THE HIRAM POETRY REVIEW
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THE HIRAM POETRY REVIEW

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On the Cover

The cover photo is of the tombstone marking the grave of Almeda Ann Booth. Ms. Booth was an intellectual prodigy and a founding member of the Hiram College faculty who greatly influenced the nature of the institution in its formative years. She joined the college in 1851 when it was known as the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute and served as a member of the faculty until 1866. During those years, her aptitudes as a scholar of Latin, Greek, and upper-level mathematics became legendary. One of her most prominent students was James A. Garfield, a graduate of the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute, Union General in the Civil War, and 20th President of the United States.

Photo courtesy of the Hiram College Archives.
Jamie Thomas

Soundtracking

If art has any responsibility, then what
is responsible for this music hellhounding me
through grocery, dentist’s office, Dodge dealership?
In the waiting room hangs a painting
of dogs playing poker. How this minor artist
captured the topography of my soul
I’ll never know. There’s muzak billowing
like air conditioning through the vents—
the vocalist is a flute—even in this case
certain riffs have their ways

of pailing memories into sandcastles.
Others like oceans, erosions. Back home
I’m strumming my guitar, all these chords
like other people’s hats—sometimes you’re not even sure
whose hat, whose head; it’s imitative

and crowded in the land of overlap,
so many songs are exactly alike yet not,
so many colors just a shade or two off.
When the Service Manager calls
he so artfully breaks it to me

that spark knock means brake pads and tires
as well as whatever the hell spark knock means.
Either a painting looks like what it’s supposed to,
or it doesn’t—still it ends up framed
into another version of itself. At least

this is how I like to remember it.
The Man with the Blue Guitar is a poem
by Stevens after it’s a painting
by Picasso from his Blue Period.
Later, Dylan gets blue all tangled up

in itself, and the sky starts getting all big-headed
and full of thunderous teeth. Lightning Hopkins
lived one giant Blue Period. So many
colors to choose from—decisions
have to made as to the shade of the trim

on the porch; after all, we’ll log a lot of time there,
watch the wind beating the dust out of each day,
each old memory like a porch light
in the morning, overshadowed by a present
sun whose business it is to remind us

the future is next, some things
are bigger when remembered—
Dylan picks up an electric guitar
and the suits threaten to axe the power source,
but everyone forgets Muddy Waters

is responsible for electricity, and that history
is changed with the other side of the pencil.
Everything changes but the avant-garde,
someone said. I can’t remember whom,
but that statement is out there

living in tattooed permanence.
Of course everything is out there, except
what’s in here, in the heart I mean: open chords
and colors, versions of truths that keep,
that would burst through the ribcage to escape.
Jason Tandon

Hot for Early May

I am not what you would call a woodsman
Or a boatswain for that matter.
Once, while sailing I tossed an empty lighter into the sea
Followed by two halves of a cigarette.
Forgive me then, if I cannot name the animal
Scratching inside my air conditioner.

As I sit and type the sun is streaming yellow-green
Through the leaves of the massive oak.
Below my window two dogs bark.
The yard is staccatoed with piles of their mess.
And my car—O my automobile—sitting there in the driveway,
What will it be this month? New brakes? Ball joints?
And this letter, here by my typewriter, denying me a credit card.

I concentrate on the ivy spreading across the aluminum backside
Of the neighbor’s garage, its red tipped leaves nosing themselves in
spite of gravity.
The houses packed in as far as my eye can see,
And the rooftops, like a slew of buxom arrowheads, plunging into
the sky.

On one back porch a woman drinks from a mug of something hot
And smokes what I presume is a cigarette.
She flicks it away and kicks her feet up,
Tenting her eyes with a magazine, which she drops suddenly,
Looking in my direction, and gives me a wave—
No, not a wave—the American sign for
“Please stop staring. All I want is a little peace.”
Jason Tandon

Blind Date

On my self-guided tour
I ventured a peek
Beneath her bed
And found a shoebox.

She was in the kitchen
Mixing pomegranate martinis.
The racket gave me a sense
Of impending alarm.

Wrapped in a scarf with the tag
Still attached: a fresh pack of cigarettes
And a framed photo of a man
Removing his hat.

Knee to knee on her couch,
After a delicious first sip
I told her in a voice smooth as hell,
A couple of smokes
Would make this moment eternal.

A disgusting habit, she says.
But neither the pickled herring
Nor her tongue
Could satisfy what I knew.
Ryder Collins

Vertigo at 30

Have you made me over
yet? Am I still a brunette? You lead
me into your one-room
apartment. The floors are immaculate
cherry. Shining my face, my length back up at me.
Your sofa and armchair, stuffed leather,
match the wood nicely. I think
of my nubby sectional, dog and cat scratched,
the threads pulled out, sparkling around my flat.
We both live alone. I cannot remember –
am I wearing a necklace?
Will you buy me
a grey suit?
Will you take me
to see a sequoia?
I stare at your new painting – she looks
away, your way. Is she me? You stir
your Manhattan with a thin
finger, then let me sip it. Can I
even tell you how
old I am
without plummeting? I do this
again and again. I always feel
like we’ve met before. In some
red restaurant. I’ve seen
you
turn. And I
watched you look
for me
while I waited to fall.
Ryder Collins
You and Oprah and John Travolta with Mango Salsa

in your garden after you worked so hard
on knees in dirt and sunflowers and shiny large baubles –
like your glass grapes which decorate your built-in shelves, your cat
hair covered alcoves – while your husband watched
the Packers in the basement, chainsmoked, and continued
turning gray. After Oprah’s boot
camp and you lost thirty pounds in three months, quit your box
of wine a night habit, told your food service chums off and finally wrote
that screenplay. You know.
And you want Travolta for the lead and he wants you to join Dianetics or
whatever sect he tithes to and you’re thinking about it and Oprah wants
to give you all the things she likes cause she and you are bosom friends
now.

    Don’t forget the mango martinis made fresh today, there’s a theme
and it’s antioxidants and mass consumption, the Marxist in you must
be repressed somehow and the semiotician likes your use of phonemes and
Japanese characters. Raise your glass – it’s fragile and tips, tipples, you’re
fragile and you giggle. Planned Parenthood’s in the dictionary.
Your daughter wants to be a cosmetologist, she practices on you and
    Oprah as
hummingbirds try to sip your highballs and Travolta
mumbles paens to L. Ron Hubbard. You have Theda Bara or is it Clara
Bow hair.
    You’re the new It Girl and the feminist in you says woman but not womyn
cause that’s so 1970s and the only thing good coming out of that decade
was P-
Funk and platforms. Although the fashionista in your daughter says
    that’s so 90s
and you counter with it’s all so retro/pop
culture and you want to remake the remake of The Stepford Wives
and it’s all been done before and it’s a backlash and a mass
ornament and little shopgirls still go to the movies and you’re trying not
to get
depressed.
    Again.
Daniel Boster

If This Was Some Old Italian Painting

You’d weigh more, have one breast exposed, and lay on one of those fancy one-armed couches. You’d look over your shoulder, about to smile.

The children would have perfectly curly hair, spend a lot of time playing trumpets, and float above the house trailing white ribbons.

On the kitchen counter, there’d be a candle with an impossibly long flame reflected in a skull and the fruits of a perfectly arranged bowl.

Next door, peacocks would strut in front of an abbey; its windows opening on a monk absorbed in his reading.

Wearing a hat with a feather in it, I might wage a backyard war with sinewy centaurs who throw boulders.

Instead, you’ll twist yourself into the sheets, talk in your sleep; one of the kids will cough, and the dishwasher will run.

After getting the trash cans from the curb, I’ll take the dog for a walk.

Chasing a rabbit, she’ll slip on grease running down the driveway of the Chinese place.

And, coming back up the sidewalk, I’ll see that old man Edwards has left his television on all night, again.
Beth Gyllys

A Large Dead Fish and Other Blessings

I want you to like me so much
you buy me a pink house in San Francisco,
a tight black dress that makes my butt
look small—you try on Armani suits,
then we go to lunch and you feed me
leaves of lettuce with your fingers,
even though I’ve splashed red wine
all over the white tablecloth.

Because this is a fantasy, I might as well admit
I want you to take me home to your loft,
paint me while I sit—peace lily
in a pear-shaped vase—my body
leaning as I perch on the lone barstool,
naked legs crossed, face bruised
by shadow, the end and the beginning
somewhere else, as outside gulls screech,
and on the pier an old man wipes his knife,
then effortlessly scales a large dead fish.
Emma Bolden

The Sudden Death Dead Cat Elegy

This is the bad poem, the one
I shouldn’t write. This is
the poem absolutely
never to write – the one

with the cat my parents bought me
at age twelve because
a constellation of pimples lit my face, this
the poem with that cat twelve

years later suddenly sedated cold
cage no blanket a needle, this
the poem for the awkward
girl at twelve who after school

scratched his scruff recited
the schoolyard names braceface
foureyes thunderblunder. This
is the poem waiting

to be sent back with a pink slip it
doesn’t quite fit please
consider subscription low
rate twenty five dollars, and this

is the poem that’s even worse
than that, the one with the grandmother
in her rocking chair -- yes even
that -- the one with the grandmother

who taught that sad girl I was
to knit badly, cuss badly, who taught
her the male anatomy
from a pack of Camel cigarettes

then three weeks later died (cause
of death: sudden). And the back row
big bangs bad glasses girl’s
high school English teacher who said If
you're gonna live then live it then
dead, him, again, sudden. And the usual
strange romantic twist — her twin
who slipped (was shoved?) away

to blood before birth, and all
those unpoemable questions was she
the right one wrong one she
the good or evil she that should

have stayed or goad and was
the other the lucky to go
sudden? With all of those
gone and sudden and even — yes,

even this far — and even
that dream with the sky
black predictably wide as
a wide pupil, cat pupil, the wide

field below that slowly sprouted
those dead, who grew arms,
bloomed hands that wiped
dirt off their eyes, who blinked

and said *My goodness what*
time is it and when
*did I fall asleep?*
Jessica Lamb

Bridal

For months after we married, I dreamed the scene
at the altar over and over, obsessively perfecting it
or striving to--but somehow we were always scrambling
breathlessly into the church naked having forgotten
everything--rings, flowers, veil, vows, each other's
names--and then as if to prove that once conjoined
we'd face more than merely human frailty
the track lighting would explode
or the septic system overflow.
Finally there came a night when I was carried
down the aisle in a white casket covered
head to toe with lilies-of-the-valley, while an angel sang
our favorite Schubert You are sweet peace and tranquil
rest and another recited Neruda, In your repose
I ground my dreams, my hushed expectancy.
The Reverend was about to pronounce us husband and wife
when a light flickered on behind my eyes and I knew
I hadn't yet succumbed, though this is how it's said
to happen, first the serene hallucinations
then the final yielding up of will.
*Matt Nienow*

**Rubbing My Mother’s Bald Head for Luck**

More like a pear than stone, still soft
and with the bruises of age, the smooth skin speckled
with liver spots, like rainbow trout rolling
at the surface of some mountain creek, a sage
scarf cupping her head, marking
contours we had never seen as children,
the sharp curve of her cheeks, yellow and raw,
eyes, swirls of amber—darker now, and dull.

One night, in the bathroom, the scarf
came off easily enough. Even I, her
son, am timid to touch, holding my breath,
my wide rough hand grazing blond stubble.
When our eyes meet in the glare of the mirror,
I can’t help but smile; she can’t help but cry.
I let my hand make several passes over
her skull, each divot and groove—no
distance between us, fingers and lobes, temples—
fingerprints marking my maker.

Let her head be my magic lamp, tarnished and intricate,
my crystal ball, holding something greater than itself—
Let the sun burn back into the sky, reflections
from her shining head, little gifts to the world,
Let this gentle rubbing bring something worth
hoping for—

hands on our own heads, feeling, like we always
have, for answers, eyes closed, sensing what’s almost
palpable — the shape of things below.
Matt Nienow

One Summer with the Inuit

I ate the blubber of a beluga whale, both raw and boiled, caribou steak, jerky, scraps and Arctic Char. I walked past junkyards and graveyards, clapboard shanties, shipwrecks, and stone cairns, past children with infant daughters and silent sons.

I drank instant coffee in seventeen different houses, walked to the rhythm of four wheelers and guttural conversation — I wore polar bear pants and mitts and learned how to throat sing, lusted after women with hard features and weathered skin.

I watched a wolf dog named Balum kill a white goose, then wander away — the bird’s body swaying limp in the jaws — saw the aurora rip the stony sky into a labyrinth of color, while on the far horizon lightning blinked amber streaks like roots or veins of heat, rising from tundra to swollen purple clouds. I paused to sit on a gnarled tooth of granite growing longer and more narrow as the tide crept away. I traded a knife and an old guitar for hides and mukluks, met a hunter who bragged about killing walrus just for their tusks.

I watched an old man carve a figure out of bone, then scratch a crude face into the middle, let a woman named Serena cut my hair and wild beard, listened while she talked an endless song about her life, time in Winnipeg, her family of shamans.

All this I have gathered— and I still don’t know the world through bone, a world of sea ice and dog sleds, of drinking Drano and getting out on the land, where Inuit means the people and the tundra gathers black flies, and summer lit skies, but can’t truly let me in.
Dan Morris

If Not for the Courage (For Bob)

Racing around from side to side
to spot my boys on the jungle gym
as other parents read and sip,
I think I must be the perfect father.

Last night, at his 65th birthday party,
his tipsy lover at his side,
Mike rated my wife and I
world’s best parents.

Sometimes I think it’s true;
my wife and I have not seen
a movie in four years,
for example.

These boys are so lucky.
I am so good with them,
they literally cry when I go off to work,
even if I hardly ever go to work,
because I feel my absence would damage them.
Plus I would miss the beautiful changes
that occur each day (each moment really)
in children so young.

And then I recall the famous poem by Philip Larkin,
the one where he says, “your parents fuck you up,”
no matter what.

How, I think, given what a great father I am,
will I “fuck up” these kids who I love so much, and who I treat
so well?
Perhaps, like my father, I will, as Gwendolyn Brooks says
in another famous short poem, “die soon.” Then my panic
about even the temporary absences of my part-time version of
my full-time job
will become moot in the face of the more permanent goodnight.

Will my boys pull on their hair shirts as I didn’t do for my dad?
His early death meant nothing as far as I could tell at the time, but now it has come clear that one element of trauma is deferral.

As I fear to repeat his shortened story, I become his mirror. It is as if he were reappearing in my desire to be a Not Him, but in a funhouse that makes everything look long and thin, garish in distortion.

But what if I do survive past 45, the age of my father’s demise?

I take my Lipitor and baby aspirin, am a vegetarian, and try to walk the recommended 10,000 steps per day. I take an anti-depressant to relieve the stress that killed him.

As noted, I do not take work so seriously, for my legacy will clearly not be what I have produced on paper or how I have mentored in the classroom (my father, too, was a teacher of a kind), but in the faces of these kids, in whose faces I see my father.

What, then, will be my “fuck up”?

And then, from out of nowhere
  (or the spiritus mundi, as Yeats would say),
comes the image of Jim Backus. Not in his best-known role as Thurston Howell III on *Gilligan’s Island*, but in the earlier role as James Dean’s father
  in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

The image of Jim Backus in the red polka dot mother’s apron, frantically picking up the remains of the tray of food that Jimbo has tossed on the stairwell rug. The image of Jimbo screaming at this weak, mealy-mouthed, womanly-man,

who is on his knees in his pathetic apron as he reassembles the bacon and bits of egg and toast on the rattled platter:
“No Dad, let her see it! Let her clean it up! Dad, why can’t you be a man? Why can’t you stand up to her?”

And then I think how retro is this image of concern. What is so wrong with Jim Backus in an apron? Why should “she” have to clean it up?
Why must definitions of gendered work and gendered clothing remain so limited to the 50s styles of *Father Knows Best*, and, retroactively, the *Happy Days* of Tom Bosley’s gray sweaters and Marianne Ross’s white cotton dresses? We know, as Frank O’ Hara knew, that

James Dean was “not the man they think I am at home” (to quote Bernie Taupin), and we have learned much of the secret lives of Bob Crane and Sergei Eisenstein. Maybe if Jimbo would have been more ok with Jim Backus in an apron,

he would have survived to appear as Mrs. Thurston Howell III. For when I think about it a bit more deeply, was not the couple of Mr. and Mrs. Howell III really a couple in drag?

Maybe Jimbo would have reached the Island by Japanese submarine, of course since World War Two. He would have been most welcomed on the Island, as anyone would have been. For the producers had made the tragic error of setting their show ON an Island, thus limiting (and, in a sense, enabling) the writers to create plausible interactions with new guest stars, the element necessary to prolong a fading sitcom, as when *The Brady Bunch* took the wagon to The Grand Canyon after the appearance of Greg with his mutton chop side burns and Marcia with her swelling bust still being in high school and in braces became absolutely impossible rather than merely improbable.

And so I shall wear my apron proudly, waving it high above my head, as did William Carlos Williams in “Danse Russe.” Unlike the one worn by Jimi Hendrix, I must admit my food-stained apron is a modest freak flag, but a sign nonetheless of a newer version of fatherhood. A sign that I am unafraid to get on my hands and knees, and put my queer shoulders to scrubbing the kitchen floor while my wild kids love me and hurt me as they climb a jungle gym on a still sturdy but aching forty-one year old back.
Jack Conway

The Dead Watch Over Us

The dead watch over us at night, coming up from the fields.
Whispers and smoke, vapors and breeze, moving unseen.
We dream the dreams they had once dreamed. Live lives
inside homes that they owned. Sleep in their beds.

A curtain that moves, a candle snuffed out,
a sudden chill, words barely said.

We make our way out to the graves during the day through
briar and brush, fallen trees leave us no path, to there and
then back. Dark granite stones, some barely erect, record
their age, their birth and their death. That’s all that we know
from cemetery stones. We read ancient dates, imagine
hard lives, stone walls that they built by hand still survive.

I was a farmer, a soldier, a friend,
a husband, a father, in a world without end.

Whispers and smoke moving up from the fields.
These are the ghosts that watch over us.
Imagining them imagining us.

This is my house. That is my bed.
I once had a life. Now I am dead.

Who are the ones that bear witness to you?
And who will we then bear witness to?
Sean Conrey
Forest Ridge Farms Nocturne

‘Twas eleven hours in the cube today,
and Fran and the kids look cooked when you
get home, rapt in the flash of a high-def
Rembrandt three group in the great room
while you quickly warm your dinner. The vinyl’s
falling off the house next door, you say.
She throws a sexy smile the kids can’t read.

Eleven trips she made today, she says,
from school to home, to lunch, to home,
to school, to home to change their clothes,
to softball, grocery, softball, home, and last
a walk out to the drive, to meet you all alone,
a kiss because she missed you, and also
cause she’s lonely, so what is she to do?

Tonight, you say, we’ll find the good urge,
to close the door with minutes to spare
and while we lay, we’ll talk out our days,
the Blankman account, Em’s ankle sprain,
sun rays and the warm grass smell. Tell me,
darling, how you pushed the window open
and stood staring, waist down naked.

How did you know? she asks. It was around
midday. The lonely quiet turned me on,
so I stared out at the vacancy, the vast
empty chainlink silence of it, ‘til I, close-eyed,
cross-legged underneath, shivered myself,
then napped on the made bed an hour.
Work, I think, would fill the void, she says.

It fills the time, but not the space, it makes
the day go quickly by, and that’s what’s got me
scared these days, you say. The girls are asleep,
she says. A humid waft slips in the window.
That cut grass smell? You smell that? she says,
That’s what got me going. I love you, you say.
This love, these thin walls can’t contain it.
Matt Dennison
The News

I am often late with my payment, mail a crumpled bill now and then in the envelope I tend to discover somewhere on the floor. Forget to write my address. Confusion results. Months go by. Papers fail to appear. Papers suddenly pile up outside my door. I scramble to gather the scrolls, bowing and waving to the paper-slinging mother as she slams past in her small car. After the last paper drought the daughter finally crawls out the car window to knock on my door. Don't you want the news! She cries, righteous indignation steaming from her hot-nickle'd hands as I stand, the eternal bewilderment of man.
Greg Moglia

Burger Days

Too many flies and mosquitoes above the burgers
And the manager had just invested
In a bug spray can the size of a fire extinguisher
So just before busy time on Sunday
He asks me to fire away and I refuse
My college course in Ecology playing in my head.
He gets Eddie just out of reform school
To take my place and Eddie loves it.
Suddenly, the burger labels
Papa, Mama, Teen, and Baby
And customer toxic dose meet.

When the place begins to buzz with activity
I am too slow for the grill and shift to the fryer.
And I stay until big Bob shows up
Lean and tall and short on talk.
An ex-con the manager said.
Big Bob tells me to step aside
Sit, relax and take care of supplies.
Big Bob did it all
Set the burgers, the rolls,
Timed the fries, ran the drinks
Wraps the deal faster than
Any four of us college guys.

I left to wonder about the world
And why it seemed so difficult?
In school even philosophy was simple
You learned that there were no answers
You told the prof as much, and you got an A.
But here the bugs land on the burgers
The best worker is an ex-con and
There are answers everywhere
And I know none of them.
Lyn Lifshin
Near the Grey Stones of the Episcopal Church

when somebody finally
asked me to dance, it wasn’t
the one I wanted, someone
who didn’t read much but
was tall and on the football
team. What I remember
was the smell of Clearasil,
how he could, after one
tackle, wiggle his two front
teeth in and out. When he
kissed me near the abandoned
rail tracks I thought of the
page in Love Without Fear
that said “if a girl lets a boy
put his tongue in her teeth,
she’ll let him do anything.”
Tho he barely brushed my
lips, I said, “we can’t do this
always.” Later in spring, I
ended it for someone, a
boy who made bombs and
didn’t care, and I never sent
back the silver bracelet the
first man sent me, dropping
out of school to join the army.
He never tried to see me or
say goodby tho he wrote
others, often, about me.
The one I thought I could
tame joined the navy,
sent a bracelet of Cuban
coins that stained my
skin and fell apart as I was
sure I would when he
left, at 13, sure everything
that mattered was over
Edward Butcher

Electricity

I
Diagram real, its current exists only when it powers machines, ceases immediately upon being clicked off, does not hemorrhage or scare like lesions under healed skin.

Passion’s literary and cinematic symbol, it was used in Frankenstein: a sensual nineteenth-century body of felt knowledge hoisted in a storm to be raped by thrusting bolts of life.

It invisibly leaps from nerve to nerve end in millions of arcs that synapse simpler memories reading the world they project in frames of perishable film.

II
Maker of static, I cross a thick bedroom rug in the twilit glare of finger flares that illuminate an unmade and still empty bed with scenes of childhood games.

Jagged as thrown mirror shards their incandescent fragments pierce the solitude of old age that hoards the losses embraced on artificial swan’s down.

A young woman’s sheeted form rises through thunderous shafts of incendiary energy unleashed for the sake of god-mad science and art’s Saturday holocausts.
William Hengst

In Search of Real Eggs

A visitor, residing downtown
at a Hampton Inn,
I pass on the complimentary breakfast:
glazed Danish, cold cereal, stale fruit.
to walk Cleveland’s streets
in search of real eggs.

But every place is fast foods,
coffee-to-go in Styrofoam,
the universal engine starter.
At Bon Pain, I ask for scrambled eggs.
The server looks at me as if my skin is purple.
*We only serve pre-cooked patties,* he says.

I imagine an old grill,
bacon sizzling.
The chef, in his greasy bib-apron,
back to the counter,
consumed in his artistry,
flips flapjacks.

I sit on padded Naugahyde
between two regulars
and winnow the morning chatter,
perfumed by coffee fumes.
Orders land in front of us like airplanes.

At a hole-in-the-wall on Euclid, I am greeted
by a gal who has bare arms like Wonder Woman,
biceps toned and sculpted,
real shoulder mounds,
not too much bulk.
*We have four kinds of healthy wraps
with egg whites in them,* she says.

While she rattles off the choices,
I continue to stare at her arms.
Jane Varley
Love Letters

What does it mean, if I tell him now,
that I loved him all those years I lived in Idaho?
Today I wrote a letter claiming,
I could say other things here but I won't.
I remember everything and sometimes feel
the weight of it. Who is this talking?
Not the woman I am, content, independent,
though most days I feel alone.
When my husband comes home from work,
I touch his beautiful hands like they are wingtips,
raise them to my mouth. It's true, I love him.
And I remember the sun, bright in midday
when this other man and I lay down on the border,
a gravel road at the state line between Washington and Idaho.
All the Palouse spread beneath us.
I picked a stem of wheat and sucked the flavor dry,
memorized the shape of his legs
by running a hand down and down each one
until the skin was hot. I kept kissing and kissing
at the center of his chest where his heart pounded.
I knew he loved only me
that afternoon, loved me only when I was leaving.
I am miles from there now so what do the words
in the imagined letter mean?
I flirt with all that's uncertain in me,
like the witch of an angel, as someone once called me.
Still I write love letters to my husband.
When he comes home again,
we will open the curtains and lie down
in slanting sunlight. I like days like these,
when we seem the only two lovers alive.
Shaun Hand
The End of the World

Analysis of air samples collected on October 11, 2006, detected radioactive debris which confirms that North Korea conducted an underground nuclear explosion in the vicinity of P'unggye on October 9, 2006.

-Associated Press, October 17, 2006

They found it in the air in North Korea--little uranium bits floating like dust in my living room.

I spent that weekend looking at trees differently. The reds and oranges were sometimes the centers of mushroom clouds. The browns were the charred bits of people before their skin and bones were burnt to dust. I was wet inside. I needed air, but that was infected. Even branches lilting like limp wrists in the October wind lurched with sinister intent. The crispness of the fall daytime was only kindling for bomb fire where we'd all blink violently like flash paper into No More.

The next day my ex and I were talking in the kitchen. She was pleasantly stoned and laughing at every bit of all my sentences.

I started moving my hips to imitate the serpentine course of hers on the dance floor the night before. She laughed and squealed, ending it with,
“Stop it! I never want to see you move like that again!”

I laughed too--
the type where your chest
and cheeks hurt afterwards.
I looked at the olive hues of her eyes
and thought, “Man, it’s going to suck to lose this
again.”

I wonder if the air was this heavy
after dinner in Hiroshima.
I wonder if that morning,
a man walked out to his car,
wincing from the open sores
of his wronged loves,
looking at the shed skin of foliage,
thinking raw and fiercely,
“Things cannot get any worse.”
Matt Bondurant

Melodrama

It's what happened after she left for work--
he sat up and buttoned up his shirt
looking bleary-eyed in the mirror,

then sitting on the edge of the bed--
when it felt, as Edward Hirsch said,
so precisely like failure.

It's the imagined conversations
about stars on the ceiling,
the dialogue that you hope sounds like poetry.

The worst poetry is always the most sincere,
and this morning I'm driving home again,
stopping to pick up my jacket at the cleaners,

where the counter woman announces
to a shop full of frowning house-wives
that the vomit stains
will take an extra day.
David O'Connell

Symposium

Jack's mourning the death of slow zombies in American movies of the new millennium, and I'm all sympathy. We're in Asia for a late bite at the marble bar, where Marcie slings Mai Tais like we're both wearing Stetsons and Tyler throws back his umpteenth Suffering Bastard. I'm thinking now that I first heard of the Zombie that chases Dumplings and Orange Chicken on the boob-tube spin-off of Altman's M*A*S*H, and almost cut in to tell Jack how Trapper John, my favorite rake, sucked down Zombies in a bar in fake Korea where the war played out like Animal House with B-movie blood. But Jack's full tilt on neurotransmitters, the ways adrenaline scrubs the frontal lobes, and I suspect this Muzak incarnation of She's Not There is driving him to stab my Moo Shoo with his chopstick dripping General Tso's each time he proclaims the zombie flick the Western of the 21st century, our most political cinema, the vérité that wakes us to the bed-wetting facts of our own mortality. Down bar Tyler groans when Marcie insists we call up that scene where the red-head back-seat tit-jiggles above her roughneck boyfriend just frames before he's gnawed down by the undead prom king. Gum snap. That gore, she says, squinting cigarillo-Eastwood-style, spoke volumes about the sex/death tautology, the dark appetite of her second marriage. And though she's clearly spliced a reel of Dekker's Creeps with the lovelorn undead sushi chef of Yip's Bio Zombie, I just nod and wink while Tyler droops like a stroke victim and Jack denounces all those mavens saying Synder's remake buried Romero's Dead. Outside, dry leaves scuttle after traffic. The wait staff lurking by the Ficus want us out. All that herky-jerk gone double time? Jack rants, Pure sensationalism, gratuitous, but the brain hunger, where can I begin? If I jumped in now, I'd grant Jack all that kaleidoscopic splatter in 28 Days Later is more Pollack than Picasso, but I'll be damned if it isn't all American. As Tyler staggers up like an extra, Jack leans in like we're the last two humans in the post-pandemic mall. For him, he says, it all comes down to that Lazarus fear: Christ's glory, sure, but fuck if I want to come back.
Edward Walker

The Disemboweled Masseuse

1

she is the one woman who always draws behind her
a little cart containing her internal organs
she is elegant and perfectly preserved all
her clients have left her in her room
the Romanesque cathedral she cuts out photographs
and pastes them over her scars lacking insides
she never goes out to the balcony for fear the light
will render her transparent

what she loves most is the early twentieth century
in those days her lovers became birds
each passionate and macabre boyish
but manly enough to pay tribute somebody
murdered a prince there was shouting
the Germans drove their motorcars into town

she regrets the colostomy of that life
there were sixteen funerals a day
now her chairs are full of cemeteries
no wonder people avoid her
the disemboweled masseuse unlatches
the front of her body and takes out
a soldier’s clothes she gathers them
in her arms and still seeing his face pulls
her cart to the bedroom wanting so much
to be dead

2

Jeremy the rugby player spends his afternoons
dressed as a captain of artillery she pays him
handsomely to stand in front of the mirror he
is small and beautiful he will turn through the light
and smile and the masseuse will hear his music
in the trees over the garden under the mill pond
bells in green water a line of priests halls
of antique roses at the precise moment of sundown
the elusive samovar will materialize from a Dugas
and Jeremy full of blue radios will pour the tea

because her mother taught the art of conversation
on the rectory steps now when she looks at a man
in her room or in a photograph she feels
the need to speak solemnly wearing black
standing in rain for womanhood
she'd known much of the world her mother
wore brooches in the rain never a stitch
out of place still her marriages failed
now her daughter's body empty of all things
arteries and fear cold as a green church sits back
and knowing her Dada likeness and accepting it
touches Jeremy and says

I have nothing nobody comes here when I
was young there'd be two inside and two waiting
now everybody complains they fill rooms
with dances nobody can dance they prowl
they put cities in rowboats their vertigo
bore me their sore legs and their indigestion
my intestines are apple trees somebody's
strung lights in the branches my lungs are moons
I'm more ice tray than woman and you more boy
than athlete in your Victoria's Cross

I need your quietness it reminds me
of somebody else but I still need it
I walk in its opera I swallow it like a bird
you stand there and I think little oboe
the nuns are on their trains I hear
the last one departing when I look at you
I'm seeing myself conceived

3

then she goes to her confessional
where an erstwhile Dominican brother
has been wasting away for years
she uses it as a dressing room
she's covered the dead priest
with a coat that he might have privacy
there are guns and snuff boxes
cracked hues  dead soldier candles
dresses not taken out since the war

there's an iron crib burning in the mirror
the disemboweled maseuse  twice
remembering explosions  wainscoting
dirty with blood  takes off her blouse
and peels the wrinkled photos from her skin
the glue leaves her yellowish  she touches
a hand to her cheek  old vivisection
she thinks  so much room for improvement

meanwhile Jeremy sits in the choir loft
in the white coat of a Russian lieutenant
like the Dnieper he's low and quiet
his legs tell of oceans  darkstars
Sevastopol's Jewish stairs  when she
finally comes out the great nocturnal
attachment will solidify  though they
spell words he will not see the incisions
sitting together they fold into a wing
Easter makes its way over the earth
like a peasant woman in snow times
with her old box of roots and buttons
a gift for someone dying in an another room
Richard Jones

The Way

I had been gone for days,
the miles hard fought as if
only the engine of the mind
mattered, as if the soul had been
tossed out the window like the last
cigarette in the pack, red embers
sparking in the rearview mirror,
as if the heart, too, was dead
but still thinking it would see
tomorrow, still driving, reckless,
beyond endurance, beyond hope,
the eyes hard as flint, the mind
racing, a dangerous machine,
the highway yawning all night,
open mouth swallowing despair
and doubt, my foot on the gas,
hand on the wheel, the needle
racing, headlights continually
searching, the dawn coming up
like a stranger, the sun at noon
offering absolutely nothing and
then on a clear green hillside—
I sped past them in a heartbeat—
three white crosses, a farmer’s way
of telling me the road I was on
and where the hell I was going.
Charles P. Ries

I Love

Your grilled cheese sandwiches under
the full March moon, as Jupiter draws
near and we witness its unblinking eye
hovering above the horizon at early dusk.

The way your lip is slightly twisted upward
at one corner making your mouth look like
an irregular right triangle.

Your explanation for washing your bed
sheets three times a week, “dust mites.”

Your mantric complaint about how hard it is
to dress well at 20 below zero in the midst of
a blizzard. Yet refusing to compromise for
the sake of warmth instead sludging, steadfast,
like an Armani foot soldier through road salt,
snow drifts and sleet. Saying, “some things
will not be compromised!”

Your method of slowly moving, methodically
passing through the house...dusting, resetting
souvenirs, just so. You, the feng shui master
of knickknacks and fashion magazines, creating
a perfect order in the universe of our life.
Review

Charles P. Ries


Louis McKee exemplifies the ‘philosopher poet.’ From the title of his latest collection of poetry, Near Occasions of Sin, to the content of his poetry we see a writer who is not just good with word, or good with image, or selective about the moments in time he chooses to inspect, but a poet who capably uses his well-honed skill with word, image, and observation, all elevated by his philosopher’s mind. McKee is rich and textured in his yearning observations, nimble in his rich insights and wise in his conclusions. I felt I was not only being entertained, but learning. I was growing larger because of his clarity and counsel. It is not surprising that McKee has led an examined life as suggested in his poem, “After The Sixth Visit”: “That’s that one / when you lie / back and say no- / thing, everything / having been said / at least five times / already, and she / says well, what / are you thinking / right now? And you / tell her that / you’re thinking you / want to fuck her / and she says why / do you think that / is? but it is / too late, time is / gone, fifty minute / hours, seventy / dollars, and you / know when you leave / that you won’t be / back, you are better / then you have / any right to expect.”

McKee is a man who wants love, who loves love; a man who adores women but has had more than his share of challenges getting them, keeping them, and loving them. He, like all lovers (and writers), is a work in progress. This is illustrated in his poem, “Failed Haiku”: “This evening I took a moment / to indulge a fantasy – you, / walking naked along a Jersey beach, / the sunlight on your lovely ass. / An ancient Japanese master / could work miracles with as much. / I am content with this.” And again from his poem, “The Reason I Write”: “I like to think she gets naked / and looks at herself in the full-length mirror; / as she does, and with a smile, slips / into soft bliss of soapy comfort, / the almost-too-hot water uncomfortable / for just a moment but then just right. / With her wondrous hair pulled up, / she uses it as a pillow, pours a glass / of wine, then picks up a book of poems. / This is the reason they were written. / The rest of you, get your muses where you can. / I write for this woman, naked in a hot bath / under a modesty of bubbles. This is our / moment. Our poem. You find your own.”
As I read this, McKee's thirteenth collection of poetry, I could not help but think of the late great small press poet Albert Huffsticker (who passed away in 2002) who, like McKee, had the ability to yearn and observe so purposefully. When I read poets of McKee's or Huffsticker's emotional depth, I wish they wrote novels. I wish these short, rich, textured scenes and their meaning could be extended 300 more pages. Many poets write well, but few poets give us work as rich and profoundly meaningful as Louis McKee.
Contributor's Notes

Emma Bolden's work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in such journals as VERSE, MARGIE, Spoon River Poetry Review, The Southern Humanities Review, and CRANKY. She has received awards from the Alabama Writers' Forum, the National Foundation for the Advancement of the Arts, and New England Writers. She teaches English at Auburn University.

Matt Bondurant's first novel The Third Translation (Hyperion) was published in 2005 and has been translated into 14 languages worldwide. His second novel was recently purchased by Scribner to be published in January of 2009. His work has appeared in various journals, with poetry appearing most recently in The Notre Dame Review and Ninth Letter.

Daniel Boster earned a B.A. from the University of Texas and an M.A. from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He currently teaches literature and writing at Ralston High School in Omaha, Nebraska, where he lives with his wife and two children.

Edward Butscher has written biographies of Sylvia Plath and Conrad Aiken. His most recent poetry collection is Child in the House from Canio's Editions (Sag Harbor).

Ryder Collins is the poetry editor of Cream City Review and has work published in Nimrod and The Strange Fruit.

Sean Conrey is currently a visiting assistant professor at Purdue University, where he received his Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition and M.F.A. in poetry. He lives in Lafayette, Indiana, with his wife, Carol Fadda-Conrey, and spends his summers in Beirut, Lebanon. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Cream City Review, Notre Dame Review, Midwest Quarterly, Aries, Permafrost, and Plainsongs.

Matt Dennison finished his undergraduate degree at Mississippi State University where, in addition to placing third in the Southern Literary Festival for fiction, he won the National Sigma Tau Delta essay competition (as judged by X.J. Kennedy). He was then accepted by the graduate program at UT Austin, where he spent one year. Recent poems have been published in *Natural Bridge, Runes, G.W. Review, Steam Ticket,* and *Whiskey Island.* His first chapbook, *Dog Medicine,* is now available from Pudding House Publications.

Beth Gylys has published two books of poetry: *Spot in the Dark* (Ohio State University Press, 2004) and *Bodies that Hum* (Silverfish Review Press, 1999). Her work has appeared in many journals.

Shaun Hand received his M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College in May 2007. He grew up among trees, pick-up trucks, and gas stations in western Massachusetts. He currently lives in fabulous Yonkers, New York.

William Hengst's poems have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *The Aurorean, GreenPrints, Pearl, Red Wheelbarrow,* and *They Schuylkill Valley Journal of the Arts.* He grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and has lived in Philadelphia for 45 years where he has worked as a city planner. Now, he runs his own gardening business and writes.

Richard Jones is the author of six books of poems, including his most recent volume, *Apropos of Nothing* (Copper Canyon Press, 2006). His poems are published in such popular anthologies as Billy Collins’s *Poetry 180* and Garrison Keillor’s *Good Poems,* and he has been heard many times on National Public Radio. In 2000, a volume of new and collected poems, *The Blessing* (Copper Canyon Press, 2000), won the Society of Midland Authors Award for poetry. For twenty-seven years he has been editor of the award-winning literary journal *Poetry East,* which celebrates poetry, translation, and art from around the world. Currently he is professor of English at DePaul University in Chicago, where he directs the creative writing program.

Jessica Lamb’s work has appeared in literary magazines such as *Poetry, Willow Springs, Carolina Quarterly,* and *Green Mountains Review.* Her first collection of poems, *Night Feeding,* has been finalist for several first book prizes. She lives and teaches in Portland, Oregon.

Lyn Lifshin has written over 120 books and edited four anthologies. Her website is www.lynlifshin.com. Her last two Black Sparrow books, *Cold Comfort* and *Before It's Light,* won Paterson Review Awards. She is working on a book about the amazing, beloved Kentucky Derby winner, Barbaro.
Greg Moglia's poems have been accepted in over one hundred journals in the U.S., Canada, and England as well as five anthologies. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2005 and for inclusion in the University of Virginia anthology Best New Poets of 2006. He lives in Huntington, New York.

Dan Morris is the author of Bryce Passage (Marsh Hawk Press, 2004). He teaches at Purdue University.

Matt Nienow's work has appeared in LOCUSPOINT, Trestle Crack Review, The Hill, and The Quarry. He has been the recipient of a Paulson Poetry Award and a Ferguson Publishing Grant. When he is not writing, he canoes across Canada, plays music, and lives with his wife in Minnesota.

David O'Connell received an M.F.A. from Ohio State University. His work has previously appeared in Fugue, Pebble Lake Review, Poet Lore, and other journals.

Charles P. Ries lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. To find out more about him, visit his website at www.literati.net/Ries/.

Jason Tandon is the author of two chapbooks of poetry, Flight (Finishing Line Press) and Rumblestrip (sunnoutside), both forthcoming in 2007. His first full-length collection, Give over the Heckler and Everyone Gets Hurt, was a finalist for the 2006 Kinereth Gensler Award (Alice James Books). His poems have appeared in many journals, including Adirondack Review, Columbia Poetry Review, The Laurel Review, Red Cedar Review, and Poet Lore.

Jamie Thomas teaches English at the University of Houston where he is a Ph.D. candidate in literature and creative writing. His poems have recently appeared in Barrow Street, Rattle, Sycamore Review and Verse.

Jane Varley has published poems and reviews in several journals, including Slant, Wisconsin Review, and Eclipse. Her book of creative nonfiction (University of Nebraska Press, 2005) chronicles the devastating Red River Valley flood and fires of 1997. She is an associate professor of English and coordinator of creative writing at Muskingum College in Ohio.

Edward Walker is a writer and teacher from Des Moines, Iowa. His work has appeared in several journals, most recently Puerto del Sol, Black Ice, and Nimrod.