

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 62 N°2  
WINTER 2011/2012

**Editors**

John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey

**Editorial Board**

Christian Barter, Melissa Crowe, Rachel Contreni Flynn,  
Juliette Guilmette, Leonore Hildebrandt, John Rosenwald, Lee Sharkey

**Editors for this Issue**

Christian Barter, Melissa Crowe, Rachel Contreni Flynn, Juliette  
Guilmette, Leonore Hildebrandt, Jill Leininger, John Rosenwald,  
Lee Sharkey

**Supporting Staff**

Ann Arbor, Al Bersbach, Karen Hellekson

**Web Manager**

Lee Sharkey

**Subscriptions**

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

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

Add for annual postage to Canada, \$5; elsewhere outside the USA, \$10.

**Submissions**

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

**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.

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

Copyright 2011 by The Beloit Poetry Journal Foundation, Inc.

ISSN: 0005-8661

Printed by Franklin Printing, Farmington, Maine

**BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL**  
**Winter 2011/2012, Vol. 62 N°2**

<b>Chad Walsh Prize</b>	5
<b>Diana Lueptow</b>	
Little Eucharistic Song	6
Poosum Idyll	7
<b>Chris Dombrowski</b>	
Tablet	8
A Toast	9
<b>Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr.</b>	
Albania	10
Hounds	11
The Owl Declines to Accompany the Other Birds on Their Quest for the Divine Simurgh	12
<b>Joe Wilkins</b>	
Letter to My Son Concerning Quickening	13
<b>Joy Jacobson</b>	
Bleached	14
Not as She Is	15
<b>Stephen Malin</b>	
Hunt Club	16
<b>Bruce Bond</b>	
Audubon	17
<b>Emilia Phillips</b>	
Clepsydra	20
Niedecker's Iron	21
<b>Jami Macarty</b>	
By Virtue of <i>And</i>	22
<b>Brittany Cavallaro</b>	
The Girl in Question	23
<b>Justine el-Khazen</b>	
Another poem taped to a lamp post	24

## CONTENTS

### **Brett Elizabeth Jenkins**

Phases 29

### **Jeremy Paden**

Trapiche (One) 30

Trapiche (Two) 31

### **Pattabi Seshadri**

Desert Grass 32

### **Eric Pankey**

Dark Was the Night 34

Chalked Equations 35

### **Amanda Warren**

Three Locks Road (Deadman Crossing) 36

Mutatis Mutandis (those things changed which needed changing) 37

### **Lauren Camp**

Again on the *Again: Fifty Days at Iliam* 38

### **Emily Rosko**

[If they would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome] 40

### **BOOKS IN BRIEF, by John Rosenwald**

#### **Bad News and Good**

*The Best American Poetry 2011*, ed. Kevin Young and David Lehman 41

### **COVER**

**Mary Greene**, design

**Janet Fredericks**, "Contemplating History," charcoal, graphite, acrylic on paper, 1997

### **Poet's Forum**

We invite you to join the online conversation on our Poet's Forum at [www.bpj.org](http://www.bpj.org). The participating poets for this issue are Bruce Bond (December), Pattabi Seshadri (January), and Brittany Cavallaro (February).

# BPJ

THE EDITORS OF  
THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL  
ARE PROUD TO AWARD  
THE NINETEENTH ANNUAL  
CHAD WALSH POETRY PRIZE  
OF \$5,000

TO  
JENNY JOHNSON  
FOR HER POEM "ARIA"  
IN THE SUMMER 2011 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  
AS WELL AS AN ANONYMOUS DONOR  
AND FORMER WALSH PRIZE WINNERS  
MARGARET AHO, ROBERT CHUTE, KARL ELDER,  
JESSICA GOODFELLOW, AND CHARLES WYATT.

**DIANA LUEPTOW**

**Little Eucharistic Song**

Oh chrysanthemum, you are so evolved,  
so selected to live communally.  
What fine scale. Yes, we could learn from that.

But if we had to act as *one* flower  
yet be in fact two hundred, it would go  
so hard on us. Your petals, worlds. Your worlds

are cups to suck the windy water.  
The new thing is inside. Loaf of pistils—  
oh, oh. That *is* too much. Oh no. Oh you.

**DIANA LUEPTOW**

**Possum Idyll**

From beyond the patio's aureole  
it stared at me. *It* became *she*, and she  
conformed to rules of Tudor portraiture:  
pointed chin, black eyes burning,  
white-faced little sister to Donne, to our  
new, the handsome, Shakespeare. Worried, too—  
by the land, the lads, the lazy servants,  
her love for the parish sexton holding  
the keys. Their velvet burrow, the golden trees.  
Oh, how he loves her rat tail, her long lace cuffs  
of black, the way each night she sneaks another  
morsel in his lap. Carriages await her  
but she doesn't care. Her aimless lord  
is ruination but forsooth tomorrow  
is sufficient. Evil waggles but not  
tonight. Venus winks in the sky.

**CHRIS DOMBROWSKI**

**Tablet**

Up the cutbank of a creek named after stone,  
striking stone, I came walking, my fingers  
stained with the pulp of raspberries picked  
from branches arched over descending snowmelt  
beneath two clouds and blue sky no one  
built. Napped between that extravagant  
quilt and sun-warmed sand until the taut line  
woke me, tugging in my palm. The trout's  
eye was a polished nickel poleaxed  
by a drop of ink, though I am writing this  
in the brown juice spit from a grasshopper's lips,  
instinct having made for many a miracle  
such as this emergent mayfly shaking its wings  
dry, to whom I whisper—Go light and soft  
with this pittance, straight to the lord  
whose commandments are writ in water.

**CHRIS DOMBROWSKI**

**A Toast**

Milkweed pod

gone to seed,

pried

open, wind-

emptied:

two shallow

cups of shadow—

**ELIZABETH T. GRAY, JR.**

**Albania**

On Sunday I went to Albania.

No one understood, clearly, at first, why I (or anyone) would go to Albania. Except my father, who knew at once: "Because, before, you couldn't go to Albania."

It had never occurred to me, before, to actually go to Albania.

For years it was there, a Mars, the ultimate hole in the atlas: Albania.

Our government said you couldn't go to Albania.

Passports self-vaporized, I thought, if you went to Albania.

The Middle Ages with Missiles, over there in Albania.

And somehow also China, Albania.

But then it was suddenly Sunday, forty years later, and it was right there. I was right next to Albania.

There's a thin strait, with small islands. You pay a ferryman to cross to Albania.

Before, people who tried to swim away were shot by men in trenches and towers guarding Albania.

Everyone was surprised when I left, alone, for Albania.

"Given her history, were you worried when your mother went off to Albania?"

"No. Well, maybe a little," they said. "She had never mentioned Albania."

When I came back everyone asked about Albania.

They said, "What did you see in Albania?"

I began to reply but that was enough of Albania.

Perhaps it was hard for them. The idea of Albania.

Maybe they never had an Albania.

They weren't panicked. They didn't ask, "What will we do, now that we can go to Albania?"

It's been a few days now. It's as if nothing happened. As if I never went to Albania.

The chart shows two ports and several small harbors but from this far offshore there are no lights anywhere on the coast of Albania.

As we move north, somewhere to starboard, steep and with snow, is Albania.

**ELIZABETH T. GRAY, JR.**

**Hounds**

Yes, you overlooked them  
when they lay easily in sunlight  
across the stone threshold of a Tuscan farm.

They did not race up behind you  
mad on the scent, the way a fire  
sears up a mountainside  
outrunning its own breath,  
nor did they force you off the trail  
through bare trees and snow,  
out onto the surface of a nameless pond.

Whoever would bring them to the trailhead  
and under these gray skies  
just let them go?

They are here by the fire,  
my friend, waiting to rise  
from the intricate carpet as you enter.

**ELIZABETH T. GRAY, JR.**

**The Owl Declines to Accompany the Other Birds on Their Quest  
for the Divine Simurgh**

Like a crazy, I have shed the lived-in places,  
chosen ruins. For the silence.  
For those moments when the nameless dead  
remove the talismans and you can sense  
the blue dome fragment in the household wall.

It's *how* you see the distance:  
all the oared ships at anchor  
in the silted plain that was the harbor.

**JOE WILKINS**

**Letter to My Son Concerning Quickening**

The wind this morning  
like a meanness in the world

spit snow thick and drifted—  
but right at noon

that runaway sky  
went silver-blue, bright

and disquieting as the coins  
of some far country.

**JOY JACOBSON**

**Bleached**

Where cattle bones grace the truck path  
I made my choice,  
a tibia, in colorless sun. Scratches  
where the rodents gnawed it  
had filled with pink clay  
and made it resurgent, useful, achingly  
so. I would chew on it myself  
but in the kitchen, Mama,  
its whiteness does not blaze.

**JOY JACOBSON**

**Not as She Is**

On the edge of the arroyo live  
the dead gray piñons.  
Drought weak, they were done in  
by beetles. This they do not  
admit. Shut  
the mind they say. You leave yourself  
open to far too much.

**STEPHEN MALIN**

**Hunt Club**

They'd bought Canadian gosling  
chicks to raise as decoys, but when  
live-bird lures became unlawful,  
the sportsmen termed them feral  
and left them to forage local farms.

Surviving birds, elderless, unled  
from incubated hatchling days,  
came with autumn to know their  
untamed blood in its surpassing  
urge to seek in height what wing  
to follow, so soon among the hard-  
frost dawns their arrow headed off,  
only to return the same forenoon.  
The next day too returned them early.

Thus their pattern, wedged in flight  
as in fixation, sometimes even  
three of these unmigrations rounded  
in a day, their cleaving quest for years  
not piercing more than county skies.

**BRUCE BOND**

**Audubon**

**1**

The night my father died I buried myself  
in a little language, a testament of will,  
measured out the way the stonecutter

measures out our names to make them fit,  
and as I leaned beneath the bell of light  
to the cursor where it pulsed, I placed there

neither man nor the shape of his absence,  
not grief as I knew it, but the tiny bones  
of ink that grief made, rising to the surface.

I have met with those who disapprove  
of passing through too quickly into song,  
as if, with death, we give to it the first

word which is none at all. Anything more  
is to make light of suffering: mine, yours.  
Or worse, to make far too much of it,

to lose oneself in the futures market  
that seeks to clear a profit on misfortune.  
They have a point. That is, some songs need

a certain hesitation to break the ice  
and move more deeply into winter's current.  
Then again, tending to a song's needs

gives loss a vocation, and who is to say  
what will come of it, any more  
than what comes of music while it lasts.

2

Audubon loved the creatures that he killed.  
That is part of the story. He loved the music  
he silenced, gutted, stuffed with clouds of cotton,

the bodies he cleansed with a surgeon's care  
then mended with needle, a stitched seam  
tucked beneath the feathers where they shone.

He loved the eyes that gave way to seeds  
of glass, the small black blisters gleaming  
with light that went just so far, so deep.

Somewhere in that region of inquiry,  
in what he could not paint, the illusion  
of life took, and fluttered to the surface,

informing the angle of the head, the beak,  
the bright rustle of wings as the ivory-  
billed woodpecker turns away from us

to make out some motion in the distance.  
Movement is danger. Or so the heartbeat  
says at first, until it settles back

onto its perch, its branch of understanding.  
What you see within the sure lines and blush  
of these renditions is an artist's gaze,

so steady, cautious as it crosses the lip  
of stillness, our open coffin, careful not  
to break the perfect silence where it breathes.

3

Suppose all the world is a house lit up  
against the night, and the eye of the bird  
our only window. If you look through

the black air, you just might see a man,  
a father, say, who takes his broken sleep  
down the hall to a desk in the distance.

He is peering over his heavy glasses  
to the near at hand, papers that await  
his signature to put his affairs in order.

When he writes, his pen bleeds a little  
ink over the line, real or imagined,  
to lay a name against the emptiness.

Birds slip into the flowered portraits  
of his study, silent, and yet made flesh  
by the hand that murdered to create them.

The Carolina pigeon dips the nib  
of his beak into the mouth he feeds.  
If he spreads his colors, ribbed in black,

it is one more song that calls the thing  
unseen. The man closes up his desk,  
and with it a passage in his testament,

the part where he asks to be scattered,  
remembered the way a body remembers to breathe.  
A ghost thread pulls outward, like a word.

**EMILIA PHILLIPS**

**Clepsydra**

Into the bath drawn cold for fever  
I lower myself until the water covers all  
but my breasts, eyes, & nose—  
one o'clock, & I imagine B's body  
now in the chamber where a magnet  
will skim her ashes for screws, bone  
fasteners, & crowns. On the plane,  
the boy behind me asked why

I was wearing the blue mask  
& held a cup of ice to my neck  
& wrists. *Pressure points*,  
I said but didn't explain.  
At security my bags & body—  
searched. *Why are you traveling?*

*Why are you flushed?* A pacemaker  
explodes in the fired  
chamber. But the heart slows  
in cold water, the fever drawn  
out of the body—hot to cold,  
hot to cold. In the terminal,  
waiting for the next flight out,  
I studied the magazine

cross-section of Al-Jazari's elephant  
clepsydra in whose hollow body  
a bowl continually fills, becoming  
heavy with each hour. Underwater  
I hear slow breathing,  
far off as someone else's.



**JAMI MACARTY**

**By Virtue of *And***

Honey given : Honey taken  
By virtue of *and*  
we divide and separate: branching into  
palo verde: green stick tree  
precipitating yellow blossoms: green tree,  
yellow blossoms: a mind sticks  
on certain images, certain colors: phone's  
ringing interrupts: it's the neighbor again  
she wishes: someone would do something  
about the bees: yellow blossoms  
delicate, fluted: all the wind  
they need blows: the blossoms let go  
so easily: falling one  
at a time: it's impossible to determine  
the moment of separation: descent  
a small scheme in the wind's master plan.

**BRITTANY CAVALLARO**

**The Girl in Question**

What the girl goes through to get here—thickets, coverlets, the half-built halls of this manor, and its elegant, crumbling drawbridges, the tease of the moat beneath. She stops at its banks. Her frock is on wrong but she can't help herself, and what's below knows her, knows her buttoning hands. *Hello* she says back to the water *you wouldn't let me float would you?* but the moat would like her to unroll the grass on the other side, to fasten it shut like skin over a sore. She hesitates. Behind her the chanting. She knows there is a boy in the wood who has dropped to his knees and drawn a circle and is saying each of her secret names. *Susanna* he says *Silent Dog* and *White Scarf* and she tightens hers to hear her pulse. *Mend my wrapping coat* he says *I am so cold*. The water begs, the boy begs her, and she could pull a girl from the storm cellar, a twin, tornado-legged and frozen, from her hiding place in the icebox, the place she learned her breath's real shape, a twin from the shaved-grass garden. She could teach them how to mend, to wait for the final girl on the road, the one who will not answer. How to wait for the answer. How to tell the two apart.

**JUSTINE EL-KHAZEN**

**Another poem taped to a lamp post**

*AM commute*

Quarter to nine and the air is circulating  
with stories, handheld cameras reel,

the idea of a bomb reddening the inside  
of one building then another,

egress twists white into an empty sky.

Next a stem of breath chalked with remainders,  
filaments of lightbulbs littering the air

and other headlines scrolled from space.

There are scenes, and there are scenes  
of bodies creating themselves  
of dust that play and re-  
play (suspension of an image).

We read ourselves

into the action of everything falling,

the mouth an open switchblade,  
sound stitched to a tremor of surfaces, chirp of machines  
going crazy and "a blip  
without additional information."

The digital eye of every clock upon wreckage and rising dust,  
each number illuminated against the next,

the eighth minute eighth hour:

first, it was a summer of bodies opened by mouths, sun calibrated  
to the distance between forefinger and thumb,

clockwork of lines trailing a lilt of limbs  
and then the mind, the mind

a chain link of Xs.

■

*Identifiable remains*

Long legs in the sand of  
somewhere else,  
a still frame.

The body will always be running  
in the dream of its own dismemberment,  
always in flight.

This is the picture (of the torso,

the hands,  
the face)  
of someone falling

out of time.

■

*Oral history*

Long curlicues of talk annotate the portions of a city  
bracketed by alarm,

the mind a thin history of misnomers:  
here, in the interim, it is spring, summer—

now a globe of filtered light,  
a chronicle of minor adjustments,

signals that splay the spired star tips of nerves electrified  
and documentation

of the blank page.



The mind cycles through its list of antonyms,  
filaments of lightbulbs flare in the afternoon,

then the bitmap of an image forming:

it's always snowing in the mind,  
each of us in the ashen image of the other,  
and the snow can burn  
(harvested letters, records, data).

Birds mass in their departure (a word may be shaped like a bird).

There's a cue,  
the tree empties.

■

*On a clear day*

The communion was something you could taste:  
every mouth closed  
and coated,  
wet membrane, hollow

pressure of a tongue held  
is a form of punctuation,  
a knot  
that can never be undone.

■

*In April*

Eighty-eight searchlights.

Headstone of a sky  
written into the next frame

and every night peeling columns from a low ceiling of moisture.  
Halogen, a short history  
of hauntings.

It seemed possible to remember,  
to profess faith in the subatomic magnification  
of energy,

but there was only a window of diffuse and colorless light,  
mottling the insides of clouds.

Prayers,  
advertised. The nights,  
a controlled experiment in mourning.

Then,  
the crystalline precision of sound netting us,  
cornu spirals interlocking forever,  
greased bar of a straight line, horizons layered like cities,

a vinculum over every number.

**BRETT ELIZABETH JENKINS**

**Phases**

It starts out nothing and becomes nothing. It does nothing of its own accord. All the acts are performed for it. A thing dancing upon another thing.

It begins like a bird pulling its wing up over its young. Slowly dragging open the curtain when you wake. The way I push your shirt up over your head.

Now, an open purse. You're sure you could reach in and grab nearly anything out of it. A pen, a stick of gum. Whatever you need. It's yours.

The middle, the part where we can't remember which way we started, where we will end. What part of this whole charade will be tainted next. An empty dinner plate. A face illuminated in a dark stairwell. A hole punched through a paper, or, say, a wall.

This is when things begin to end. Draw up the sides, like a hammock. Soon it will close up the light inside itself.

The end is tricky because we all feel we've seen this happen before. Drawing down the corners of your lips. The last sliver of an orange rotting on the kitchen table.

And now. We see nothing of it now. A blank board. A night lake you could walk across if it were cold enough. A table with nothing missing because nothing is there.

**JEREMY PADEN**

**Trapiche (One)**

the ass makes its round  
clop clop clopping

the stone turns crushing  
rock extracted

gathered dust  
bathed in quicksilver and piss

hands stained black  
blistered mix the slurry

until the amalgam falls  
to the bottom and the wash

polluted is poured out  
upon the earth

and the ass keeps circling  
the stone keeps turning

the blistered hands keep mixing  
keep pouring out

keep riddling  
the earth stained

keeps

offering

**JEREMY PADEN**

**Trapiche (Two)**

The trapiche still spins  
clickety clack

a pulley and a diesel engine  
and the clack clack clack

of the weights and the stones  
as it turns crushing ore to dust

knocking stone against  
stone against weight

and the spinning  
merry-go-round

jostling jockeying  
shoulder against shoulder

click of the camera  
clack of the tongue

the trapiche still spins  
did he say that

it's a lie            it's a lie  
it's a lie

**PATTABI SESHADRI**

**Desert Grass**

Every man is endowed by his Creator  
With underground deposits of flammable fluid.  
The ancient streets of Baghdad  
Were paved with tar.

With a phosphorescent light stick, a guard  
Sodomizes Mr. Waleed.

The Americans are drilling day and night  
Through soil and rock, hoping to meet their Maker.  
Now I will rise and return their love.

■  
I hear voices at the tunnel's end:  
"They flipped the switch.  
It felt as if my eyes were being pushed out,"

As if they were extracting great quantities  
Of pitch and tar out of a stone.

"What becomes of all the young and old men?"

From the heat and pressure  
Of geological time, they emerge,  
Naked, forced into a pyramid.

■  
"I was tied to the radiator  
And subjected to the continuous playing  
Of 'By the Rivers of Babylon' by Boney M."

I want to stop thinking about this.  
In the desert a body smells like dry grass.

"I gave you my body.  
If you hadn't abused my love and trust

I never would have been photographed  
Giving the thumbs-up."

■  
A woman says to a satellite,  
“Allah, this baby is yours.”

My apertures open and close in the dark,  
Urge urge and urge, the procreant urge  
Of photography.

“Take full advantage of my love and trust.  
Step on my head while it lies in urine.”

These distances always terminate  
In my receiver's previous location.

■  
My servants ask me who I am.  
I answer that I am an Iraqi Muslim.

Then they ask me, “What is the grass?”  
But I do not know the answer.

Then they ask me,  
“Where is Osama bin Laden?”  
And I say, I know where *I* am. I am everywhere.

My thumb, my eye, my saliva  
Surrounded by barbed wire.

■  
I am the feeling of health, the full-noon trill,  
The song of a mouth held open,  
The warmth of an interrogator's hand.

I am the song of me  
Rising from my bed of fumes.  
I scan myself onto a magnetic disk

And fling it into space for the public good,  
Like the “I sing” of poets,  
Like the “I declare” of kings.

**ERIC PANKEY**

**Dark Was the Night**

If I blow on a charcoal stick and enliven an ember,  
A momentary, lurid light,  
I might recognize the emptiness  
As well as the space I occupy.

Moonlight

Or frost on the ground: pearl gleam of finite deferrals.  
How long have I kept the past hidden, tarp-covered,

Not on view,  
as if awaiting some final restoration?  
The horizon retreats. The distance remains constant,  
A dark distance where shadows are quarried.

A dragon of river mist lifts from the gorge. Moonlight.  
The past, like a poem, I've come to learn,  
Does not change,  
but around it language does.

**ERIC PANKEY**  
**Chalked Equations**

The freight of ambiguity can be figured as  
The discrepancy between *a* and *b*,  
As well as, but different from, *a* suffuses *b*.

::

Record the last cache of August daylight  
As the dark hollow of the plucked raspberry,  
As willow-leaf shadow on her nipple.

::

That said, each stanza is, nonetheless, an island,  
Joined and separated by the depth and distance  
That surrounds, and in surrounding, defines.

::

One can sever the bridge cables and still  
The bridge stands, engineered to bear more  
Than the weight of its expanse.

::

The vacancy marked by the thorn-sharp shriek  
Of a red-winged blackbird's territorial caw  
Is an amalgam of rare and remote elements.

::

Record the quicksilver sliver of memory,  
All that remains of the past: granaries  
Collapsed beneath a bountiful harvest.

**AMANDA WARREN**

**Three Locks Road (Deadman Crossing)**

Although the fruit grows heavy and bright,  
we do not eat with the dead.

We do not eat of the dead:  
their jewel brightness, ripe for the taking.

We leave the fruit of the dead:  
it rots on the grave where it lands;  
we remember what feeds it.

**AMANDA WARREN**

**Mutatis Mutandis (those things changed which needed changing)**

Memories out of sequence,  
overlapping in the cold light of now:  
    false filter we peer through—winter's slow-moving waters.

Survival has its price:  
    the syncopic moments piling one atop the other,  
    the perpetual replay.

The scent of blood in falling snow.  
Animalic on the cold fabric of my jacket.  
And consequentially, the scent of his hair,  
    once damp frozen to points against my palm.  
So metal, so clean, sharper than any affection—  
    cut it away,  
    try not to break the skin,  
    stitch it wrong side to wrong side.

**LAUREN CAMP**

**Again on the Again: *Fifty Days at Iliam***

—a painting in ten parts by Cy Twombly, 1978

*Sing, Goddess, sing of the rage of Achilles*, the days of war  
and black purposes. When the painter draws a line

he hears the battle between drawing and drawing,  
as the black waters of the Greeks move to the ships.

Pulling his thick crayon, he grabs hold of the shield  
he is drawing in Bassano in Teverina; he leans

his fist over each smeared study. He waits,  
and salutes the long call of discipline. His waiting

is nearly a circle, wide as his arm, an explosion. Each day  
he draws ghosts, or he sits by his mind watching the sea.

*The sea is white three quarters of the time, just white,*  
he says to himself. He scribbles the war.

*Patroklos. Achilles.* He repeats the names  
in his stone studio until he can sketch them.

■

The painter doesn't pace. His precision is only a line  
of tragedy forming in the form of light. *The gods all sat assembled.*

At night he reads the war,  
and in the morning when day's white cuff presses down,

color trembles and nods, then lands on itself again.  
He looks out the window at the slurry of the winter sea.

His hand touches the large canvas with the red language of dying;  
he rubs in nine years' battle he fought into the scrawl

of the oils. A. A. A.: each letter loud and undisciplined.  
Will he sleep tonight, after holding the red and red of the gods?

■

Using his darkest crayon, he draws a crescent curve for grief,  
nestles into the arm the white of loss, digging out

LAUREN CAMP

the rapturous first stroke of vengeance. His hands are warm,  
and the crayons he is holding

tell him how to draw the cycle.  
Without slowing, he scribbles his theories

in alizarin and blue pigment, the theories which are tones  
and lines. Is he traveling or unraveling?

He is used to these lapses of certainty. He holds the pencil  
like a dagger. Erases and deciphers this battle in his hands.

■

He works the canvases together, fighting them, unrelenting.  
Space forgives the sound of the words he has read,

never a sound but the scratching  
of the tool in his hands.

The line chases, not moving away, until it has never  
stopped; space gathers at the corners.

The battle is fought again on the again.  
It will always be this way,

the rapturous names of the gods getting smaller.  
He pushes each letter away.

Outside his studio the night is naked,  
the dark music of fighting moves over

to the very last sentence of color,  
a voluptuous white that harvests the drone of the sea,

a battle of where the beginning begins:  
what is unpainted, the myth of the gods,

what is liquid or heaven.  
Up close, devastation: ten canvases with a trail of exertion.

**EMILY ROSKO**

**[If they would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome]**

The steps were cold—  
an ancient cold. We huddled  
in lines that wound

through city streets. Stores  
boarded with ply, as empty as  
our traded-in gloves and shoes.

Mostly we cooperated, most  
of the jostling happened behind.  
Our hearts, fixed forward, gave off

a blue affection. The scale  
tipped this way and that, in one  
pan clay, in the other a pyramid

of faceted gems. We were the eyes,  
we were weight shifted  
foot to foot. This was a capital

moment. The mechanism, armed,  
wavered, springs twitched  
to settle, mixed swords

and scales, fear and favor.  
What would never be ours  
hung in the balance.

**JOHN ROSENWALD**

**BOOKS IN BRIEF: Bad News and Good**

***The Best American Poetry, 2011*** (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2011, 237 pp, \$35 hardbound, \$16 paper, ebook edition available). Guest Editor **Kevin Young**, Series Editor **David Lehman**.

First, the bad news. Frankly, not much of the work in this year's *Best American Poetry* interests me greatly. When preparing to review a volume, I usually read it straight through, marking poems that attract me enough to want to write about them. This year the count remains quite low. I can't ignore the potential danger of entropy in such a series; some will inevitably see its continuation as a sign of conservatism and complacency. At times comments become vituperative. Writing in *The Huffington Post*, Anis Shivani remarked about last year's volume: "One cannot escape the feeling, twenty-plus years after the inception of the series, that it has absolutely run out of steam, having become a coterie affair where one goes not so much to seek the most exciting in poetry, but to admire, with horror, the quaint artifacts and robust machinations of the Old Masters. . . . This is gibberish pretending to be poetry. . . . The bulk of the academic poetry written today is from a stance of moderate, earnest, entirely boring emotion."

It's not surprising that in any selection of "best" poems a reader will find some disappointing; the percentage this year, however, seemed to me higher than usual. Even some work that intrigued me needed editing before appearing in public. Mary Jo Salter's "The Afterlife" sensitively and intelligently explores the ancient world in an ekphrastic poem describing the limestone statue of an Egyptian couple but provides too much detail and ends with a superfluous sketch of the viewer heading out into the Chicago cold. Jude Nutter's "Word" begins brilliantly with lines describing her ailing mother and concludes with a strong image of this "woman / who spent the last months of her life with nothing / but rain inside her." The previous two and a half stanzas, however, elevate the diction to a level that undermines the rest of the poem, moving from a "skylark's rising // smear of music" to a "sleek, white pony / in the wet, roped-off pasture . . . / navigating . . . through the high // surge of wild iris." Neither Salter nor Nutter is an Old Master. Neither of these poems, however, presents gibberish; both in their more successful moments move well beyond "moderate, earnest . . . boring emotion."

So there's good news as well. Although numerous poems do not excite me, the poems I like I like a great deal. Furthermore, I delight to see that the world of this year's *BAP* is larger than that of its two predecessors: more countries, more politics, more references to other poets/writers/musicians/artists. If the 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics went to three scientists for their discovery of the accelerating expansion of the universe, then Kevin Young, editor of this year's *BAP*, deserves an award for choosing poems that recognize the expanding universe beyond our borders. Perhaps as we were leaving the Bush era, experiencing the aftermath of the Great Recession and the election of the first African American president, poets again began to look outward. Barack Obama strides through these pages, from Elizabeth Alexander's sketch of the candidate in "Rally" to numerous comments in the fascinating, informative autobiographical and compositional notes at end of the book.

In reviewing the 2009 and 2010 *BAP* volumes, I struck mostly a thematic tone, remarking as suggested above the limited vision (geographic, literary, political, cultural) of much American poetry. I also observed the elegiac music that dominates the poems. Kevin Young plays the same notes: "Our age seems to be an elegiac one. . . . often not just for the dead . . . but for the living." Since we sound the same chord, I shouldn't spend time this year recreating the melody in a minor key. Let me instead move toward the tonic: In this year's *BAP* the elegy continues, but at least we sing in different languages and of different lands. And though the poems remain elegiac, they often become anti-elegies as well, as if even to express grief means to move beyond it.

It's easier to tear down than to build up. Rather than dwell on weaknesses let me praise strength. For starters I quote in its entirety Jane Hirschfield's "The Cloudy Vase," an elegiac anti-elegy that I admire for its concision, crisp image, and understated wisdom:

Past time, I threw the flowers out,  
washed out the cloudy vase.  
How easily the old clearness  
leapt, like a practiced tiger, back inside it.

Robert Hass creates another anti-elegiac elegy in "August Notebook: A Death," reliving his grief at his brother's dying but

relieving that grief through his own exploration of language, deciphering the language of his grief, and discovering coincidentally an appropriate poetic form:

I woke up thinking about my brother's body. . . .

That was my first bit of early morning typing

So the first dignity, it turns out, is to get the spelling right.

Whether it arrives in the form of accurate typing, the music of Billie Holliday, "an order / of doing things and symbolic forms of courtesy / for the bereaved," "Mississippi John Hurt's / Great song about Louis Collins," the ability to argue with his brother about their mother's happiness, or the conclusion of the arguments through the death of the brother, evicted, disabled, broke—appropriate language enables the poet both to express his grief and to transcend it. In his note to the poem, Hass quotes Judith Moore: "Sometimes . . . a poet just wants to say *river, bicycle, peony*." Or sometimes, making no more sense, and no less, the singer wants, as Hass does in the middle of this elegy, simply to sing:

The ones who don't take the old white horse

Take the evening train.

What I respond to most in poetry is rhythm and image—musical, imaginative use of the language. Hass presents a fistful, a full feast.

Music plays an even larger role in Patricia Smith's "Motown Crown." Smith reigns as queen of slam poetry, winning the national competition four times, more than any other competitor. But "queen of slam poetry" doesn't quite cover the turf. The numerous performances of hers I've seen have relied not so much on the histrionic element of slam as on the oral tradition, on the compelling power of a tale recited without the intervention of writing and reading, as if straight from the mouth and heart. Like Carolyn Forché, Smith at her best convinces an audience that what she is speaking is fresh-cut at that very moment, even if it is a poem she has already published or performed numerous times. Her poems have seemed shaped by the narratives themselves rather than formal concerns. So it is fascinating to learn that she created the crown of sonnets that graces this year's *BAP* after she "fell in love with the possibilities of prosody and meter while pursuing an MFA." As she writes in her note,

I love the crown. I love its quirky math, its illuminating repetitions, its insistent song. . . . I wrote the crown in a

relentlessly driven stupor in about three and a half hours. . . .  
In the months after its creation, I visited the crown often.  
Revision was like walking into the house of an old friend,  
each time rearranging the furniture a little.

On one level a tribute to Motown itself, the sonnets move one by one from the Temptations to Smokey Robinson to Stevie Wonder to Diana Ross to Mary Wells and onward, providing snapshots of the singers and their songs, their individual and shared sounds. As she describes the music, Smith also presents the artists behind the songs (“Mary Wells, so drained of self-esteem, / was a pudgy, barstool-ridin’ buck-toothed dream.” Most tellingly, she explores the effect the artists and their music had on her as a young impressionable black woman, from a fascination with Smokey Robinson that would lead her to “replace / our *daddies* with his fine and lanky frame” to eventual recognition of the limitations of such fascination:

So now, at fifty plus, I turn around  
and see the glitter drifting in my wake  
and mingling with the dirt. My dingy dreams  
are shoved high on the shelf.

What these particular lines reveal is Smith’s ability to create iambic pentameter that feels like spoken American; what they don’t show is how skillfully she on occasion breaks the iambic pattern with an extra syllable, one that keeps the pentameter from becoming too regular, too monotonous. Note her deft handling of the final line of this passage:

One day she’ll own  
that quiet heart that Motown taught to speak,  
she’ll know that being the same makes her unique.

In the sonnet that completes the crown, Smith steals a jewel from each of the preceding fourteen poems, providing strong examples of gnomic or aphoristic verse:

Ask any colored girl, and she will moan,  
remembering how love had lied so loud. . . .  
Less than perfect love was not allowed  
and every song they sang told me to wait.

Among my favored modes, gnomic poetry has a special place. In his introduction, series editor David Lehman comments on our love of memorable phrases, from Dickinson’s “transport / Of cordiality” to the opening line of Frost’s “Directive” and beyond.

Kevin Young seems to share that love for the pithy statement, not only as segments of long sequences such as the Motown set, but also in much shorter poems. Although I have no space to focus on other gnomic verse in the volume, let me pay brief tribute to a few poets who caught my ear.

Terrance Hayes:

Not what you see, but what you perceive,  
that's poetry. Not the noise, but its rhythm; an arrangement  
of derangements.

Alan Michael Parker:

My friend remembers all he reads—  
so when does he finish a book?

Jude Nutter, whose poem I criticized earlier:

My mother's sentences become shorter. . . .  
Stone bridge with a diminishing

span.

And finally James Richardson, who challenges the very notion of poetry by crafting poems that are only aphorisms or epigrams:

Too much apology doubles the offense.  
The heart is a small, cracked cup, easy to fill, impossible to  
keep full.  
The reader lives faster than life, the writer lives slower.

One quality of gnomic poetry is its concision. Another is its pithy and explicit wisdom. On the surface, the haiku tradition as historically practiced in Japan works in quite an opposite direction; though concise, it often refuses to summarize, to state. One brilliant quality of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," stemming both from his discovery of classical Chinese and from his knowledge of the European tradition, consists in suggesting the asymmetric beauty of Asian watercolors, their "petals on a wet black bough," while echoing in its slant rhyme the symmetrical heroic couplets of Alexander Pope.

In this year's *BAP* the haiku cross-dresses in gnomic clothes. In "Time Pieces," Rachel Wetzsteon creates a string of haiku, each with its own title. Accentuating the haiku/couplet mismatch, the poems all rhyme. The verbal play throughout is as rich as the title of the sequence as a whole. Some nibble at cynicism, as in "Reunion time":

Days passed like drugged snails.  
I met you at the station,  
laughed at their faint trails.

“Retronym time” applies that vision to politics:

Cheering: it was done.  
But soon the Great War would be  
renamed World War One.

Some, like “Temp time,” depend on a single crisp image:

Will I be alive  
when the twelve-headed jailer  
announces it’s five?

It’s sadly ironic that Wetzsteon did not make it to five o’clock; she died in 2009.

Richard Wilbur, one of the Old Masters scoffed at by Shivani, contributes a slight but lovely elegiac anti-elegy made even more delightful, as Lehman points out, by its alphabetical juxtaposition with Wetzsteon’s work. Wilbur’s poem also consists of rhymed haiku, now cast as stanzas. In “Ecclesiastes II:I” he takes the “old metaphor” “We must *cast our bread / Upon the waters,*” links it to “rice farming on the / River’s flooded shore.” He then finds solace in the belief “That it’s no great sin to give, / Hoping to receive” and, as he throws “broken bread,” bets that “One more spring will come.” The poem reminds me twice of Wilbur’s mentor, Robert Frost, first for its resemblance to the tiny Frost poem “Dust of Snow” and second for the recognition that even Old Masters sometimes create small masterpieces, as if we might ask with Frost of old age itself “what to make of a diminished thing.”

Haiku figure as well in C. K. Williams’s “A Hundred Bones.” The title comes from a Bashō passage quoted as an epigraph: “In this mortal frame of mine . . . made of a hundred bones . . . there is something . . . called . . . a windswept spirit.” Although Williams quotes no haiku by the Japanese masters, they are present even in their absence. Like zen koans, gnomic without being aphoristic, wise but not witty, classical haiku often disappear like Bashō’s frog into the sound they make. In “A Hundred Bones” Williams leaps quietly between past and present. From the start, the language bears no resemblance to haiku: “And thus the hundred bones of my body plus various apertures plus that thing I don’t know yet / to call spirit.” We’re not in the

present but in the past, “all aquake with joyous awe” not at some Buddhist revelation but “at the shriek of the fighter planes” as they “swoop in their practice runs” near his New Jersey home during World War II. And he’s a boy and he and his buddy Arnold love the planes and know the need to bomb the “Nips, Krauts” and to torture their own “enemy-friends” who have thoughtlessly “gone off to a ball game without” them. He rejoices at the “victory,” the “clouds like giant ice creams over the evil Japanese empire.” In retrospect, Williams recognizes “Japanese poets come later. We don’t know we need them. . . . Especially Bashō: ah, that *windswept spirit*; ah, that hardly there frog,” that force that brings home to the two boys actual warfare and its manifesting of “our *flaw . . . our error.*”

I’ve never been a fan of James Merrill, so I was surprised to find myself admiring greatly the elegiac anti-elegy to him by Stephen Yenser that closes this year’s volume. I didn’t know Yenser’s work previously, but “Cycladic Idyll: An Apologia” possesses much that I admire in any poetry: gnomic moments, emotional commitment, skilled use of language (especially humorous word-play), compelling narrative that, again, looks beyond our national boundaries. The poem begins with no clear story, plunged in medias res, in essentially rhymed prose:

I come here for the views.

I come because there is no news.

Because things have been arranged. Because I have no other plans. Because there are no plans for me. Because I do not have to choose.

It quickly moves to literary allusion (Matthew Arnold), more wordplay, and slow development of the narrative:

I come to be alone. Because I am alone. Out of season. Like the few midges left. Adrift on a stony island no known poet hails from. Enisled. Outlandish as that term. (*Annihiled* is different but only by a smidge.)

Without abandoning the wordplay, Yenser’s first section ends like a symphonic movement with a subtle resolution of the melodic narrative line:

. . . here where it twists on itself  
like the walkways to waylay laid-up freebooters like me  
and my dead friend.

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

The friend, identified only in the indispensable autobiographical notes, is James Merrill.

The wordplay becomes less thick as Yenser explores Greece and explores his exploration, then returns to his original method near the end of the six-part poem:

And I am in over my head again, where it all flows, beginning  
with the simplest language, where once some tongue-slip  
led to *slime* then slid along to *loam* and *lime* and then  
*oblivion*,

While even stone is hardly faster, sea creatures secreting  
shells whose limestone pressed to marble harbors  
streaming linen.

I come back because I cannot stay away. Because I cannot  
stay.

I come back to leave. Not to leave a mark, either. To take it,  
rather. Like a vow. A vow of silence, say. . . .

To take it and to leave it, then. To leave my  
take—as pirates and directors have it—and to take my  
leave.

As these strong poems demonstrate, this volume brings good news as well as bad. But Shivani and other critics of the series raise important questions. Before I take my own leave I'd like to say that I intend in future issues of the *BPJ* to pursue those questions, to comment on the *Best American Poetry* series as a whole and on its role in determining what poetry we Americans get to read. As we approach the 2012 quarter-century celebration of this valued and still valuable series, I want to consider what David Lehman as series editor and his individual volume editors have accomplished, investigate how their work compares to that of other tastemakers in the world of American poetry, and place that comparison in the context of the general culture in which we live.