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Vol. 67 N° 1 Fall 2016

Regan Huff

How the Wasp Flies 5

James Ellenberger

Of the King's Poison 6

Blue Collar 7

Must Heaven Be Symmetrical 8

Marjorie Stelmach

The Divestments of Autumn 9

Graham Barnhart

The Road to Pol-e-Khomri 16

Kenneth E. Harrison, Jr.

Big Psalm 17

The Room in Space 18

Jennifer Sperry Steinorth

The Score Again 19

F. Daniel Rzicznek

Wreckfish 20

Cintia Santana

Ode to Your Salmon Soul 21

[E=] 22

Leslie McIntosh

Epistle: the Fugue Between Life and Death

Is (Always) Black 24

Jeanine Hathaway

A Long Engagement 26

Ron Riecki

EMT Hopes Pregnant Plumber Doesn't Give Birth 27

Alejandro Crotto

En el haras Vadarkablar 28

At the Vadarkablar Stud Farm 29

translated from the Spanish by Robin Myers

CONTENTS

A.E. Stallings

Selvage 30

Kathy Davis

Snapped 31

Kevin Craft

Low Hanging Fruit 33

Kasey Jueds

Talisman 34

Messenger 35

BOOKS IN BRIEF by Dawn Potter

A Land of Echoes

Christina Hutchins, *Tender the Maker* 36

COVER

Mary Greene, Design

Ran Ortner, "Element 32," oil on canvas, 2016.

www.ranortner.com

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

REGAN HUFF

How the Wasp Flies

(Étienne-Jules Marey, 1869)

Marey admits a ray of sun.
The wing's tip, shining,
draws a figure eight
in the darkened air. He measures
the invisible by seeing
it; we measure, he insists,

to know. A wasp in a tiny metal harness.
A gold flake in a drop
of varnish at the edge
of its membrane wing.
Flying centimeters above the table

and no farther.
A wasp dying
measured and exhausted. Given only days
on earth to start with. On earth
but lifting from it, painted gold.

JAMES ELLENBERGER
Of the King's Poison

Hand-wrung from a field of burgeoning thorns,
the belladonna opened up like musket wounds on the table.

Imagine: a whole hog cooked bright copper, an apple gag
in its mouth, the king chewing a cigar. A few petals

skirt the tincture like pink schooners, liable to sail
off the world's edge. It's surprisingly

intimate, the mortar and pestle: labored repetition,
how oceans comprehend their shores, leaping

against stone until all's reduced to ocean.
Try reckoning every next meal into a Bolognese

with a first sour bite, perhaps garlic or green onion,
but different somehow, nipping like heat lighting

the palate's dark ledge, pleasant, then unnoticed until
the meal's over and it's too late: trout-gleaming, the king's blood

darts in rivers from which to drink means
a lineage of fogbanks with sycamores in the distance,

torch-lit stone hallways runged with the long
shadows of clergymen. No grace in dying like that.

The wild sun dissolves those illusions
yet wallowing in the moss-bearded

grotto of his loins. See his lips greased with pork fat
purling nimbus foam. How easy it is.

Some flowers.

JAMES ELLENBERGER

Blue Collar

A warped plastic swimming pool.
You up to your neck.

JAMES ELLENBERGER
Must Heaven Be Symmetrical

Must we honeycomb our throats
at last, again. Must heaven be symmetrical.

Must sex. Must we dream in hexagons of better
hexagons. Must we yield to any keeper's

grizzly whims, teeth, some tongue, while lifted in
wet combs, dripping, whatever

it wants. Must we love
anything the day rustles up

until we shake with it.

MARJORIE STELMACH
The Divestments of Autumn

i. As above, so below

We must love life before loving its meaning.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky

Late twilight, early autumn.
High, distressing winds in the cottonwoods and locusts.
Scores of the dying drift from the branches
to lodge in the understory.
As above, so below.

How did I learn
this discontent? Not from the cottonwoods and locusts,
calm as ever in their autumn losses. Nor from
the Rose of Sharon, bearing her crown
of the seasonal dead.

A barred owl dips
and crosses my vision in a ghost-gray hush
with death in its talons, its shadow-wings
staining the tangle of bushes
where mute birds huddle,

black and knotted
and smaller than their voices, smaller than their heartbeats.
An alchemist, Earth, tending transparencies—
banked fires, coiled waters—intent on
transfiguring light.

Humble down, I tell myself.

Love this.

ii. Twenty-nine Bones

*It's about the people, who have stopped believing,
because the cup of evil has run over.*

—Dmitri Shostakovich, speaking of his *Eleventh Symphony*
subtitled *1905*

It happened the year before he was born,
but he knew the story, how the Tsar's soldiers

had dragged a sled burdened with massacred children
through St. Petersburg's streets, children

who'd climbed the trees for a glimpse of the soldiers,
their uniforms and guns.

The soldiers—laughing—shot them.
The children, too, laughing, their corpses smiling.

Twenty-nine bones in a human face.
Smiling.



Nineteen-nineteen. *Petrograd* now. A prodigy
starving in a shattered city, his family, too, starving.

Dmitri plays nightly for the silent films. His job
asks nothing commensurate with his genius:

to sight-read a music scored in the huge
faces above him, faces of light encoded

with suffering—*noble* suffering, always for love.
Love in the lit bones of the faces.

Night after night, the theater packed,
the audience hopeless, starving.

Humble down, he tells himself. *Love this,
like everybody else.*

iii. A Language Incomprehensible

Chaos instead of Music

—headline in *Pravda*, January 1936

It opened to awe, to ovations, all of St. Petersburg
lauding his *Lady Macbeth of Minsk*

until Stalin himself attended, and the show closed
that night. Had he seen himself in the predatory Lady?

No surprise that night the NKVD arrived at Dmitri's door.
No surprise either that in a heartbeat the artist recanted.

But how to recant an opera? *I'd begun to speak,*
he confessed, *a language incomprehensible*

to the People. Witnesses claim he was pale,
he stuttered, again and again adjusted his glasses.

He bowed to the humbling for the sake
of the uncomprehending People. And soon, it was

Come home, Dmitri, all is forgiven.
Stalin

Soon he became a Soviet Hero for works exalting
the proletariat. Other works, secret, began filling the dark

of a locked desk drawer—death in the scoring,
terror in the strings, never performed.

iv. Atonement

Shame is the feeling that saves mankind.

—Andrei Tarkovsky, speaking of Shostokovich

In the glass: my face
with leaves falling through it—dusk's familiar
cellophane self. In the darkening yard,
branches and small birds
emerge,

tangling my hair,
complicating my vision. By small shifts
of focus, I cast and erase my face
and its fleeting
components,

peeling the tissues
again from a wound on the verge
of healing. Soon I'll abandon
this game, snap the light,
and disperse.

v. As above, so below: Reprise

Seek His face,
the Psalmist advises. Early winter has a face
lean as an oboe—bony brow, haggard gaze.
If God's face were to peel
from this sky,

peer down upon us
in our own image, it would be—nothing like this, but this
is the best I can say: *as if from an unsuspected
dimension curled inside a caesura,*
we could

just barely discern
the tones of a solo viola, rising from nowhere's ruins
bearing unbearable sweetness. Instead,
this cosmic drone, its chords intoned
ceaselessly,

becomes the caesura—
an absence suggesting Divine recantation—
a confession so terrible, so intimate,
it must not be heard: God's apology
(too late) for Time.

Seek His face.
But if God bent His brooding countenance even once
into our winter and lingered—a perfect continuity,
perfectly remote—would we see or somehow
know

in our marrow?
In the stirred hair of our napes? Taste a sweetness,
a leafiness, perhaps, or sense a chlorophyll-ing—
the skin's heightened affinity
for light?

vi. Humble down. Love this.

Full dark now.

Walking in the suburb's chill air, my eyes are drawn
to a woman's face cut by rectangular panes of glass,
a mosaic above a sink where
an aloe plant spikes

from one pane to another.

Shoulders unmoving, she gazes over her lawn, eyes lifted
from the work—hands immersed in filmy water,
stilled wrists broken at the waterline.
Or so I imagine.

An alchemist, Time—

stirring, stirring—as the Earth turns us into our dispersal.
The woman in the light won't see me pass.
She's watching, I imagine, the other side
of her face.

vii. Atonement: Reprise

I set my CD on continual replay. Each time it rises—
the great *dies irae* of the *Tenth* with its *ostinato*

buried beneath his elaborate scorings—
it lifts the hair at my nape: the same four notes

again and again, a Cyrillic encrypting of his name.
D E-flat C B. *D E-flat C B.*

Who first understood, when the broken
elegist rose, ghostly, from orchestral depths?

Who first deciphered the code, when the notes emerged
from his *ostinato*, spoke his name, and dispersed into hush?

Even decoded and long after everyone's death, it remains
an incomprehensible presence. A brutal re-wounding, plea

for forgiveness, act of feeble defiance? Again tonight
I try to summon some measure of healing

from the past's silent screen, but no code breaks through
history's flickering black and white. Nothing but *complicity*.

■

Who first
understood the divestments of autumn, saw
chlorophyll's crazed after-burn as *thirst*,
heard this lushest of all Earth's scores—
briefness, brittleness, ghost—

as *grief*?

How to recant an age? Early autumn:
the gorgeous sear of the air, but always beneath
the crescendo of beauty, the drone
of atonement.

Material concerning the life of Dmitri Shostakovich, including the direct quotations in part iii, was taken from Stephen Jackson's 1997 book, *Dmitri Shostakovich: An Essential Guide to His Life and Works*.

GRAHAM BARNHART

The Road to Pol-e-Khomri

may also be the road to Nahrain
further

to Jang 'Ali, and Na'man
north

to Baghlan, Kunduz, and Bu'in.
Be wary.

To the south you will meet Golbahar
where bombs

are often heavy and shallow
buried.

No one will offer you shelter
in Ghazni

or Gardez. You will not sleep
until

Qalāt-e Ġilzay is well
behind you.

Though the road continues, you
will cease

in Kandahar—perhaps at last
a city you know.

KENNETH E. HARRISON, JR.

Big Psalm

An other the soul I imagined an organ

filling those cities no longer desolate

as fishermen lift netting I was young

walked along a brook never did sink

a water strider with rocks our father

an other the soul I imagined an organ

like the liver reddish brown secreting

bile but high-ceilinged room enough

for our grief a table & some chairs—

KENNETH E. HARRISON, JR.
The Room in Space

Anything to quiet the mind torn from

that moment last sailed the furniture

years ago hands trembled as the sea

gone flat dazed the fishes to surface

the greatest among us a father carries

his grown son into the emergency ward

heaved like fins a boat hove alongside

prayer no more than a jolt a body turns

against the colors of a room reemerge—

JENNIFER SPERRY STEINORTH

The Score Again

There is a poem about the rain that fell after he was shot by himself; it was very strange weather. Everyone said how strange—yes, yes—for years later, for many years later: it can be hard to predict the weather. In the poem, flowers bloom out of season because that is what they did; the phrase is *oversoon blooms*; they were also over soon. In one draft, the summer came *premature*. Premature came later. It is good to have a poem for an occasion. It is good to talk about the weather on which everyone

can agree, and did, it's hard

to predict the weather except, come to think of it, didn't it look like rain didn't it look like sun didn't it look like it would never never snow and then like it would snow yes, it looked that way right up until it snowed and snowed and snowed and the gun we knew it would melt real fast you can know and not know you couldn't have known when it got hot real fast and everything bloomed and bloomed and bloomed as if

we knew we knew we knew

F. DANIEL RZICZNEK

Wreckfish

The sick in their unkempt beds
under low clouds, woolly with rain,

with rivers pumping through.
The woodlots emerge like islands

out of the fog and corn, reflected
in the gazes of the convalescent:

opal skin, shriveled eye, dementia
of the ocean's caves, broken ships.

The creeks boil, rain from upstream
gathering an indifferent momentum

around the very bedposts.
He climbed the roof, called *help*

into the floods, the peak a crow's
perch, unsteady above the world.

CINTIA SANTANA

Ode to Your Salmon Soul

to your mother and your father / and their mothers
and their fathers / to the pale pink of their love / and
their cold / unseasoned waters / because it made / you
you / you / Ode to your mouth gasping / to its echo
of my gasping / to your bludgeoning / which is my
bludgeoning / and the tears lost to this water / Ode
to the bear's maw / wound-wide and lovely-dark /
To the quiver and muscle / the barb / the tidal marsh
and the cruelty of shallows / To the fight / the current
the heave and the climb / to the higher / higher / heights
and the estuary's sky / the riot of stars / silent winks
that bind / Ode to the slope / the steepness / the leap
and the lope / To the feast and the / stones / to Chinook
and Chum / To the / sweet / eelgrass / to the first gravel
nest / and the next / To your / rings / narrow / wide
to your hump / your growing / teeth and your / kype /
Ode to your / cherry skin / your darker / silver / blues
to your / milt your / red roe / spilling / ripe / Ode to you
to / you to / you / to the / river rumoring / home

CINTIA SANTANA

[E=]

we the once
 to the things that are
were and will be
 how we long to see
the wild apple
 the lizard's bright blue throat
to say
 spring
sakura
 again

we the once
 to the things that are
were and will be
 did not expect it
we crossed
 aioi bridge on bike
a stone in our pocket
 for sharpening knives
every wristwatch
 stopped
8:15
 enola
his mother's name

above hijiyama hill
 I saw the splitting of the light
their elijah
 carried skyward
in a chariot of fire

our lips
 sealed into scar
our throat
 an open grave

I waded in
the current faster than I thought
when my feet touched bottom
 I thought that I had reached the other side

I was found
my bento
under my body

I was not found

we waited for fine gauze
to bandage our eyes
around and around

I, so unlike a butterfly,
watched
the skin of my hands peel

at night
red clouds
as if woven from fine silk

I called out for water
but there was no one
to hear

then from the skies
that sealed our city's fate

black rain

we drank

in november
beside the burned grove of bamboo
a canna bloomed

my mother found
my wooden sandal

LESLIE MCINTOSH

Epistle: the Fugue Between Life and Death Is (Always) Black

—*for Flying Lotus & Kendrick Lamar*

External to your gaze
is a fruit tree between
Dead-boy & Dead-girl.
Hollow shade and bread,
archetypal hands hold
the ready of, claim
possession of Demise
as the whip to push
ulterior sugar down
the block, dancing
with the clarity of debt
defrauded.
See them going back
where they did not
come from; see
them come from
back across
life, abject delight
gone ripe unseen,
obscene swift sweetness,
roving blackness flavor
ocean from rooftops
tonguing the stained
glass window, candid
over railings, across
backs of church
goings, of black hats
hung on knobbed black heads,
chiseled, scaredy-ass
beauty. The eye
ever trained
to latchhook
without question,
the same day
worn day-to-day:
visible unseen,
candy coats,
the realness
we roll up

→

LESLIE MCINTOSH

sleeves to irritate
our debt
repayment.
Simple and straight,
a debt. Settled over
black hats, black
heads that don't see
where they don't know
they come from.
No need to see
the bright fractal photon
of the fruit skinned:
dried, electrolyte
bused out of
the delicate, to pave
futile, to fail.
Yes, this body
savors failure.
The sweet still between
dead-boy & girl
is deep enough
to nourish tent cities
without showing,
uncorking dirges
to put you where
you didn't see you
leaving out of to go to,
to taste,
stately repose
in the secret
of your party
hearse, the furnish
of our
open ready.

Heartfelt,
Bayard Rustin

JEANINE HATHAWAY

A Long Engagement

Tickbird sits in Rhino's ear: *trik-quiss*, her hiss
and crackling sets his very horns on edge. She plucks
and crushes ticks, then sips the opened wound,
beak pressed to blood, blood the better food.
But what symbiosis is utterly benign? Who
wants myth's arrangement falsified by fact?

RON RIEKKI

EMT Hopes Pregnant Plumber Doesn't Give Birth

She's too skinny to have a baby in her,
looks like a pipe, is a pipe. She's quiet
but her husband won't shut up, bragging that Mario,
the video game character, was a plumber
and that Joe the Plumber was a plumber

and he says the obvious, that giving birth
is plumbing and I tell him to go boil water,
that we'll need it when the baby's delivered,
though this is bullshit—boiling water
is a long medical tradition of getting people

out of the room who are serving no purpose,
like telling someone to get you a vodka tonic
when you just want to be left alone with your cousin
to tell her you have a crush on her, which is illegal
in most states but not the one where you grew up,

the vowel state with its screaming eagles
and quarterback addictions—but there's nothing
else to do and the anorexic lupus woman in a letter Y
plumbs out a bloody baby right in front of you
and you try to catch it but the gloves make it

that much more slippery and you just fumble
the football child until you finally
make the catch and the room breathes a sigh
of disbelief at how inept it all is—
the sex, the divorce, the remarriage, now this.

ALEJANDRO CROTTO
En el haras Vadarkablar

Hasta el corral de tierra y tablas
trajeron al retajo,
un criollo sin halo genealógico,
sin nombre inglés o propio o sangre pura,
a que probara conocer si estaba lista la alanza
alzada como un dios entre jejenes en la luz amarilla de la tarde
con tormenta de fondo; a ver si estaba honda y dispuesta,
veterinarios jóvenes de blancos guardapolvos entreabiertos
entraron el retajo lazo al cuello, y el caballo
meneaba cabizbajo entre resoplos la cabeza y de repente
la levantaba señalando a la alazana espléndida; y la yegua
tirante, sus ollares finísimos alerta, casi ciervo,
miraba de reajo mientras daba su grupa florecida,
y se hizo agua un poquito, se iba abriendo, parpadeaba
su sexo, y apartaba la cola, y el criollo
era potencia aproximándose creciente
hasta montar la yegua, y lo desviaron
las manos enguantadas, lo sacaron tirándolo del lazo y uno dijo
“está lista, búscalo al Equalize que por las dudas la maneo”
y mientras se acercaba por momentos de costado
luego enseguida pecho al frente,
desplegándose altivo, cabeceando
el aire que rompía al paso fino,
el padrillo valioso, se llevaron al otro hasta un corral
con bebedero hasta mañana, y el retajo
ya manso, hocico en agua,
temblaba en ráfagas oscuras
con mínimos relámpagos; no había viento,
se venía la noche.

ALEJANDRO CROTTO
At the Vadarkablar Stud Farm

They brought the teaser
to the corral of dust and planks,
a criollo with no genealogical halo,
no pure blood or English name or name of his own,
so he could find out if the sorrel mare was ready
as she presided like a god among gnats in the evening's yellow light
with a storm in the distance; to see if she was deep and willing,
young veterinarians in white half-opened lab coats
led in the teaser by a rope around his neck; the horse tossed
his head amid his snorts and suddenly
raised it high toward the splendid sorrel,
and the taut mare, her graceful nostrils keen, almost a deer,
stared from the corner of her eye while she presented
her ripened rump, trickling a little, opening herself; her sex quivered,
and she shifted her tail, and the criollo
was potency advancing toward the mare and growing till
he'd mounted her, and the gloved hands
diverted him, they pulled him off her, hauling at the rope, and one said
"She's ready, go get Equalize, and just in case I'll hobble her,"
and while the costly stallion approached her from the side, chest forward,
unfolding himself, haughty, lunging at
the air pierced by his supple gait,
they led the other to a pen and trough
where he would stay until tomorrow,
and the horse, now docile, his nose in the water,
trembled in dark rushes with faint flashes
of lightning; there was no wind,
and night was coming.

translated from the Spanish by Robin Myers

A.E. STALLINGS

Selvage

(from *self + edge*, the firmly woven edge of a fabric that resists unravelling)

Who knew her son had salvaged so many hates?
Their feet twitched a little, like thrushes caught
In a fowler's net. The simile had the tang
Of remorse. No, surely the idea was his
To hoist them up like flags in their long skirts,
Modest now, the sluts, the dirty flirts,
Tongueless belles, spinsters of their own doom.
While they twitched, a flutter of pity. But as it is
She finds them tidy and domesticated,
Dull plumaged with death, now that they hang,
As if in the spot-lit vitrine of a future museum,
From the warp like a dozen ancient loom weights.

KATHY DAVIS
Snapped

Her daughters shocked
to a splay-footed
standstill,
hair bows askew,
ears cocked
as if wary
of what's happening
behind them. 1914
and the family fruitcake
recipe says
blanch the almonds,
shell pecans,
crystallize the cherries,
then call a man
to stir the heavy batter.
Too full
of four- and six-year-old
giggle and squirm
to pose pretty and smile
for their mama
who has finally snapped,
"Turn around
and face the bushes!"
and is taking a picture
of the backs
of their new white
summer Sunday dresses,
the rows of tiny bone
buttons scavenged
from an old blouse,
the flounces crocheted
by kerosene light,
the cropped sleeves
trimmed with lace bartered
from the pack peddler
for a skillet supper
and a spare bed. No
running water, electricity,
phone, or paved roads; no
self timer to unchain her
from the tripod; no

→

KATHY DAVIS

click and share;
but one snapshot
and generations of us see:
Here is a woman
who could wield a needle.

KEVIN CRAFT

Low Hanging Fruit

The washing machine shrieks
like three howler monkeys fighting in a forest canopy.

It's a lazy dispute—
something about breadfruit not native to these parts.

Outside it isn't raining. Inside the girl sleeps
to the row of monkeys hissing

among territorial leaves, beating their fists
against the broken boughs. Maybe she likes

the rhythm. Maybe she dreams of the jungle
she grew out of—rosewood, kapok, little violin.

I am upstairs noticing
everything that hasn't happened:

stunt pilots climbing out of biplanes,
media junkets gathered on the lawn.

Maybe it takes a sleeping girl
to underscore the incivility.

Sound bites of howler monkeys
ravage the neighborhood.

Outside loop, hammerhead stall.
The heavy waiting in the wings.

KASEY JUEDS

Talisman

As the small-leaved, small-
yellow-flowered plant

is said to be, against witches
and thunder. So lines painted

on the stone in your palm mean
a time of waiting. All night

the deer build the house
with their breath, the long

grass flattened beneath
their sleep. Big bluestem,

little bluestem, invisible seam
of river behind trees. You can close

your hand over the stone until
it swallows your heat, or search

for lost things in this
shallow water and find them

one by one by one.

KASEY JUEDS

Messenger

What about sparrows storm gathered
in the maple one crow lifted

toward the sky's different dark
inside your hands it's already winter

in the silence-house the nowhere hours
in the book with one name

written on the flyleaf saying itself
in fading ink if you could

hear me if I
could speak only wind

in leaves dissolves
this sleep wind mistaken

first for distant traffic
mistaken then for sea

BOOKS IN BRIEF: A Land of Echoes

Dawn Potter

Christina Hutchins, *Tender the Maker*

(Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press, 2015. 346 pp. \$19.95 paper)

In an essay about what she calls “soul-level influence,” the poet Teresa Carson has written that echoes among poets are “not a simple pass-the-baton process; we do not read our poetic ancestors and then just pick up the conversation where they left off.” She continues:

Rather, we are, by nature, related to particular poetic ancestors but not to others. As J. D. Salinger said, “The true poet has no choice of material.” We and our influences cannot help but work the same vein of the Underneath, however dissimilar our surfaces may appear. If we are persistent, honest, and loyal to that vein, then we participate in and continue the conversation of poetry—a conversation that transcends time, place, and style. (“The Temple of Delight: John Keats and Jack Wiler”)

“Persistent, honest, and loyal.” These are workaday traits, yet maintaining faith in them, as Carson reminds us, may allow a poet to find her way into the long conversation of art.

As readers enter this conversation, they, too, must be faithful to their own patterns of engaging with the echoes, and sometimes that means embracing an extreme simplicity of reaction. I decided to read Christina Hutchins’s most recent poetry collection, *Tender the Maker*, for the most naïve of reasons: because I liked the title. I was drawn to something modest, something old-fashioned, about those three plain words. Yet I also sensed a vulnerability in them, for it requires a certain bravery to construct a title that risks being dismissed as a sentimental badge of devotion. And beyond meaning, I was held by the sound of the phrase’s three words: a repeated cadence balanced on either side of a single note. The exactness of that pivot startled me.

Often I have preconceptions about a poet whose work I’ve never read—perhaps I know something about her style or subject matter; perhaps I have seen a photograph or an advertisement; perhaps I have skimmed someone else’s review or overheard gossip. Rarely am I able open a collection with the sort of

innocence I felt when I was young, when nearly every volume was a wholly mysterious land. So how would I teach myself to meet this unknown book? In the case of Hutchins's collection, a first clue was my swift reaction to her title. I began asking myself, What do these poems sound like? How do their cadences rise and fall? Where does dissonance pull me? And just as quickly my mind began reaching for *who*, as if a name could offer me a sonic metaphor for what my ear was beginning to hear.

The name that came to me was Robert Lowell, the early Lowell of *Lord Weary's Castle*. Like Lowell's poems, Hutchins's often arise as formidable cohesions of diction, meter, syntax, image, and time. The two poets live among words in ways that are both densely aural and densely imagined. Compare the opening of Lowell's "Mr. Edwards and the Spider"—"I saw the spiders marching through the air, / Swimming from tree to tree that mildewed day / In latter August when the hay / Came creaking to the barn"—with the first stanza of Hutchins's "The Disappearing Doors":

Don't despair if you begin in joy,
the day still new on its hinges,
and end at evening distraught,
all that radiant air and easy access
gone, the day shut up tight
and painted closed.

These poems do not share subject or style. What they do share is the flexible power of the unspooling sentence. Both poets have listened to English as a composer might listen to Beethoven. Thus, I was not surprised to learn, later, that Hutchins is a pianist, nor to see she has also worked as a biochemist, a minister, and a scholar. Clearly, the exigencies of these duties have guided her into her particular version of poetry, for which the precise simplicity of her title is a sort of shorthand.

"Eye of the Storm, Pescadero Coast, 1972," one of the smaller poems in the collection, is a compressed example of the way in which, throughout the book, Hutchins guides me into her patient, fragile, complex vision:

The same shirt pulled over the same head
not once but again and again, a eucalyptus turned
inside out. Brutal, foam-white,

the sea tore at its rocky coast. Route One was
forsaken. The big house was unlit, the plowed yard
a pool of rain. A cloud ceiling

pressed yet lower. Along worn cliffs
in the farm workers' small-windowed shacks, stoves
burned into the dark of the day.

It was Sunday, but only the storm made it
Sabbath. In flooded fields, unharvested
Brussels sprouts clung to their stalks.

The poem is a map of images—a tree, a coastline, a highway, buildings, a sky, a field. Each sentence is as self-contained as a musical motif, yet, as in a sonata, those melodies accrue into a pressure of emotion. The tipping point is the first sentence of the last stanza: “It was Sunday, but only the storm made it / Sabbath.” The moral weight of these words is also a weight of sound, and somehow also a weight of history, of experience. The line is inexorable—like music, like chemistry, like God.

Tender the Maker won the 2015 May Swenson Award for Poetry, and in her foreword to the collection, the competition’s judge, Cynthia Hogue, writes that “Hutchins combines a pitch-perfect and precise lyricism with a postmodern sensibility of language’s materiality.” As an example, she cites the poem “Between Pages of the Dictionary,” an artful imagining of the way in which “[t]he opening of an old dictionary leads to a rich dwelling on the thing itself, the actual book and the materiality of the language it houses.”

I agree with Hogue that Hutchins’s ear is her conduit into imagination, yet to my mind this sort of playful poem is not nearly so compelling as those in which she pushes the language beyond brilliance into more shadowy articulations, ones that often address layers of history. As Hogue notes, “If the poetry’s music tethers Hutchins’s poems internally, what holds them

together in theme and subject is the thread of the elegiac at both personal and historical levels.” One of the most poignant of these elegiac threads is the speaker’s grief, in poem after poem, at her brilliant and much loved father’s effacement by Alzheimer’s. The wordplay of “Unrepeatable Poem” becomes the heartrending portrait of a man who can no longer reliably match his words to meaning or memory. Yet, as Hutchins shows, the accident of dementia is, at times, also the accident of metaphor:

On the porch-swing, he and I lean together. *How many fingers am I holding up?* “Seventy.” *What time is it?* “Seventy-one.”

In McDonalds, his soda spilled, root beer dripping everywhere—his chest, his lap, the curved plastic seat, the floor— “What was that explosion?”

His voice again, a desperate sundown, “They’re locked. It’s terrible. They’re all locked in.” *Are you lonely?* “Yes.”

A hot August day and a slow walk, both thick-soled beige shoes dragging. He stops to point at his feet. “I’ve got chairs on those.”

Last photo of the three of us, he picks out my mother and me. She points to the one he doesn’t name, *Who’s that?* “Oh! That’s that smart man!”

The poet spins innumerable elegiac threads—landscape and story, water and sun, sweetness and ignorance—and they are linked across time and place by the acuity of tenderness. In “A Way Back to Life,” Hutchins writes:

From Russians I learned never to shake hands across a threshold, but a half-hour after rising, I return to set my cool hand into the bed where a river of dreamheat lingers, the still-warm flank of our horse’s dark gallop.

To make sure it was me they got, my parents put up all night with a mockingbird perched aloud in one of three liquid birches

→

a handspan from their open window. Do you
think I'd make that up?

Hutchins offers such imaginings with enormous generosity. She, as the maker of these poems, holds herself accountable for their tenderness. In this way she reminds me, at times, of Jane Kenyon, despite the different physicalities of their writing styles. Like Kenyon, she is always aware of the “luminous particular”—the concrete reality that communicates the ineffable; and in the final three stanzas of “Cleaning Out the Garage in 1968,” she offers what might be a lesson on that notion:

Beams of the day reached into the garage
and struck an already brittle stack
of newspapers where Dr. King
still marched I was seven years old
It was the newspapers The dusted sunlight

It was Alexander's desiccated body
pressed thin as a ping-pong paddle
translucent as apricots held to the sun
and it was an old shoe
dried into the same stiffness

laces untied and dangling and
shadow where your foot should be
the leather tongue
still molded to the known
curve of your high instep

Hutchins and Kenyon also share an attachment to the poetry of Anna Akhmatova; in fact, the biographer John H. Timmerman believes that Kenyon first coined the phrase “luminous particular” as a way of describing Akhmatova's work. Hutchins herself was in St. Petersburg while she was writing several of the poems in *Tender the Maker*, and the life of the Russian poet was a doorway into at least one of them, “A Traveler Is Met by Touch.” In this poem the material objects of Akhmatova's apartment become, for the speaker, a conduit into the history of evil—“a cinder never quite burned out,” as Hutchins notes in her epigraph, quoting the French poet and Résistance fighter René Char. Europe's midcentury devastations haunt her; she returns

again and again to those images. In the poem she shifts her imagination from Akhmatova's samovar to Krakow, then to Salzburg, and then to the death camps:

At Auschwitz I placed my two hands flat on the gas
chamber's wall, then flat on a brick oven's sliding drawer,
a raft so narrow on its tempered rails. When my hands flew
to the roof of the mouth, like one blind I felt my way

to where I had never been. I needed to trace the arch.
To know what? Evil, and something more. To follow the path
of risen smoke?

Yet at this moment in the poem she allows the rising smoke to lift her attention away from Auschwitz and back toward home, where "last year my father was incinerated, / a tag on his memorized toe. / His ash scattered by strangers beyond the Golden Gate." These collisions of loss—one so vast, one so personal—are a form of time travel. And though, as Hogue notes in her introduction, the words "Evil, and something more" may seem to be "a moral imperative (to *imagine* evil, as Robert Duncan famously urged of Denise Levertov)," Hutchins is equally compelled by "Life's unrepeatabe, glorious Mystery," one that may so eloquently turn on a vision of "risen smoke."

In his "Ninth Elegy," Rainer Maria Rilke writes that "truly being here is so much; because everything here / apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way / keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all." Hutchins, too, ponders this ambiguity, this sense of seeing oneself as both necessary and extraneous. The theme is woven throughout *Tender the Maker*, though she reconfigures it within a variety of voices and settings. In "The Disappearing Doors," for instance, she invents a bardic speaker who proffers a generational comfort:

O celebration, human, do not despair the days,
your life. In Venice, old stone stairs
march down the tide. Slow-rising
waters submerge the generations, remnant
hollows of their footsteps, cupped sills,
the houses' bright doors.

"Interregnum" ponders similar ambiguities in a first-person voice that is both private and mythic:

Plum-hot the anvil, lava, the volcano's rise, ours
is a sky of yellow crumb and ash. Amorphous, still I am consuming,
yea and nay, and consumed,

but shaken loose: empress
of undertone, perilous foam,
creek in its natal dark.

Many such moments involve a sudden recognition of doubleness: "the child inside the child," "the poem within the poem," as Hutchins writes in "The Music Inside." In "Atop Zugspitze," her speaker recalls a summer day in the Alps, when "at three I came to myself":

Boots on the guardrail, I spread my arms:
the mountain cast away from its own
terrible boulders. An unbridled wind arose.

I leaned into
the mouth of my making.

Rilke may have become a mentor of sorts as Hutchins worked to document her visions of the "glorious Mystery." She quotes his work frequently throughout *Tender the Maker*, including this passage from *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which she translated herself:

One who is like a fountain flowing from itself
realizes her essence and, passed through that motion,
bright creation—jubilant!—often closes with a beginning
and opens with an ending.

At the end of the collection, in her "Notes to the Poems," she shares some of her thoughts behind the word choice in her translation:

[Rilke's] phrase "realizes her essence" can also be translated "recognizes herself as made by the making," so realizing one's "essence" is not discovering a preexistent, enduring self but the dynamic of the artist realizing self as a motion-in-relation through which the work of art completes itself. The work of art may be a poem or a conversation. It may be a human lifetime.

Her explanation brings me back to my initial sense of these poems, as sound, for sound involves more than pitch or texture. Like a conversation or a lifetime, sound is also movement. The artist who "recognizes herself as made by the making" is shifting back and forth in time. However, rather than simply progressing

chronologically, she advances into the unknown as a dancer does—formally, circuitously, with cadence and intent. Substitute the word *scientist* for *dancer*, and the metaphor is still apt. Both the depth and the precision of Hutchins’s work arise from her exact attention to the “motion-in-relation” of herself as an artist, which is also attention to the tools of her work and to her imagination’s duty to honor the seen and the not seen.

“Perhaps,” Rilke muses in his “Ninth Elegy,” “we are here in order to say: house, / bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window.” Again and again, Hutchins is driven to record such clarities: canoe, summer, barefoot, water. “Praise this world to the angel,” Rilke tells us. “Show him / something simple which, formed over generations, / lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.” And Hutchins writes, in “Reservoir at Uvas Canyon,”

. . . The spillway loomed
high overhead: we floated

under its concrete mouth. Ankles
sloshing, we dragged the boat partway up
a yellow-soil bank and scrambled up the listing
stone to sit on the great lip.

Dangling our legs, my friend and I
ate pork and beans from the can
with a single plastic spoon. We did not
litter. We did not sing.

Certain poets do their best work in a land of echoes, and Christina Hutchins seems to be one of them. I have heard Rilke, Kenyon, Akhmatova, and Lowell inside these poems, but there are many other voices as well. In her “Notes to the Poems,” Hutchins writes of “being in conversation with Emily Dickinson” and acknowledges borrowing phrases from Handel’s *The Messiah* and Mahler’s *Adagietto, Sehr Langsam*. “The fourth movement of his Symphony in C Sharp Minor,” she notes, “is quietly driven by dissonance.” In the process of reaching for her own language of sound and motion, she is constantly attentive to the ways in which other artists have wrestled with the search. Like Teresa Carson, she knows that “we and our influences cannot help but work the same vein of the Underneath, however dissimilar our

BOOKS IN BRIEF

surfaces may appear.” In *Tender the Maker* Hutchins rethinks, reworks, reimagines the echoes. For, as she writes in “Linseed,” “Who knew at Auschwitz the grass would be / so very green?”