issue #65. Last year's journal was very well received at the 2004 Association of Writers and Publishers conference and earned a favorable review from [newpages.com](http://newpages.com). We hope to further that success with issue #66.

Since I have joined the *HPR*, we have made the transition from a bi-annual to an annual publication. Therefore, each issue is literally a year in the making. We read submissions year round and are always on the lookout for odd works of genius. To paraphrase Longinus, we prefer poems that exhibit excellence with flaws rather than general competence. That said, I think you will find few flaws, if any, in the poems in this issue. As you can see from our contributors list, we publish obscure and well-established poets. It is our hope that each poem we publish will refine and expand the sensibilities of readers who are interested in contemporary American poetry.

WPG





*J. Allen Hall*

---

**Four Letters from SPC Elycia Loveis Fine  
(Occupied Baghdad, May 2003)**

1.

It's hot. No matter the time,  
no matter my state

of undress, sweat coats  
my scalp, knuckles, knee-

creases, eyelids. The bathrooms  
are so revolting that,

if possible, I wouldn't defecate  
for the rest of my life. Even

if the pain ensured a slow death.  
I put on my uniform, the gas mask,

the Kevlar helmet, two flak vests,  
rubber boots, carry my rifle

down three flights, then fifty  
yards out, just for the pleasure

of relieving my bladder. Fuck beds,  
fuck steak; fuck movie

theaters and buttered popcorn.  
I just want to flush a toilet.

2.

Iraqi air is diseased — not like Ebola diseased,  
but there are things in the air our fragile American  
immune systems aren't used to.

I woke one night certain I was dying.  
The medics administered two bags  
of rehydration to combat the nausea.

I slept fifteen hours straight. Goetz photographed me,  
when I was well, on a seized palace's veranda.  
Behind me, trees bloomed purple in the heat.

It isn't bad enough that Iraq makes me smelly  
and angry, but it has to make me sexually deprived too.  
One step at a time. Now, I just need to work on my road rage.  
Tell your mom she's a dirty whore.

3.

I sprout a new dreadlock  
every five minutes and

my soul keeps trying to run away.  
I'm lucky my soul isn't very smart.

Usually, I capture it before  
it can cross the borders

of this fallen city. James, Baghdad  
is beautiful at night.

4.

I've changed and now my friends won't know me.  
Last week I was an infantry squad member.  
The mission: secure the banks.

Goetz pretended I was vital. I wasn't.  
I just really wanted to go. We got lost  
in the downtown marketplace throng.

My job: watch for rooftop gunmen.  
It was like Mardi Gras, with fewer beads  
and boobs. It's scary

how I no longer find a donkey pulling a cart  
along a busy street foreign. Did you know  
the Arabic word for thief is *ali baba*? No lie.

While downtown, this kid driving a bus  
kept licking his eleven year old lips at me.  
I pointed my gun. I think he shit his pants.

Send more letters. Don't leave out the details  
of your sex life. Please, no more tootsie rolls.  
You must understand, I'm living through you.



*Marine Robert Warden*

---

### **Covered Bridge, Indiana, 1950**

it's across the river in between the limestone cliffs  
it's early September and the river runs low and clear  
the trees on the slopes show a mix of green and burnt umber  
my bride of two months and I sit downstream from the bridge  
the clear water flows over stones that in places have hollows  
where wheels of a mill once ground the corn  
my bride wears a green and blue plaid dress  
she raises her knees and tucks her arms round her knees  
using her old camera I take a picture of her there  
with the red wooden bridge behind her  
this is only a moment in time under early Autumn sun  
  
in the photo her hair is the color of the bridge or some of the trees

## **Victor Hugo Didn't Write This**

It is said everyone in Hollywood  
is a writer of screenplays  
or of story treatments  
or has a concept  
for a film trilogy or two.  
Every waiter an actor  
& so on and so on

How is it really?  
My aging hair stylist writes love poems  
to a surfer she once shacked up with.  
A boxer I used to drink with writes  
Latin satires imitating Juvenal.  
My tax guy is writing a war poem  
*The Sexual Torture Quartet.*  
My apartment building is over stocked with poets.  
Behind every door beats the heart of a rhymer.  
David in 2-C composes ditties about copulating  
with wolves & primal man integrating with nature.  
In 3-A bald Roger of the BMW writes  
about glass & other glossy surfaces.  
Mary Ann writes of rodeos & cowboys  
& riding bareback without her underwear.  
Eugene lashes out in an angry poem or two  
but mainly he drinks by himself.

I drive to work with a Navajo Indian  
He is a poet too. He writes about white underwear.  
Once we sat at a stop sign for 30 minutes  
while he wrote about this Girl Scout's underwear.  
I was surprised the bus came before he did.  
We were both late for work.

I want to write something too.  
Something grand. Eternal.  
about lonely streets & men in T-shirts.  
about the smell of poverty in LA  
about city miasma  
about hope & transfiguration—  
but  
after living in LA all these years  
I have taken to writing about urine  
how a few drops can glisten & cling  
  
to virgin pubic hair.



## Circular Patterns

The cashier says *have a nice day*.  
I whisper, "I have other plans."  
I head for my 1947 Cadillac.  
In the parking lot an ancient pilgrim  
in railroad coveralls stands  
streaming epithets,  
like stone in a stream.  
Her shopping-cart wheels  
jammed between cement lines.

I find the car.  
Geno is sprawled in the front seat,  
drinking wine & putting finishing touches  
to a poem that tells how horrible it is  
living in the suburbs with a female lawyer  
& about the awful neighbor kids &  
how he'd like to kill them.  
I start the car & head toward the exit.  
The ancient pilgrim is still leaning  
into her cart as if into a high wind.  
"I slash throats with a garden hoe,"  
screams Geno. I stop the car.  
"I crush skulls with a fireplace brick."

I get out & say hello to the wayfarer,  
Her teeth slip,  
I lift her cart over the  
gouge in the earth.  
"Asshole," she cries & clenches  
her fist to strike.  
I jump back into the car.  
Geno is still ranting his poem.  
"I eviscerate the little bastards &  
roast their guts for the dogs."

“You have a gift,” I tell him.

“Pass the wine.”

I’m thinking of Dante’s *Inferno*.

Canto XVII to be exact:

“*Those who have done violence to art.*”

As we round the Long Beach Traffic Circle,

I suggest Geno call all the

neighbor dogs *Cerberus*.

The night grows hotter.

*Joan Dy*

---

### **This used to be**

a poem about the small hairs that line  
your ear, wavering and stiff  
at my touch  
    This used to be  
    a poem about desire, the knife-clenched hand that  
wants to thrust  
        itself into your chest, slice your heart  
under sinew and skin    Now  
    it is a poem about animal  
instinct,   that sweet indiscretion that listens only  
    to the hiss of breath heaving in my ear, blood rush-  
ing into beats  
like flint clacking together, fire bursting from blue stone  
    Your tongue in my mouth is nothing like his,  
    a beating of wings against my throat,  
and there is nothing I can say to stop this,  
    this bitter sweetness that knows nothing of love  
or loyalty, but only of shuddering,  
        singing heat    If I touch you here,  
I'll open a door into the den,  
        where a man sits on a leather chair  
        in front of the fire,  
reading a book, the Bible maybe,  
        and his finger points to a verse in Jeremiah,  
the words shapeshifting serpents, indiscreet As and ahhs  
    I know we are doomed, dear, but I am a violin  
string about to break and this  
    music can't be played with just one mouth  
on one splintered reed  
    so play my body like a blue trombone, and  
sing me like a song you've  
        forgotten all words to.

—after Rosal

## **Why Is He Frightened?**

Why is he frightened? Your son,  
three-years-old and shrieking from my hug.  
Maybe it's the beard, my vagrant voice, diesel  
under the collar  
in the bus station, bright  
as a shepherd's cave. *He's tired*, you say,  
wrapping him in blue fleece.

The paper reports a heavy cache  
of rockets and rifles found at a Baghdad butcher's.  
Rubbing your boy's little back,  
and glancing at two shaky girls boarding for Chicago,  
I wonder if we can bury fear with a little sleep.  
Or bite it with good tires when the highway freezes  
and the speed of America is irreducible?  
Maybe just roll it over. An off white  
brightening our kitchen mood  
when we brew the morning coffee.

Wake to gunfire, to glass and hard crusts  
swept into a corner. There's a blood-blotched man  
sitting silently by the door. His crying daughter  
cradles him tea in a pretty cup.  
In an hour he'll be arrested for trafficking weapons.  
Next month she'll explode  
in a decent restaurant  
where a lieutenant, your husband and my old friend,  
has just ordered the lamb.





**E Mail #77 I Can't Send**

did you feel like  
an escort? Did  
you feel like a  
gigolo driving  
Ms. Lifshin.  
title of an E  
Mail you sent  
me before I  
sensed you  
wouldn't send  
more. I suppose  
you never were  
trained to be  
one. You were  
never on time  
and aren't  
escorts supposed  
to dress natty?  
Not in wrinkled  
running shorts,  
isn't a gigolo  
supposed to be  
stunning? You  
were, tho, and  
that's where this  
poem falls apart—  
I'm not in the same  
anguish I was, in  
the agony when  
other things this  
week left me. But  
I think if I write  
you into poems  
you'll appear. I  
wonder if I could  
think of something  
awful you did it

would be easier to  
forget you. Instead,  
one woman writes me  
says he was "a dear"  
says she'd like to write  
you. Another calls  
you a hunk. Another  
says "I can see why  
you find him fascinating."  
Weeks before he  
wrote "do I sense a  
change in a lowering of  
the temperature?" as if  
he could taste my  
fear. He hadn't even  
kissed me when he put my  
jacket in his closet as  
if it was me, left it while  
we went for drinks.  
When we came back at  
midnight for the late  
night slam he showered,  
said you don't want to  
take anything with you  
do you as if that way we'd  
come back at 3 or 4 and  
it would be too late  
for me to leave.  
But I wasn't sure  
what he was thinking.  
He said he was leaving his  
wife because she could  
not communicate and  
because she's Russian,  
has always kept  
things inside. Well, I'm  
Russian too but if he  
was closer I'd tell him I  
think the one who isn't  
saying what he means  
is you

*Meg Thompson*

---

## **Like I Always Imagined Yours to Be**

I thought I had forgotten your smell, and I was terrified, that scent  
which was so  
distinctive to you. I tried for an hour to remember, thinking about that  
night when your  
head was on my body pillow, hair covering your eyes and your mouth  
open in protest  
when I jumped out of bed to my laptop because you looked so natural  
I had to write about  
it immediately.

But it drifted back to me when I was at a concert, general admission,  
festival seating

when the guy in front of me who was taking pictures without the  
flash, advancing the  
film with the smallest click, which I heard so clearly, turned around  
and whispered into  
my ear specially, I like to think, the lone word, *orgasmic*, after they  
turned up the bass so  
loud, my heart beating without me in the floor and the walls,  
I caught it. That dry mix of marijuana and sweat and cologne which I  
always associate  
with you. I wanted to look at his hands and see if they were lined  
with the imprints of  
guitar strings like I always imagined yours to be, or ask if he was  
related to you, but I  
didn't, because I have to wonder if you ever try to remember me. If  
you ever strain when  
you are trying to fall asleep to think about what kind of shampoo I  
used or brand of  
detergent. If you ever jolt, the way I do, when I am driving and I hear  
certain songs on the radio.

## **How to Clean a Bottom Feeder**

He wasn't supposed to catch it, my father says.  
Not on a spinner meant for a bass leap,  
but after a long struggle, letting the line  
out with jerks of the live nerve  
of body, he nets it, slips a link  
through the mouth & gill.  
In his hand, a nine-inch nail, poised

above the skull. It groans  
as I lift it to the tree. The body seizes, flicks  
as he hammers through the brain  
& soft pine. The blade, steel, hair-split  
sharp, slits a shallow circle  
below the head's rim along the body.  
His hands tear at the flesh, strip it

the body's length to the final fin.  
Blood seeps across the slick meat.  
Just a fish, cold-blooded, no nerve ends  
to let it feel what we feel, he tells me.  
The blade sinks into the white belly  
just above the heart, draws a red line.  
He plunges his hand between

the cleaved sections, rips out stomach,  
intestines, heart, eggs, naming them  
one by one. It groans again &  
the body writhes a final time.  
He hefts the rusted ax. The edge glints  
in the morning sun. He makes eye contact  
to make sure I watch. His eyes shift

to the bottom feeder. One swift chop  
& the head's lopped almost off, the carcass hangs  
by a shred. He hands me the body,  
bends, gives me a peck on the head.  
"Remember, it didn't feel a thing."  
I nod, hose blood off the ax,  
& throw scraps for the turtles & dogs.



## **How to be a Modern Woman:**

Sit still. Stand up. Don't walk too fast. Don't walk too slow. Don't swing your hips; it attracts attention. Don't swing your arms; you'll look unapproachable. Be yourself. Be perfect. Be proper. Be free. Cross your legs like a lady. Uncross those legs; what are you hiding? Wear jeans, they're hard to rip off. Wear pasties, the celebrities are doing it. Double stick body tape is a girl's best friend.

You are independent. You're not oppressed. You don't have to cover your face in public like those women in other countries. Flaunt it. Show your midriff. Show your ass. Let it all hang out. Just don't blame anyone but yourself when you entice decent men to do things they wouldn't otherwise do.

Wear thongs. Panty-lines are a no-no. Thongs are slutty, but slutty is in. Wear a bra; sagging is gross. Go commando; it's your choice.

Wash your crotch. Don't be a skank. Please don't talk about feminine hygiene. That's the last thing men want to hear.

How much do you weigh? Eat a cheeseburger, for God's sake. Eating disorders are so five years ago. How much do you weigh? Try the Atkin's diet. No one likes a cow.

Don't be a bimbo. Don't be a smartass. Use your power. Use men for their money. Men hate gold diggers. They write songs about them. Sell your pussy. Don't be a whore. Shake your ass. Don't get yourself in trouble.

Be proud. Be independent. Be a lipstick lesbian. Date an athlete.

Don't press charges. Rap music is ok. Let's face it, some women are bitches and ho's. They're not talking about you. You are a respectable woman.

Share the wealth. Have a threesome. Don't be a slut. Enjoy sex, but don't act like you know what you're doing. Fake it. So what if they never learn?



*Daniel Morris*

---

## **Most of What I Have, I Have Been Given**

Most of what I have, I have been given, true,

But I brought prints from Piranesi to Paschke when I moved in with you;

Pieces I'd hoped against hope would fit the red walls of your Matisse design –

Of the Great Rooms in the Great House of You My Lord.

But, granted, most of what I've acquired has been given away, or put in storage,

In a cold garage an hour away, on which I continue to pay

A handsome monthly fee for crates of paperbacks worth zilch,

And that I'll never read, but couldn't resist – the bag day

On the last day of the Tippecanoe County Library summer sale.

And so I continue to pay for thrift. Can you let go of what you've never read?

I had a Dublin chair, a Barcelona chair, requisite if not quite fashionable,

Among the Bohemians who'd made the transition from Brooklyn

Back to the Lower East Side after the war.

Tattered little Oriental rugs scattered around

From an apartment I once wore, I was so proud.

I had a few fail-safe recipes for butternut squash  
With just a touch of Mexican flare. Guests  
Didn't expect, but said they'd approved, or weren't aware. I bought  
A file cabinet for just those recipes! Won't it go well with your  
Ergonomic chair? I had a plasma TV, but you  
Sprang for deluxe cable; I had an arts and crafts  
Dining room table – made just last year – but you had  
Grandma's authentic Morris chairs. I have  
Copied the neighbor's software, the website is up,  
But no home page. Most of what I have  
I'll have to put away. Wait, I have a TV  
Cart. Couldn't we display some paperbacks? Yes, I agree,  
It really is an "entertainment center," and just  
Doesn't fit this American 4 Square.

*Kathleen Rooney*

---

## **You Know How I Worry About You Dying**

before me. So even in my dreams,  
you mess with me, pretending  
you've been killed—a cowboy shot  
in an Indian ambush. (My dreams  
aren't PC, okay?) And as you lie  
there in the dust, eyes glassy,  
life oozing from your wound,  
I rush to your side ready to stanch  
the bleeding with my petticoat,  
your bandana, anything at hand,  
begging you not to give up the ghost  
because with you, life is essential.  
Without you, it's all the rest—assorted  
boring *mises en scenes*, monotonous  
landscapes unbroken by mountains  
of trees, me drifting like a stupid drab  
tumbleweed. I plead like this until  
you stand, smile, brush the sand  
from your chaps, and show me:  
the arrow's not through your heart,  
just stuck under your arm.

## **Domestic Canticle**

Let me sing for my husband a love song concerning this antique house.

He neither laid its foundation, nor raised a wall, nor nailed a shutter, nor hung a door.

He did not paint its cedar shingles, nor set them, like fish scales, even and close.

And now the neighbors, and now the town-folk, and now the family from out-of-state,

whisper and frown at peeling paint, at slouched porch columns, at fissured window panes, yet lauding the center entry's fine, old bones.

Could I have done more for this house?

Could I have saved it from this condition?

I meant it to shelter us, a dwelling unto our twilight.

If shelter can not stand, how can it be restored?

It no longer counts for anything, but is dismantled, despoiled, trampled under foot.

I shall forsake therefore the broom, the sponge, the blue Comet in warm water.

I shall remove these yews, these hollies with unnamed disease, uproot these insatiable rhododendrons.

I shall turn their mass to mulch.

I shall level these walls, I shall lay all this to ruin.

I shall dig up fieldstones, pry them apart at their cemented seams.

I shall command the rain to wash away the monstrous rubble,

for in this house, my light went out, and no wind breathes upon the ember.

*Sean M. Conrey*

---

## **Revision of the Sonnet**

It is not quite spring but there is a sound of grass  
pushing through the stiff brown yard outside.

In the kitchen there is silence and bread  
and red dimes of Spanish wine sitting in empty glasses.  
If there were any more

release, it would all end; every blade

retreat. It is because you didn't stay that a feather  
on the scale in the bathroom bends to either side  
and all this gravity becomes like the body  
of a cosmonaut

under the old weight

of his bed sheets. You've brought me to this,  
this quiet morning, above this silence  
and bread, because the simple thought of you  
falls like cold water from a spoon

and I give into it. I feel that you won't call me back;  
the phone has so much gravity,  
every cigarette filling up the time of day,  
my black front door closed and hot from the sunlight,  
and it is just another sunny day

among the leftover everything.  
3:20 PM. This is the time, and it is always different,

when I find myself here among the living.  
I am wide awake this afternoon again, longing—  
No, that's too obvious a word— more like believing  
that between two there is such a thing as longing



and it becomes too much.

I quit typing and I reach out to open the door,  
the sun falling from the porch to my bare knees,  
and I find the words in motion as they were before  
we labeled them all, the simple forms. Do you see?

It is easy to believe in every glass of wine.

## **Immunity**

Over the years, I've built up an immunity  
to knife wounds as well  
as that photograph of Mussolini's corpse you so admire,  
and it is because of such miracles

that I have been able to love you for so long.  
Yes, I've received all your letters,  
I am sorry to say, and I am sorry to say  
I do not read them. Instead, I stare for hours on end

at your picture, and imagine we are arguing  
or waking up together in Chicago.  
Last night, I slept for the first time  
in a bed our baby hasn't slept in. When will you visit?

I am still packing your things and dusting  
the bookshelves and throwing away the junk mail  
I never forwarded to you. Don't bring your lover.  
I don't want to see

a bigger hole in the place where I stood  
than I would if you came alone. The new  
apartment won't surprise you. It's in the same building,  
four floors down, and looks just like ours

but backwards and missing a room.  
None of the cabinet doors are falling off. Feel free  
to test them all. That is how easy I thought it would be  
to live without you.

## **She's Turning the Corner on Ditz**

Nothing happens worse than morning.  
Or did. Lately her voice wavers like this  
between octaves, like the new one she found  
while explaining to her lab partner  
the strange science by which clownfish  
can't have dads. The low voice surprised her  
even more than the ease of expression,  
and for a second she considered trading in  
the twenty minute sting of a butterfly tattoo  
for ten more pages of *Madame Bovary*.  
It's the sting that moves her through the cusp  
of college, that tips the first shot glass  
from the second story of the fraternity,  
a party beneath her, a guy named Nick  
between. It happens as quick as this:  
She wakes up with base on again. The boys  
turn her around one time too many. Her bob  
slows, her squeal tires, and when she wakes one night  
to find her friends clutching limes and another  
12-pack, her smile dies before it finds her eyes.

## Lavender

Kim Novak's a really good faker.  
She falls in love with your hands  
first, then falls like a sack of meal

from a church tower. Just for you.  
Since it is not her breath, the wind  
frightens her, and neither is the water

below the golden gate quite the ice  
of her goodbye. If the blond eddy  
of rivers dizzies you, she washes her hair

like laundry and swirls it in a bun.  
She's like the girl grades above you  
once who dozed in social studies

and woke in a relief map  
of India. The girl whose family  
you could never find in her face.

No father bent over spectacles  
or an engine block. No mother  
to summon with a squint's wish.

She was the first dream of a girl  
whose dream was never you.  
How you candled your avenues

till she came. The thought-lost milk  
of her hellos, the lavender skirt  
she washed in the foam of breakers

once. It killed you then like Kim Novak  
kills you still to know that any guy  
could dress her, change her name,

break her for sport. In the shallows  
she'd have been a perfect blue,  
if not for the smile, trace of blood.

*Yvonne B. Robery*

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## **The Sick Mother**

I just had to lie down  
after the shower, still a bit damp,  
my heart racing, the room spinning.  
On my back between the sheets, I close  
my eyes and focus on breathing.  
I am not sure what made me dizzy.

I think of many people in a dizzy  
collage of memory and fantasy down  
through time, all the images breathing  
through my frame. My damp  
stomach under my palms feels close  
with its growling and spinning

patterns through my system, spinning  
my illness out in the dizzy  
interplay of body and mind. I am breathing  
more evenly. I feel my heart settle down,  
but my palms remain damp  
where they rise, fall with each breath. The closed

door to the bedroom hides me. I have closed  
myself off from the rest of the house spinning  
through routines, the living damp  
on their lips, unaware I am dizzy  
and tucked away under the down  
comforter where I concentrate on breathing.

I just had to lie down and slow my breathing  
for fifteen minutes to stop the spinning  
list of errands, to take time down,  
to remember friends I have been too dizzy  
to call in the busy, closed  
circuit of the day-to-day. I am less damp

as I sit and open my eyes. I leave the damp  
sheets behind me. I open the closed  
door and hear the morning's dizzy  
pace, the sounds of leaving, all the breathing  
clatter of five children spinning  
out the door. Then, I am down

on my knees, hugging a robe around me, down  
on the floor, my vision blackening. I close  
the door, bend over my knees, my dizzy  
head between them. I stop breathing,  
then breathe again. I will the spinning  
to stop while my skin mottles. The damp

returns. I just have to lie down. Dizzy,  
I close my eyes and focus on breathing.



## **Pourriture nobile**

*Noble rot n.* A parasitic fungus (*Botrytis cinera*) that attacks ripe grapes and causes an increase in their sugar content.

—American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (3rd ed.)

All through the Rive Gauche, it was said, a sweet ripeness filled the air, like an abandoned orchard in October, and reminded the inhabitants, along with the shortened days and a certain melancholy, that a season was ending and would never return, as Oscar Wilde slipped away at 13 Rue des beaux arts, rotting like a bruised peach in a hothouse of regret.

Never mind, everything seemed to say, other pleasures remain. Foie gras in the mouth, like brown butter that disappears on the tongue;  
a sugary sauterne, plucked at the first wrinkling of rot.

There is always a couch in the Louvre, from which to make love to the peaches and mauves of the Odalisque. While you are fumbling at her impossible torso (not quite ripened or ready to drop) she will turn with indulgence toward your sighs. A brazier has been painted in to ward off goose flesh, and a pipe, filled with opium perhaps, for after her admirer has moved on.

Have a coffee at the café in the square of St. Sulpice from whose dark interior the middle ages whisper in Latin, not your language, yet sustaining like a familiar melody, whose long vowels you are still mourning.

But in the Tuileries beware the naked shadows of the statues stretched on autumn's rack. The sun can barely raise its head. In a panic, flocks of predatory children swarm the tourists like starlings plucking ripe berries at the moment of turning.

## Depleted

Screwed to another will, I thought I was a man assembling an ideal child from all his desires, but the count didn't take or maybe it was motile, all ten million plus sperm targeted for nothing. For me it's a matter of insurrection, to detour a population curved on the destruction of another population. One small wiggle and this mandatory high school safety lecture drafts my senses again: procedural rubbers and police with riot gear plus spermicide gently splaying back inseminators. Even as I was easing into my target heart zone, sweat dripping at hairline, I comported every action that had led to that moment— hours of exercise forcing blood under my nails, practice drills with live ammunition, ejaculations of low level radiation. Still, a zero between plus and minus, even in perfect love, has only direction, when one's psyche decentralizes immune system, when one's dream-fetus feasts on irradiated sand at ground zero. To cast out knowledge, even in the burn of muscles, creates no second wind. My penis had mutated into an urn already. And of manhood, only once did I ever have that talk, at seventeen with co-worker, Bob. He was thirty-seven, trying to hold down a third job to support a fourth child. It was in a marathon of scallop skewers. Zucchini. Scallop. Bacon. "Someday, buddy, imagine." Scallop. Scallop. "We'll be able to relax." Bacon. "I want to watch them work." Scallop. Zucchini. Arrange in rows. "My children workin' for me." So I threshed my hips to apex, remembered my own drive to inflation like bits of chalk grinding into a blackboard, every year at the pump, metering out more money. I found it even more defeating to focus on exponential growth, compound interest, double timing, dividing growth rate by annual rate of increase. I quit that job soon after, but even before those thoughts let go, I let go, caught my breath and disarmed all momentum for safe warm down— no RHR (Resting Heart Rate). I felt the testament of my birth inside that first will, and I couldn't imagine my sperm working it out.

## Review:

***Wild Civility*. David Biespiel. University of Washington Press, 2003.**

Henry Hughes

David Biespiel ransacks the registers of English and speaks in a brilliantly deranged voice that is civilized, but not sterilized, by his own form of the sonnet—what he audaciously prefaces as the “American sonnet”—a nine line, ten-foot terror that rolls down the page like those “classic Thunderbirds, something distinctly American: wide, roomy, & with a robust engine.”

But even after riding around in these roomy sonnets, it is difficult to say where we’ve been. There are virtually no narrative scenes or actual characters, yet the dramatic voices and head-crashing language are not conventionally lyrical. Like the abstract paintings of Arshile Gorky or Willem de Kooning (which have recognizable forms but little realistic representation), these poems are hard to explicate, memorize, or reproduce. The poems do not haunt any earthly place—they live radiantly in the moment of reading. But this is not Language Poetry, which distrusts and deconstructs sayable meaning. Biespiel trusts language completely, so completely that his work runs on little else.

If the reader can survive the initial incomprehensibility, there are enormous rewards in the sound, rhythm, and what may be called the taste and texture of these sonnets. In *Maneuver*, first in a reeling series entitled, “Drunks,” Biespiel gushes gorgeous.

He wallows in good fellowship, slung over the mild wine. He  
vamps at a cool distance  
Somewhere in the corner of the crowd. He won’t get his feet wet  
in the bun fight.  
Inertia of the brain, his timbre. He’s a featherhead, his loam is  
untilled, and his long suit is vanishing.  
He won a feel-good shag, that’s all. He embrocates and gargles,  
a looby, vaporous, chlorine-drunken medic.

Not only can Biespiel pour-out the swollen momentum of a directional drunk, but he is one of the few contemporary poets who can write about getting high without the postured *cool* or the adult *I know better now* nostalgia. In “Hallucination,” Biespiel just repaints the word action of shrooming teenagers.



Dotted-and-raised, strutting, like Braille, we transformed our  
blood into rigs of nipping swallows, and flew  
Into evening's quick ink and fiddled on the swing-set jetties and  
ribbed the fibrils of light.

It makes sense that Biespiel's nearly irrational love of form and language would best serve the often nonsensical, irrational states of intoxication, hallucination, poetry, fighting, and faith. The book begins in the pagan's voice:

In that sleep-world I was a pig, a glögg-head, a fearless man-  
child. I knew my navel  
Better than nectar. Flagellation was my vitamin. Not one  
serenade, not one salve, to save me.

The pagan does, however, crave sound and form. "Godless, I loved and listened like a crow to the chortle / of rain. *G-o-d*, that sound, was my nest." This creative desire is contrasted late in the volume when the "Spiritual Guy" confidently chirps: "I won't be / chicken of sketches. My gallop is all romp. I'm the most / positive man in the room."

But meaning is always secondary to the linguistic groove of these poems. Biespiel uses words and phrases more as notes or visceral song lyrics than as denotations of specific or crucial meanings. And though there is a measured beauty in many phrases—"I was Mopsus where moss was concerned," "Kakistocracy of rub and touch," "rebooting in the gamboge of the light," "shorn as flan"—the vocabulary can sometimes feel alien and gratuitously arcane. Unfamiliar words and shattered narratives will challenge, frustrate, and drive away some readers. *Wild Civility* is not for those seeking accessible, sensible poems representing moments in everyday life. Aside from the beautiful and surprisingly sane poem "Starlings," I don't think we'll be hearing selections on *The Writer's Almanac*. Yet as in Emily Dickinson's more mysterious poems, there is an associative aura that goes beyond understanding. As an antidote to poetry that seems little more than lyric prose with line breaks, *Wild Civility* is distinctly poetic—a commitment revealed, perhaps, in the couplet from "Dear Justice."

The mithridate that is rhythm and dream only—these are the ingredients to be endeared to or die for,

We all may recall Archibald MacLeish's adage that "A poem should not mean / But be," still, it's not easy to forsake narrative and the mantel of meaning for the pure dance of language, just as it wasn't easy for abstract expressionists to communicate to a world comfortable with familiar, representational pictures, but this is how art and literature evolve. Biespiel is an original and innovative poet who cannot be ignored.

## Review:

***Poppy*. Austin Hummell. Del Sol Press: Washington, D.C., 2004.**

Henry Hughes

From Lou Reed to Denis Johnson, we've seen great music and writing rise from the dungeons of heroin addiction. And yet we're often left wondering if such miraculous transformations are really possible. Is there something terribly revealing and defining about heroin? Are the survivors of this war of the mind heroes? Or is it purely the alchemy of art that deserves our awe? *Poppy* is a work of very fine art. If there are *scared straight* confessions and tragic moments (and there are), they are so brilliantly woven into Hummell's gorgeous poetry that we may not feel their vein-scraping skid. Yet *Poppy* turns over some big questions about the nature of being human. This is not a tormented confession on heroin addiction, rather it is literary exploration of human development and consciousness that is, in some profoundly undeniable way, related to heroin.

In the opening poem, "God's Early Church," a man tells us his story:

Whole months pass without sun. February  
all coffee and the stink of iron. Once,  
a girl from Carolina left me  
for dead. Something about ambition  
and the ropy vein in the bend of my arm.  
I lanced them both with flowers from another  
country. You should have seen it.



It's also important that we learn of his recovery. Dear prices were paid but the narrator regains a tremendous appetite (and a new addiction) for the clear living world.

Years of that until the windows were full  
of a juice called methadone designed I guess  
to sweep the streets of me. I weighed myself down  
with coats of it. I unplugged the voices of my friends.  
The world? Fuck. I can't get enough of it.

This gateway poem uses a direct, first-person narration that establishes a human voice. But for most of *Poppy*, Hummell modulates away from this direct telling into an artful second- and third-person lyricism. For some readers this may soften or over-aestheticize the drug experience. And though it's mostly the poems, not the people, who do the talking, this reviewer loves what he hears.

One need only turn the page to find the book's formal invocation. "Sunday Morning Percodan" sings of a woman surviving on long-distance phone calls from her son, pills, coffee, and a faith that is narcotic, emotional and traditional—"the swollen / heart of Christ astride a donkey, / with the lazy palms of Sunday waving hey."

Hummell's music is unfailing, and in "Sunday Morning Percodan" he is able to both sing and tell a compelling story. Sometimes, however, the tongue and leap of his language blurs the narrative beyond recognition. Is this intoxication or the craft of an overly sober art? "Helen's Cordial," for example, develops as a dark syringe tale but falls into a confusing blend of pronouns and men that makes it difficult to appreciate what finally happens. Perhaps like the women we meet later in the kitchen, this poet can't help singing when he means to speak.

Despite moments of narrative confusion, Hummell has a feel for the sweet and delicate edge of life's highs—that crumble toward panic. And at the edge of the parenting high, there is frequently panic over the security of one's children. This tension is powerfully portrayed in the poem "Panic."

We pressed our backs into the pillowed terror  
of children asleep beneath the Black Forest,  
of cruel pruning of a daughter's limbs, and waited  
  
for the grim click of light switches and closing doors.  
Now we try to forget—when halfway through life  
the swirl of blue lights and sirens shocks us.

“Panic” segues into a new section dealing with children. Hummell loves the sweet, dark origins of experience and myth, and he knows that drugs can bring back that fragile, sometimes bold, uncontrolled childhood self. Drugs are also the ultimate initiation into adulthood. Every poem in this section is exquisite, beginning with the beautifully mysterious “The Island of Misfit Toys,” about a child with Down syndrome, and moving to “In the Great Green Room” and “Galleons Lap,” which examine the epistemology of imagination as it’s shaped by children’s stories. This section matures with the Plath-like “Mirror Mirror,” “Equus,” and “Kaspar Hauser,” all the while leaving us with the heavy, distant echoes of “Giants,” whose love is “clumsy and dear” and who “just never learn from tripping.”

Section III plays among film, television, and sports stars—taking them just seriously enough. Like a Greek bard, Hummell has his gravity defining heroes, namely Michael Jordan—“was there ever anyone / so unmoved by gravity, / so happy in this air / between wax and rafter / at the top of the key.”

The penultimate section IV relaxes and toughens with lyric dreams of birds and profiles of people finding or defining themselves on sex, college, politics, and career. Here there are also poems having little to do with drugs. Although one can’t forget that heroin is “cooked” for the syringe, one must somehow forget it in a poem like “It Was a Kitchen to Live In,” where “the Children of Lilith” recall the rich images of the old country’s kitchen and the domestic, life-giving labors:

a window cot for slow bread,  
an oil cloth on the butcher’s block,  
a begonia in a dented kettle

At the other margin, in the poem “Alien Abduction,” such comforts are unbalanced by the creepy and playful analogies between childbirth and, well, alien abduction.

Torn  
from the warm swamp of her womb  
against your living will, you’d remember  
a struggle, like abduction, a gallery  
of eyes and the naked sensation  
of being watched, for the first time.

In the final section, Hummell returns briefly to the child's world where the myth of Phaethon losing control of his father's sun chariot and "el niño, this child / of the sun blowing a chaos of weather / onto the belly of a sagging superpower" help the speaker understand that the "night is not long enough for both sleep / and heroin. But I'd never say so—" And though Hummell's art is never preachy or didactic, his anchoring poem, "Heroin," which gives us the fine details of shooting up, also speaks personally of the "fear drawn from a fat child's quiver. / When love is a wound, we drug it." The third movement of "Heroin" is so exquisite that it must be quoted in full.

Plunge is some of it, the taste of blood  
sublingual, the rush of warmth  
that laps through your heart till a pulse  
of pleasure deepens to a nod.  
You want both the armor of junk  
and your heart to beat beneath.

So quick is its spell that you forget  
to pull out the syringe sometimes,  
and it bobs at the bend in your elbow  
like the prick on a fickle boy,  
or the question he saves for a certain  
girl, like: Why have you driven  
through my heart? Make that what.

*Poppy* is a superb collection of poetry, and only in the midst of its extraordinary music and language could I find any fault. Is the poetry too refined for its raw subject? Would hell raise such a lovely choir? It did for Dante. *Bibere venenum in auro.*



## Review:

***Bryce Passage.* Daniel Morris. Marsh Hawk Press: New York, 2004.**

Gregory Hill

Daniel Morris is not Delmore Schwartz. And thank God for that. “Del,” in spite of his prodigious contributions to literature and critical thought, and an ostensibly successful academic career, lived a miserable life. Beset with a crippling fear of failure and a concomitant disappointment with the realities of life, Delmore is the quintessential failed American artist. Of course, he was doomed from the start: the only way to be a successful artist in America *is* to fail, and the greater that failure, the greater the ultimate achievement. Get famous and you’re finished.

In *Bryce Passage*, Del looms large, as do many other artistic progenitors. In this, his first book of poetry, Morris chronicles the poet’s attempt to reconcile the promise of art with the requirements of adulthood, both through the lens of the subjective “I,” as well as the “eyes” of other historically prominent (and not so prominent) artists and writers.

*Bryce Passage* begins aptly, with “A Ballad for Jules Olitski,” a poem written, ironically enough, from the perspective of the great Abstract Expressionist painter himself, and which investigates the troubled relationship of the artist to the critic, and for that matter, to history and art itself. In it, Morris’s Olitski laments his unfortunate position of being within Clement Greenberg’s circle, and the pressure this brings: “I am sick of trying to please Clem,” Olitski exclaims. He continues:

Am I still living or  
Have I already entered my historical moment?  
I want both, but Clem who is a big Hegelian says that’s impossible,  
And about this law I must agree.

The lure of art is the promise it makes to allow for critical inquiry into the self and, by extension, universal human consciousness. However, what “A Ballad for Jules Olitski” posits is the impossibility of authentic experience, and therefore an alienation from the very thing art is supposed to grant access to. The poem ends with a stark realization of this failure:

When I saw my exhibition it became clear. No  
    revolution, or  
It was extremely mini. Or will be. By the time I arrived  
Maybe 50 people noticed. Maybe three cared  
When I left early.

This notion of alienated artistic labor extends throughout the first and second sections of the text. The third and final section, however, reveals the artist at later maturity, and with a greater acceptance of the conditions of his existence. While the first two sections are intelligent, clever, and clearly the product of an incredibly synthetic mind, in the final section, Morris's language is rich and emotive, and not at all derivative, though he is clearly in dialogue with the greats, most notably Frost and Stevens. There is a sincerity there that brings out the best of Morris's poetic powers. The poem "Mikvah" is a prime example. Like several in the collection, "Mikvah" uses the form of a conversation. And like the others, Morris makes use of dissonances between correspondents—disjunctive, absurd, and yet logical, as in the work of Eric Baus—to create the kind of tension that allows his very best lines to resonate with remarkable intensity. This is apparent in the final lines of the poem:

*As for a discovery?*

You possessed another set of hands that you had recognized as useful, but hadn't belonged to you. That for your parents it was not a day of celebration. They had reserved the privilege of naming you Shem, but you had insisted on the identical name that no one in your neighborhood knew how to spell.

It is this assertion, this Joycean "Yes," that finally stays with the reader, and in some sense, covers over whatever flaws may exist in *Bryce Passage*. What's more, it illustrates the movement the text was after from the beginning, toward a maturity in the artist that bespeaks the kind of promise Morris must now fulfill.

## Review:

***In the Dark.* Ruth Stone. Copper Canyon Press: Port Townsend, 2004.**

***Delights and Shadows.* Ted Kooser. Copper Canyon Press: Port Townsend, 2004.**

***danger on peaks.* Gary Snyder. Shoemaker & Hoard: Washington D.C., 2004.**

William Johnson

### **Sparkles from the Wheel: Ruth Stone, Ted Kooser, and Gary Snyder**

Though this discussion features three aging poets, the vitality of their work shows that it's not quite closing time; all three poets may yet have great poems in front of them. This isn't to say any of these volumes contains work comparable to Hardy's late work or the late great work of Robert Penn Warren, but all three poets have produced poems that an anthologist would be interested in as a reflection of the poets' continued growth.

Ruth Stone's work often leaves one feeling like she's alone on a type of frontier, not Han Shahn living atop Cold Mountain but Ruth Stone, mother of three grown daughters, a widower, going blind, living in cold Vermont. Though *In the Dark* chronicles her deteriorating vision, "The dusk of my time and the nights / are so long," the preoccupations of the book are reflective of Stone's career: her love of science, her ability to chronicle life in small towns, and in a broad sense survival.

Some of Stone's poems based on science observations come up short. The poem "Drought Again" makes a clever point about rocks acting as Geiger counter in their recognition of tremors. The fact that they're not sympathetic towards the grass suffering a 39 day drought is clever personification but doesn't carry a great deal else. The opposite is true in "The Self and the Universe" where geology, astronomy, and human biology meld to create a poem both of tenacity and human frailty. Stone reminds us that this poem won't strive to be poetic but will expose poetry. She reiterates the fragility of our situation:

You lie on your bed,  
the snowball earth,  
a frozen chance;  
the little knowledge of dust lanes...



Establishing our vulnerability the frozen earth orbiting in lanes, she hints back to an earlier passage in the poem that states, "At night, on the page, / the lines change." This echo feels unsettling and reminds us not only of our physical vulnerability but that our whole reality is dependent on signifiers or language. She states, "How fragile and enduring the words." Later in the poem, she reminds us of our basic elements: dust, molecules, rocks, then reminds us human frailty is simultaneously intimate, and universal, and still holds mystery:

and lighter elements, like your fingernails;  
like the configuration of the spiral lines  
on the soles of your feet,  
undeciphered.

Stone is particularly good at observing the complex roles of women. In "The Driveway," young sons spar waiting for the tar to dry; their fathers' car trunks are popped open exposing chips and beer. Meanwhile, we're left with the enduring image of women in house-dresses pouring tar out of buckets:

...These women in cotton dresses, in tennis  
shoes and jersey pullovers, are too old to sweat.  
They sigh when they stand up and stretch. Their flesh  
is as dry as the clutter of deciduous leaves in the fall...

Throughout Stone's career some of her most enduring work focuses on youthful memories of her husband and his eventual suicide. In Stone's current book, the poem "Am I" reveals that when she first called her British psychologist to report her husband's suicide his first reaction was, "Well, what do you want me to do about that?" In "This Is How It Is," Stone, years later, wrestles with the thought of her husband.

I wrestle with your obstinate ghost.  
But even that is better  
than this three-dimensional life  
that is so boring without you.

And in the heartfelt memory, "I Walk Alone," she states, "I remember / your elegant fingers / in the flare of a match." It is observations like these that make Stone always seem youthful despite her accumulation of years.

\*

Ted Kooser is the country's newest poet laureate. His greatest advocate has been National Endowment of the Arts head, Dana Gioia who believes Kooser, as compared to many of his peers, has achieved a high level of perfectly made poems. In the book *Delights and Shadows*, Ted Kooser's world of button jars, creamed corn, Depression glass, and lunch buckets no longer evokes the things of our world, but they evoke a certain time and place along the Great Plains. Kooser has a broad ranging imagination. For instance, in "A Spiral Notebook" he states, "The bright wire rolls like a porpoise / in and out of the calm blue sea." Kooser captures that flow of sleek silver wire. He is like a child playing Cat's Cradle. He grabs a certain strand or imbedded truth in his subject and recasts it into something wholly new.

In a strong poem, "Dishwater," we have the poet's grandmother, the sound of her boxy black shoes on the wooden stoop. She moves in her cotton apron:

out to the edge and then toed in  
with a furious twist and heave  
a bridge that leaps from her hot red hands  
and hangs there shining for fifty years  
over the mystified chickens.

For anyone who has ever witnessed a scene like this, Kooser's description of the twist and heave, the leap of the water from her red hands is all wonderfully apt, and one marvels at Kooser's ability to bring that place and time back from the dead. One hopes that readers who have never seen this scene will note the fine compression of the language and how well the poem serves as an historical artifact. In many ways Ted Kooser continues the valuable work of Nebraska prose writer and photographer Wright Morris.

"Grasshoppers" is a microcosm of what Kooser does so well and highlights his wide-ranging associative abilities with language.

This year they are exactly the size  
of the pencil stub my grandfather kept  
to mark off the days since rain,

and precisely the color of dust, of the roads  
leading back across the dying fields  
into the 30s. Walking the cracked lane

past the empty barn, the empty slip,  
you hear them tinkering with irony,  
slapping the grass like drops of rain.

For the prairie, the grasshopper has been an iconic insect since the grasshopper plague. The poet's comparison of the grasshopper to a pencil stub, with the color reminiscent of dust and dying roads in the thirties, is an inventive way to evoke our lived through or textbook memories of the Dust Bowl. With startling quickness, Kooser links the dryness of the grasshopper with the craved for rain. This creates a type of mindfulness where the reader never listens to the slap of a grasshopper against a field quite the same again. It's the American prairie's answer to Basho's frog jumping into the pond.

Toward the end of the book, Kooser addresses old age in "Tectonics." In the poem facts:

...slowly begin to shift  
and turn, grinding  
pushing up over each other  
until their shapes  
have been changed  
and the past has become  
a new world

Once this shift takes place, hauntingly, there is a whole new paradigm, "even a love affair, one lush green island" will eventually "slide under the waves."

\*

Gary's Snyder's first new book in twenty years, *danger on peaks*, continues the wonderful coherence of his work over the years. Sometimes dismissed as a nature poet, (Snyder even titled a collection *No Nature*) his framework is more broadly Buddhism. This is a faith that accepts even the imperfection of the "asphalt riparian zone" of McDonald's and Denny's across the landscape. It's a faith that can be



political. Crucial to Snyder's vision has always been this poem by Issa: "This dewdrop world / is but a dewdrop world / and yet—." Snyder accepts both the transience and the perishability of things, but it doesn't make him apolitical. In fact, in "Atomic Dawn" he recounts in a prose statement that when he heard of the bombing of Hiroshima, he vowed to "fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to / use it, for all my life." With *danger on the peaks*, Snyder continues to fight the good fight—not only through meetings with the Watershed Institute but also through careful observation of nature and community building.

It's fascinating to realize many of the daily objects Snyder mentions in this book were once associated only with the counter culture. Green tea, sandals, and baking bread are now part of the mainstream. Snyder, one of the founders of Earth Day, writes in "To All the Girls Whose Ears I Pierced Back Then," "I searched for a cork & the right size needle / & followed the quick pierce with a small gold hoop." He goes on to remind the reader that he was the only guy in those days who wore an earring. Much of the book focuses on human fellowship. There's a piece celebrating Philip Whalen, commentary on Allen Ginsberg, and numerous mention of laborers, particularly in the logging industry, or just friends helping Snyder with work on his house. There are wonderful tiny poems, such as the haiku-like "A Dent in the Bucket." Also, there are haibun poems that often focus on travel. There is prose also, but whatever the form, the reader is always urged to know their watershed and find transcendence through the details of nature. Our present is always seen through the vast epochs of historical and geological time.

Recently the *New Yorker* published what I believe to be one of Snyder's signature poems. It's among the most autobiographical and emotional work he's done to this point. The poem is entitled "Waiting for a Ride," which right away has a certain emotional resonance because many poems from Snyder's youth have him waiting for rides in the High Sierra. Now as an old man waiting for a ride in the Austin airport, he catalogues what his mother and former wives and children are doing while he waits. One ex-wife is making websites from her home; his current wife and stepdaughter spend the week in town so his stepdaughter can attend high school. Snyder's 96 year-old mother lives in town, too. One son has a family of his own, the other, rarely seen. This stock-taking is particularly interesting to those who have read Snyder through the years because in some instances, family members have served as characters in Snyder's best poems. When he gets to his first wife (Snyder has been married three times), we sense the poet's increasing mortality:

My former former wife has become a unique poet;  
most of my work  
such as it is            is done...

The poem then shifts to October second. There's a full moon. Since the Tang dynasty one thousand years ago, the Chinese have celebrated a mid-Autumn harvest festival. Snyder eats a mooncake—a little cake made with egg yolks in the shape of the moon—alone on his deck in California. Snyder is always aware of the wider nets of nature around him. He mentions the sound of owl hoots and rattling antlers, the sky “Castor and Pollux rising strong.” The pole star drifts, it's a sky whose rotation Snyder may never see again:

Or maybe I will, much later,  
some far time walking the spirit path of sky,  
that long walk of spirits—where you fall right back into the  
“narrow painful passageway of the Bardo”  
squeeze your little skull  
and there you are again

waiting for your ride

Bardo is a reference from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It means, in between island; it serves as a guide for the dead during the state that intervenes between death and the next rebirth. So the old poet keeps open to the possibility that waiting for your ride might not be *the final* ride, but through reincarnation, we may pop out yet again to witness Castor and Pollux, the pole star drifting another time.

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All three poets manage to retain a certain youthfulness in their work, but one also feels a sense of their mortality as well. Stone's previous book received the National Book Award, so there is hope that *In the Dark* will continue to bring her new readers. For many, she's a late discovery. There is a blurb on Kooser's book that states he'll one day rank alongside Frost, Masters, and Williams. That seems a bit ambitious, but I do hope while he's the poet laureate we get a more recent selected volume of Kooser poems. As Gioia has stated, readers would be surprised to learn how sustained Kooser's career has been. Snyder continues to be vastly influential. He connects on many points, whether they be cultural, religious, or environmental. His poems are not always artistic pieces and many are polemic, but he *has* written timeless poems. He's created a whole Snyder world.



## Review:

**Henry Hughes. *Men Holding Eggs*. Mammoth Books: DuBois, Pennsylvania, 2004.**

Daniel Morris

Henry Hughes's *Men Holding Eggs* put me in mind of "Big Two-Hearted River, Part II," my favorite story by Ernest Hemingway. On one level, Hemingway's story is one more demonstration of his macho persona—the tight-lipped survivalist on a solitary fishing expedition to come to terms with war trauma. But on another level, and what I love about this story, is how it displays what Virginia Woolf referred to in *A Room of One's Own* as the "androgynous mind." For me, the best moments occur when Nick Adams performs domestic chores: finding the best spot for camp, setting up his bedding with fern underneath the blanket, debating with himself about how to make coffee, cooking his beans in ketchup and burning his tongue, and wrapping onion sandwiches in greased paper. There is even a moment when Nick wades into the water, creating bulges in his shirt that resemble female breasts. Nick embodies a first man and a first woman, but the womanly side—the keeper of the hearth—takes precedence over the warrior.

Just so, Hughes places his own Hemingway-esque predilections and often-violent instincts in a kind of internal dialog with the generative powers of the feminine. The title poem is illustrative. It begins with the speaker acknowledging his destructive powers: "I'm walking over the Brooklyn Bridge / with my eight-year-old sister. / I can throw her over this wall, I think. / Physical laws make it so. Easy." By the end of the poem, however, and after recalling a childhood of breaking toy cars and throwing trains out the car window, the speaker re-imagines his sister as the embodiment of the fecundity of nature and animal birth. Her hand is described as a piece of fruit, a "lemon hand," and his language transforms her into a bird-like creature: "She's whistling something, her hair / bouncing light feathers / down her back." After the sister inquires about a schooner heading towards the Hudson, the speaker notes, "There are men on deck holding eggs." Aware of the fragility of life's beauty, as well as his own will to annihilate, Hughes thus re-imagines masculinity, at first associated with the power to destroy, but then with the power to restrict violence through preserving the generative productivity of females.

“The Tree House,” written in memory of the poet’s mother, Marion Spies Hughes, who died at 38, suggests that the poet grew up in the world of the fathers, but that he writes lyrics in order to recover the voice and vision of the mother who was absent in his early maturity. The speaker recalls an adolescent scenario in which he trades fireworks, purchased with money his mother had intended him to use to buy a book about birds, for *Playboy* magazine. A decade later, he tries to recover the mother’s voice—and renounce the images of violence and exploitation of his initial exchange—by purchasing the *Peterson’s Birds*. “[A]nd now, in the yard, holding its pages open,” the poet pronounces the names of birds as his mother had taught him to do, “so she can hear from the steps,” even as “she didn’t wait to lift / these heavy words from my head”. In “Calling Down the Geese,” the speaker forgives an uncle, described as “blind” and “savage,” for beating his wife, in part because he recalls the uncle’s ability to call geese and gander together with his voice.

Hughes is a complex lyricist who combines a hard-boiled minimalist style with lush descriptions of nature and the animal world. He calls attention to the poignant internal dramas of rough-and-tumble folk—river rats, hard-drinking guys who work for the cable company, buddies who go ice fishing and deal with a wife who has left town, shipyard welders, merchant marines on long distance cargo ships, old salts, World War II vets like the poet’s dad, and friends who are hit by lightning, softballs, and who fall through the ice—one does not often connect with the imagery of eggs, bird calling, and reverie for the sublimity of nature, of sky, and of international travel that Hughes so vividly brings into view. Hughes is himself a world traveler, and his poems are set in familiar places such as Council Bluffs, Iowa, and Lafayette, Indiana, but also in China and Japan, where the poet lived and worked for five years in the 1990s. His devotion of poems to animals—dogs, ants, penguins, gar—as well as his section of poem entitled “Away,” in which he records his experience in Asia—suggest his willingness to come to terms with the self by imagining a deep relationship with the other. He generally maintains the personae of the real men who don’t eat quiche championed by Norman Mailer—microwave pizza and cheap beer are the cuisine in these poems—but Hughes’s mediation of New Age sensitivity with the rugged terrain of Hemingway certainly makes for fresh insights into a possible image of masculinity for the new millennium.



## Contributors' Notes

**E.R. Carlin** grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. He has recently been published in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Hunger Magazine*, *Blind Man's Rainbow*, *Iconoclast*, and *Epicenter*. He has work forthcoming in *Poems & Plays*, *Cedar Hill Review: Roque Dalton Redux Issue*, *Wicked Hollow*, and *Hazmat Review*.

**Sean M. Conrey** completed his M.F.A. at Purdue and is beginning a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition. He spent his undergraduate years at Western Michigan University. His work has appeared in *Permafrost*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Plainsongs*, and *Cream City Review*.

**Steve De France** has been twice nominated for a Pushcart and is the winner of other lesser poetry awards. Recent publications have appeared in *Mid-America Review*, *Amherst Review*, *Lynx Eye*, *ArtMag*, *Tacenda*, *Writers Bloc*, *Rattle*, and *California State Poetry Quarterly*. He has an M.F.A. in poetry and teaches writing at an inner city college in Los Angeles. He lives in Long Beach, California.

**Joan Dy** is an M.F.A. candidate at Southern Illinois University—Carbondale. Her poems are forthcoming in the *Southeast Review*, *Re)verb*, and *Lyric*.

**Robert Flanagan** has published a novel, *Maggot*, two collections of short stories, *Naked to Naked Goes* and *Loving Power*, and numerous chapbooks of poems in Canada, England, Northern Ireland, and the U.S. He lives in Ohio.

**Sarah Gemmill** lives in Winchester, Massachusetts, with her husband and three children.

**J. Allen Hall's** poems and personal essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly*, *Bellingham Review*, *Margie*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Rhino*, among others. He lives in Houston, where he is currently completing a doctorate at the University of Houston.

**David Hart** retired several years ago as general counsel to a corporation headquartered in Chicago and resumed the study and writing of poetry. He graduated from Northwestern University, where he majored in composition, and from Harvard Law School. His work has appeared previously in *Southwest Review*.

**Grace Haugh** is a college student. She grew up in Missouri and Arkansas, and people say she has a funny accent. She has been writing poetry for several years, and she has had two poems published. She enjoys crocheting and cooking, and she thinks men who dress as women are sexy.

**Gregory Hill** lives and works in Chicago, Illinois.

**Henry Hughes'** poetry has appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. His collection, *Men Holding Eggs*, received the Oregon Book Award in November 2004.

**Austin Hummel** teaches poetry and film at Northern Michigan University.

**William Johnson** holds the Conway Chair in Social Studies at University School. His poems have appeared in *Antioch Review* and the *Denver Quarterly*.

**Lyn Lifshin** has published more than one hundred books of poetry, including *Before It's Light*, *Cold Comfort*, and *A new Film about a Woman in Love with the Dead*. She has a new book forthcoming in 2005—*Another Woman Who Looks Like Me*. For more information about Lyn Lifshin, visit her website at [www.lynlifshin.com](http://www.lynlifshin.com).

**Shane McCrae** received an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and is currently a student at Harvard Law School. His work has appeared in *American Letters and Commentary* and *Orion*.

**Daniel Morris** is author of *Bryce Passage* (March Hawk Press, 2004). He is a professor at Purdue University.

**Chad Prevost** teaches at Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee, as assistant professor, creative writing specialist. He has works in print or forthcoming in places such as *Puerto del Sol*, *The Connecticut Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Confluence*, *Cimarron Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *RE:AL*, and *The Southeast Review*. He can be reached at [chadprevost@yahoo.com](mailto:chadprevost@yahoo.com).

**Yvonne B. Robery** has had poems published in *Christian Century*, *The Cresset*, *Christianity and the Arts*, and others. She graduated with a B.A. in literature from Wheaton College in Illinois and earned an M.A. in literature from Northwestern University. She works as a supervisory paralegal for federal administrative judges at the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board in Chicago, Illinois.

**Kathleen Rooney** is the author of *Reading with Oprah* (University of Arkansas Press, 2005). Visit her online at [www.kathleenrooney.com](http://www.kathleenrooney.com).

**Meg Thompson** is originally from Grafton, Ohio. She is working toward her M.F.A. from West Virginia University.

**Marine Robert Warden** lives in Riverside, California. He is a physician consultant to the California State Department of Health. Recent poems have appeared in *Bellowing Ark*, *Free Lunch*, the *Iconoclast*, and *Pearl and Rattle*. Future work will appear in the *Sulphur River Literary Review* and *Glass Tesseract*. His hobbies include family, cooking, and fishing.





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