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BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 65 N°4 SUMMER 2015

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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.

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

**Retail Distributors**

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

Ubiquity Distributors, 607 Degraw St., Brooklyn, NY 11217

*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.

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ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, Maine, using 100% certified renewable energy

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

**OTILIE MULZET**

**Light**

The light gradually eats away at  
the image, at the contours, and at  
the words, stealing a dot here, a  
curvature there, a lone slender

stalk that used to be an *I*  
until it was eaten away by  
forgetfulness, first the serifs became  
indistinct and the black became

uncertain, as if perpetually  
asking itself: am I really a mark  
on this page? and it asked the  
question so many times that the

light saw its advantage, and  
answered: no, no, no, and so with  
that, the *I* relinquished its hold on  
that one millimeter of space

**JUNE ROCKEFELLER**

**Squall**

I once watched a storm cross a pasture.  
The horses fled, but I was stuck

dizzied by darkness, the potential  
of water and open space.

I was unchanged by it. Meaning,  
it taught me nothing.

But I still remember  
just before it reached me,

outstretching my hand to feel rain,  
my head still bone dry.

This isn't a metaphor to teach you about love.

It's a way to say goodbye.

**JUNE ROCKEFELLER**

**Spider**

As a child I found a wolf spider, her scalloped web,  
the wooden bench she sheltered under.

I remember checking her at dawn, at dusk.  
Egg sack on her back, her body

no smaller than my thumb.  
My fear of her was all-consuming,

I remember confusing it for love.  
If I tossed a cricket into her silk, she'd drop down,

spin it unrecognizable. As an adult, seeing  
the spider's photo, I'm caught—frozen but twitching.

Who am I to recall her this way?  
When her egg sack began to pulse,

didn't I strike the match?—  
all those spiderlings—didn't I burn her kingdom down?

**DARBY PRICE**

**This Requires Wisdom**

We woke up this morning, each of us,  
a stinging in our right hands.

The flesh welled up in a red curving line  
as if a brand had been pressed

to our skin as we slept. We puzzled it over coffee,  
consulted our lovers or parents or friends.

No, it doesn't burn anymore. No, doesn't itch.  
There's nothing the matter, it seems, except

we're convinced this can't be good—  
the suddenness of it, the uniformity.

We begin to lay one hand over the mark when we meet.  
We nod at each other instead of shaking.

It is like a nakedness, this flushed swell, and  
no one wants to talk about it anymore.

But behind our backs, our fingers move:  
tracing, retracing the rise.



**CORTNEY LAMAR CHARLESTON**  
**How Do You Raise a Black Child?**

*—with a nod to Claire Kageyama-Ramakrishnan*

From the dead. With pallbearers who are half as young  
as their faces suggest and twice the oxen they should be.  
Without a daddy at all, or with a daddy in prison, or at home,  
or in a different home. With a mama. With a grandmama  
if mama ain't around, maybe even if she is. In a house, or not.  
In the hood. In the suburbs if you're smart or not afraid of white  
fear or even if you are. Taking risks. Scratching lottery tickets.  
Making big bets. On a basketball court. Inside a courtroom.  
*Poorly* in the ever-pathological court of opinion. On faith. Like  
a prayer from the belly of a whale. In church on Sunday morning,  
on Monday, Tuesday, and every other. Before school and after.  
In a school you hope doesn't fail. In a school of thought named  
for Frederick Douglass. Old school or not at all. With hip-hop or  
without. At least with a little Curtis Mayfield, some Motown,  
sounds by Sam Cooke. Eating that good down-home cooking.  
Putting some wood to their behind. With a switch. With a belt  
to keep their pants high. Not high all the time. On all-time highs  
at all times until they learn not to feel and think so lowly of  
their aims. To be six feet tall and not under. With a little elbow  
grease and some duct tape. Sweating bullets. On a short leash.  
Away from the big boys on the block. Away from the boys in blue.  
Without the frill of innocence. From the dead, again. Like a flag.

**WILLIAM KELLEY WOOLFITT**

**Tongueless**

Think of the pine woods, men who strike bark  
with chipping knives, given over to their work

as if bewitched, none speaks or turns to look.  
Think of the camp boss on a horse with lifted ears,

escorting Zora Neale Hurston, who means to collect  
songs and lies. *Up in his face asking to be talked to,*

she wrote. Think of wounds in living trees, gum oozy  
and viscous, the good soft drip, thin and light, cream,

almond, pale yellow. *Black men whose swift strokes  
bleed the pines for gum,* she wrote. Think of trees

cat-faced, the gouges diagonal, whiskery, cicatrixed.  
The chippers don't make up songs, the boss tells her.

These are lonesome woods, he says. Think of threats,  
shanties, beatings, commissary bills. All she hears:

the slash of knives, bark chips shifting underfoot,  
men who grunt, sigh, exhale, keeping time perhaps,

perhaps whistling a few cautious notes, maybe not,  
little sounds, the drip of scars, the silence of trees.

**SUE BURTON**

**Letter from Antoinette Bope to Her Sister Mabel, May 24, 1902**

—*for my great-aunt Nettie, 1880-1902*

Oh, Mabel, *that*  
that I feared.

                    Questions  
loosed & plaguing me at night.  
I wish to tether them & my body  
that demands I touch  
certain parts.

                    Could it be the Soul  
has like demands, for all Eternity?

'Spose God would look down  
& say I have Sinned. Though Mac  
claims Sin's not  
a constant.

But it all went so fast.  
& the Truth is—  
                                writing  
this morning makes  
the letterpaper qualmy.

Papa would not approve  
as Mac is not  
prosperous  
& not a Lutheran.

■

Have found a Mrs. Beatty.  
Rickety stairs up & up,  
five pine chairs & a picture of Jesus.

She poked my belly through my dress  
& took my money & said, come back  
on the morrow—

■

Mabel, the morrow  
is upon me.

All night, dreamt of the Terrible Shooting—  
& who would be next, when even the President  
can't be kept safe?  
I don't like to think about Death.

■

*Clock,*  
*Unwind:* be New Year's again—  
today Unsuspected, Mac still  
a glimpse, curly  
black hair in need  
of a trim,  
bit of a lisp.

Oh, that my face were not  
so broad & plain.

*Fear, I am dizzy.*

God has slacked  
his Grip.

■

Rickety Stairs, railings  
corded with rags, have  
Mercy on me.

(Yet how can Sin be raveled from the Soul?)

Mrs. Beatty has a chipped  
tooth. Though my landlady says—  
oh, by all accounts, she's—

if only—but, Mabel,  
what *other*?

Always,

**SUE BURTON**

**Virtue a Lily, but Pennyroyal Being Practical**

—*Culpeper's Complete Herbal*, 1653

*Boiled and drank, provokes women's courses.*

Rundled, bitter purple herb.

Grows big by the wayside (run-by-the-ground,  
flee-away). Here in Suffolk trapped in gardens.

*With vinegar, abates the marks of blows about the eyes.*

*Helps the cold griefs of the joints.*

Carminative. Diaphoretic. Also called witch weed.

*Ought not to be taken if pregnant.*

Squaw mint, stinking balm.

Weeks of icy rain, hay moldering in the fields.

Oh, to be you, cousin, running wild all the way to London.

**RAE GOUIRAND**

**Petrichor**

We count the amount it has not rained  
in days, in inches, in mind: I do not speak to

others if I do not have to, I do not  
pretend. It has not rained, and I do not

wish to discuss my day, or my choices.  
I do not wish to consider choices. The air

is wrong is what I say, there is nothing  
in it, you can feel yourself hanging in your mouth

if you breathe. I say if when I mean  
when or because. I mean the dust on everything.

Everything sticks to everything inside  
of me, indistinguishable from lack of water.

My friend says a grave is the absence of dirt.  
I remember once walking the yard seeing

in the invisible age this box I filled  
with sand my heart. I am sick of saying it—

I am not asking anyone to take on the water.  
I am not asking anyone to take on the air. How

to think of a place needing rain when it feels  
this close to disappearance. A desert is not a lack—

like every living being I used to be one  
younger version of myself. I do not miss but

envy her scent for water, the way  
she divined. What is a grave if you're literal

about it. What is a glass but a vessel we raise.  
I taste the current that travels the air wrong, like

something forgot. When I was a child  
I took petrichor for granted, smelled it freely

through the rust of tinny screen: dust and  
rain-cooled shingle sizzled the clouds moving

through every room like sound. It's not the effect  
I long for but it helps to say it. It helps to say a grave

is the absence of dirt. It helps to say  
it has not rained and we need it, speaking

in the plural, covering the singular as  
the rush of absent things would cover their first sign.

**DAN ROSENBERG**

**The House Braced for a Bowl Its People**

all day have gone hungry    some men are  
girding themselves to our eye sockets  
where hunger has launched forth in a rage  
during the neighborhood guac party  
where I ended up somehow with blood

sausages and brittle flecks of chips  
ground down in the bag like clipped pinions  
    the neighbors so graceful shoveling  
my slight gifts inside themselves during

each breath of televised slaughter    men  
disguised as golems striving to crush  
or be crushed while a small pig skitters  
among them stepping from hand to hand  
as the glut shifts up and down the field

    leaning toward comprehension I join  
my neighbors in their red murder howls  
only once calling for the severed  
hands of one the rest wanted kept whole

in a distinction I once would have  
understood    but in these latter days  
I see man for the flesh sack he is  
    flightless and brutish and short he will  
reach for the pig he will fall again



**DAN ROSENBERG**

**To Have My Marrow Fate Must Crack Bone**

—after Dexter, 1791

but Father I don't want to be some  
prophet priest king to such family  
    peel this blessing from my hairy arm  
I want it light and loose for hunting  
what wild game streaks by my present tense

    happy to quitclaim my future   it  
passed to him in your invalid words  
but my sighhounds speak forthright   howling  
their hunger up at the deaf-mute stars

no clodpates these beasts   nor dullard I  
for loving the flesh and the pottage  
    no sly mind geared to anticipate  
in my skull yet I often reflect  
and distress myself with my nature

    profane man of body they whisper  
I know with serpent mouths unfettered  
and judging   but I am home in waste  
here with the dragons of wilderness

hunting under what eyes I know not  
nor care   for when I hunger I eat  
and when the roaming burns me I roam  
    and if my seed is to be lesser  
still I will spill it into nations

**JACEK DEHNEL**

**Brzytwa okamgnienia**

—*Warszawa, 7.–13. IV. 2005*

Spójrz, właśnie tędy przeszła brzytwa okamgnienia,  
plamki zakrzepłej sepii świadczą o jej przejściu,  
z prawej zalane łąki i dachy obejścia  
ponad nadmiarem siwej, nieprzejrzystej wody,  
z lewej oni: tobołek, kufajka, patelnia,  
warstwy rozwilgłych spódnic i rozmyte brody

pod kreskami kaszkietów. Łodzie ratunkowe  
dojdą albo nie dojdą z Brześcia lub Kamienia.  
Stan wody bez zmian. Zastój. Brzytwa okamgnienia  
odcina to, co zbędne: całą resztę świata  
za rozlewiskiem, jakieś sztaby kryzysowe  
w surdutach, z wąsem, z lśnieniem słuchawek na blatach

szerokich, mahoniowych biurek. To, co płaskie  
zostało na płaszczyźnie, na lśniącej powierzchni  
cięcia: trafiają do nas te, nie inne, kreski  
deszczu, bez chwili przed i chwili po, i wielka  
woda i strach (na wróble) i ukryte paski  
na których wisi w pustce mała, czarna Leica.

**JACEK DEHNEL**  
**A Razor-Sharp Glance**

—*Warsaw, 7–13 April, 2005*

Look, here's the spot where a razor-sharp glance  
sliced off a swath of clotted sepia as proof:  
to the right, waterlogged fields and barn roofs  
emerging from the murky, gray expanse;  
to the left, a knapsack and frying pan,  
damp pleats, somebody's fleece, a blur of chins

beneath workers' brimmed caps. Rescue boats  
might arrive—who knows when—from Kamien or Brest.  
The water's still high. Grows stagnant. This one  
sharp glance trims away the rest: the excess  
world beyond the flood, crisis team in frock-coats  
and mustaches, their gleaming telephones

on broad mahogany desks. Whatever's flat  
remains so on the blade's bright surface:  
these streaks of rain, not others, reach us  
without the ones before or since—the rising  
water and drowned scarecrows and hidden strap  
on which a small, black Leica is dangling.

**translated from the Polish by Karen Kovacik**

**JACEK DEHNEL**

**Korytarz, późna jesień**

*—pociąg Gdańsk-Bydgoszcz-Toruń, 21. XI. 2003*

Wychodzę z przegrzanego—jak zwykle—przedziału.  
Od rana same Breughle, bo to późna jesień  
(gdyby nie jakaś stacja od czasu do czasu,  
jakiś blok i bocznica, pociąg by udawał  
salę w Kunsthistorisches z zupełnym mistrzostwem;  
puścić między te wierzby chłopów z tasakami  
w karminowych kubrakach i w spodniach niebieskich  
i malować starannie, z paletą i z głową. . . ) .  
Otwieram któryś obraz (pani obok pali)—  
—widok przejrzysty, jakby zdjęć mgłę i werniksy:  
pod ścianą rosochaczy (które ktoś życzliwy  
nazwałby może laskiem) szafirowa chmura,  
obok druga, czerwona, na tle czarnych żerdzi.

Jak zawieszona w mrozie rozpylone krople  
zakrzepłej farby albo zdjęcie elektronów.

Mieszczuch—nie znam, więc szukam w głowie; pociąg zwalnia;  
i znajduję: że krzewy tarniny i głogu  
(czyli cierpkość rosnąca pospołu z miłością;  
mieszczuch, ale z książkami), z których liście właśnie  
opadły, zostawiając obłoki owoców.

I jakby nie opisać, po tych wszystkich Breughlach  
po wszystkich erudycjach—ta gwałtowność piękna.  
Od kogo taki prezent, tak niespodziewany  
w dwudziestym trzecim roku: te krzewy tarniny  
i głogu, te obłoki przypięte do ziemi?  
Odpowiedź: “Od nikogo” byłaby niewdzięczna  
i, na szczęście, zbyt prosta. Tarniny znikają.

**JACEK DEHNEL**

**Train Corridor, Late Fall**

*—Train, Gdańsk-Bydgoszcz-Toruń, 21 November 2003*

I slip out of the compartment—stuffy, as usual.  
Since daybreak, I've seen one Breughel after another  
as it's late fall (and if not for some station now and then,  
some apartment block or side track, this train would resemble  
a gallery of the Kunsthistorisches with its exacting replicas:  
oh, to drop those villagers with carmine doublets and blue trousers  
between the willows, cleavers in hand, and to paint them  
so meticulously with both palette and the mind). . . .  
I unlatch an image (the woman next to me is smoking)—  
a landscape so clear, as if all fog and varnish had vanished:  
beneath a wall of twisted branches (which some gracious soul  
might call a grove) a lapis cloud looms beside a red one,  
against a backdrop of thin, black trunks.

As if suspended in cold air, like atomized splotches  
of clotted paint or a photo of electrons.

A city guy, I'm weak on trees, so I scan my memory;  
the train slows, and the names come: blackthorn and hawthorn  
(or tartness grafted with love—  
I'm strong on nature, thanks to books), their leaves just fallen,  
revealing clouds of sloe plums.

And after all those Breughels, all that mental effort,  
how not to describe it: this fierceness of beauty.  
The hawthorns and blackthorns, those clouds  
sticking to the ground. Such an unexpected gift  
and from whom, in my twenty-third year?  
The answer "From no one" would be ungrateful  
and, in truth, too simple. The blackthorns fly past.

**translated from the Polish by Karen Kovacic**

**STEVE WILSON**

**Tone Study**

Within the weary beauty of Chopin—  
nonpareils, Champagne—we sit and sit,  
confused accoutrements. Monet, who dreamed  
of water: how unbodied do his lights  
descend. And small Gauguin consumed like sweets  
his nudes, his mangoes, greens, the girls unsure  
he'd keep his word. To wander slow, dead slow,  
along ennui. Ah, the luxuriousness of boredom.  
Sea breeze. A certain way of shaping sound  
and color. And music. Long, retiring chords—say  
the way is clearer now, my friends, friends for  
the polonaise. Insistent, nonchalant,  
we're languorous in time. I'd turn. I would,  
but for the weakened battlements outside.

**STEVE WILSON**

**Little Poem for Edward Gorey**

Something mutters at the trim  
of the page—a word or two  
concealed within an heiress's coat.

At the gallery opening, she draws them  
to herself again, under her breathing,  
beside a dimmed canvas. It is raining now

across the broad plains of Kenya, where  
syllables range, sweat, conspire  
to become: the needle within her thoughts—

at once certain and sheltered. What is  
this sound—sound's shape? The voice of  
a lover leaving? What trails through air

remorseless as this slender glass of Sémillon,  
abandoned beside a paisley chair?  
Speak. Speak, pale form, lest I be lost.

**SUSAN TICHY**  
**Mỹ Tho**

—*Vietnam*

Photograph of a sign  
I cannot read

Can't read except  
a guillotine

in cheap paint  
strong as pillars once

dashed down  
Dashed down but in

an artist's hand  
arrested

Arrested or  
incessant fall

of thought once  
steeled

Resistant words  
I can't read in-

to the world  
I can

■

Say one true thing



**SUSAN TICHY**

**Imago**

*You will be sent a brief biography of your prisoner,  
along with a photograph if one is available.*

—Amnesty International, instructions to prisoner adoption groups

And some days I hold before me  
like a cross against the devil  
the face of a man who was jailed.

I say his name  
instead of weeping, and this is what comes of it:  
the tie,

just barely loosened from his thin neck, stays  
the same. Four hundred and eighty days  
in solitude stay the same. Seventy days in a cell  
in which he could not lie down remain  
one day and then

another.

A man leans forward as if impatient  
with the edge of a green couch.

And so much depends upon the palm  
of one hand against another, the shape of his knee, the glaze  
of sweat across his forehead—

Confess: he is no proof against the sky,  
but bargains with it.

Like a witch on a wheel, like a raven  
who speaks long after death, he makes himself  
ungainable, he makes himself an obstacle  
to ease.

But I am not dissuaded.  
Each surface I look into holds  
this battered, minor god—  
pressing upward, flayed, pursued.

*Look, it says—a face—we do not die.*

**SUSAN TICHY**  
**The War Poets**

—*for M*

They came to this the same way I did  
They had to imagine it, except

They had to imagine it  
As it happened

A large man, who is black  
Or white

Carries a woman  
A small woman, a girl

In through the door of a building  
Without a door

Something else is burning, a building  
And she is screaming

It is night and she  
Is only one of the things they have had

To imagine  
In their short lives

They want to help her  
But they don't

I don't have to imagine this  
But I do

And I don't help much  
Either

'Sixteen years ago today'  
You used to say

Twenty-eight years  
Thirty-two

Years ago, today  
Buildings burned

And something else was screaming

■

*In another dream, in silence*

We get out of the car  
It isn't our car

And follow the man and the woman  
Him dragging her, her screaming

We know, although  
It is memory, and silent

Past the fires' dangerous light  
Past the fires in-

To the building  
In through the door

Where he will be waiting for us  
And he is

And what we do won't help her  
But we go

In through the door in a full knowledge  
You first and then I follow

I always come out without you  
Without her

With or without him chasing me  
On the dark, wet grass

And I will outrun him  
I will outrun him because

SUSAN TICHY

There is something back there he wants  
More

And whether it is  
Your death or hers

I wake again  
Without knowing

**VASILIKI ALBEDO BENNU**

**Elections**

—*Athens, January 2015*

He says that  
but what if he says then he  
says the country has or maybe  
oil plutonium maybe how  
much and not but enough so  
what if under the surface who  
knows he says he knows and he  
and he and he but not he he doesn't believe  
maybe he says in the future. Germany  
and Germany and Merkel and Schäuble  
and conspiracy and so dumbed  
down as a what do you as a  
nation do and as this glory that was is  
ours forever and look at these books  
and these books and these our words and  
we can learn to pick up our litter if  
taught if told if allowed but no  
these our ruins and that  
bleeding union that bleeds that we need that we don't  
that we do and what about  
next year what about in two and in ten  
will house bubbles rise and soar or burst and bust  
in two in five in ten and will we pay for  
them again and again and taxes and when  
can we sell and when will pensions  
will they how will they and the winters are cold and the wood  
and that tax and that tax and that tax and that  
tax and that tax and we  
will not be downtrodden union unite why should will they  
in Spain unite denied deny we know we don't  
believe in debts we do and they do and then  
and then what if will they next year in two in five we must  
believe. This is now. Today. Don't get slapped  
on tv. Not our fault our fault and where  
are the rich we are poor the rich on the hill  
with accounts accounts unaccounted accounts  
and now they we're all poor and then he remembers  
our glorious dances and lifts up his arms like the rays  
of a sun to the people who scream Yes

→

and remember these years these thousands  
of glory years ago and now what now what  
who is to pay who is to rectify he says he can do it  
and so does he and he and he and he and he and who  
in what do we believe

KEVIN RIEL

Against the Campaign to Stomp Out “Awesome”

*Awesome*, its two-beat life span trochees in and out  
of my mouth, a defiance riding the silence  
that enjoys us, like I did that chile relleno burrito, or last

week’s pinkest sunset, dad’s new surfboard, or the news  
the darkness on my forehead is benign. Yep, *awesome*  
“is elegy to what it signifies,” meditates Robert Hass,

as the pleased voice is pleasure’s psychopomp;  
the just-dead world made word, made, as poem, almost  
successfully alive. Yet on public radio some poet

calls me, mom and dad, probably you, *ridiculous idiots*  
for saying *awesome/awesome*. *Awesome*  
is more gesture than word, is a pumping fist,

nodding head, thumbs up; never *le mot juste*,  
none exists. There’s nothing precise about *awe*,  
its magnitudes are unknown quantities of *some*,

a suffix that suits *The Big Lebowski* to Half Dome  
better than those of *wonderful*, *beautiful*, *purposeful*. Yet  
*it’s dreadful, just dreadful*, says the Oxbridge pedant,

*dreadful, my dear, these youngsters with their fretfully*  
*impoverished vocabularies*. Qualifiers are drowsy reflexes:  
The astute server says, *the Napa pinot is terrific/*

*terrific choice, the sole with farro and peas/have a terrific*  
*evening*. Where’s the terror? Where’s the terrific  
fuck I’m supposed to give? Hackneying is not . . . no,

not just thoughtlessness; it’s sharing a lingo,  
an understanding, a social identity, yes, lost  
the more it’s shared, just like the thoughtful play

of synonyms can be a bully’s game. *Awesome*  
means you no harm, just rolled out of bed, and  
hasn’t done yoga in like a week. But *awesome*

is the monument we'll raise to your *splendorous*,  
*venerable*, your *preeminent* diction of novelty. *Awesome*  
will be the natives' education; bedeck our adjectives

in morion, codpiece, and crucifix 'cause who needs readers  
when subjects can be got cheaply? Who needs art  
when vestments are the rage? Forgive me, *dreadful*

is my overreaction. This hyperbole keeps rupturing its crypt;  
it can't stand beadledom, not least of which my own.  
Hordes of undead hyperbole to come, the most ingenerate

mode of speech because we all make like *awesome!*  
and die. What's there to repel the *dreadful*, *dreadful*  
darkening but our persistent *awesome/awesome/awesome?*



**KATHERINE NOBLE**

**Arias di Sorbetto**

**1**

I have crossed the Judaic age of reason  
twice now at twenty-four. Innocence interpreted  
as a mere illusion of childhood—  
a basic sleight of hand. Experience  
like an appendage we find on our bodies  
in the dark, then bury and revisit  
and bury until the map is too worn  
to unfold and follow.

In junior high a girl  
grabbed my jeans out of my gym bag,  
put them on, and paraded  
around the court, telling classmates two of her  
could fit in the pants. *Magic 8 Ball*,  
*will I be beautiful?* I asked  
over and over in my grandmother's basement.

During our weekly game of dominoes,  
an old man urinated on the floor  
then wept for it.  
These are the things that kill us eventually.  
Our organs respond to neurons wrapped in shame  
through the decades—the effect cannot be ignored.  
Kunitz claims desire makes the engine go. Shame  
shuts down the motor mid-rotation.

**2**

Tiresias, why were you embarrassed  
watching two snakes fuck?  
Did the phallic wrestling conjure too much arousal  
to witness without destroying them afterward?  
*Magic 8 Ball*, *will I be beautiful?*  
My childhood clairvoyant rolled its blind eye,  
told me to concentrate and ask again.

Arthur Conan Doyle called on a medium  
to contact his son, Kingsley, killed post-combat.  
*Tried hard not to die*,  
Kingsley communicated to the soothsayer.  
Doyle strained to hear him through the thin  
November air. Nothing.

*She said Kingsley calls me dad,*  
Doyle recorded later in careful script, dying  
to remember the medium's tête-à-tête  
with his dead, holding hope  
against reality: *That's good—*  
*but he always called me dadsy.*  
Tiresias takes off his sunglasses,  
realizes he can see right in front of him,  
and his breasts are leaking.

3

The empires of history are filled  
with the shameless breasts of concubines.  
They laugh and refill chalices, thumbing silks  
with despondent eyes. Write miserable poems  
in careful left-handed script. They do not want  
freedom—that is a misunderstanding.  
They want a fig tree  
planted closer to the window,  
a dove nesting. Albino peacocks.  
Caramel cakes, hot oceans,  
arias di sorbetto.

They want the men  
to turn around one more time  
as they walk away.  
But these longings are common, private,  
and not worthy of record. They repeat through the castles  
of civilization. Dust, and the dust returns.

4

Linda Gregg told Jack  
loving him was like being alive  
twice. Her life large enough  
to fit two people in its fabric  
two times over. But as for me:  
Both times a wall met me.  
Both times, I was naked and ashamed.  
Both times, I was most mesmerized  
by the aria di sorbetto, sung to me privately  
while everyone else waited in line for Champagne.

5

The Japanese reorganize  
their wooden objects to instill small meaning.  
The light lightens, and the moon is lassoed  
when it tries to spin itself away.  
C. is asleep for two more hours,  
and I watch the morning catch dust  
across the floor, hear him breathe, wait.

I saw something similar  
in a barn once while feeding horses  
at 5:30. As I stood knee-deep in hay,  
listening to the mares and the Arabian hum,  
I knew I could never explain the beauty to anyone—  
the dusk was gold and ghostheavy, splitting  
the mangers' planks like rapture—  
the afternoon a painting no one will ever get right.

**CARA DEES**

**You Have Two to Three Months, Maybe Less**

In spring they cull you, the doctors, those dreams  
of a beyond-territory built with

clean human minds in concord, chimed  
to a single knell, shrines astonished with

burnt sacrifice stacked under a cut-white  
sun. To eat, eating, will be eaten. To

make of misfortune a cleansing, a mild  
*matité*, a morning rising and rose-

trimmed. In winter they reassemble you  
(the battered veins, the glitching beat) among

their likenesses, with smudged armor, thumbscrew  
CT scans, those whose gazes ferry them

from yours taking them in, who won't say they  
sold you anything like wonder or hope.

**JENNIFER LIGHTY**

**The Door**

If we leave our front door open even  
a crack, the dog comes in. *A fuera—out—*  
I groan from my bed. I am waiting out the sun  
with a book of poems in which a woman  
walks naked to a well and pulls a rope  
from the dark earth  
like a serpent's tail.

When she pours the cold water  
over her skin, drops cling and glisten.

I sweat. Scratch flea bites. Cringe  
when my roommate yells  
with the necessary force to send the dog  
out the door.

The dog is pregnant,  
looking for a place to give birth.

The guys who live in the bar next door  
call her *Chaparrita*. I'm told it's an endearment  
for short, chubby females.

Yesterday I watched her gnaw plastic bottles  
they threw in the street. They claim she's theirs,  
though I don't know what that means here  
or in any other country.

Every time she sneaks back in she looks at us  
like this time we'll realize we love her.

At sunset the bar opens. We lock the door.

**JENNIFER LIGHTY**  
**Shaping the Dark**

I didn't know I was afraid of the dark  
until it rose off blacktop and ran toward me  
as if it had been waiting for me to round the corner  
where the last streetlight burned a hole in the jungle night.

By the time I know the dark is a dog,  
it's too late to turn. All I can do  
is pedal faster and hope my fear  
carries me past its teeth.

I could shout, but I don't.  
It's only when I realize the dog is silent too,  
that I see it's Chaparrita running toward me,  
nipples swaying beneath her belly so swollen  
it almost drags on the street.

I brake, flip my kickstand down, get off,  
and kneel before her. When I press my face  
against her neck, I breathe in hunger and dust  
and love.

Was she waiting for me?  
It doesn't matter. I'm the one  
who rode out of the dark  
crying her name. *Chaparrita!*

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN**  
**The After-Man**

wants ~~an art that~~

a that which

exceeds ~~calculation and~~

wants

~~abrogation of~~

a that with which

to reset

~~the hands of the~~

the heads of the

clock

wants

at zero

a clock which

wants

to reset

with

hands ~~which~~

but

breaking with the past [~~strikethru~~]

is actually ~~forgetting~~

repeating

the ~~sublime is~~

that which

~~is wanted~~ exceeds

breaking

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN**  
**Because we want**

it there, we put  
it there

our wanting it  
is it  
it is

father  
lover  
lastly  
genre

please  
here,  
a variation on refrain

(smell of sex,  
drinking  
with children in the house)

because we put it there

(how we  
all stayed friends)

every borrowing

drags along with it  
the whole

we put it there because

please here



**BOOKS IN BRIEF: New Wine**

**Melissa Crowe**

**Sandy Longhorn, *The Alchemy of My Mortal Form*** (Ponte Vedra Beach, FL: Trio House Press, 2015, 75 pp, \$16 paper)

**Bradford Tice, *What the Night Numbered*** (Ponte Vedra Beach, FL: Trio House Press, 2015, 109 pp, \$16 paper)

I must have been five when I realized that, unlike other kids, I had no father. Suddenly, it seemed clear not only that one kind of family passed as standard but that there were also deviations, mine one of them. It would be years before I'd get the details—my eighteen-year-old mother a cocktail waitress, my father a man she'd met in the bar, in his thirties and with another family a few towns over. I couldn't fathom this adult drama. In short order, though, I'd produced a tale that explained my father's conspicuous absence. He'd been in Vietnam, I said, and he didn't make it back. The more sophisticated I became (and the more movies I saw), the more detail this mythos accrued. I saw him crawling through a burning field, abandoned to die as his platoon lifted off in a helicopter bound for safety.

This fiction, however bleak, was a comfort to me. As Joseph Campbell has noted, myth teaches us the social order, conveys an understanding and respect for the way things are, this grasp of norms a matter of literal survival. Myth stirs in us "a sense of grateful affirmative awe before the monstrous mystery that is existence." I needed the bigness of war to understand my monstrous world and to transmit to that world the size—the significance—of my loss.

For similar reasons, artists turn to myths, finding in them all they need for grappling with cosmic forces and the human drama of every era. Poets often refashion the tales they borrow, critiquing the sociological systems those tales reflect and reinforce. Reginald Shepherd has written that such work sets about "questioning [the myth's] terms, bringing out what it represses or excludes, giving voice to those whom it silences, giving presence to those it makes invisible." Poets also engage in mythopoesis, adopting mythology's moves to confer upon intimate terrain the weight of long tradition.

In *What the Night Numbered*, Bradford Tice applies the myth of Cupid and Psyche to the story of the 1969 Stonewall riots, offering the perspective of those who resisted homophobic

harassment and gave rise to a movement. In *The Alchemy of My Mortal Form*, Sandy Longhorn mythologizes life-threatening illness in an effort to illuminate the struggle to survive intact the efforts modern medicine makes to save us. That both make the leap to myth so easily, so convincingly, lets us know their own stories were always big enough, their worlds monstrous enough, to inspire our awe.

■  
*The Alchemy of My Mortal Form* portrays a young woman with an unnamed disease characterized by the fevers common to leukemia patients. During a year-long hospitalization, she seems to undergo chemotherapy. Words like *stethoscope*, *prescription*, and *DNA* signal that the speaker of the book inhabits a near-present moment in which a high-tech medical establishment wields an arsenal of pharmaceutical weapons. The doctors, she tells us, “prescribe more medications meant / to hold me here, their fragile fool.” Several poems depict her receipt of blood transfusions and a bone marrow transplant, treatments that seem to result in remission.

This contemporaneity wouldn't be notable if much of the book's language didn't put us nearer to an ancient or alternate historical moment. In “General Orders of a Whitecoat,” Longhorn describes the physicians' work in terms more medieval than modern; they “battle the degenerate blackness of night” and “approach the body by preying without distinction.” Their methods appear violent and imprecise, drawn from an era of superstition and misapprehension: they “lance the wounds & let the poison seep.” To be a whitecoat's patient is to suffer near obliteration via a cure in which it's impossible (at least at the outset) to have much confidence. By braiding contemporary and archaic images and diction, Longhorn suggests that, while there may be a chasm between bloodletting and chemotherapy, patients treated for cancer still experience tremendous pain, confusion, and fear.

Lack of control appears another distressing holdover. Longhorn's speaker describes her room as a jail; the staff drugs her with regularity, her “dreams induced to knock / [her] damaged crown askew.” She's robbed of privacy, procedures taking place while she's unconscious. “When I wake,” she says, “my bones /

have been replaced with porcelain, sinew / altered to wire, & my tongue, my tongue / lets loose what once was barred & guarded." Since all the whitecoats are male and the patients female, this powerlessness seems gendered, calling to mind a mythic tradition in which women are variously punished or trapped (in towers, under glass) and awaiting rescue. The female body as alternately docile and rebellious becomes, then, another crucial link between the book's two timescapes. Longhorn's blurring of them suggests one of two possibilities: that treatment for catastrophic illness feminizes everyone or that medicine is persistently patriarchal.

Does a sexist imbalance of power persist in hospitals? I'm certainly willing to entertain the prospect, and these poems imply it does. Nurses, always female in Longhorn's book, defer to "all whitecoats who may appear, even unscheduled, keeping eyes downcast & humble." Hospital staff act as handmaidens in the effort to subdue the female patient, her illness configured as sin or revolt. Like most people deprived of power, the speaker is by turns compliant and resistant. Sometimes she acquiesces because her physical and emotional resources are depleted, by both the illness and the cure. In "A Dark, Gelatinous Ruin," Longhorn writes:

The whitecoat proclaims my body a stubborn  
subject that refuses. He shakes his head, scolds.  
Against my will, I wilt, weeping before him.  
I suffer & succumb. This body now  
his salvaged wreck to scavenge.

Later, the speaker sees her doctors' efforts as benevolent—because effective. Emerging from fevered delirium, she admits, "I must forgive the whitecoats / for how they forced / my hands to loose their hold / on the pyrite & the flint," and proclaims the doctors "saved the root" of her, affording her rebirth. Is Longhorn suggesting here that, though patients experience their care as painful and coercive, that care is necessary and its purveyors well-intentioned? If so, femininity becomes a trope for the experience of having been denied control, perhaps justifiably. I worry such a metaphor threatens to obscure the literal experiences of women. When powerlessness is equated with being female, we're in danger of naturalizing precisely what we ought to reveal as constructed.

I'll admit I'm not sure where Longhorn lands on this issue. It's worth reading her book, though, to grapple with the questions it engenders: Is medicine still predominately patriarchal? Do we rob patients—female or otherwise—of control over their care? Do the methods by which we seek to cure cancer still feel like torture, and can we do anything about this? When it comes to prolonging life, do ends always justify the means?

And in the end, the speaker's critical stance toward her care doesn't disappear when she starts to feel better. In fact, the book's mythic moves redouble in the final poems, as the ever-stronger protagonist begins to plot her escape. She is hounded by staff to pay medical bills she can't afford and may be refused release until they can locate a relative to take responsibility for her debt. Recognizing the troubling nature of a system that charges upwards of a million dollars for lifesaving care, she doesn't await permission to leave. Instead, like a world-starved and wily inmate or a Rapunzel prepared to save herself from the tower, she uses a "pilfered knife" to loosen the bars on her window. Longhorn writes:

My one regret,  
         that I won't see their faces  
                 when they knock & wait  
 & eventually discover this room  
   emptied  
 of a now-hale body, emptied  
         of all my small possessions,  
                 save the stub of this dulled knife.



As Longhorn mythologizes the patient's experience of exile from the world of the healthy, Bradford Tice borrows the story of Cupid and Psyche to shed light on the exile of those who don't conform to heteronormative expectations. He focuses on the Greenwich Village drag queens who came to be known as the Stonewall Girls. Psyche, abandoned by her family because they fear her beauty might draw the wrath of the gods, and Cupid, who engages in forbidden love, make apt figures for the speakers of the poems in *What the Night Numbered*. An oppressive, punishing cultural mainstream stands in for Venus, Cupid's jealous mother.

Tice begins with the first exile many gay and transgendered young people experience: rejection by family members. The early poems dramatize the origin story of Tice's version of Psyche, who begins life as a Midwestern farm boy and then escapes to New York City, he tells us, "the night my father caught me / in Mama's wedding dress." Among the city's mixed squalor and glamor, the boy finds community, a social order with rules he can embrace:

The world may think there is no  
category, slot, fit for a boy in love with the lick  
of glitz, but hooked to the pain as we are,  
there is always a grand gesture, a way to thrive.

Thriving, for the Stonewall Girls, is a matter of living authentically in the ferociously homophobic New York of the late 60s. The drag queens who adopt the fourteen-year-old farm boy must struggle to survive their work as prostitutes, the violence heaped upon them by everyone from johns to cops. In "Zazu Recalls Psyche's Birth," the speaker recounts being attacked by a couple of men in the park: "the blow to the back of the head came first, // then the names—*Faggot, thicklips, freaky nigger bitch*." At this moment, the boy she would rechristen "Psyche" "stepped out / from behind the dumpster" to become Zazu's unlikely comforter. She tells us:

he pulled my head into his lap,  
hummed along with the band playing live

from the Copacabana,  
used his sleeve to soak the blood

Here and elsewhere, Tice makes moral heroes of those the culture would make outsiders, thereby offering an alternative to the dominant narrative of the time. While the "normal" people, including police officers, behave in ways underhanded and cruel, Gin Phizzy, Zazu, Tommy, and the rest of the gang treat one another with tenderness, living by a shared ethics made explicit in "The Golden Rats": "*Be kind to someone every day, / make sure your makeup's never running . . . can't be dirty . . . / protect who's in trouble, attacked, someone queer.*"

Together this makeshift family moves in and out of whatever gay spaces they can find or create. All such spaces, including

mob-owned clubs like the Stonewall, offer both tenuous refuge and the specter of danger. Tommy's lover, Joe, is a cop who comes to Mama's Chick'N'Rib (a diner that serves as a gay hangout after hours) both to enjoy the cover it provides and to collect "hush money" for the police. Tice echoes the Cupid and Psyche story, in which the beleaguered lovers can be together only at night, when he writes, "For eight hours every day, Joe forgets / Tommy exists." Aside from the Stonewall Girls, most of the gay men in the book (all called "Cupid" by Tice) live this double life. As in the original myth, Psyche and the other girls never know whether the men they love, always hidden from full view, are beautiful gods or monsters. The homophobic culture that contorts their lives makes the likely answer both. The pain of such contortion is evident when Psyche tells her Cupid:

I know about your girl  
in that penthouse uptown. I know  
about your daughter.  
They don't breathe here. Only we do.

All Tice's Cupids struggle to maintain a split self, to contend with "what it feels like knowing / what you are, what they would call you if they saw." The risks of being outed are harrowing—wearing an insufficient number of "gender appropriate" items of clothing could result in jail time, and homosexual acts, if discovered, might lead to institutionalization. Once hospitalized, gay men were in physical danger. As in Longhorn's book, the patient in Tice's "Cupid at the Asylum" has been deemed unfit and consequently suffers legally sanctioned mutilation. Cupid tells us "Lobotomy, castration, sexual deviance. / The words are a part of a thing that's inside me / they say, a thing that will need to be lanced."

For years, the law tried to *lance* those who lived outside accepted sexual mores. The police raided gay bars constantly. For years, club goers cooperated. And then, in the wee hours of the morning of Sunday, June 28, 1969, during a raid, patrons of the Stonewall refused to line up or provide identification. As the police attempted to load them into wagons, a crowd gathered outside and began to hurl insults, coins, bottles, and bricks. The Stonewall Girls formed a kick line, serious play aimed at goading police and strengthening their own sense of solidarity. Protests continued throughout the week, crowds growing to over

a thousand, evidence that the days of quiet adherence to abusive laws were ending. Gay men and lesbians met in the aftermath to form coalitions and plan further action. As Tice has Psyche tell us, “The mythic / possibilities of that hour / were endless.” Those so long left out of or denigrated by the central stories of our culture were in a position now to seize the means to shape that culture’s future.

By the end of *What the Night Numbered*, we feel the full weight of the sorrow and pain experienced by the drag queens, transgendered folks, homeless gay teens, “Cupids,” and others deemed unlawful by mainstream America, but we understand there has been among them no failure to thrive. An oppressed population, fed up, is radicalized before our eyes. Tice concludes the penultimate poem in the collection with the lines, “There we were in that new city. There we were / strolling our avenue, none of us dropping our eyes to our feet.” This note of sudden pride and power feels perfect to me.



Near the end of her book, Longhorn’s patient writes to a woman friend on the outside, “Expect me three nights past / the new moon. I’ll be insolvent, hungry, / in need of just enough to make my way.” Still struggling and still stubborn, she’s ready to locate salvation in herself and the possibility of help from a sympathetic quarter. Whatever may come, she has disrupted the conventional story of a woman simultaneously saved and subdued. Similarly, in Tice’s revision of Psyche’s story, Cupid fails to swoop in and save his bride from his mother/culture’s impossible taskmastering. Instead, he tells us:

It was one of your kind, a street kid, who took your hand

and pulled you back into their number. Me, I was the one  
who watched all of your trials—suffering in the face  
of my desire for the grit of your jaw, brace of your back—

did nothing but wait for the story to finish.

Here are calls to readers to do something other than wait for the story to finish. Alicia Ostriker describes revisionist myth as an “old vessel filled with new wine” capable of “initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural

change possible.” When we tell stories of people left out or silenced in myth, Ostriker argues, “we look at, or into, but not up at, sacred things; we unlearn submission.” These books by Tice and Longhorn, then, become not just retellings of old tales but new wine that might help us all unlearn submission. Perhaps I could unlearn submission by telling my personal myth a little differently; in this version, a young woman overcomes shame and fear to track down her father, to present herself to the man who failed to come for her. She braves a field of fire to bring him back from the brink, and though that salvage quest doesn’t succeed and she must hitch a ride back to safety, leaving him behind, she becomes a kind of hero to herself. Such new wine, I think, might taste pretty good. The mythic possibilities of this hour, too, are endless.