

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 62 N°4 SUMMER 2012

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Poet's Forum

We invite you to join the online conversation with *BPJ* poets on our Poet's Forum at www.bpj.org. The participating poets for this issue are Tanya Olson (June), Benjamin S. Grossberg (July), and Hayden Saunier (August).

races them, losing to herself every time:
chased by the shades of her, even as she

of lamplight, the Bridge's sole shadowcaster,
she rides by herself through the puddles
When it is early or late enough,

where it glows like a glass pipette.
From Canal, she enters the bikeway
empty open of the unmooned sky.

between the black rush of river, the
of fragile incandescence suspended
from afar, bead the path into a filament

those anti-crash talismans, which,
emit—flashflash of head- and tail-,
distinguishable only by what they

tires. By night, they are depersoned,
fixies, suits on foldables with donut-sized
brillo-haired hipsters on tricked-out

old men riding children's bicycles,
and varied as insects in the airstream:
By day, its traversers are numerous

in chainlink, diamond-netted.
this passage of concrete is cloaked
the auxiliary artery lashed to the Bridge,

Manhattan Bridge Bikeway, Up

AMELIA KLEIN

Intent

Then, overnight,
new leaves, their newness

astonishing as a stranger's
trust. And again it seems

possible to live
differently, my mind

veined with green as a blackbird
chases his shadow

back and forth between
the wires. Simplicity,

intention wedded perfectly
to action, lines

of current, lines
of flight. The bird, the human

and what the human makes,
all hierarchies washed out

beneath the leaves. Until I
build them up again.

I have no choice:
I choose. All summer long,

I constellate the shadows
as the slur of pollen falls.

AMELIA KLEIN

Less

Lane edged
with trees at first, and

squares of light
that mean

this space is tended.
Mean there is intention

here, hands and tools
to keep intact.

Expect a tomorrow
much like today.

Expect the pact to hold,
the sea to stay

in place. Failure
to expect: what we

call madness. For example
to notice

those birds are not
where they are

supposed to be.
That disappearance

multiplies. Not only
the ordinary

betrayals: we thought
we were damned

to live
among traces.

We must live
without them now.

MICHAEL JOYCE

Uppsala Sunday Morning, February

I am really in love with these bare branches in front of a lead-colored sky. It is as if they were letters in a strange language, trying to tell me something.

—Lars Gustafsson, *The Death of a Beekeeper*

It is the strangeness that consoles the oaks along the allée in the sunlight that stuns all that moves this February morning. They keep their counsel and welcome back the songbirds and meanwhile know the leaden light will live out its term, even these peeping creatures once again growing mute.

We all are silent, walking townsfolk, infants in prams, along the cindered paths that follow the frozen river, the speed skater in her long strides suspended numb with promise, a statue on the rink in stop-time bent toward the future, aerodynamic arms clasped behind pewter-colored tights molding the thighs and buttocks above the sheer silver plinth.

This smelter's silence my father would have recognized, raking aside a skim of crusty slag at the open hearth in his thick felt tunic and asbestos mittens, a molten spark occasionally spitting out fulvous as this low sun, turning dull as it cooled into a worm upon the metal-studded gloves, winter or summer he, too, a man of stolid silence, trying to tell me something.

MICHAEL JOYCE

[before you leave a place in your dreams it is best]

before you leave a place in your dreams it is best,
if you can, to put things back in order behind you:
scrub the stain of dried milk from the marble corridor,
comfort the girl weeping soundlessly on the low sofa,
try once more to decipher the strewn papers that before
skittered from your grasp, look in the mirror again
to see if the nacreous swirl of the void is still there
or if a lifelike portrait of your mother has replaced it,
a charming young lady in low heels moving effortlessly
through an otherwise jittery home movie, now fading,
the cream-colored silk suit with pink piping at the lapels
that for years she kept wrapped in glassine tissue paper
disappeared somewhere perhaps your sister can recall

MICHAEL JOYCE

[we were at home alone in a very big place and it wasn't a dream]

we were at home alone in a very big place and it wasn't a dream although everyone wanted it to be, or at least as far as they could see no, it wasn't, it wasn't at all, and it was bigger than you can imagine and empty although there was a sense of hundreds of others moving there in the night, in the walls, along the attic rafters, among the speckled insects the characters of a multicolored dream, of a raft, an ark, a doomed ocean liner, candles on the table, a string quartet, though none of us, as we said, were dreaming, no, none of us or at least none that we could see alone there in the dark, imagining others' eyes in the way you do remembering a lover, a dead parent, the smoldering gaze of Dietrich in *Der Blaue Engel* singing "falling in love again." you have to understand how big this was and how empty and you will when you remember, uncertain when the night would end never being certain if she could hear you, alone there then long after what you do not know, cannot recall, light so stark it made you blink, grit of sand on your lips and nostrils, scent of cotton baking in the sun and nothing coming into focus, not even a snake stirring in the scrubby sage, the window fogged with mottled dust, unable to wet your mouth even after a drink of lukewarm water, waiting for what, for someone, or some time after all this when reverie, though not a dream, would be a fit name for it, for this place and time, that is, call it California or Tulsa, Antibes or Paradise, and the year nineteen sixty eight or two thousand and eleven, lucky numbers for someone somewhere if you could only get through to them somehow

NIGEL HOLT

The Sixth Lion

Poppy-lick, the rivulet, sky-wet
and Kush-lipped, field-filed, red; redder yet
than lips sequestered by the blood of drug,
than joy caressed, than pinching fingers snug
around the bulb, tighter than regret.

Poppy-lick, the drip-drop, blue-thick, gray-sweat,
silver-sliver of a dream-state death threat.
Carry off your brothers in a jug;
splash them on the Panjshir graves you dug,
you dug—you thought you dug one bloody sunset.

Poppy-lick, the mistress, lover, kismet,
wallet-dry and purse-debt, Sufi pirouette,
remembrance of passion-past, smoke-fug,
deep-draught of red-bloat from sleeping fast, bedbug,
wake-thirst and never-sate, this morning-met:
Poppy.

CHARLES WYATT

Old John's Jig

With a feather in its arse and a jiggedy bounce,
the whale, that tiny fish, creeps up,
his lip the hinge of hell. And a hook,

and a hook in the lip of the whale, and old Johnny,
old Johnny remembers, remembers.
A hole in the ground. The first of the month.

A box of raspberries. Send the dog for the cream.
Oh sorry, my master, the dog drank the cream,
the doggedy dog, four feet up in the air.

CHARLES WYATT

Kitty Got a Clinking Coming from the Races

Here at the table with the books
stacked precariously we think of
Kitty and the races on the moon.

Down the moonbeams skitter
the best of all the mice, and each
into the mouse pot glitters and thuds.

Apples will float or sink at the Kitty fair
and what is real is all
this spinning in the air. No repeats.

EUGEN GOMRINGER/ERIC ELLINGSEN

This Also Doesn't Mean That Too

entropie ist schön

On May 17, 2011, a cashier at a café says *this means beautiful. I do not know this. This is a word from a book I know. Wait, no. No, it's not now. I do not know where you got this. Maybe this means transformation. Maybe? No. Not transformation, but when you change. Maybe this means a density of information that has physics. Maybe it just means entropy like in physics. Like the loss of something. Like energy.*

das gegenteil ist schön

An hour later an architecture student at a technical university says what this means, says *this means the opposite is nice. The opposite is nice, or beautiful. Yes, the opposite is beautiful or nice.*

wachstum ist schön

Later, a woman next to me on a bus, carrying a child, says *growth is nice. But I think there is something nicer than growth going on here.*

veränderung ist schön

During lunch the dean of the university says *this means the state of change, or a something which changes. It's reflexive. The whole thing means then that change is beautiful. It's an important thing, change, more active. More like changing is beautiful, the change in motion, not just passive change, abstract, is beautiful.*

dasein ist schön

May 18, 2011, at a botanical garden near the zoo, I am with the landscape architect who designed the garden. We are under a tree shipped from New Zealand to Berlin as a gecko scurries between us and a group of artists. He says *if you write this with a capital letter then it's subjective, which means that it means being or existing is great. But if you separate the words into two words, it means being here is great. I think it means the big kind of being, because they are together, but it must mean both somehow, big being here is great. It's not playing correctly, the grammar is not by the rules. Big being is great, beautiful, nice, but it's not playing correctly in the line.*

ordnung ist schön

May 18, 2011, two landscape architects waiting for a lecture say *order is nice. To order. Something ordered.*

das gegenteil ist schön

Later that night during a dinner and after a lecture, a Latin American architect who researches urban drift says *this means this: To counterpart is beauty. To duplicate.*

materie ist schön

Material, material, this means material, like you know, material, just material. Material is beautiful says a woman who runs a research institute in Russia, but lives in Rotterdam, sitting next to me in Zürich at a French restaurant.

energie ist schön

On May 19, 2011, a Turkish guy selling slices of pizza says *this means energy is beautiful. Energy is energy. Energy is beautiful.*

botanik ist schön

Later that day I am introducing myself to a group of thirty-one young artists and architects. We are sitting in a group together in a park saying where we come from and what possesses us to do what we do. I ask them to *help me do the meaning of this one thing* as an example of what I do, and they agree *this means botanic is beautiful. Botanic like flowers, like trees, like plants live, like from all over, like to study living things from all over. Botanic is beautiful, very beautiful.*

sanskrit ist schön

On May 20, 2011, a guy fishing for trout on a bridge in the center of the city says *Sanskrit is nice, beautiful, like the writing, and nice can mean nice, like casual, or nice can mean beautiful, like beautiful beautiful beautiful.*

das gegenteil ist schön

Later, two giddy Swiss geezers laugh while waiting for the tram, say *this means the opposite is nice. But there's another way, not only is the opposite of the thing nice, it's also good for you.*

verzicht ist schön

To disappear is nice, a landscape architect says as we stand beside a stuffed owl in a large studio spread out over four cities.

irrtum ist schön

The sausage vendor says *it means if you think something wrong, it's this, but not wrong like a mistake. It's beautiful to think the wrong things. But why do you do this? Is this very important for your life? I have ideas* he says *I have ideas.*

bedeutung ist schön

On the way to the university, I ask an ice-cream vendor if he speaks English after he has been talking to me in English. We laugh at my stupid question, then he tells me what this means. *This means meaning is beautiful. But why is meaning beautiful?* he asks me. And I feel licked.

wahrheit ist schön

On May 21, 2011, around the corner from Café Voltaire, close to a yarn store, an Indian man, after telling me what this means, says *I like what this says; I really like what this says: truth is beautiful. But it could also mean reality is beautiful. It means something more philosophical, or a legal clarity of truth, not just big T truth, but something argued, or proven true, true because we proved it by talking about it.*

das gegenteil ist schön

This means the opposite is beautiful, but this also doesn't mean that too, a gallerist in an empty gallery just killing time says, while curating a performance where one hundred miner's hats are launched at the same time like fountains into the air.

Near the gate, a man in his late fifties working Information tells me *this means something is beautiful, this is beautiful. I don't know this exactly, it's floated. But I think this says the same thing.*

“entropie ist schön” by Eugen Gomringer, variations by Eric Ellingsen

Translator's Note

I see these translations as little performances, ones I create when traveling or simply when moving to and from my home. The experiments add small space eddies to a stream of daily patterns. They invite introductions and personal contact without building the trust confiding in others requires. I first research a poet vested in translation and experimentation, then set up constraints to nudge an original text around a living boxing ring in which an assortment of people can rain down blows. The experiment creates chance encounters in public places between people and poetry, little speed bumps slipped into a day to practice being in slow motion.

Through these conversations I create connections that allow others to drop their guard and simultaneously profit from the vulnerability of thought with a stranger. For a moment we become unnumb to each other.

I also use these translations to think about what translators are and might be, and because I think poems are enacted and performed, and must be un-Pinocchioed. Poems un-Pinocchio in a pack of people when lines are spoken together, thought about, moved from a fixed place as we drift together through a city. They map a moment of where we are in a place that doesn't stick to us, and then invite it to stick. They connect our thoughts to our feet, language to the way we flow through the day physically, psychogeographically, and emotionally.

After I collect the translation material I reconstruct it, working with a cobbler to stitch the pieces of paper together, at the same time re-viewing the raw material and working it into a translation. This puts the kite back into the sky without cutting the string from the original, lets it catch the turbulence, dive-bomb the unanticipating day. But this also doesn't mean that too.

CHRISTIAN MORGENSTERN

Die unmögliche Tatsache

Palmström, etwas schon an Jahren,
wird an einer Straßenbeuge
und von einem Kraftfahrzeuge
überfahren.

“Wie war” (spricht er, sich erhebend
und entschlossen weiterlebend)
“möglich, wie dies Unglück, ja—:
Daß es überhaupt geschah?

Ist die Staatskunst anzuklagen
in bezug auf Kraftfahrwagen?
Gab die Polizeivorschrift
hier dem Fahrer freie Trift?

Oder war vielmehr verboten,
hier Lebendige zu Toten
umzuwandeln,—kurz und schlicht:
Durfte hier der Kutscher nicht—?”

Eingehüllt in feuchte Tücher,
prüft er die Gesetzesbücher
und ist alsobald im klaren:
Wagen durften dort nicht fahren!

Und er kommt zu dem Ergebnis:
Nur ein Traum war das Erlebnis.
Weil, so schließt er messerscharf,
nicht sein kann, was nicht sein darf.

LISA GROVE

Diary of a Young Morgue and Shoe

Heptuary 24th

In the Castle Lord Palm Storm, His Nimbleness Most Licked

“We war,” pricked the heir, skin-bent
on inch loss. “Morgue-and-Shoe!
Toss me a Glock!—*yawn*—Daisies or geishas?”

Bees click clogs for wagons.

In older war, veal cuts she licked.

Again hulled in bow tea, I tuck hair
by the balding seltzer booker.
For sugar, wagons often dart.

Many grab knees to ward off love.
Social lists mess scarves,
nick signs, nick art.

Yours, Wolfie

**homophonic translation of “Die unmögliche Tatsache”
by Christian Morgenstern**

CHRISTIAN MORGENSTERN

Das Knie

Ein Knie geht einsam durch die Welt.
Es ist ein Knie, sonst nichts!
Es ist kein Baum! Es ist kein Zelt!
Es ist ein Knie, sonst nichts.

Im Kriege war einmal ein Mann
erschossen um und um.
Das Knie allein blieb unverletzt—
als wär's ein Heiligtum.

Seitdem geht's einsam durch die Welt.
Es ist ein Knie, sonst nichts!
Es ist kein Baum! Es ist kein Zelt!
Es ist ein Knie, sonst nichts!

LISA GROVE

Hymn of Knees

I insist in kin, sons. Tunics!
I insist kind bomb! I insist kind salt!
I insist eyes in knees!

I creak forward, blink animal eye in man.
Shots align the loom. Toss kin
knees. Hares' eyes light the tomb.

I insist eyes in kin! Sons naked!
I insist kind bomb!
I insist eyes in knees, sons naked.

homophonic translation of "Das Knie"
by Christian Morgenstern

GARRIN RIGGIN

Practice

“Our kid was kissing
the bathroom mirror.”
“No, no,” said the boy.
“Don’t tell me,” said
the mother. “I’d recognize

those lip prints anywhere.”
The boy tried to make
himself smaller by clenching
all of his muscles. He crossed
his thin arms over his belly to

hold his innards in.
“It wasn’t me,” he said.
The word *me* was barely
audible and his mouth became
as dry as a moth.

MEGAN ERICKSON

For Hours in an Airtight Room

I thought it was a one-time deal: the kind of humiliation you forget
so you can tie your shoelaces and eat something besides Froot Loops

for dinner. But then the technician took the bottle of Windex
and the roll of paper towels from a drawer, tearing off three more

than he actually needed, and said *Again?* and she, instead of asking him
if he'd lift her up from her chair and wipe her clean, instead of extending

her unwholesome arms and letting him touch her like a child would
touch a piece of bone in a museum, as if his hand might be withered

by this chance encounter with the imperfect corruption of age,
screamed in the direction of the ceiling fan *Don't touch me*

and wandered out of the waiting room with her handbag hanging open at
her side.

Roast a chicken for 125 hours and you'll get what her skin looked like.

Comrade from the land of the ailing contaminated confined
unwell, we are all moving this way and we are moving forever.

TANYA OLSON

flower of the mountain

longest living marrieds
the man say dont seem like it
but he say one of the last longest livings
gone now it us he say we
the longest living marrieds now
whats your trick he say dont go to bed mad
that aint a trick aint a trick to it
stay living stay married stay stay
and you done it a man call you
say now you the longest living marrieds

it hard he say married aint no hard
married just staying but staying
aint not leaving to stay you got
to stay man drifting downriver on a log
aint leaving that log but he aint stay
my man river captain know every
stuckup bit of land every eddy
my man stay that river so long
times it like he that river
married maybe river my man
next longest living marrieds

he say you finish each other sentence
how he think that married how he think
I know what my man say man open
his mouth foolish crawl out every day
married aint finishing sentences them two
Chinese brothers joined at the heart
finished they other sentence we seen them
up the fair sitting joined walking joined
one died right after the other cause they
shared blood them boys had no choice
they nothing like marrieds

how you do it he say times choose marriage
each day some days choose each minute
chose it this morning choosing it
right now choosing how he asked said
theres many he could choose
and many would choose me I think
Lord he going to do it right here
atop the colored wheel at Seabreeze

he take my hand and the wheel go up
I see them Chinese brothers and think stuck
he say what you say I think he a river captain
he come he go he already choose he choose river
he say I choose you you my mountain flower
we top the wheel now I ask him ask right
he say you do me the honor and I think
just now no one know but me

the wheel break over the top stop
look out over Seabreeze
tallest I been since I left home see people
I never see again I say yes
he say yes that wheel start down
he say seeing them joined boys good luck
this time wheel go round dont stop

man today say tell everyone
your story I say we atop a wheel
and I seen it all he say Zelmyra
say yes I say yes
and the big wheel spin top the fair
I seen it all ocean mountain river swamp yes
the wheel go round while you sit still
Oh Lord yes it most certainly
do yes it still do

JILL OSIER

Aubade

My neighbor stands on a ladder
high enough to serve tea
on her roof. It's seven a.m.

and she's seventy-three. She rakes
down ice and snow, wrangling
potential disasters before

I'm even awake. Months
from now, when my front steps
have lost all definition,

I'll end up sliding
over to her house for salt.
I'll knock late for a casserole dish.

One night I'll make seven trips
back and forth to thaw out my back door,
her teapot steaming.

JILL OSIER

Pony

The day my mother was bowled over by the neighbor's black and white miniature staked in the field was a day of clarity and a tidy loop like that of an owl, or an ice rink, or hair being braided.

I found her in a quiet, violet gray at one end of the couch.
No light was on her.

The years I spent in the mountains left me unable to recover her face.
A sliver I could grasp at a time, phases of it like a moon's,
but never the thing whole.

There is something we take from the violet hour because we need it,
and everything we take resembles what we took before.

I thought it was maybe her own father's death that left her subdued
those hours normally kept for us, our supper, our pain. She said
she tried to hug its neck, to bury her face in the mane.

JILL OSIER

Lake Saganaga

And the whole time we fished, wishes
lined up the way shadows
refuse to. It ended up being the perfect time
for them to do this; we were all still
remembering ourselves as a family, and the light was
as it is when you trust it will hold something,
good enough to know you may have had something
but lost it. Certainty always stands closest
to no thing we have.

HAYDEN SAUNIER

Wooden Bowl of Spangled Fruit

1

Awaiting test results, I dust
each studded fruit, each mini-masterpiece

of bead and sequin pierced by pins
and nailed to shapes of orange, apple,

plum. I use an old Electrolux, attach
the dusting brush, distract myself,

deep breathe. The apple's crowned
with a plastic molded leaf-and-stem

the exact opaque olive green
of my brother's sack of army men,

the ones, when bored with battle strategy,
we'd string up and dangle, man by man,

above a fire kindled between privet hedges
until all poses melted. My brother's brilliance:

making sound effects to match each burning
liquid death. Inside, the aunts were bayoneting

plastic oranges with silver pins, while we,
safe in a green thicket, marveled at the varied

shapes our torture and disfigurement
could make. No two men died alike.

2

What were
those women
thinking,
powdered,
perfumed,
girdled,
thimbled,

→

punctuating
private talk
with tiny
hammer taps,
brows softly
furrowed
as pink
polished thumbs
bore fiercely
down?

Admit. Admit.
Just need
to fix
in place,
hold tight,
secure, make
beauty stay
by making
beauty hard
and faceted,
no corruption
so no
nourishment
and nothing
ever to be
bitten into,
sparkling
wholes.

3

The silver pins begin to gleam.
An unexpected shine that makes me think

of Saint Sebastian—arrows shot through flesh
the way the silver pierces ruby bead to shiny dish,

drives, spikes them into the form.
Impaled, Sebastian lived; that was his miracle.

Until they killed him more dependably: his body
beaten, body dumped down a Roman privy shaft.

Held to the light, this jeweled apple beams.
Turn it inside out: the world's a globe of nails.

4

I line up rhinestoned
 peaches, purple beaded

grapes, the scarlet plum
 with darker scarlet cleft,

a ruby apple, gilded pear
 along the shallow sill

of my sun-struck kitchen window
 a chorus line of pastied

Vegas showgirls, sparkling
 beneath the cotton curtain,

and the ordinary kitchen sink,
 the shelves, the wooden floor

go dizzy, shine with jazz flash
 colored star-flecks all slow

dancing to the ticking
 of the ordinary clock and still

the room fills up with how
 the telephone won't ring.

MOLLY BASHAW

Posing Nude for Andrew Wyeth

The old wagon became a sexual being

reminding of its history as trees, the wood steamed
and giving way, the wood measured by hands, turned
on a lathe, the wood fitted and driven into place,
the axle under the breast still lithe, the tongue still reaching out for a team.

■

The sweet bright black flesh of earth
was an ear we listened to

as it listened.

Are you speaking of us, we asked.

In it a scent of rope and garments, carob, the threshing machine.

We held the reins, the fences held the fields' hands,
in them the scent of eggshells, fish, the sea.

Leather stretched taut rubbed on the bit,
the britchen, the bells.
The furrow rushed over
our feet, a wave of sepia milk,

in it the scent of ink and beaks,

the voice of the sky,
the voice of the ground,
the voice of the sky,
the voice of the ground.

O raven, O blackbird, O crow,
we only accused you of what we also were.

■

The honey and the onions spoke:

I am wrapped in my own skin.
I am wrapped low down, around a branch of oak.

I rise up from underground, drawn by the sun.
I was celebrated before they took the comb.

I cast a reddish, purplish hue.
I have been eaten by animals quickly, bursting with bees.

Drying on barn boards, you'd think I was a group of forgotten travelers.
In those hexagons there is perfect memory.

Unwrapping me you might expect a center.
I am a tent built around the scent of a small queen's body.

I am pages of water.
I connect the buckwheat blossoms to each other.

■

Yes, said the grass body,
I carry my psalm in your palm.

■

The logging scoot
used in spring to drag
woods to the mills:

its big wood thighs—pale in that sunlight
that snuck through darkest branches—
pinned together and chained up, the peavey
driven in to rest there,

it told the story of body weight,
dragging nights through mud,

an image we hitched ourselves to and pulled,
an image that pulled us,
an image we hitched ourselves to and pulled,
an image that pulled us.

Though the cord of chopped wood spoke two languages,
one of silver maple trees, one of fire,

it was the language of the stove that saved us,

the iron house,
the ashes we carried from it,

that rocking chair.

■

The doors to the barn were never completely shut, propped
from swinging open by a board, the old wood sagging
and the hinges bent, a wreath of wind in the rafters. The sound
of snow on the roof said to the mouse, fox, or tramp who'd slipped in
through those cracks and found grain and nested in the eaves;

the sound of snow
on the roof said to anyone who listened:

no one possesses the kingdom of dust.

■

A punt in the field quietly went to pieces,
a rowboat next to the grain silo,
one oar left, took on moss, letting go,
a dory tucked into the eaves of the barn
floated on the sun coming into the hay in the loft
like bright green seawater,

though the only water for miles around
was in the spring-fed trough
and in the spring itself.

The horses shifted their weight to different hooves,
the cat knocked over a clay pot

to the gale of barn swallows.

Rows of old silken women
on the winter cornfield
smiled their two-toothed cobs,

MOLLY BASHAW

they held brown flags, mauve and beige flags.

The train rushed past.
They said, You are that strong.
The tassels moved in the wind,
singing want

is a delicacy, always, further—
Bear witness.

MITCHELL UNTCH

Harvest

Apples prepare.
Windows lie open.
He grooms the strands of my hair,
does not know me,
or hear the pain inside my body, the slow tear.
Our faces, close in the dimness.
It is pleasure and pain and I do not know the difference.
I am fourteen, a boy, and the bed is a square of ripped moonlight.
Afterward, the wing-tipped blades of his shoulders rise,
the bathroom door opens slowly inward.
I see my relief in the mirror,
turn to the windows—
a field of tall grass, the orchard's breeze, and stars.
A fin alters the mood of the lake.
The moon becomes a loose stitch on the water.
I close my eyes. Imagine my body buckle
inside the rim of reeds.
My nerves ripple like the hooked jaw of a fish.
What is lies flat on the tongue:
A bruised apple is worthless.
A drop of blood ruins sheets.
I count backward until he falls asleep,
draws the covers, his back to me.
Moths bang the screen.
Moisture they cannot shake clings to them.
In the morning, they break in my hand.
I brush them off the sill, ride my bicycle home.

KAVEH BASSIRI
Invention of Country

Years before you were gone, I buried your uniform
in a chest camouflaged as a scarab, its wings latched.

Now, I can't find it anymore. I should have memorized
the atomic number of sidewalks, the gender of doors

on Pahlavi Street, walked between news columns,
read the vines scrawled on the brick wall.

But I don't trust flat surfaces;
from a distance everything turns scenic.

I know the earth is round, and if we continue falling,
the afternoon's revolution never grows cold.

The yellow oaks are wounded;
their fruits surround them like shotgun shells.

I put one against my ear to hear the penance of the forest.
I track the footprints on the blackboard's plain,

round up the shadows peeled off branches.
I must have been a great collector once.

In the cellar hides a clutch of bandaged boxes with open mouths,
we recognize them by their exuvia.

Someone said they identified you by your blue socks
and porcelain inlays. The ants must have heard. They came in.

Their excuse is that they can't rest in the compound light outside.
The fig trees in the cabal stopped delivering fruits.

The terrace watching over the pond is getting smaller.
I'm going back today with my chemistry set devising a playground

for dew worms and Bedouin snails. Surely they can find you
among weeds in the sandpit, the briary fleece of the hills.

BENJAMIN S. GROSSBERG

A Thought

Like a feather descending
in its back-and-forth motion,
slow twirl down to one
end of a balance, and that end
begins to sink—
but so slowly that days pass,
an unscrolling of weather,
the view out the same window
over a series of months:
trees burst in lime-green flowers
so tiny that three or four buds
could rest on the tip of your thumb,
and then come rainy days,
darker leaves, and brightness
expanding like the yawning
of one just woken—
everything unfolding, changing.
And now you find it is
autumn, and somewhere
inside is a difference. A quiet,
monumental thing, difference.
Some dream had long
seemed foundation wall
to a structure you'd hoped to build—
a Jeffersonian grandness.
You'd imagined marble, imagined
columns. But now it is you
who seem to find the structure
more trouble than it's worth, you
who might just, you decide, be
okay without so much grandiosity.
You even surprise yourself
with that word, *grandiosity*,
with its undertone of mocking.
What was it? A word, a look
from a man that wasn't—
you realized a moment too late—
directed at you. A small, casual
failure that added its name
like another entry on a long
petition. No one, not even you

→

BENJAMIN S. GROSSBERG

heard the creaking sweep,
the rusted iron gate
of your will. Though afterward,
at the window, you may
have wondered what bird
dropped that feather—
though so long ago now
there's no telling what kind,
or on its way to what country.

LESLIE ELIZABETH ADAMS

Winter: Plane and Violin

Dry branches rasp a high violin whine,
a keening lean and hungry as the cat that spins
the thin lines of its cries through the morning.
Sun fires the tops of trees into a web of flames
I would cup my hands around
if I could reach the branch crests.
Each flat surface—the planar ground unwound
from the trees' femoral trunks, the dry backs
of my hands—collects light like ice,
and from the long-fingered branches
frost scripts its hard name against every window.
Overhead the smoke of the day's first planes
chars pale scars. All the ground bone-brittle,
prone to shatter, birds startling in short bleats
of flight, breaking fragmented from undergrowth
and right now I would rise and walk
without stopping toward the first voice I heard.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Scattershot, Tommy Gun, Canon

John Rosenwald

What follows: not a review so much as jottings by a war correspondent embedded in the culture wars, striving for journalistic accuracy.

What follows: as noted in *BPJ*, Winter 2011/12, an attempt to evaluate “what David Lehman as [*Best American Poetry*] series editor and his annual volume editors have accomplished, investigate how their work compares to that of other tastemakers in the world of American poetry.”

What follows: follow-up, quarter of a century later, to Marion K. Stocking, “The Art of the Anthology” (*BPJ*, Spring 1987) an examination of thirteen volumes. And to her review of each annual *Best American Poetry* volume as it appeared, beginning in 1988.

What sources: *BAP* volumes from 1988 to 2011; the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, the *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, four other fat anthologies from the past two decades, one comparatively skinny one from 2010.

Total weight: 72 pounds ± the gravity of the last century.

■

Cannon

Start with the big guns. Other ships blown out of the water. “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare. . . .”

That’s not how it once seemed. At least not to those on the man-of-war. For this correspondent’s generation: a ship named the *Norton*, under the command of the Admirable Abrams. The English *Norton* sailed into battle unaware of battle. At least on the surface. But beware the torpedoes. The ship had a gallery, twenty-eight portraits of previous captains, boldly displayed on the foredeck, ranging from Canterbury Chaucer to Dublin Joyce and St. Louis Eliot. Captains and crew all male. The date: 1961. The ship: Ironclad. The canon: Insurmountable. Irresistible.

Given the indestructible ship, no need for cannon. Its presence sufficed: indisputable, intimidating. And the shipyards were bustling. 1970: Admiral Abrams christened the *Norton Poetry*. Even bigger. Even more canon. No justification for armament needed. None offered.

This weaponry called the New Criticism. No fuss, no muss. Title,

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one-page intro, no poet's life. *Dragnet's* Joe Friday: Just the poem, ma'am.

By the time the revised *Norton* set sail in 1975, the self-evident unobtrusive ironclad defenses revealed some cracks. Defense Department? Need to meet budget? Possible mutiny of the bounty? "War is the health of the state"?

■

Why, for the past page, this military vocabulary? Culture wars. Let's look at the current cannon, at those "four other fat anthologies," all published in the quarter century since Marion Stocking's essay, all contemporaneous with *BAP*:

From the Other Side of the Century, ed. Douglas Messerli, 1994
Poems for the Millennium, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, 1995, 1998, 2009
Anthology of Modern American Poetry, ed. Cary Nelson, 2000
The Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry, ed. Jay Parini, 2006

Douglas Messerli introduces *From the Other Side of the Century* with a comment on the "battles" Ezra Pound and others had with their nineteenth-century predecessors; he moves immediately to "the frustrations of contemporary poets with the academized bastion of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*." Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, using language first concerned with actual warfare and then only slightly less bellicose when applied to literature, announce that their *Poems for the Millennium* traces poetry "as opposition. . . . to the dogma and conformity that overlays us." "The very origin of the whole system of literature has to be attacked." Both anthologies identify "schools," "movements," "gatherings" (Messerli's term). Both retreat to Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960), which begins by emphasizing "one common characteristic" of its poets: "a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse."

The language: *rejection attack hostile bastion battle*. An outbreak of hostilities was predictable.

Cary Nelson views this naval warfare from above, identifying combatants, writing their history. He focuses on the collective, the cultural, emphasizing at the same time the significance of the undertaking. Already in his second sentence he announces his "unashamedly grandiose" "special claim": "Modern American poetry

is one of the major achievements of human culture.” He creates and then acknowledges the “conflictual” element of some choices but remains distinctly above the fray, asserting in a final comment that his selection “returns the last 100 years of our poetic heritage to us.” Like a sacred artifact in a foreign museum? Did anyone know it was missing?

If Nelson emphasizes the collective, Parini stresses the personal. Looking back to MacLeish (“a poem should not mean but be”), he philosophizes, “One does not experience a poem as an example of a movement or school. The text itself should be an experience. . . . All that really matters is what you, the reader, think and feel when you read a poem. You must test its inherent value on your pulse.” He offers no rationale for inclusion other than his opening claim: “Poetry is a language adequate to one’s experience.”

Twelve years separate the Messerli and Parini volumes. Reading the four introductions one might suspect culture wars had raged, but ended.



Differing strategies regarding American poetry in the twentieth century are not new. When Marion Stocking commented on the art of the anthology she looked back to what she herself called “poetry wars” between “the academics and the wild men, the ‘raw’ and the ‘cooked,’” contrasting *The New American Poetry* to *New Poets of England and America*, edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson (1957). An academic, but one as attracted to the wild as to the raw, Marion recognized the continuing division between the “primal energies of a tribal or communal spirit” claimed by the Allen set and the “formal and thematic tendencies” characteristic of the “academic” strand. She might observe or even bemoan the “conspicuous” or “astonishing” or “extraordinary omission” of one poet or another from a particular anthology, but she did not raise the rhetoric to the level of war. She commented on the quality of individual poems and on the content of volumes as a whole but never inserted into her discussion issues that would come to dominate the culture wars: questions of race or gender or sexual preference or age or ethnic background.

Attacks on the *Norton* as “academized” would suggest that *Norton* editors followed Hall/Pack/Simpson more than Allen. Yet the first *Norton* selection included nine American poets from Hall’s anthology,

six from Allen's. The first *Norton Modern*, published in 1973, had more from Allen than from Hall. When it appeared in 1975, the revised *Norton Anthology* had the same number from each.

If one front early in the culture wars concerned "schools"—"academics" and "experimentalists"—race, gender, and other locuses of identity politics soon became another. Definitions of "black" and "woman" remain complex, but neither the Allen anthology nor the Hall/Pack/Simpson volume reflected much commitment to diversity: *The New American Poetry* included one black poet; *New Poets of England and America*, none. Of forty-four poets in the Allen anthology, four were women; in the first Hall volume, six of thirty-three.

The history of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* reveals a clear pattern of continuing response to the cultural shifts that have occupied the United States for at least the past half century. From a one-page introduction that asked no political questions, the narrative commentary expanded with each new edition: apologizing first for the absence of Canadian poets, "amplifying" the number of black poets and women, presenting "a significant increase in poems written in English in other countries." The tactic became "diversify!" To which my wife always cries, "Where are the Lithuanians?" The title page over the past third of a century reveals a shift from six white male editors, each wearing his North American university name tag, to two women and one man, still white and still wearing university badges. By 2006 the editors joyously proclaim the included poems come "from 'the round earth's imagined corners'" and have extended the concept of poetry to "light verse" and "ballads." "World poetry" and "rich diversity" have become characteristic phrases for their announced vision, the "entire range of poetic genres in English."

One case study for measuring the limits of vision involves race. The first *Norton* contained five living black poets: three men, two women. The second expanded to eight; the third fell back to six; the fourth moved up to eleven, of whom eight might be clearly identified as poets of the United States. The fifth edition remains the same, including the first five, with no new black poet added from the United States since 1996, and only four since 1983.

A second study involves recognition of women. The first *Norton* (1970) includes eight, none earlier than Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. For the revised second edition, the number nearly doubles,

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nearly doubles again for the third. By the fourth, with two women out of three as the primary editors, the number has increased by almost a factor of ten over the first volume. By the fifth edition, having expanded the proportion of women to one in five, the editors seem comfortable enough with their continuing progress to make no mention of the matter.



Inclusion of poets other than white men provides one measure of shifting canon. Another is continuity. If the *Norton* has presented the big guns, what cannon do other ships carry? Four contemporary non-*Norton* anthologies remain under consideration here; only six poets alive in 1988 appear in all four: John Ashbery, Amiri Baraka, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Michael Palmer. Except for Palmer, who is one or two decades younger than the others, all appeared early in their careers in the Donald Allen anthology. All except Palmer and Duncan have appeared in every *Norton* since at least the revised edition of 1975. All are male; five are white. Another seven poets alive in 1988 appear in three of these four anthologies: Charles Bernstein, Gregory Corso, Denise Levertov, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Adrienne Rich, and Gary Snyder. Rakosi and Oppen are of an earlier generation, Bernstein (b. 1950) of a later one. Corso, Levertov, and Snyder appeared in the Allen anthology, Rich in the Hall/Pack/Simpson volume. Of these seven, Corso, Levertov, Rich, and Snyder have appeared in every *Norton* since at least 1975.

A list of *Norton* poets highly visible within their generation might include these nine: John Ashbery, Amiri Baraka, Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Gary Snyder. Michael Palmer entered the *Norton* in the fourth edition; Charles Bernstein, in its most recent iteration. Add to this group three poets who had died before the first appearance of the *BAP*: Frank O'Hara, Charles Olson, Anne Sexton, all of whom also appear in at least three of these four hefty anthologies and at least three versions of the *Norton*. Call them the Fat Fourteen. Does this cluster establish a new canon for poetry in the United States at the end of the last century? Does the *Norton*, hauling them on board and firing its heavy cannon, remove them from the list of poets in opposition to the academy? Has the enemy infiltrated the academy? Who is the enemy? What is the academy? What war?

If there's a war, the battlefield has shifted. Messerli may consider the

Norton the “bastion” of the ruling powers, yet the “schools” or “gatherings” associated with rebellion and experimentation have received at least as much attention from the “academized” *Norton* as the supposed academics. The *Norton* has responded perhaps more vigorously to accusations of discrimination and exclusion than Messerli. But these criteria almost don’t apply to Rothenberg and Joris, who have expanded the concept of anthology by moving toward a world poetry encompassing languages and visions beyond the English-language “world poetry” conceptualized by Margaret Ferguson and her colleagues.



Tommy Gun

If the canon according to *Norton* is cannon, *BAP* is tommy gun, firing its burst each year, retaining the language of “best” in at least an implicit attempt to establish, with its yearly barrage, what David Lehman calls “poetry standards.” Does the series, do Lehman as general editor and his yearly editors, corroborate the vision of poetry presented in those massive volumes?

How to explore? First, simply, count. Make a chart of all *BAP* volumes, listing all poets and the frequency of their appearances. Such a chart reveals that over the past quarter century, if the count is right, *BAP* has published 892 poets. Of these, roughly 79 % appear only once or twice; 63% only once. Though reasons vary and include diminished production, old age, and death, the list of those who appear only once is curious, including Baraka, Wendell Berry, Martín Espada, Ted Kooser, Sonia Sanchez, Patricia Smith. Among many who have never appeared in *BAP* are Gwendolyn Brooks, Sandra Cisneros, Audre Lorde, N. Scott Momaday, and William Meredith.

Eight have appeared ten or more times: Charles Wright (10), W. S. Merwin (10), Richard Wilbur (11), Billy Collins (13), Donald Hall (13), James Tate (13), Charles Simic (15), John Ashbery (18). They constitute less than 1% of the poets published. Call these the *BAP* Eight. Once again, all male; this time all white. The five most frequent have served as annual editors in the series. In fact, the first eleven annual editors are among the top 6% in frequency of appearance. This might reflect their preeminence among American poets since the first *BAP* appeared in 1988, or it might reflect inbreeding. Other than Ashbery, no overlap exists with the Fat Fourteen. The dominance by white men does not correspond to the identities of annual editors; Lehman

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has chosen one woman almost every three years and an African American almost every five. Principles of identity politics missing from any written rationale for the first *Norton*, identified in the second, and emphatically reiterated ever since, had by 1988 transformed the literary landscape.

Do identity politics influence the selection process? Despite aesthetic differences as large as any between Donald Allen and Donald Hall, despite sometimes having almost no overlap in their choice of poets, the seven female annual editors have selected a fairly consistent percentage of women. Five remain within eight percentage points of each other (from 31% to 39%), the exceptions being Rita Dove (45%) and Adrienne Rich (exactly 50%). The equity between male and female poets in Rich's 1996 volume seems part of the provocation that led Harold Bloom churlishly to choose no poem from Rich's selection when preparing *The Best of the Best American Poetry* (1998). Not every landscape shifted.

And if the *BAP* volumes, like the *Nortons*, have come some distance in their inclusiveness, they still have a distance to travel: Where are Momaday, Erdrich, Harjo, Silko, Ortiz, Cisneros, Santiago Baca? And where are the Lithuanians!

Over a quarter century, in the context of the increased growth of the publishing industry as reflected by the gravity of the monster anthologies, it is not surprising that older figures dominate historically and that white men dominate even within that context. What happens with a narrower glance, at poets who have appeared frequently over periods of, say, six years? In other words, a study of the shift in canon from 1988 to 2011 as reflected in the *BAP* series.

Between 1999 and 2005 thirty poets appeared in at least half the volumes, including all the *BAP* Eight. One third are women; two, both male, are African American. One Latino, no Native American. In the most recent six-year stretch, 2006 to 2011, only twenty poets appeared in as many as half. Four of those are among the *BAP* Eight: Collins, Simic, Tate, and Ashbery. Five, or 25%, are women: Rae Armantrout, Denise Duhamel, Louise Glück, Allyn Rosser, and Natasha Tretheway. Three, or 15%, are African American: Tretheway, Terrance Hayes, and Kevin Young. No Latino/a, again no Native American. Of the twenty, seven appear also in *Norton*, fifth edition: Ashbery, Collins, Glück, Robert Hass, Paul Muldoon, Simic, and

C. K. Williams. Only Armantrout, Ashbery, Collins, Glück, Simic, and Tate appear in at least half the volumes in both five-year periods. Ashbery seems present wherever one looks, but other than him, this view suggests that quite different clusters of poets began to attract frequent attention during the past decade.



Scattershot

Between Water and Song: New Poets for the Twenty-First Century, ed. Norman Minnick, 2010

One more anthology. Kind of a skinny one. Here because unlike the others it does not purport to present the “best,” though three of its poets have appeared in *BAP*. Because (full disclosure) the editor is an acquaintance. Because the range among poets is extraordinary: Albanian, Native American, African American, Montanan, Ukrainian, Veteran, Nigerian, Belarusan, White Breadian (but good crusty loaves), though to identify by only one adjective is to oversimplify. Norman Minnick has picked poets he likes and respects, but he offers no hyperbole about them or their accomplishments. Only near the end of his introduction does he slide slightly in that direction, claiming the poets are “simply the most intriguing writing today.” Not best. Not most honored or famous. “Most intriguing.” A good word, intriguing. Equally appealing: the warning Darwin sent himself in a letter: “Never say ‘higher’ or ‘lower.’” *Scattershot* pelting an audience with verbal nourishment from many corners of the United States.

An anthology such as Minnick’s, with its broad taste, provides a rich sampling of current poetry. Yes, the *Nortons* still sit on the *BPJ* bookshelf. And annual versions of the *BAP* deserve the attention of this magazine because one can avoid the tommy gun barrage, can find in the volumes something beyond rejection and opposition, between the purely personal and the grandiose. David Lehman and his yearly editors, despite the hype, try to do each year just what Norman Minnick has done in his volume, what the *BPJ* editorial staff does each day—choose from among many poems a cluster rich enough to engage their readers.

Time to move beyond military metaphors. The young boy arranging toy soldiers for epic battles on the living room carpet can outgrow such games. Can leave this language behind. Particularly in poetry it is not needed. No more mosts.