

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 65 N°2
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BPJ

THE EDITORS OF
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL
ARE PROUD TO AWARD
THE TWENTY-SECOND ANNUAL
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE
OF \$4,000

TO
FIONA CHAMNESS
FOR HER POEM "CHOREOGRAPHY FOR ENSEMBLE"
IN THE FALL 2014 ISSUE.

HONORING THE POET CHAD WALSH,
COFOUNDER, IN 1950, OF THIS MAGAZINE,
THE PRIZE IS THE GIFT THIS YEAR OF
ALISON WALSH SACKETT AND PAUL SACKETT,
MADELINE WALSH HAMBLIN, SARAH WALSH,
AND FORMER WALSH PRIZE WINNERS
MARGARET AHO, KARL ELDER,
JESSICA GOODFELLOW, ELIZABETH T. GRAY JR.,
JANET HOLMES, MARY MOLINARY,
LUCIA PERILLO, SUSAN TICHY,
AND CHARLES WYATT.

ANDREA COHEN

Doing the Loop

The rules are made in factories.
The rules are made to be broken.

Broken people see themselves in broken things.
Whole towns of broken people work somehow.

Somehow is not a place.
Yet you get there and wonder: how?

How, repeated, is a kind of howl.
In wilds and towns, how answers how.

How do you begin or end?
There are no rules. Begin again.

ANDREA COHEN
Poison Hotline

It's got one operator
and two numbers, one

harried taker of incoming
whose job it is to listen

and sound unalarmed, to
first do no harm by recalling

which number a caller
at the end of her tether

has called. One number
offers antidotes for poisons

taken mistakenly. The other
instructs how to bake

a Bundt cake with hemlock.
Keeping it straight is a lot

to ask of one insomniac, who
on quiet nights dials one

number from the other, taking
turns as a certain injured

party, practicing for when
he gets back to the dark

still house and talks
himself through it.

SARAH J. SLOAT

Inksleep

I lean into sleep alphabetically but tonight
I can't follow the *q* or the *g*, only a lapping

that deadens all letters and seeps into margins,
a lapping that drapes a blanket over recto

and verso, over misprint and ardor. Inksleep,
moving with magnetic instep, pulling

the loose pieces to it, the run-ons and fragments.
I wade in, awash in the blotting, hem

gone indigo, knees steeped in the deep blue
that comes not with the terror of typesmear

or error, not with sessions of eyeshut,
no blotch or flub, no fear of omission. Just

ink that spills from its tipped well
that seals the lids with lists

and inscriptions, the inverse of erasure,
the gathering stain I let at last overtake me.

BEATRIX GATES

Blueprint

—for Jane Cooper

1

A blue-gray triangle

fills the body's chambers

breath across the collarbone quiet down the ribs

flowing flame at the solar plexus.

Breath drawn from the space of air outside the body

penetrating tiniest nerve endings clustered at the fingertips.

Hear it See it

The sun reminds us of our time.

Peaceful curtain, drawing.

Blue-gray inside orange finger flame.

2

A bird knows

how to re-enter the sky

flying from the buildings scaffold of wing.

Is the blue-gray triangle your mind

growing rays from the cool hands of the clock

towards a large still place?

Not supposed to live past the age of five,

you wondered at what you saw:

porpoise signaling from the waves.

Later, your poems tracked the sight lines

of aviators clearing the bomb trail

and from the ground, "the sky . . . streaked with pilots falling."

Blue-gray porpoise, lasting, leaps into the sun.

Your mind skirts the universe starlight from canyon floors

and names far and near as blood and stranger.

No use dying amid your sense

of having to climb infinite ladders and stay standing.

The high cliffs beckon.

The birds.

3

Approaching the city

from the west I see the rising
blue-gray towers, orbs, triangles,
silhouette of mysterious Chrysler
and Empire State buildings.
The river strand shining white
like your hair around your living
lined face.

Cool slices of sky in the river current.

4

Blue-gray, the changing cloudscape
nest of orange sun behind trees

Gray changes to rain freshens the paved road.

And when I ask, you direct me.
I leave the door open a crack
for higher heat—your mind aglow
and three new pencils dreaming beside you.

Looking down, looking around for clues I say little.

“It’s all so incomprehensible,” you reply.

Your eyes, the blue-gray
looking out from the horizon.

BEATRIX GATES

The Verge

—on 2/3/13 for M.

It snowed the night
white and black
And you are sharp
outline of this tender visible
seeing

This morning, every branch speaks to the ground
as it speaks to the air

February: an ungallant, undeniable
between

This is the juice, the squeeze between,
the time ground works
to bring round what we will know
and recognize—

How we need the verge

Caution Shoulder Work Ahead
Ice jam at the bridge Stream's locked
Busting concrete's cracking from the beam

I hear delirium, the changing blood
Water caught hard
Ungallant, undeniable
The water must through!

It could be called delirium
Speaking to many
But it's not
Change

LISA ALLEN ORTIZ

Betaken

Stay I said but already she was gone.
I set the table: feeble sun, napkins rolled
in their beaded rings.

Silver tiffin box. Outside: that tree.
Moss and lichen, damp ferns,
all its tendrils crack and spin.

I was left alone. Every dawn retaken.
A paper hymn, each broken note:
gate, road, tires, rocks.

Before she died she said: *too many windows*.
Birds marked up the sky then it all erased,
blue as before. Dark hole, brass horn.

LISA ALLEN ORTIZ

Assistant to the Curator, Notes on the Donated Collection

One taxidermy grizzly bear, standing (fair condition).
Albatross skeleton, mounted as in flight.

Domed vignette of songbirds in bronze leaves & branches.
Foreleg fossil identified as mastodon.

Eight framed boxes of butterflies, organized
by color, no thought to genus.

Everywhere I look the moon in mirrors:
reflected in the gems of beetle backs,

planets in the glassy eyes of foxes.
A world unbalanced by so much keeping.

Murder bird. Milky flame of ivory.
Feather thief. Name things. List.

Box of pressed ferns & orchids.
Notebook sketches of hummingbirds & swallows.

Taxidermy badger, taxidermy armadillo.
Framed pine-tree study: its leaves, seeds.

Mass of feathers, box of jaws & teeth,
Various bones, unlabeled shells.

PHILIP METRES
from Shrapnel Maps

[]

Palestinae Delineatio Ad Geographiae Canones Revocata

As there is no adequate Arabic version of “as the crow flies”

When you come into the land of Canaan

We are the distance

The Delineation of the Borders [1603]

That is the land

The Holy Land once the Promised Land or Palestine

That shall fall unto you

The distance

Of the journey in the wilderness and the conquest and partition

And as we were worthy of sketching it so will we be worthy, with our own eyes

The distance

Of seeing it built up and settled

As today it is called

The distance between birds and Jerusalem

PHILIP METRES

[]

*Is most true and the most considerable of all for the entire Land of
promise, from Dan even to Beersheba, a description of the*

As with a map, as with narrative

Any chosen detail necessarily blots out

Proximate details

Like the new studies of memory—

Items in a list spoken aloud

Are made more memorable

But make the unspoken ones

Disappear

Say: that painted copse of trees

A quaint flourish

Could cover over a village

PHILIP METRES

this is the map without names & names
without maps / maps of unprecedented
embroideries of flora / maps of sleeping
stone / maps without edges without scale
if I don't let my right hand wither if I don't let
my tongue cleave to the palate of I do not
remember / unexploded coffee unamputated
bread / room at the inside / room at the outset
if an image of haven if image of heaven if image
of leaven if cleaving leviathan then leave close
the question who begat whom / before
we settle on a name / contract the pregnant question

JAMES TOUPIN

What Light Admits

—*Daguerre*, “View of the Boulevard du Temple” (1838)

The view from on high
looks down at the way’s turning,
the instant an eon.

Only what lasts out the gaze
is destined to appear.

Always before
the human has been lost.
It almost is again.

The street, then crowded
with the traffic

of drays and carriages,
is vacant. No one
strolls the boulevard.

What did not stay put
could not be caught.

Only by happenstance
could a man emerge.
He stands near the corner,

shadow fixed to page
because he was fixed

to the spot in life.
His shoes, it is thought,
were being polished.

The smudge at his feet
might be the bootblack,

seen as the eternal,
if it does,
might discern us.

JOSEPH BATHANTI

Postdiluvian: Mingo County, West Virginia

The day dawns repentant,
sky blue. Union Mission

hauls in food and blankets, toys.
Pigeon Creek, now slaked,

plumb in its banks, yet still flexing
at its gouged shoulders, is sick—

green-brown in clefs of sunlight—
dull as a gorged serpent.

Too much to drown,
after more mine-rain runoff

than Mingo tribal land would suffer,
its breach was obscene—massing

diluvia bent on blood feud.
Sycamores snapped in tandem.

Roil stormed the house, cleaved
its seams and sockets, white

shakes skived in coils from its face—
the Pigeon in the children's room,

counterpanes of water
draping spinet and chifferobe.

The roof caved the porch.
The saltbox jackknifed, joists

gone for tinder. A good house—
swamped, then sundered,

vitals bared, the yard
washed off to Pike County.

SHEROD SANTOS

The Green Screen Settings

How could I care I'd come to be a member of a family
my name so-called I rose from bed
made my way down the corridor up the stairs across the stone threshold
the mole-hilled yard already in sunlight
sparrows already in bunches roiling.

■

Once upon a time I sat upon a curb where was I where was I going to be
what took me aside the butterfly bush
what boredom lifted the hours away.

Once upon a time a bicycle fixed on the future passed
a girl in marigold pedaling
one leg shorter than the other
not a word between us only once or twice a glance my way.

Was death upon her then?

■

Would it hereafter ever be over? Like waiting for a knock at the door
I paced myself biding time
between thumb and finger the green-gold powder from a monarch's wing
its iridescence fading.

■

The night I left not fleeing so much as walking away from myself in time
I broke my word
no moon no stars no last look back just making my way if not then
where would I bygone be . . .

■

. . . or come to be preoccupied
with what across the inward eye amounted to my destiny
a sixth floor walk-up with an alley view
interior to a shadow play whose end if unforeseeable
I still presumed to say.

TIM SEIBLES

At 59

Roving from Nike to New Balance,
Prince to Puma, I pick up a pair
of size 13s, some shorts and blue sweats,
still feeling the sneakered beast scuff
his muzzle against my skull.

Two tall, hard-shouldered young brothaz
fondle Air Jordans, talkin a little shit:
If I getchu down on the block
wit deez muhfuckas'll be callin you Betty.

“A drowning man,” Mooji wrote, “is not
interested in air” and as the constellation
that pardoned my life goes dark, I recognize
this snag in my chest, this cut breath, this

lonely, late mid-life knowing: the inescapable
all around me, desperation all around—my own

stumbly efforts at love, my own
trying to say *say something*,
while the duck-speaking dickheads
salute their zombie platoons.

Always big, bad Death posting me up,
backing me down, the ball's trick bounce
racking my heart: I know he's smooth
with either hand, but still mean
to snuff his shot.

In my college days,
when my parents were well
and the bulk of worry sat elsewhere,
I strolled around with *my boys* and mostly,
we wanted the same things:

to play sports, “make big bucks,” and have
the fine babes find the come-hither in our faces.

What I miss is that damn sure *hellyeah!*
we carried like crisp cash. JC, his wit,
that manic laugh, Eric's slick grin,
and Doc, so thin only his head
cast shadow: that loud halo
of hair. "Don't touch the 'fro," he'd say.

I miss my boys and the *Ohio Players*
funkin' us up against the Earth's black hips—

. . . *you a bad, bad missez*
with those skin-tight britches
runnin' folks into ditches, yeah . . .

We couldn't help ourselves.

O Sex, song book of the Better Angels, how I craved
and savored your generous pages—chapter
and verse and verse: kissing for hours, daylight lost
to the liquid velvet of the tongue, the body:
delicious synagogue, cello hungry to be bowed.

These days I'm a *Sir* a gray beard to be addressed with deference,
someone whose wisdom might even be vaguely revered.
I don't believe the longing ever ends. I can't believe
I'll ever understand what I need to understand,

but in college I told Doc, "Prob'ly by the time
I'm forty things won't get to me as much."

As I look at my life, I'm afraid and earlier today,
in the mirror, I saw my mother's face
shocked at how old I am. *My goodness! How old*
are you?

And when I tell her, she's sure
I'm lying—and to be honest, I just
don't know if I'm the age I am. Each year,
part of a conversation I almost had
with someone I meant to call.

You think maybe all you do adds up
to a definable sum: the eulogy,
a campfire that lets survivors
warm their chilly hands, but really
nobody knows
what turned inside you or why
evolution has guaranteed that
none of us stick around. Recently,

a friend shrugged, "Might as well be positive,"
and I want to bear the *affirming flame*,

to believe in people because I'm a person.

I think about Kennedy's brain
blown all over his wife's pink dress,

and Malcolm X, dying
with a new idea guiding his voice—

but whoever mentions Yuri Kochiyama
holding his head in her lap? I believe
in the last word she saw lighting his lips.

Across the street, beneath a sky-blue sky, trees
black-barked and bare. I'm in a café now, surrounded
by clattery laughs and scrambled chatter, a mad jazz
that would scatter birds. Awhile back,

one of my boys died. I heard about it long after—
the funeral, somewhere in Georgia—so in my mind's eye,
Dewey's still alive: *doin' the bump*, party-whistle
beaming in his mouth, "Jungle Boogie" *rockin' the house*.

I used to think my lucky days made me
different somehow—"some angel
payin' my way"—like my mom said,
but this poem
could just as easily be Dewey, almost
remembering me at the same party,

TIM SEIBLES

under the same groove: my fantastic history
filed down to a few finger-pops and some *Kool*

& *The Gang*. It's hard to breathe
without the delusion that magnified my life.

I sat across from him in class. We both
wrote poetry. Does everyone secretly

believe they're indispensable? I stall
inside this self amazed by my face

which is brown and not remarkable.

LOLA HASKINS

Smilax

O smilax! How deliciously
ambiguous you are, neither asparagus
nor mushroom! How seductively
mottle-hued! In spite of your thorns
I wade right toward you every
time you beckon from the bushes!

JENNY GEORGE
Sword Swallower

1

The soul enters the body
through the mouth.

So the legends say.

I say: the soul enters
through childhood.

2

A barn with its doors left open
fills with night swallows.
In the hayloft
certain dark sections
flicker with movement,
the dimension of depth.

Finally, stillness. The moon—
a threshing tool
revealed in the diminished light.
The glint of its blade.

And the earth under a black quilt.

3

Sleep: that ancient union
of death with its body.

The child sleeps.
As in—the child returns
to the time before her body.

But the earth always adjusts.
A blueness pools in the shadows.
Dawn pierces her
with its strange dream.
The birds open their throats, cry out—

4

Before language, there was just
the peculiar house of nerves.
Now the world is buried in me, to the hilt.
The sun burns off the mist.
I take my violence out over the field.

JENNY GEORGE

Bait Dog

It's not the fighters
bred on hunger and chains,
not the losers, shot in the end
and dumped in a pit,
but the bait dog, the one
who crawls into the ring each night,
back bent, gaze magnetized
to the concrete floor.

She crawls to me
and all my lost feelings return,
their teeth sharp, unused.

JOEY DE JESUS

self-portrait as queen of adders

you've sighted me among red lechwe
lunging over waterlogged weeds, my snarl
a curl slurring psalms of a mokoro sunday.

I am that claw or that hook in that mouth,
that fullrot hole, that venomous root.
I am metal in the sole

of your durashock boot, a body toggling
after an asp's mass of fiends—heathen
me, lurching low in the lichlands,

slaloming for meat—I am the flintlock,
the longfang, harpooning through air
the snare kept and coiled

on the battlefield a hoplite in scalemail,
this merciless gab, both ghost raid
and drone war, this star-garnet crown,

this whipcord in longhand is me as a snake
the charmer, the wrangler, the rat—those too
are me. and the slipknot. and the bullet—

RACHEL RINEHART

Epithalamium for a Feral Child

They have listened at your throat for root sounds,
sought the Ur-language in your heaving grunts
and sharp barks, but you are only
a corn farmer's unsanctioned experiment,
your teeth rotted and rank with bitch's milk.

Once they kinned you to a boy, needle-boned and reared
in his father's aviary. Seeing you, he winnowed and chirruped
for his finch mother, his robin aunts.
They tore you from his neck in a spray
of inexplicable feathers.

Yet you charmed the youngest anthropologist
with your lean haunches and swinging breasts,
the way words glance off your shoulders.
There is, of course, shame in it—the wanting
what nature has not prepared for want—

and in his furtive pleasure at your messes, your spine bowed,
your quiet straining in the corner.
During the ceremony you chew nuptial lace,
swallow seed pearls like pill bugs, and sniff at the preacher's crotch,
your hackles subdued in a froth of taffeta.

You will not be the first to enter the bridal chamber
on your knees, your nails clouded and clicking the tile,
nor the last to nestle afterwards at the foot of the bed.
This will become your routine, nightly the splitting of thighs,
monthly the measuring of your dark, estral skein.

Though you prefer raw things, things steaming still
with life, he would wither you on greens.
Though you can skin a rabbit with your eye-teeth,
he will prod you to radishes. You will slink into the yard at night,
fatten instead on worms and frogs,

and once an eyas, storm-blown and keening
for its mother. When you cease returning for suppers,
he will cease to let you out. For days you will sleep
dizzy on stacks of field notes until you wake one morning,
your nostrils thrumming with the scent

of his jugular. When it is over, they will find you in the yard
crouched behind rusted scales, jawing your husband's skull,
sucking, greedy, his white-shined bones. When, out of fear,
they abandon a leather muzzle by your mat-thick head, know this:
it will be worth the belly full of buckshot.

AMY SONOUN

Wreaths

—after George Herbert

1

Today my daughter testified *de raptu meo*,
“Concerning my rape,” bore witness to the truth,
The truth of that to which she testified,

From Latin *testis*, root of “testicles”—
In the vernacular, “*cojones*,” “nads,”
“Balls,” “boys,” and “stones”—and though she swore by none,

No man or boy has call to lend her one.
Her one great role—played by so many stars!
So many stars, most cast for just one night,

For one-night stands, no second or third trial,
Trying, under pressure, to say what’s right.
The right to silence generally conferred on us

Conferred, on her, an onus to speak up,
Speak up and stanch those tears behind her words
Her words could stanch. It’s all obscenely trite,

To write a scene—cribbed from a screen—that writes
Itself, itself repeats and magnifies the harm,
The harm, not hurt, it took some balls to do.

2

Cecilia Champaigne played her role. No balls,
But balls enough to testify that Chaucer,
Chaucer the couplet man, did take by force,

Did take by force what she alone might give,
Might give and never have again. Released—
By her released—he sent Cecilia ten pounds.

Ten pounds Cecilia gained for having “stones.”
Chaucer’s stones lie now in Poets’ Corner.
In Poets’ Corner canons dust his stone,

His stone and those of lesser English poets,
Poets whose voices dropped a pitch at twelve,
And who, by twelve, knew honesty by tone,

By tone of voice—the men who hear it, know it.
I know what silence in a church won’t say,
Won’t say which of these poets, pens at rest,

Penises dust, rests easily in such a place,
Placed as they are so close to Geoffrey Chaucer,
Chaucer the couplet man, stone silent, now as then.

3

Athens cross-examined Maycomb's Ewells,
You'll recall, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,
A mocking, superior Atticus Finch

Inched Mayella Ewell away from perjury,
The jury itching to deliberate,
Deliberately to affirm Mayella's lies,

Lies she learned at the left hand of her father,
Farther and farther, bent by blows, from truth.
One "truth" witnessed on screen by many boys—

Many too many boys?—Mayella lied,
Lied like a girl, lied *de raptu sua*,
Concerning a "rape" that wasn't one at all,

But a confederacy—Maycomb's fathers'
Fathers' fathers bringing rope for that "boy" Tom,
Tom "robin's son," no mockingbird safe from Finches.

From Finches too many boys learned girls lie,
Lie ballsy with their right hands on the Bible,
Biblically lie about boys they know they want,

Want to lie *with*, not *to*: lie is what girls do.
Girls do not have what it takes to testify—
From Latin *testis—de raptu sua*.

4

How many met like Cecilia and Chaucer?
Chaucer in arras, whispering “boo,” pen stiff,
Stiffened most urgently, though he was married,

Married fourteen years, and not to Cecilia,
Not to Cecilia but to a well-born maid
Called Phillipa, like her queen, a lady’s maid

Made in a bed—her father a courtier,
And a courtier’s son—a vessel, a lady
Made—doubtless—in release, release most blessed,

Blessed by the church, and with his wife ordained,
Ordained the one vessel of his seed. How many?
How many met like Cecilia and Chaucer?

Met Chaucer, and made him ache—so he did find—
And finding make, make in his chamber, make
To understand him, at a feast, in half-light

Half-cast and half-withheld by torches,
Torches, sconces, tapestries, or in some crook,
Crooked while his one vessel Phillipa danced her part,

Her part in a new reel, and rushed to enter,
To enter as he entered, in a rush, to reel,
And reeled, too, in a bawdy house, as some say

Cecilia’s stepmother did run, as her family name,
Chaumpaigne, French for “open country,” or “field”—
That field, as it were—seems made for meaning.

5

Today my daughter took Cecilia's part,
Mayella's part. For Chaucer stood a boy,
A boy my daughter "knows," but barely—

He barely knows her, though they've met, this boy,
The boy who got her stoned, the boy whose stones
Ached—she passed out—ached until they didn't.

I haven't said yet how he met my daughter,
My daughter, whom he knows biblically: she drank
Three shots, pre-party, then he put a bong

Bang against her mouth. Maybe they kissed, lips
Bang against lips. Maybe he put his hands,
His hands, on her ass, in his room. Maybe,

Maybe his balls ached, like Chaucer's balls, until—
Until they didn't. She'd passed out. When she woke,
She woke in open country, no underwear,

Nowhere near his room. She didn't know until—
Until she did. She does not know him sober.
Sober is Athens, not Maycomb. Sober can

Consent. Sober knows "no" and "no" is no
Double negative. Soberly she testified,
From Latin *testis*, meaning "stones," and "boys."

6

My mother held her tongue and held a glass,
A glassy silence seventy years long,
So long that even I learned to see through it,

See through the nothing that her mother made,
Made and kept for her, until she'd make her own,
Her own to care for—silence, a man, and children.

(Six children, it turned out, four of whom had balls.)
The balls it took to break so long a silence!
The silence brokered, weekly, by her mother,

Her mother, weakly, strengthening in mine
What I reject in me. Of course her mother knew,
Knew for years her husband raped her daughter,

Her daughter tasting beer and anthracite,
Anthracite, tobacco, and acid reflux,
Acid reflux, like emotion mooted,

Muted, his slow bent motion muting her
Mute bedsprings, release coming to nothing,
Nothing for seventy years, nothing I saw through.

7

When my older brother raped my older sister,
My older sister says, I had just come out,
Come out—peekaboo!—like the film based on

To Kill a Mockingbird, starring Gregory Peck,
Star of *Roman Holiday*, my mother's leading
Leading man, who would not touch a lady,

The lady she wanted to believe she was,
And *was*, unless she wanted him. O Attic shape!
O Atticus, O Tom, unable to keep silent,

Silent as glass, as vodka with rocks, not stones,
Not testifying, from Latin *testis*.
My sister did not not not want to say it,

To say it is not Boo—is never Boo,
(Whose name means “be afraid”)—it is not Boo
We ought to fear, but fathers, brothers, mothers.

8

*A wreathèd garland of deservèd praise,
Of praise deservèd, unto thee I'd give,
I'd give to thee, who knowest all men's ways,*

*Men's crooked, winding ways, wherein we live,
Wherein we die, not live: for life is straight,
Straight as a line, and ever tends to thee,*

My daughter, who did testify today
De raptu meo, and who does not write lines,
Nor poems, which sound so round but wind,

Wind down the page, as Herbert's "Wreath" has done,
Must do, in black and white, for poems' resemblances
Dissemble. Life is not straight. It writes,

It writes us down, twists facts, makes images.
Imagines, for example, a girl waking,
Waking up sober in life's open country,

Glassy eyes open and no clear memory,
Memory cleared by alcohol and life.
Life left grass in her hair. Life's strong left hand

Bruises the page, as any poem must do,
Must do, to do a poem's work—hurt and not harm;
Hit hard and drive the reader to her corner.

To corner a mockingbird's no sin, you know.
You testified, my daughter, *de raptu meo*,
"Concerning my rape." I have bent these wreaths

*For thee, who art more far above deceit,
Than deceit seems above simplicity,
Forgive not poetry, but poems' complicities,*

*So I may live, and like, and know thy ways.
Know them and practise them: then I might give
For these poor wreaths, give thee a crown of praise.*

NICOLE STELLON O'DONNELL

Advice to the Young Right Fielder

Hold the glove to your face,
cupping your chin.
Peek through the holes,
and the world will telescope out.

See your mother sitting in the stands.
See the pitcher swoop her fast arm.
Breathe in warm glove.

You have been put here
because you are good
at being wrong.

Be wrong well.

Catalog the dandelions,
the lumpy lawn,
the foul line's chalky trace,
the cloud that rises from first base.

Stand, unready,
in the green nothing
you have been allotted.
Close your eyes.
Don't worry.

Everything never
comes your way.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: The Still-Living Past

Rachel Contreni Flynn

Amanda Auchter, *The Wishing Tomb* (Florence, MA: Perugia Press, 2012, 85 pp, \$16 paper)

Jake Adam York, *Abide* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014, 82 pp, \$15.95 paper)

Elise Boulding, lifelong peace worker and futurist, insisted that we all have a responsibility to address damages from the past and to repair them in the present and future. To drive home this obligation, she coined the term “200-year present,” a concept that envisions each lifetime as at least the life span before and after it. Within that time frame, we are charged with responding to injustices and needs—both human and environmental.

Amanda Auchter and Jake Adam York take up this charge in poetry collections that grapple back for comprehension as they reach forward for change. *The Wishing Tomb* and *Abide* confront, wrestle with, and mourn damage and suffering in poems that urge us to understand and heal. York writes, “Time is moving forward / in memory, memory’s // moving back,” and Auchter joins in, “This world is in me: // let us build ourselves again.”



Our modern memory of New Orleans is perhaps dominated by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the governmental neglect of human need in trauma. Boulding’s vision warns us off such a narrow focus, however, and encourages a broader memory. Auchter’s *The Wishing Tomb*, her second book, offers a deep view of the city’s history and its people. Spanning from the late seventeenth century to 2010, the collection takes as its project the city’s complicated, gorgeous, and ugly identity.

Much of the authenticity of this work arises from that juxtaposition of beauty and horror. The book begins with “Early Pastoral,” a prose poem that describes an ocean journey to New Orleans in 1718 through “a nauseous lullaby” of “rain and its humid talk.” Upon landfall, the immigrating speaker encounters her first view of the city and is pleased by the lush landscape of “marshweed and sycamore,” but at the same time is appalled:

We never imagined so much water, the stench of bodies led away in chains. The mosquito-darkened sky. We watch the town open and open. The first glint of light, smoke. Soon we are standing on the shore and the heat stuns us. We

watch a man lead away another man by his shackled neck
until we cannot see him. So many bodies.

The Wishing Tomb continually employs such disjunctions in its lyrical imagery, layering opulent descriptions of flowers, food, and music with scenes of struggle and brutality.

In this way, Auchter authenticates New Orleans: there are no euphemisms or simplistic portrayals of Mardi Gras or hurricane outreach here. Rather, she presents the city as multifaceted, its traditions both comforting and catastrophic. Disaster is spliced with natural beauty, as in this description from “American Plague” of how malaria decimates certain wards, where Auchter describes loveliness amid tragedy:

a mosquito dabs the water, glances rim,
table, wooden spoon, pale scalp.

For a while, the children taste rain, wild-
flower, sugared bread. For a while,

there is no fever

These poems swarm with obsessive repetitions: mosquitoes, smoke, sweat, magnolias, cornpone, chicory, beads, and water—always *water* swamping, advancing, retreating, wrecking—providing both life and disaster to the land and populace. The collection begins with the line “The question is water,” and does not let up probing what that life force and destroyer means for New Orleans. Auchter keeps the dichotomy always present. She writes in the voice of slaves patrolling the levee: “We are of the water, its moon- // shards, the desperate way it breaks through / whatever contains it.” In “The Good Friday Flood, 1927” she comments.

The sky tongues its way into houses,

into hot water cornbread rising
out of the pan. Someone sings *trouble*

the water, adds flour to roux, parboils
rice. Rosary-fisted, someone kneels

to the floor, says, *swallow me back*,

Oh Lord.

Expressions of faith abound in *The Wishing Tomb* as Ursuline nuns offer blessings and herbal remedies, and Marie Laveau, a renowned voodoo priestess, performs love spells and ceremonies to stave off danger. Yet spells and prayers never ward off the rising water; both the faithful and the superstitious despair. When Hurricane Katrina nears the city, some residents look to old charms, tossing holy bread into the wind even as they are filled with bitter doubt, even as the cathedral's statue of Jesus is broken by a storm-spun brick. Post Katrina, the faithful continue to pray but are deeply shaken. "Prayer at Saint Rock Cemetery" is delivered in a flat, perfunctory voice, giving tasks to a deity who is addressed with no name:

Dear _____,

clear the rain that covers the broken
paths and graves. . . .

At dusk,

we will light small candles, offer what we have:
MREs, crucifixes, photographs

Throughout its history, despite vigilance, prayer, hard work, voodoo spells, and repeated rebuilding, New Orleans has *withstood* rather than *prevailed*. While *The Wishing Tomb* describes how New Orleans has survived chronic floods, fires, disease, and ferocious violence, it makes clear that survival has come at the cost of suffering for its least powerful residents. A slave caught eavesdropping has her ear sliced off. Prison inmates protest brutality by cutting their own Achilles tendons. When the city's black and Creole populations are hardest hit by (and blamed for) the fever epidemic in 1853, a mother implores, "What language / must we speak to keep safe? / Every prayer a tongue of fire, every psalm // a child's cry deep into the night."

Elise Boulding's work urges us to "sample the invisible," to give historical importance to the experience of those outside an entrenched power structure. That quest often fails, given the power structure, given the dearth of extant material. Auchter's book tells its wrenching truths in the voices of disenfranchised persons or sympathetic witnesses, focusing on the "invisible" and their often-hidden perspectives. In *The Wishing Tomb*,

women's and children's stories dominate, and African American experiences are central.

The trauma of the slave trade and the devastating repercussions of racial injustice in New Orleans remain ever present in these poems. Those who were never asked to report finally weigh in, as slaves speak in "Report on Levee Breach, 1816": "a white man whips mules / with a chicory whip. And our backs: // sweat-shined, marked." Auchter imagines the warning given before "Homer Plessy, who was 1/8th Black, was arrested for entering a whites-only railcar":

They will want to take you into the field, fill you
with bullets. They have been known

to make a man disappear. They will call you
coon and *boy*. They will yell *pull him off*

while showing you their revolvers, their lips
spit-slick, white. No one will look up

Auchter does "look up" to comprehend and carry forward otherwise neglected experiences, including the pushed-aside stories of residents devastated by Katrina and its aftermath in late summer 2005. The poet joins Patricia Smith (*Blood Dazzler*, 2008) in leveling invectives against the criminally negligent response to the disaster. Auchter's book, perhaps gentler in tone but no less strenuous in its stance, speaks in its final section to the suffering caused by this neglect. These last poems are awash in debris, sewage, shotgun fire, and mold—they do not adopt false optimism or tease out the beauty that was present in earlier poems, earlier times. As Christmas arrives, New Orleans remains grim and devastated:

an alligator wearing a Santa suit

waves and waves through the dome's
clear glass. Inside the Dome,

all the lights are out. Every window

black, empty. Inside the glass,
the dome has gone dry.

Auchter's rich, troubling poems do as Boulding encouraged: they insist that history include the testimony of the fragile and marginalized. They remind us to return and make right:

What brings you back is the sugared air. . . .

What calls you: the music

of a gate opening onto Tchoupitoulas Street,
chicory-heat, the roof tiles

in the black sky. The water. The rising.



If we are to undertake, as Auchter does, the charge of crafting a present and future mindful of experiences of those historically overlooked, we should heed the last poems of Jake Adam York. In his first two books, *Murder Ballads* and *A Murmuration of Starlings* (see *BPJ*, Vol. 63, No. 1, Books in Brief), York undertook a “work of a life, both countless and one” to elegize the martyrs of the civil rights movement. This project was cut short by his unexpected death in December 2012 at age forty. *Abide*, published posthumously, remains true to the project. In verses that echo Boulding's concept of an extended present, York writes that memory “reaches back, like the future, / which is just another kind / of history, a shape / for whatever's missing.”

Time flexes frequently in York's poems, straddling history and the future. Memory is made malleable by associations, and by the poet's meditations as a son, grandson, and great-grandson of Alabama's rural culture. He writes that family recollections emerge “Like my grandmother's recipes, / you'd get the idea / but not the numbers.” He acknowledges this blurriness as he attempts to come to terms with his place as a white man whose poetry elegizes “men, women, and children, murdered by men whom I resembled, demographically, by men to whom I may be related or for whom I may be mistaken.”

Placed at the end of *Abide*, York's essay “Foreword to a Subsequent Reading” describes, delicately, his approach to this work that required a “hesitation, a stutter, a silence in which the ghosts of the murderers may be sloughed from my skin, even if only for a moment.” The poems in this book are replete

BOOKS IN BRIEF

I have this purse and its coins and bits of story
that don't fit together. So

I do the one thing the farm taught me
and look away,

into the stars
and try to shape the dots
into myths.

Yet York refuses, after all, to look away. Instead, he strides purposefully from the farm to inquire about matters of justice, memory, willful forgetfulness, and responsibility. Then he writes poems that are at turns restless and meditative, demanding and comforting. In "Postscript," dedicated to Medgar Evers, York posits, "you are everywhere, / in the face of which I'd ask / how can I say anything, / in the face of which I ask / how can I say nothing at all?" In "Letter from Okemah," the speaker memorializes the 1911 lynching of Laura and Lawrence Nelson in Oklahoma, recognizing how easy it might be for him to shy away from such events, to sidestep facts and to disregard the few grainy photographs of record. "But I see them, I see them all, / and cannot look away."

In this poem, York employs a recurring metaphor for his quest to plumb memory and eulogize the dead: he places a phonograph needle on a vinyl album to bring forth music and history:

I hinge the needle into the groove
of a hundred years' sound
and finger the platen's edge

and pull it back
until the horn is gasping,
until the sound's gone out of everything
and the wind is coming in.

He remarks that he learned as a child this is a "needle I am not / supposed to touch" and yet "I have to raise the needle // I couldn't touch, once / too delicate for my hand, / needle that had to wait // for my father's."

As in *The Wishing Tomb*, the lyrical poems of *Abide* circle and obsess on central images; York returns time and again to stars

and constellations and grooves in vinyl albums, the needles placed there, as well as to birds, coins, steel mill furnaces, juke joints, and guitars. Sometimes these images come together in near-ecstatic expressions of truth-seeking. The poems propel themselves in long, unpunctuated stanzas as York elegantly wraps language around an often-inexplicable history, as in “Cry of the Occasion,” an elegy for John Earl Reese:

so I
 can say something a little more blunt
 like thunder a finger through the bone
 peeling back the husk of the voice
 opening like a bird called into
 the wild answering

In this poem, as York writes of his poetic purpose of memorializing the forgotten or ignored dead, he claims the murdered are “calling my name louder than I’ve ever / heard.”

In another poem dedicated to Reese, placed near the end of the collection, York makes a subtle shift to invite others to hear the call, and to respond. He tenderly addresses Reese in lines that roll musically and urgently, proposing that we go back to the café and its memories. We should return, he writes, not to relive the hard facts of trauma but rather to honor what “was lived, what is written here, / in the night, in vinyl, in the air . . . / for you, if we may, pull back the arm / and start this music once again.”



Both Amanda Auchter and Jake Adam York recount moments of faltering, or “stuttering,” to move forward with the poems they felt compelled to write. Auchter admits, “Part of me / wants to watch the bus pull into the distance of a coastline // of frail houses and scattered roof tiles, then walk away.” But they did move forward to write painfully vibrant, galvanizing work that teaches us with every stanza, every hidden event, and every brushed-aside death. They have accomplished what Elise Boulding presses for from each individual: a “personal and interpersonal promotion of peace” that reshapes understandings. These poems add critical stories to our history, enlarge our humanity, and perhaps make that peace more possible.