

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 64 N°1 FALL 2013

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Subscriptions

Individual: One year (4 issues) \$18 Three years \$48

Institution: One year \$23 Three years \$65

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$10; elsewhere outside the USA, \$15.

Discount rates available for classroom adoption.

Submissions

may be sent at any time, via Submission Manager on our website or by postal mail with a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Retail Distributor

Media Solutions, 9632 Madison Blvd., Madison, AL 35758

Beloit Poetry Journal is indexed in *Humanities International Complete*, *Index of American Periodical Verse*, MLA database, and *LitFinder*, and is available as full text on EBSCO Information Services' Academic Search Premier database.

Address correspondence, orders, exchanges, postal submissions, and review copies to *Beloit Poetry Journal*, P.O. Box 151, Farmington, ME 04938.

Copyright 2013 by The Beloit Poetry Journal Foundation, Inc.

ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, Maine

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Fall 2013, Vol. 64 N°1

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→ An arrow at the bottom of a page indicates the stanza does not break.

OCEAN VUONG

Telemachus

Like any good son, I pull my father out
of the water, drag him by his hair

through sand, his knuckles carving a trail
the waves rush in to erase. Because the city

beyond the shore is no longer
where he left it. Because the bombed

cathedral is now a cathedral
of trees. I kneel beside him to see how far

I might sink. *Do you know who I am,*
ba? But the answer never comes. The answer

is the bullet hole in his back, brimming
with seawater. He is so still I think

he could be anyone's father, found
the way a green bottle might appear

at a boy's feet containing a year
he has never touched. I touch

his ears. No use. The neck's
bruising, I turn him over. To face

it. The cathedral in his sea-black eyes.
The face not mine but one I will wear

to kiss all my lovers goodnight:
the way I seal my father's lips

with my own and begin
the faithful work of drowning.

MOLLY SPENCER

Demeter [Days I hunted the mend]

Days I hunted the mend where earth
had torn. Dowsed with my forked heart
for her slow river of tears.

Went home, looked under the bed.
In the stalled closet, leafed through her sleeves
for landmarks. Even laid myself down

on the thatched field
listening for the *thud-thud* of his dark
headboard against the wall.

Counted months by moon phase.
Left the stove and washing. Turned
the garden graveward. Stacked wood.

Until there she was in my kitchen,
taller than before,
a basket of wash on her hip.

It was hours of scrubbing and rinsing, hours
of pinning bleached petals of slip and lament
on the line before I asked, Where?

And it was hours
before her deep-water reply: Mom,
Mom. It's not the kind of place you can point to.

MOLLY SPENCER

Persephone [I no longer know]

I no longer know how I came to be here.
She claimed me? He returned me?

There was a great rending, more light
than I'm used to now. Then everyone

pretending I've never been anywhere
else. Here at the sink, tasting summer

in my mother's kitchen, washing plates
until their painted edges fade.

But I've taken on the green
of his river. I'm listening

for the whine of his dog
wanting my hand on its warm belly,

for the long hall of his walk
coming up behind.

There are children now, open-mouthed
and spindling toward light,

a tree we planted together
that fruits in red, debts that sound

somehow familiar. A deal I struck once:
the way I left off watering,

hoping growing things
would know to dig

for what they needed
deeper, down.

LUKE JOHNSON

Camp

If pain is enough, all stories are ghost stories.
The same man splits wood with an adze
and heavy hammer to loose whatever's bound:
the woman, the incident, the dog, that damn dog
the meadow and does lured
every spring before he dragged her
snarling back to camp. And now he's haunted
by the water dish in the breakfast nook,
the leash. He still calls. He leaves messages.

JOHN A. NIEVES

Harvest Moon

Come calling, come hauling the sickle
and scythe. Bring a short knife on your
belt and a light in your hand. When the sun
quits and the heat flees on the night breeze,

we will swing and gather, twine together
stalks, and cough. Wet breath foaming in
the corners of our songs. Our strokes are even
and tight. Glistening, listening to the night

birds, the cricket trills, we whistle our way
uphill. The children in their beds rise and
fall like these fields. I hear winter in daybreak
echoing from not far enough. Gather, gather.

JOHN A. NIEVES

Spin-the-Globe Charades

Spin One

I am acting like a wall with one portico
adorned by a cockatrice and subtle
lichens. She swings and I crumble. Then

she stands over me. I act like a man;
she acts like the state. Her knee sinks into
my throat. I pretend she is choking me, or

I am choking, or I see something startling
in the sky. She cocks her head back,
mouths the song of sirens.

Spin Two

I am doing a rather obvious tree; she, too,
is creating a simple impression: thick fog
rolling over low hills. I'm part of an orchard.

She fills me, and then rifle reports and marching
and clanking. At my base, I hold my toes
just right to represent a memorial plaque, to imply

what happened here has sunk deep, has rolled itself
up in the rocky soil. And she is moss, so green
and dense and always facing north.

Spin Three

With the score tied, and the other couple on
the couch, she arches into a rainbow over
my creeping vines. I send tendrils into skulls,

and statues of skulls. In a second she'll be thin rain
beading in the same hollow eye my bloom
presses through. My hand, down below, resembles

a group of sitting men, pulsing, chanting, clucking.
Her hands become their hands and the shadows
of their hands. My eyes, the ritual, the bees.

The Final Spin

Now we are winning. She is a red brick house
braced tight against the prairie that was
my back. I breathe hard and the wind shrieks

through the tall grass. Then I am someone digging
and she is someone dragging another someone
toward the new ditch. The dead one's eyes bulge

red and its lips seem more cracked than possible.
The skin is all rise and fall, pock and peak. I am now
the ditch and I welcome the dead. I have so much room.

BETSY SHOLL

Orison

Let me give back to God
his jacket, his locket,
his thin slippers,
sunglint, sleetspit, stars.
And here's my cracked,
my sullen, unstrung
guitar, hung like a rabbit
in the butcher's window,
a hole in the belly
where a song should be.
Emptiness only
emptiness can see—
Let this be my prayer.
Does anything belong to me?

ГЕННАДИЙ АЙГИ

Пьеру Эмманюэлю: запись, сделанная при переводе его стихов

и за ненужность вещи за бумажку
переживаешь с каждым днем все чаще:

бумагу рвешь: “ведь сам не отличаюсь”:

как беден карандаш!—

и кто же клюнет изнутри
вещь нищего?—

и кто заговорит?. .

1966

GENNADY AYGI

To Pierre Emmanuel: notation made upon translating his poems

for the non-necessity of a thing for paper
you are troubled with each day more often:

tear the paper: "I cannot distinguish myself":

how inadequate the pencil!—

then who will peck from within
a destitute thing?—

and who will begin to speak?

translated from the Russian by Alex Cigale

JAMES LANGLAS
Hiking at Brush Creek

—for my brother and sister

When we turned and descended
the hill that morning, our jeans
and sneakers dew-drenched,
the grass and knee-high
weed trees parting
with our sliding steps,

we saw the mist drifting among
the sycamores below, following
the long, thin finger
of the current, the carvings
of field and slope, water and rock.

Imagine the earth having been dark
since the beginning and then
the arm of the sun brushing
away the night. And our fear,
once suspended in the cornerless air,
gone too.

And finally this, the gray cloth
lifting, revealing
the green tongues of the corn,
the lumbering, drooping figures
of the cows, and the barn leaning
toward us, into the light.

REX WILDER

from *Boomerangs in the Living Room*

Sirens)

Sirens

approach like you walking toward me in my bed
of dreams and then move on
to the fire.

Dry)

Dry

lakes and assimilating washes fool no desert
thing. Either in memory or wait,
they lie.

FRED MARCHANT

Etymos

a seam down through
strata of red rock ganglia of meaning
nerves exposed
the trail worn soft by mules and dotted
with shit the pebbles
treacherous switchbacks sharp and steep glare
worse than burns first
on this cheek then that as you start to dream
the river below shaded
by big-tooth aspens water from the glacier
your shoulders ache
to float in the currents traces of word-feeling
that drift and brush
against your legs cold mouths open
as if to nibble or to kiss

FRED MARCHANT

Passage Tomb

Knowth, Co. Meath, Ireland

—for John F. Deane

So friend, you bring me to this unassuming field,
day-glo brands on the sheep, wire gates my girth

barely lets me slip through, an afterthought of
rubble at the entrance, sunlight angled to look in,

our eyes adjusting to nightfall under guardian
stone-shapes so like the lives we imagine it took

to lift granite to canopy, my fingers now wanting
to pry them apart, unlock the mute interleavings,

to peel away mica from quartz, find a fleck that
holds the light, ask it about the dark workings

of metal, the mineral veins we shape into blades,
the soft tissue we lay open, the blood we let fall.

FRED MARCHANT

A Day Later

Thus lines of force that pass through us
leading to fields and cities: muddy fingers,
a tailor's needle and thread, an invisible line
that slips through my fingers like water, leads
me down to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre,
the city of narrow, well-worn paths, dark stairs
and rotundas loud with pilgrims and prayer,
the beadle's stick leading his own to this altar,
to gold icons, their sad faces. Priests in black,
Ethiopian Copts, squat outside in a corner by
a charcoal fire, a heat-treasure, as it is winter,
the day short, and a wind has come up from
the desert. There is a wood-smell from fibers
of the planet, a fire with little light but reason
for a prayer, and smoke that rises like incense.

FRED MARCHANT
Ivory Bull Dancer

scripta minoa
his hands grip its invisible horns
to leap the furious eye of our desire to kill and be killed
over our origins in strewn rubble of children bewildered and wards locked
over medicines of shock and sledge the therapies of iron hammers
over the never to be forgotten even in the striking down
over the unsaid word the venom coiled inside
over rump and pelt and dust
his feet land
touch
so that we do not forget what we do here

FRED MARCHANT
Quang Tri Elegies

—for Kevin Bowen and Nguyen Ba Chung

Route 9

I am pretty sure that I would have died here
 maybe here in the rain that comes down to pick at
the red clay hardness of a long snake-road upward,
 and I am pretty sure I would have killed here,
and wanted to, or had to, or tried to, or didn't mean to,
 with no god, and few others, to forgive me.

Joss

As I bow so that I and the burning sticks bow,
 and my spine, my complex, pliable inner organs
bow with me, each filled with a sorrow I hardly
 know I have but which the honeyed, musky scent
calls out, a sorrow that curls and rises like a dragon
 before which all I am bows, and then bows again.

Batteries

Double A's die on the road heading west, near rubber
 tree plantings the Swedes donated to bring back
the land, miles of trees in rows so straight my camera
 orders me to change the batteries, but I let the cells rest,
and they recharge for more, one or two at a time so we
 can get through the rows of graves, acres limed by them.

Dug In

Mist holding to the trees as if it didn't want to leave,
 stones engraved with provinces the dead came from,
my legs unsteady on the wet gravel, mind wandering
 to what the nights were like, what lights shone across
the valley, what smoke wisps would rise over the trees,
 what low clangs, or whispers I wouldn't understand.

Combat Base

Practically nothing there, a sandbag bunker restored,
plus a one-room museum on stilts, into which we walk
empty handed, no straps over the shoulder, no mirror lens
to zoom and widen, nothing to hide the face with,
nothing to see with but retina, cones, and rods, the wires
to the brain cells running for cover, huddled, shaking.

Museum Pieces

Still I love the web belt, its brass eyelets and cloth
strong enough to hang a pair of canteens on,
a bayonet, first aid pack, ammo pouches and holster,
the thick fiber in the bottom of the display case,
this durable gear, the stained canvas of jungle boots,
a green helmet cover that belonged to someone.

Quang Tri River

Next day coming down from Lao Bao, you tell me
you would sometimes swim here, the snipers asleep,
old farmers and women working the fields, river children
eager to bathe with you, your body given to this cold
mountain stream, sweat falling away, pure flesh left,
your open hands, your fingers, your mother's own.

SALLY WEN MAO
Mad Honey Soliloquies

Xenophon, 401 BC

The soldiers straddled thorn hedges
to sneak a taste. Along the Black Sea,
the honeycombs rose like marmalade jars.
Laurel, scorched oleander, and honey,
that yellow voltage. I tried a drop myself.
Some tasted ambrosia.
Some heard prophetic hymns.
Some cringed at tremors blooming again,
youth in their chests, windshorn Eridanus,
then in the sky, an atomized sun.
And me, I got nothing.
Just another lonesome breeze
freezing my ribs until my muscles
stopped moving. Finally I spat it out.
Like that, my men snapped forward,
purging everything. They purged the honey,
the oleanders, the olives. They purged the suppers
from all the nights they'd ever pined.
They purged the junipers, the stars,
the salt and seaweed. They purged the ocean,
the canker, the long fortnights
spent far away—the Kurdistan mountains
unlike any hillock back home. Imagine:
a field of grown men on all fours.
Armored men in full panoply.
Even through all of this, I fell asleep
half-hoping for a vision, insight, anything.
I would have taken intoxication,
even gagging. As I led these young men
through the waning terrain, the only
prayer I dared was *rid us of our collective needs*.
Socrates once asked me, if all memories
are theaters, then what can we make
of the shadow scenes, the ones that lurk,
unseen and unexplained? The question came back
when I saw the dew blind them.
And then at dawn they rose like revenants.

Pompey, 67 BC

It was swarm season—of honey and carnage:
one moment men scavenged, the next they were carrion

under an orange sky. It was swarm season
and before you could count to ten, quivers raked,

stars aimed, a thousand twigs rustled, fell.
Honey and carnage, divesting us of reflex.

It was swarm season. In the sweltering evening, blood
was scented, pure delphinium. Honey and carnage:

Delphi once prophesied, *The man who eats meli chloron
can speak only truth.* Whose sentence was this,

the pleasure of green honey? Ribs flashed,
tongues wagging, sliced off, churning, stumps for speech.

It was swarm season—over before anyone
could bray. But a few mouths were open in surprise.

SALLY WEN MAO

Immigration

—from “Migration Suite”

Howl forever if you must, but it will never be music.
Make deaf monkeys out of everyone.

*Father, you leave us without explaining but I heard
the rumors saying you can heal or fatten the wound
on your knees with the clot of a stranger’s country.*

Sepals crown this city of sloughing light.

*Maroon us here in the flying city.
If your heart is a stunt man fishing for ice then mine
is a cold ingot gilded to the stairs.*

Sorrel, sorrow, spumes of science furl
over your reddening sclera. Your breath
beneath the ochre. What troubles make you?

*The kind of father I want will dig a hole through
the floor of his home to find a deeper womb for me.*

Ask the earth what it will feed you.
The truth is a pyrrhic purring—listen
on the airbus with crackling ears.

*Father, I thought you were a revolutionary! Every day
you were gone, I anticipated my own journey to the west.
I was the Monkey Princess. Every day I sketched
a different charcoal portrait of you.*

Here is the lesion on your couch, the tomb,
the television. Take what is abandoned,
thresh the silver from the dross. When the water
crosses the dam, be ready and on your knees.

It is not a life if your neck is (is not) soaped with sweat.

Set your watch back, the rain is beginning.

MICHELLE GILLETT

Rowing from Monhegan to Manana

I leaned into the dinghy's oars, pulling through the brightness,
Indian summer brightness, mute and clear

as if earlier,

the portable radio in the lobster shack had not buzzed with news
and the lobsterman in his Red Sox cap and faded t-shirt,
painting his buoys as he did every September,
had not beckoned me inside.
Something terrible

has happened, he said.

I moved closer to the words until we were complicit
in the salt-pocked windows, the torn green shade,
the swag of shocking pink buoys, the radio
repeating itself as island light spilled through
the narrow door, the silence we kept

until he returned to his work
and I walked down the path to the beach
where rowboats shouldered each other,
trash smoldered in metal drums, and gulls feasted
on corncobs and lobster shells.

Between Herring Gut and Smutty Nose
rocks cinched the harbor. The ferry blasted its horn
nearing Pemaquid Point. I needed somewhere

to settle the fear that rose with each stretch of oars,
threading me like light through strands of water.

But when I climbed the wooden steps to everything abandoned,
signal house, keeper's dwelling, boathouse, and bell,
gone too was the sense that anything can keep us.

Because there was nothing to hold I crouched low.
Under my palms lichen's rust clung to stone.

MARK JAY BREWIN, JR.

The Coming Apart

So much said to me of how
they were let loose on the Ford Fairlane
how he was tossed the keys and his older brother my uncle
lugged over the whole of their grandfather's tool chest
in a wheelbarrow for them to pick over and tear to hell
the engine bay and all its tickings stripped down
to metal and gasket all on a whim for no reason at all
or maybe the old man witnessed that hint of distance
and grudge between brothers even then no hope
hands fumbled and dismembered air cleaner from carburetor
distributor coils from the block as if they tried to understand
how each bit worked or just loved the coming apart
and when every stitch of upholstery was split
the faceplates and knobs off without a scratch
a whisper what if there was the trace of hope my father
finally happy to have traded Allen wrenches and drivers
without bruised knuckles without fingers dug under collarbones
to drag him around the den finally almost there
at the heart of it looking to drop the dismantled motor
when the old man called them off worried about
crushed toes the car nearly down to its framework
but there was his brother my uncle turning away from it
staring at the Phillips in his hand hauling the tools
back to the shop and the young one my father left
palming the keys to something that wouldn't go anywhere.

FANI PAPAGEORGIU

The Jaguar's Wife

A girl marries a jaguar
so that she can get all the meat she wants.
No need to make a song and dance of it, she says to her family.

The jaguar comes to live with the Indians.
For a time the girl's family becomes friendly with the new couple.
As long as you know how to walk into a room properly, that is all
that matters,
the father tells his daughter.

Soon a grandmother feels mistrust.
Run your kitchen like a ship, she tells her granddaughter,
then resorts to witchcraft and kills her.

The family becomes very frightened of the jaguar,
expecting him to take revenge.

You will remember me in years to come, says the jaguar
and goes off incensed by murder.
About hypothermia they say,
You're not dead until you're warm and dead.

The mind goes first.
Then you can't fill the gap.
Don't be tractable, Lévi-Strauss says. Be reckless.
The sound of roaring comes from farther and farther away—

CHRISTOPHER MORRIS

Miscegenation

—from Daylight & Coma, *the free encyclopedia*

This article has multiple issues. Please help improve it or discuss these issues on the talk page.

This article may require cleanup to meet quality standards.

This article's lead section may not adequately summarize all of its contents.

The neutrality of this article is disputed.

Miscegenation (/mɪˌʃɛdʒɪˈneɪʃən/; from Nuremberg, U.S. *nigger-lover* “slavemaster” + *mischling* “soldier”) is the living death of an old guitarist.

As in:

1769: King Cotton comes with bolls of citron for a woman in trouble. He cadenzas *wench* to the tune of muddy water mandolins. Cornbread burns in the big house, and cedar plumes fuck angrily on swollen magnolias. A blade through fertile Cush means whips for whimpers. Slender, brown fingers clutch at something once known to be true. Her eyes, rapidly Nile-flooded, search for the quartered hymen of the Gold Coast. *So this is marriage*, she thinks, seeing her cream coffee *zygote* ripped from the belly of azure moons to citizenship. Gabonese elders tongue the mandolin's whispers along front teeth. Cuts and bleeds, this infernal hurricane.

As in:

1949: James Arthur Baldwin had a dream last night that he was dead, hanging from a bridge. In death, dangling naked by the neck, Baldwin feels an icy overture on the tips of his toes. An avalanche of Parisian light . . . and kneeling upon an embankment, Baldwin sees his noosed body dancing luridly with the reflection of a white man in a delta below . . . music cresting his penis.

Buoyant as the smell of the sea, Baldwin plunges nation-first into the night-long twitch of a lyre. At dawn, he puts midnighted hands to the sun glare of his white reflection and plays the bridge on the bed.

As in:

2008: *We the people, in order to form a more perfect union . . .* the President begins. He stops. The sounds of mandolins and lyres cling to the roof of his mouth. This isn't supposed to happen now. His advisors and speech writers have worked tirelessly for four hundred years to iron out the overture of history. But the President hollers his mother's name and mulatto bone rolls on a lightning streak to the radio of a Chevy four decades prior. On a Honolulu highway, an African and a white woman shift gears, songs into rhythm.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN

Child Is Father

We are farther post-Christian and richer entropic,
make more of our movements and less of our masses.

We matter as physics. Our matter's less ethics.
Without them we're moral as moons and we orbit

no center. We make a mathematics
that roots in a stillness less stable than zero.

We matter as ether, no-telos our telos,
and stake your ascendance with flags of our absence.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN

Fuel

And I am the downed tree
and the thriving sorrel,

the calcite logarithmic spiral
shell, and the gum creature

oozing and perishing inside.
My live corpse feeds

the frothing ever breeding;
my multiplying

petrifies.

DANIELLE JONES-PRUETT

From Descartes' *Treatise on Man*

*I suppose the body to be nothing
but a statue or machine: lungs
like bellows, blood flowing*

as in a hydraulic system, tubes
and membranes not unlike
a church organ. Memory, sleep,

hunger, pain—all can be accounted
for mechanically, like the movements
in a clock. I look out my window

and what do I see but hats and coats
covering ghosts: simulated humans,
moving only by springs?

DANIELLE JONES-PRUETT
Descartes Rebuilds His Daughter

The fever burned
through everything,
left only her body,
tinged blue, hands
folded cold. Her father
measures the circumference
of her head, the span
of her arms. He fingers
each groove of her spine,
traces onto onion paper
the map of her veins.
Holding her hair away
from the nape, he cuts
close to the scalp, removes
her pineal gland, *her soul*,
planning to plant it
in her new body. But first
he sews her slack mouth shut,
makes sure the mask
of her face looks right.
Already he can't recall
the way the moon flashed
in her eyes, but remembers
the day she was born,
her skin soft and warm.

DANIELLE JONES-PRUETT

Simulacrum

Descartes was traveling with his daughter,
but no one else had seen her. In the storm-dark of his cabin,
they pried the lid off the box marked *fragile*,
found the girl encased: black curls nesting
on smocked shoulders. In lantern light her lips
blazed copper. She cocked her head
when they reached for her,
their wedding bands ringing
against her metal arms.

ANNA MARIA HONG
The Age of Increment

—after Percy Bysshe Shelley

Liberticide optimized in an age
of glint democracy—a pretty line
for a pretty time continuously engaged—
the King's flag flown above the sign

of the dove—our hawkish Queens keening
the horn on a third front—one occupation
blunts another and another—meaning
gummed in purple doublings, set to stun

dialogue to silence—to recession
from attention to what matters, dies—will,
individual, broken by the extension
of hope and its perhaps inevitable

dilution—interest dipped, tinted, rinsed, and fenced,
looped and linked like a tarnished chain reaction.

SEBASTIAN AGUDELO

Summary

—after Valerio Magrelli

All said and done, for every foot
of majesty in the humpback breaching,
there's forty of proglottid adding
to the strobila of the tapeworm,

miles on end of herring-, screw-,
round-worms, cyclospora, giardia,
trichinia, liver flukes, and kissing bugs.
Hookworm larvae wisp in the blood.

There's also the cone plant's stemless
perennial lumps noshing on leaf litter;
clonaid sponges boring into shell
and rendering a filigreed brittle lace

that's the minute version of pock-
marks a Colt AR-15 will bore on walls
of captured towns, Mogadishu, Kabul.
In sarcoma's seeming sexual itch

you can hear something like music
arguing, in its very logic, its own end,
hear suspended subdominants, nonchord
tones disperse in serial, aleatoric, micro-

tonal effervescences fizzing everywhere
in the body of sound, the close-grained
spruce of Cremonas, the alveolar whirl
of woodwind. A tonal catastrophe,

history, arrhythmic cells, superfetation,
ambush, hold up, what lymphoma does.
And look at the land and sea, captives
to a guest that's armed and dangerous.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: The Heart, Yes
John Rosenwald

Katharine Rauk, *Basil* (Aspinwall, PA: Black Lawrence Press, 2011, 37 pp, \$9 paper)

Jay Leeming, *Miracle Atlas* (Rochester, NY: Big Pencil Press, 2011, 83 pp, \$15.95 paper)

Abbot Cutler, *Say Dance, Say Night* (Northfield, MA: Slate Roof Press, 2013, 30 pp, \$13 paper)

It is June in Maine. I have just returned from the Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father, originally organized by Robert Bly, at which my artistic family has gathered for nearly four decades, regularly in recent years at Camp Kieve on the shore of Damariscotta Lake. For just over a week we recreate traditional stories (this year “Eros and Psyche”), sing at 6:30 each morning, make masks, dance, talk, mock ourselves and each other, and hear/write/recite/discuss poetry. The Great Mother Conference (GMC as we call it) provides for me an annual feast of aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual energy. Although I often urge poets who attend the conference to send poems to the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and although we occasionally have published them, I rarely bring into my work as editor explicit mention or consideration of conference matters.

Here, however, I shall. Without suggesting that conference poets, influenced by each other or by Robert Bly, speak with a unified voice, I wish to draw attention to recent books by three long-time conference participants: one still quite young, one now middle-aged, one nearly as ancient as I am. Each of them in recent years has not only participated in our community but also had some responsibility for its functioning: Katharine Rauk as shepherd of poetry readings, Jay Leeming as Convenor or day-by-day organizer, Abbot Cutler as a Greyhair, one of those who have eventual responsibility for the entire conference. Given our relationships I cannot address them formally; instead I will call them by their given names.

Begin with youth: What makes Katie Rauk remarkable as a poet includes her word magic, her ability to make music in the midst of straightforward description and narrative:

For him
she hummed, trimmed
lamps in the unmanned
mansion of her mind.

With that music come striking images:

Now we smell
of freshly split wood,
that splintered moment
when lightning licks open
the heart of a tree.

And:

The potatoes slept beneath
my feet: pale

dirt pearls, their bellies
swollen

with buried light.

Beyond creating her music, Katie directs a cast of characters remarkable in its diversity. If one element of much contemporary poetry remains its egocentricity, its narcissism, *Basil* surprises in that what seem at first like predictable autobiographical narratives shift voices so often that we eventually suspect ego plays little role here. The first, "Fuse," opens with an image that could introduce many self-obsessed poems by young confessional writers, "She would have an affair," but ends with a name that makes such an interpretation unlikely: "with a man named Ulf." The second, "The Rapture," again begins with "she," but its word magic renders biographical interpretation implausible: *rapture*, *capture*, *scripture*, *suture*, *rupture*. The third shifts to first person, but since the speaker decides to "dedicate" herself "to light bulb collection," we should again presume that autobiography is not the issue. In the fourth poem, "Self-Portrait with Monkey," one of the strongest in the book, the speaker seems to be Frida Kahlo, or at least the figure in Kahlo's painting. The title poem, "Basil," uses the voice of the herb itself: "In India, they place me in the mouths / of the dying." As a poet Katie seems to have developed not only an ear for word music but also a skill she ascribes to those "young women who are learning to listen," for often she listens to and speaks for others rather than for herself.

If not her self, what? In a set of three poems near the physical and emotional core of this slim volume, Katie introduces a theme central to her work, to this review, and to the GMC itself. In this cluster she contrasts an unnamed male who asserts, "I've

never met a pie I didn't like" with "Chloe," who longs for the "hearthstone lost / in the double-dark . . . a heartbone . . . of has-been and will-be and now." This heartbone maintains, like the moon, "confirmation // of circumference: even if you can't / see her all at once," a heartbone she calls "my nub, my sweetness, my buried / bruise," and about which she wonders, "when I find you / will I be found or not found?" In two other poems she turns inquiringly to Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions*, but at this moment, in *Basil*, the questions remain, appropriately, unanswered.

■

In *Miracle Atlas* Jay Leeming shares a commitment to the heart. The opening poem, "Beggar," introduces the theme:

It was the bardic scientists of the ancient future
who discovered that at the heart of everything

there was not a particle, a quark or a vibrating string

but a single line of poetry.

At this point the reference seems casual, idiomatic, secondary to thematic irony, but later in the book the centrality of the image becomes explicit: "the choosing of a man's vocation is . . . a matter of heart and not of head." Near the end of the volume he reiterates the science/heart contrast: "Today the pressure of reality on art exceeds a million pounds / per square inch. No instrument can measure it, only the heart."

This commitment to the heart, however, contrasts with Jay's public persona. His conference readings emphasize his trickster qualities, his coyote nature. At his most recent GMC performance, he read to considerable applause poems such as "History," which progressively tumbles names, occurrences, and texts in a "dream of fact . . . from which you have yet to awake":

It turns out that the first white man in North America
wasn't Columbus, it was a Viking from Jorvic. . . .

It turns out the Declaration of Independence

was originally written in Celtic by Duke Ellington
and Mao Tse-tung, then translated into English
by the druids of Mexico.

In “Days of Glory” the poet mock-heroically pillories “the shimmer of our grandiosity” in an office setting populated by “Bob,” supposed “Pillager of Cities,” and “Debbie, / Clearer of Paper Jams.” Like Harold Pinter’s, his language reflects the banality of our daily linguistic experience, as in the cluster of brief phrases that constitute “Hang On”: “We’ll have dinner. / Nice to see you again. / You look great. / I missed you. / Hang on. / I’ll be right there.”

Miracle Atlas comprises four parts. The first contains mostly work that highlights the author’s wit and his role as ironic chronicler of the other side, the side that ignores, denies, or turns away from the heart. It ends with “The Silence Artist,” a poem raising serious concerns treated by Kafka and John Cage, but on the surface a comic piece depicting a poet whose success grows as he becomes increasingly reluctant to perform his work. Whereas Katie creates musical magic, Jay ironically casts doubt on the efficacy of words, his skepticism levied not only on Pinter’s inarticulate characters but also on us. In our linguistic environment, he asks, how can one continue to write, to speak?

Miracle Atlas is the longest and most complex of these three books. If Part One identifies Jay’s skepticism, Part Two applies it: “All this time // I’ve been using language to protect myself . . . how determined I was not to see.” “All of a sudden you get tired of the story you’ve been telling yourself.” “Homecoming” interrupts the “snores and baby-cries. . . . the cough of the man sleeping” on a night train with the “loud voice” of “two men . . . in sunglasses and desert camouflage” who remind the reader of the linguistic and military violence that underlies our culture: “I came this close to blowing / his fucking head off.” He begins the last poem in the section with the language of mythic storytelling: “my mother put me in a basket and set me adrift // in the river. . . . and when I awoke I sang the poem of creation,” but shifts to a contemporary environment: “until I came to a field / strewn with empty beer bottles and cigarettes, / until I . . . stumbled // out into the parking lot between Office Max // and Hollywood Video.” In this new environment he again rejects the significance of the tale and of its articulation: “And though a lot happened to me after that // none of it is worth telling.”

Part Three attempts to reclaim the efficacy of poetry and language by invoking mythology—Gilgamesh and Sisyphus as well as Disney World and Superman—but ends again in an implicit rejection of linguistic communication. The last poem in the section, “Trail,” suggests a search for resolution of the poet’s dilemma, but finally announces “when you’ve gone far enough // you realize you’ll never get any other answer / but a fern or a loose stone.” This conventional nineteenth-century vision provides no assistance for a twenty-first-century ironist. More interesting is the penultimate poem, in which three twentieth-century poets, Yeats, Neruda, and Whitman, emerge as models who might teach us how to live and write. Yet in this poem, titled “From *Lives of the Saxophonists*,” Jay has transformed the makers of word-music into actual musicians, ironically suggesting that mentors we might have as poets use no words, no language, only music as their medium. And despite his praise of their poetry and vision, their message eventually remains in its final image that of Romanticism: “And the man turns back to his tomato plants arriving out of the dark earth.”

Part Four opens “at the blazing fire / of big questions. . . . ‘Why am I here?’ ‘Is there an afterlife?’” But again, as the questioners surround this “rusty oil drum at the edge of town”:

No one said
 anything, nothing was discussed
 or debated. It was enough simply
 to stand there, warmed by the fire’s heat
 as one spark after another
 flung itself up into the dark and went out.

The uncharacteristic but delicious pun in the final line begins to suggest a resolution to the poet’s dilemma. The spark of language may go out, but it nevertheless goes out into the darkness. *Miracle Atlas* darts between irony and the “fire’s heat” of the heart, “for this poem lives on the road, and knows separation well.” In a sequence of ghazals near the end of the book, the poet dances between isolation and community, between belief in language and doubt. In classic disjunction between images, the final ghazal concludes with what may be my favorite juxtaposition in the entire volume:

After the snow fell, the tracks of the deer were easier to see.
 This white page laid down between the earth and who I am.

■
Basil has the feel of a first book: slender, a bit sparse in design, but with a crisp, striking black-and-white cover. *Miracle Atlas* offers color photographs, readable if traditional type, serviceable if conventional paper. As physical artifacts both resemble many volumes the *BPJ* receives each month. Not *Say Dance, Say Night*. Abbot Cutler's book presents a different face, slim but elegant, its cover embossed with a shining, spare black figure dancing on a matte black cover paper that feels like a cross between velvet and vellum. Inside a gold flyleaf peeks through the cover stock, holding in place text paper that has a linen feel to it and carries the Cochin font with conviction and clarity. Simply put, it's a lovely book, a delight to hold.

And to read. And to hear read, for Abbot has a deep, resonant, gravelly voice that he uses well as he slowly speaks the words of his quiet but confident poems. Many seem to echo Adrienne Rich's exhortation in "Transcendental Etude": "Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity / the striving for greatness, brilliance." Abbot once commented, "There is way too much focus on being published." Instead he suggests poets concentrate on their craft: "Try to write good poems then think about getting published ten years down the road."

Heart language enters this book early and often:

What do we know, heart, after
 traveling so far together, me
 with my old boots, you with the muted shoes.

And:

The heart of the great whale bursts
 onto dry sand at the sound waves
 of the shiny machines coursing the oceans. . . .
 Praise the heart of the beast, lift it up
 and the distances will begin to lessen.

Like Katie and Jay, this poet holds particular affection for Neruda:

To read [him] now
 is to have your heart blown open.

But what can one do with such a heart, such emotions? Like Jay, Abbot remains skeptical about communication within contemporary society. In "No Poem" he doesn't "want to go anywhere, not today, / not the entire summer, no / new place,

no new faces,”
no tonal singsong incredible river flow
of sound running from the beautiful
mouths of people whom I have never
met and will never see again. . . .
and no worries, no plans, no
phone, no.

For him Neruda’s odes provide an antidote to “endless sentences / about *commodity markets* and *unregulated practices* and *the new paradigm*,” though the danger remains that the sequence of life and death is simply “all / those lists and then lying down.” The possibility of language as solace, as solution, remains problematic:

the temple of words I thought I lived in
collapsed around me and it was only dust
that I lived in.

In the volume’s opening poem, “Another Place,” Abbot addresses obliquely the question of language as a tool for confronting experience, describing an arrival on “that island” (perhaps Borneo, where as a young man he taught for two years), where “there is more than one language: / gestures, signs, laughter,” and where

the noise
and your own silence will begin
to fill the space around you
and without any costume you will begin
a slow dance in the original tongue,
say *dance*, say *night*.

Silence remains central to his sense of communication, from the creation of poetry through concentration on craft, to the desire for silence that permeates the “No Poem,” to the final image from “In A Time Of Greed”: “rise at dawn and write / at a desk made from wood / found along the beach.”

The danger of unexamined Romanticism lurks in this pastoral vision, but Abbot resides too firmly in the complexities of nature for that danger to take hold. Perhaps my favorite poem in the book is a short one, “Winter Morning”:

Snow curves up and over
the stone wall, perfect in its sweep

→

out into the world. Mathematicians
and angels dancing together,
their temples against each other,
their bodies in concert, came up
with this just as it is.
In the house, *heart*, says the woodstove,
the world says, *cold*. *Little tricks*
of beauty says the table. *Nothing*
lasts forever says the black iron frying pan.

If Katie explores voices and Jay seeks to reconcile the voice of irony with the voice of the heart, Abbot seems to know what he wishes to say and how, patiently, to say it. Katie ends "What She Knows" with the line, "Yes? Yes? Yes?" Speaking as Sisyphus, Jay lets "the boulder go," grabs a beer with his buddies, but then feels "the blue addiction" come over him again, and walks "out to the boulder in the dark," saying yes to the task before him. Abbot has reached the point where he's "ready to give up the way I have of hiding / behind the sly smile of irony," ready to "untether the horse of need and empty the saddlebags / of the fast food of *I don't care* and *whatever*," ready to

Say yes and tomorrow and absolutely and yes,
yes, yes.

The three do not speak with a single voice, but they speak well. And although Robert Bly is now of an age that he can no longer join us in Maine at Camp Kieve during the first week of June, many of us will be there next year, joined by new participants, speaking with our own voices, but with his words and spirit in our hearts and minds. For all his wild energy, his sarcastic humor, his at times harsh political and social commentary, his fierce insistence on quality, his explorations of darkness, Robert Bly has continually offered one lesson: listen to the heart, prepared to say, again and again, Yes.