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Mary Greene, design

Eleanor Spiess-Ferris, "Shoreline," oil on linen, 2006

www.eleanorspiess-ferris.com

→

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

CINTIA SANTANA

Portrait of a Marriage as *Library After Air Raid, London, 1940*

1

Luck has left
the tidy shelves of books intact

and a leaded window in the back:

each square divided into
smaller, beveled panes. They defy

and say *survive, survive*.

2

Three men in bowler hats
stand before the shelves and browse.

As if oblivious to the ruins of the house,

the terrors of the night, they study spines,
reflect. Wear woolen overcoats amidst the char.

A timber holds the standing walls apart.

3

Under rubble, a ladder and a covered chair, crushed.
The archive, leather-bound and made to last.

What once was roof reveals the vastness
of the sky. Inside becomes outside

and everywhere the shock of light.

ÉIREANN LORSUNG
Early Flemish painting

In the disregarded foreground (beneath
patrons, awestruck, on each panel's edge),
out of sight of God's eye which rolls up
the azure gradient of our flattened sky,
careful studies of the unessential
take place: dill, borage, common daisy, mint;
little mallow, tansy, comfrey, dandelion—
the painter's hand was restless, the flowers

*say, so painted us, who toil not (neither
do we spin, but here we are); up there
the work of conversion goes on: the hand,
dove, and wheel; an apostle; a baptizer—
faithful, devoted, intelligent, wise,
the chosen people kneel. But we're the field.*

ÉIREANN LORSUNG

One last time in her antechamber

With their frames the panels seem
to be a window, so we look

in through a window to a window,
beyond it to a square we know

from CNN or Al-Jazeera; anyway,
the news. No one's here. The angel's

gone. The girl has walked away, to ponder
things and keep them in her heart.

Anything could happen. The future
isn't *yet*. Outside, a siren passes,

then again: an ambulance. A cord
of oily smoke in a far-off neighborhood.

She's left her book. What does it say.
The page is creased and rubbed

and old. *What does [smudge smudge]
require of you. Do not turn away.*

MEG DAY

At the Museum

entrance, her body
rotates to reveal the pale cotton
hammock eight months has made
of her shirt

& the skin beneath it,
& she shimmies through the turnstile
in slow motion, cradling her girth
& swaying,

more like a dinghy
listing in its dock than any ragtime
dance. We pause for what seems
an appropriate

length of time—one
Mississippi, two Mississippi—before
each spectral reproduction and nod
in the direction

of every art student
proudly standing post beside finished
Rothkos & da Vincis made distinct
with personality

& permission. How,
I wonder, can I be so different: I stand
beside her as if I did more to render
her expectant

than follow directions.
Thirty-three weeks & a fortune ago,
Luck slipped on suspenders & heels
& appeared

at last as a blue plus
on a pee stick from the corner store.
She is everything every book promises
a woman

with child will be & I have
little to do with it. You I can't yet
know are not offspring nor descendent
& your composition,

while original, will be
of an inheritance I'm unable to give. I cannot
dream the Mona Lisa in a wheelchair
or call my water

lilies Monet's any more

→

MEG DAY

than I can make believe that you are of
me. If it's true that addiction is prayer
gone awry, then what

is this ghost
of myself I have cast into the double
helix so swiftly refining your lines? Your
mother is van Gogh

& I am merely waiting
to see what she will deliver into my frame.

ARIANE BOLDUC

Mastectomy

Longing, we say, because desire is full of endless distances.

—Robert Hass

I've lost *Praise*—

the missing green spine startles
in its absence, and that absence recalls the absent
hands

that once held the book
at a café on Hoover St., in the heart—
if we can claim one—of L.A.,
where a man swiped his palm over his head
and shrugged
before handing the book back to me,
lighting a cigarette and staring off
into the distant light

fading

into dusk. Even the endless distances end,
when we don't even long for the time
to return. I think of the places
where his hand, *any* hand, used to be.
Of Georgia O'Keeffe,
the photos that Stieglitz took of her
before the operation, before the mistress
and the pictures of her posed in the same positions.
Of O'Keeffe, triggered
into new space:

harsh,

but her own, down to the bleached bones,
arid in red dirt. Give me that
loss: the shape of me in shadow.

That

I would like to lose, to scissor myself from my feet
and write something separate
from feeling
all this snow on my tongue.

Listen,

it's simple. *Praise* is no longer on the shelf
where it should be: pressed tightly
against (the naked right breast, the split-
figure on the cover of) *The End of Beauty*.

PETER LABERGE

Viscera

Outside, her mind lies,
a set of keys. Proof
of living, the brass steeped

in the snow. Inside
my mother watches her wedding
on the VCR. She wants

to unlock the last home
of this tuxedo gathered
like breath in her arms. She names

each child on the tape
the same pretty name, one
she has asked me to notch

in her bedpost to guard
against mistake. When I hear
the familiar music and knock

on her door, she opens
herself like a cloud
to let me help her. *Phillip.*

Gregory. Anne. I review
her siblings until it is clear
each small bird has flown

south for the winter. Outside,
she takes the snow into her mouth,
proves it's ephemeral in seconds.

HERA NAGUIB

Cilantro

—*Yonkers, New York*

I wheel my cart through the vegetable aisle.
The leaves awaken a familiar tingling, of mint
and pepper, pungent in my throat's wall.

I remember Lahore: the humid jostle of aisles
in a shop tucked in its neighborhood.
Cartons stacked up front. The shopkeepers

squatting in the shade beside a host of flies
dizzied by heat. Shalwars folded over knees.
I shake the limp stems, spraying my hand.

I remember the trickle, the lick
of sweat loosened on my mother's back
as the pot over the stove fire spat and sizzled

through the afternoon. Her hair frizzed,
as if piqued by her temper. I stayed away,
skirted the kitchen door and lined mats,

plates, and cups on the table, listening
to her fingers snip the leaves
over the rice, heaped and steaming,

the pulp lazing in a pool of lemon,
and her song, soft and low,
easing into the afternoon.

HERA NAGUIB
In the storeroom

A photo falls—of you,
of the city of saints. Behind you,

terra-cotta bricks of a Sufi shrine.
Centuries ago, a Sufi arrives at the city.

At its outskirts, the people hand him a glass full to the brim.
No more room, they say. Outside, too, the season

is long and indisputable, winter locks necks
with another day, fetters petals in the ice.

The Sufi entertains them, returns the glass
after placing a flower on top, afloat

and out of season. All day, I bury the omens—
the phone call, the flowers, the missed note

in this far country—no longer count
the leaves falling over the headstones

outside my window, the days that lift
and drop their cloaks at the sill, the regrets

that loom, the crown of hawks overhead.
The Sufi is welcomed. He graces the city in return

with a day of endless sun. Beneath damp cartons
and spider webs, back in the storeroom,

I bury the photo. Behind me,
the telephone rings. I answer it,

my mouth a broken glass.

NICK LANTZ

Bats, Above the "Walls" Unit

—*Huntsville, Texas*

A scrap, a scrap, a scrap.

And you cat-crept upon the warehouse, all smoke and black velvet,
to see those dark scraps drain skyward—

that they might tangle their tremor in your hair,
their calumny circling the streetlight's aureole.

Mostly space—those scraps, that brick—
though none can pass through.

Your rasp voice sparking its low medieval purr.

Lo, the guard tower eye! A scrap of shadow, a wing, a scrap—

not the unmown wheat storm-shivered,
not bricks knuckled together, but one mind touching another, tugging,

movement a contagion, a fever turn
wheeling above that bright ache of razor wire.

The lights in town no long flicker. We trade one barbarism for another.

But how the mind still longs to bury its face in the rich fur of words.

KYLE ADAMSON

The Architecture of Dread

If this tower reaches heaven,
who will deny us paradise?
With that promise, I build.
But what I think is a great spire
is just the lofty perch of Post Bravo—
night's eye with a machine gun cornea.
But what I think are fallen angels
are the fantails of F-18s, shrieking fire.

GRAHAM BARNHART

Pissing In Irbil

Behind me an old Kurdish woman
holding cherries in a plastic bag
rustles gravel

the way you might clear your throat
if you caught a foreign soldier
pissing in side-alley rubble

that had been the walls and ceiling
and staircase of your home. Even rocks
drag shadows away from me.

Old men beneath the street
squat in catacomb cellars,
drinking chai, selling rugs:

Turkish, Iranian, Persian woven
patterns: old maps, unforgotten
transgressions, borders made soft,

reassuring to bare feet so that color
might bloom crimson in the pattern
pressed by a hundred thousand steps.

Irbil is like Rome in this way,
it is like Athens, each city suturing
new skin to the skeleton.

And this is what passes
for ablution: splattering dust from rubble.
The woman coughs her black shoe

in the gravel again. Laughing, she offers
a cherry and slow Kurdish

This was an Arab's house.

With cherry seeds
and the hem of her dress
she disturbs the dust.

GRAHAM BARNHART

Call to Prayer

Closer than a church bell's dismantling. A stillness
raveled rather than torn. I expected violence

brought forth upon good rust and megaphones,
upon command wire, unfastened earth, and buried yellow jugs.

I expected old men around gas-fed heaters
to turn their faces away from me, and children to throw stones,

but not the young girl at the hand pump water well
kneeling beside her bucket to kiss the dirt.

Even the sun arrests its tilting, shade pools at the minaret's base
like thawed ice run out from the stones.

I did not expect the song to be lamb smoke wandering
paper-thin between the furrows of sunset-hammered

rice and poppy—a drifting current of lemon through red wine,
a ribbon sometimes

touching the lips—obliging the lips to touch the hands,
the forehead the ground.

MAJDA GAMA
Bride of the Red Sea

In Jeddah, city of Eve, weeks flew,
calendar days as useless as money
pegged to the dollar, as useless to me

as a passport without a guardian's signature,
as trivial as the marriage proposal
from the middle-aged man whose room

I was led to by a scheming sister after
a ladies' luncheon. The latest in a line of eligible
girls to be snared so. And she from an old family.

When I confided to the Red Sea, the pipes
in my bathroom burst. Hajjaj, our handyman
with Nile Delta wisdom, scratched his head.

To the sure earth of Arabia I entrusted myself
on my carpet at noon, envisioned a Nabatean
door carved into rock, entered there.

The pulse of my heart a tether unwinding
behind me. In the rose chamber before me
a man, no, what smokeless fire perceives to be man,

form not as crisp as his sharp yellow eyes.
Here was an ally. If you have nothing
to say to the jinn, then say nothing.

All those long days of two calendars,
the sun pressed in as the virtue police patrolled
the seashore and shops, cafés, and malls.

I chose my veils, my perfume, and my jewelry
with care, then my face and fingernails
became provocative. And then a fatwa

forbade women to be alone with male jinn.
Tedious are the days behind a woman's
gilded ribcage, awaiting the key to be let out.

TRACI BRIMHALL

On the Feast Day of Our Lady Hippolyta

We want customers to bring us arrows fletched
with macaw feathers and whisper the password—

sterile—three times before we let them in. We want
men with narrow hips and a good memory for myth

to keep us up all night reading Ovid's *Amores*
or recite Sappho as they groom their mustaches

in the mirror above the bed. We want to bite,
to climb, to zipper our way back into the story where

the Amazon queen appeared in her girdle before
three children and foretold the lumberjack apocalypse.

We want the men who bus in from sapphire mines
and rubber plantations to spend a week's pay

on ten minutes with a one-breasted woman who'll let
them call her Hippolyta, the sound of their bodies

like a fresh catch slapping the dock, wet and desperate
and piscine, like damp laundry flapping on the line,

like a mule at its branding, like a novitiate visited
by the Holy Spirit in the middle of her vespers.

If we want sonnets to praise the downy hairs
on our upper lips, who cares? If we want to learn about

the French Revolution as we eat cake, so what?
Only in this building on this day in this town does

anyone commemorate the children returning home,
their knees already scabbing with bark, to warn

of bulldozers and chainsaws and the perils of flying
kites next to power lines. We celebrate the miracle

one customer at a time, nocking our arrows
and aiming for the sun's white eye. We want

TRACI BRIMHALL

to write in our diaries—*Dear, there are some things
I would not do for pleasure.* We want it to be true.

JAY UDALL

Because a Fire in My Head

The leash yanks—a trace, invisible
messages trailing

I open a book, seeking
a remembered passage

*as far down the scale of life as the worms and even perhaps
to the amoebas, we meet a general alertness of animals,
not directed toward any specific satisfaction, but merely
exploring what is there; an urge to achieve intellectual control
over the situations confronting them*

grackles cackle in the bamboo

■

suspended from nothing, pennants
of breathing white putty hovered
above our heads, one for each,
pursuing us wherever we ran
in the green field—dread

■

when the blood vessel broke in the left brain
of the neuroscientist, she couldn't say
where she ended and universe began—
it was all a matter of energy
shimmering swim of molecules atoms
streaming fabric of being belonging
her tears recalled when she could speak again,
out of her right mind, trying to explain
to the hungry brains gathered in the hall
what she'd seen and touched on the other side

■

*the seeking circuit fires during the search for food,
not during the final locating and eating of the food.
it's the search that feels so good*

■
in a dream I vomit
living fish—
the river, somewhere close

■
words shaping air, stroking skins
(braided bark, old scar) awake

in the mind flesh flames
with rustlings of switchgrass,

crow caws, purple starflower
and fire ants, the quiet cow

come to the killing floor,
the body a story being

told, untold tongues telling

■
inside: spin and pull,
whirled space of muons
and bosons, weak force, strong force,
quarks named “strange” and “charm”

dark energy, dark matter

outside: this cosmos
one among many
lifeless or haunted
by life forms, seeking

■
say nothing
say no one
is ever lost
forever lost
say what slips
from saying
what is said
by “this leaf”
or “the rain”
say the names
we can’t keep
what keeps us

■
absconded gods,
Ithaka, Eldorado,
ghosts of appetite—

say emptiness
is an entrance,
disorderly ditch
of pungent mud and slime,
last year’s tattered cattails,
new reed blades rising,
not the singing
of a golden bird
on a golden bough,
but trills and raspy clicks
of red-winged blackbirds
in the accidental light

DANIEL TOBIN

Downstream

*Twelve voice retableos after twelve paintings
by Eleanor Spiess-Ferris*

1. Listening

How long have I been sleeping here
Naked upon this louche divan, fluid
In my sloping dream, the dream I dream
Of you in the terracotta shadows
Listening? I might be an odalisque,
Though this is no one's chamber but my own.
And yours—it is the chamber of the dream
In which I speak to you, the faintest breath
Out of Brahma's mouth, say, the fragrance
Of lotus drifting across the waters,
Or the scent of a word that comes to know
Its meaning by moving dream to dream.

2. River

When I rose from the river I was still
The river, and in my red hair flamed
The encircling wheels, wheels within wheels,
By which the very air around me moved.
It was then I felt my body blossom,
Orchid and trumpet flower, lily and lace,
A necklace of birds spread hand to hand
As my fingers poised to key them into song:
To be the stream and what allays the stream—
Fountain splash, dolphin leap, supernova sky.
And the nipple-hard blue mantle of my breast
Like a cold eye staring into nothing.

3. Tears

Salt-heaves out of the inner ocean flow
From the threshold eye: self's backwaters
Laboriously fermenting, while the legs
Of the ballerina twist around themselves
Like snakes around a tree. O snifter, flask,
My little drip-bag of tears, the extract,
The elixir, the equinoctial champagne
That keeps me primed and wired for the jump!
I balance on my head a punchbowl of heads—
My many faces, the brave losses bobbing,
And these bottomless flutes like waterspouts.
Lift a glass. *Cin-cin*. Watch the boats go sailing.

4. Ark

Sea worm, sea slug, this moiling sea of skulls,
The crocodile's puppet mouth gapes wide
At starboard. On the ark of infidels
The clown is captain, his zombie face
Gazing out from under a pinhead cap.
Professor Wolfsnout, aft, has found his likeness
In the bridge-less waters. He ponders it,
Raw *imago*, like someone reading Braille.
Portside, the hound master gives the horns
To ward off the sky's bloodshot *malocchio*.
The muffle-eared, the apple-crowned, the dead
Rowers—only the foc'sle birds aren't me.

5. Passing Through

To be without oars in this great dismal swamp,
Mire bayou, slough of despond, toxic boat way,
Naked, puffed, choked, following the current,
Or is that my navigator, leech-ridden,
The steam-engine swan hauling me through?
This roiling swill fumes with my childhood,
Bed-buggers and boogie men, a brackish troop.
Or shall I call them my colleagues, sump-mouths
Wading beside me in their element
Under the impossibly blown, blasted trees?
Far off, the acetylene sky breathes and burns.
Even here, who can believe, a drift of jasmine.

6. Islands

Now I see even the islands are moving,
Carried away on the ocean's current,
Stream of many streams that runs downstream.
Now I see that my eyes are their eyes,
The islands' eyes, the many searching eyes
Who look castaways from a sunken wreck—
Bird-hatted, flower-collared—that one
Whose every thought is a lily plume,
That other whose fear burns above her like gas.
If I could but be the one looking up,
The heaven-starred, of Easter Island calm,
That one island, I-land, landless: Is.

7. Shoreline

What do the birds whisper from their crown,
The crown they have made around my head
Each in its own tuned, rueful lingo—
Chirps and chatterings, chuffs and chants,
Each wound in its own restless fluttering?
On the shoreline the dun reeds also whisper.
It is the wan voice of the undelivered.
Nothing of that sentence translates in the dusk.
Am I not a warrior left behind, the war
Over, still at war, an assassin wreathed
In camouflage, my body draped in flow?
Time to kill the king on his empty throne.

8. Flood

*Downstream the head floats: the head of No one.
Along the floodplain and out to sea: No One.
No one sings now to the gone sky, No One.
Into the dead eyes and behind them: No One.
Each one, one thing and all things: No One.
Lullay, sing lullay, lullay sing to No One.
Echoes along the surface, into depths: No One.
Tiger blooms rise. The torn body: No One.
Orpheus dis-limbed to the bright gates: No One.
Birdsong's adornment: this nest for No One.
Intervals of silence lift high now for No one.
No one from No one, No one into No one.*

9. Ophelia's Garden

After the turtle shook the world from its shell,
It homed through all the waters without bounds,
Through quale and quanta, ever ascending
Until it broke the surface on the single pool
Where the dead girl floated who dove in there
And swallowed her fill until she was the pool
She willed herself in her swelled grief to be,
And so began the change, her skin turning scales,
Her breasts lifting lilies, the fronds surrounding
Inclining like mourners, while the turtle
Paddled, swimming to her palm, dandled, open,
Flowering there in the sky blue of Krishna.

10. Floater

Goldfinch, grosbeak, cardinal, meadowlark
Frame me counter-clockwise in my slow repose—
Eleven o'clock, eight o'clock, six o'clock, one,
Such as they've arranged themselves around
The jade leaves with their black, revolving blooms.
I would compass them to the four directions.
I heard each itinerant call in my sleep,
Listened until I rose awake, feeling
The strange ferment of my eyes, their wakefulness,
And then, out of the searing, blinding coal
Of my own death flagrant on my tongue—
This violet and golden bud emerged in bloom.

11. Fecundity

And all shall be well, and all manner of thing
Shall grow through and out of me like a body
Made of light, my feet rooted in the planet's
Lucent pool, its waters reflecting sky
Out of which flower fields unfold their flesh,
Such benignly eloquent wordless bouquets,
Everything efflorescence, sexy material ghost
Of me, immaculately maculate quickening
Life, bone-house birdhouse (the human hidden
In the heart's whorled foliage) and the blue
Haloes upholding twin swans curving whitely—
In me you will find no sunset, only sunrise.

12. Fledgling

Out of the sea's cracked membrane of stone
Struck as by Moses's staff, this island of islands,
Emergent, the tree burgeoning from deep below—
An improvised mast, an ascendant cross
Lifting its one fruit through the blue reaches,
The heavenly zones at the mind's final end:
A child's face, *imago*, heron-crowned, rising
Out of the sleeper's dream, out of the river,
Rising as anywhere forever out of blight,
Out of the boundless, out of nothing, molecule
By molecule with the perilous spin of stars—
It has been waking for a long long time.

TAMMY ARMSTRONG

The Vestas: Pubnico Point Wind Farm

Seventeen giantesses speak in tongues as we unleash
the dog to run mad through alder-thick ditches.
Each is named for a woman in the life of the wind backer
who sells their collective work to a Florida conglomerate—
sisters, mothers, daughters, Baba Yagas in one-footed stands
pull near-dry wind off the line before the rains come,
fold the charged edges, neat and tucked.

Left out toward the sea,
these seventeen forgo the wind's rowdy entry
as wrecked weather coaxes, crooks
stormstayed birds in whirring holds,
collects, collects to nameplate capacity.
Sea birds, drawn by force,
drawn to dissected skies and the props' salutation,
must navigate narrow openings between the blades.
Just the same, we cannot stop making this pilgrimage.

We circle their hutted footings,
their slow drag across cloud-foxed sky
and hope for acknowledgement. Bless the humans
on the edge of land haggard with self, on the edge of blades
where the wind tolls up on hind legs, and hesitates
around the turbines to sniff out our salted shortcomings.

Snagging loose threads of static, the storm's white light
rumbles of rain, and fog breaks into bud.
The Vestas shadow the access road cuts—small hallways
leading into purple clover, devil's paintbrush,
evening scrawl of lupine's color wheel.
If this weather holds, it will all keep spinning.

CLAIRE MILLIKIN

Asbestos

One winter they cleared the asbestos from our rooms.
Through great chutes the white gray flowers withdrew.

We breathed asbestos in our dreams of snow,
its delicate tendrils. They said it wasn't dangerous,
the way it sifted through interior skies like a kiss.
A boy will press himself to you.
You will inhabit his bed
for somewhere to sleep because you have to sleep
somewhere, when snow is falling
or asbestos, unquenchable.

Unquenchable, no flame can touch it.
One winter with the building sealed deep into snow,
they pulled out the asbestos, leaving vitreous white shimmers
everywhere in the light around our hands.

Asbestos would keep us warm if it enveloped winter rooms.
You leave the house and walk out into snow,
where you can no longer tolerate what he has done.

One winter they sucked the asbestos from the halls and closets and
back rooms,
with steel hands peeled asbestos from the ceiling.
We wore our frayed nightgowns and watched the men.
He will press into you and you will think you cannot breathe,
but it's only asbestos flickering, a small pale bird in your mouth and soul.
One by one the birds get taken.

Allow him to reach for you. Against the wall at night
birds' wings shudder, winter flight, fugitive
unquenchable substance of asbestos
through which girls pass with slender feet.

ADAM TAVEL

The Walmart Sparrows

—*for Bill Knott*

flap and flit inside the steel
rafters bare as bridge girders
through which their cavernous
shrieks echo waking
puffy-eyed pre-work
shoppers adrift in the hangover
fog of dreaming each
to each our carts' bum wheels
chatter down the shadow
aisles where we brim with
tampons tarragon enough
Energizers to resurrect our dead
Hess trucks from their boxes
I scarlet the bargain bin
mirrors with my pre-dawn
neck-knot askew I cannot
tell where the sparrows weave
their sleep to shake the weeping
pelt of rain do they sanctuary
here because they can no longer
nest above their crushed young
sprawling goopy cruciform
across the knuckle-gnarled
root-moss no wonder
they gorge on low
feed bags of Tastee-Os
corner-torn from grazing
the clerk's blue behemoth
ladder he clatters
from one blown bulb
to the next twisting
us all ablaze hereafter

TRAVIS MOSSOTTI
About the Living

The Dublin pitch-drop experiment was set up in 1944 at Trinity College Dublin to demonstrate the high viscosity or low fluidity of pitch—also known as bitumen or asphalt—a material that appears to be solid at room temperature, but is in fact flowing, albeit extremely slowly.

—Richard Johnston, from the journal *Nature*

Not that the man waving me slowly
into the single lane or the men
behind him laying asphalt
in the doldrums of August are aware,
but the world's longest running
science experiment has ended
just as it was predicted to end,
which proved what was already known:
the road upon which I drive only appears
to be solid, is in fact an artery
or minor capillary of bitumen oozing
me home from work against the flow
of the funeral procession approaching
from the opposite direction.

I've heard hearse drivers in Missouri
earn an average of ten dollars an hour,
which is difficult to live on, even here,
but is still a job with a purpose as clear
as the ozone-stripped sky,
and as the driver passes me with his train
of mourners in tow, we briefly
make eye contact, and he nods
in my direction as if to say,
the only thing we can possibly say
to one another in such circumstances:
You exist, I acknowledge this much.
In the rearview, I see the procession
as they are given priority through
the work zone and see the workers
who break and turn to watch it pass.

But there's one man who keeps on after
the others have turned back to work,
thinking perhaps about the living
who follow so closely behind
the dead to the cemetery
that will absorb the body
into its rapture of worms.
And even though
he'll probably have forgotten
this moment by the end of the day,
right now he stands there alone
against a river of molten tar
like the gnomon on a sundial
refusing to cast its shadow.

MICHAEL LAVERS

Country Song

A cold wind strums barbed wire, but off-key.
Distant thunder spooks a dozing cow.
The fields are empty and are going to be.

My old dog run off with some bitch coyote,
my pony sold for glue or puppy chow.
A cold wind strums barbed wire, but off-key.

Slipknots tighten over memory.
Seasons carve their tally in the brow.
The fields are empty and are going to be.

I crashed into the prairie's only tree,
but sculpted this guitar out of its bough.
A cold wind strums barbed wire, but off-key.

Now, not even buzzards follow me,
and turkeys roost inside my rusty plough.
The fields are empty and are going to be.

The sky is blue. The earth is wide. And she
is gone. No mare comes to foal here now.
A cold wind strums barbed wire, but off-key.
The fields are empty and are going to be.

MICHAEL LAVERS

Arkhangelsk

From the height of a glacier I beheld half a world. . . .

—Joseph Brodsky

1

The train ride up Russia's
north coast makes him nauseous.
Snow falls, in a hurry
to mimic the mercury,

and flapping seagulls'
Cyrillic squiggles
mark, in mute air, where
the mackerel are.

The barge traffic hum
sounds almost like home,
and a Bolshoi ballet
is pent up in each bullet.

2

If the cliché of the state
is to scribble its *stet*
on each corpus, dictate
its subjects' brief predicate,

demand they pronounce
only plural pronouns,
then what scares the tyrant
is that poems, read

from the right distance,
resemble fingerprints,
that the Hermitage
of one's language,

no matter how abstract,
can't be ransacked.
But what good are metaphors,
he thinks, *if I freeze?*

3

He'll chop a wide plot
through that dark wood
the first autumn, follow
Auden's bright shadow

until his waves crash
their accent against English
shores, making our own lines sound
so far from home.

The moon will recycle,
one day, its sickle
into a rubble
he'll pick from the rubble

of stars, and vanish,
with Charon, past Venice.
But not yet. The train comes
to the end of its sentence.

Full stop. He looks over
the cold samovar
of the evening sea.
What breakers say

to the sand isn't much,
but stones are no match,
being mere matter,
for the water's rough meter.

SUSANNAH NEVISON

Horse Broke Clear

1

Horse broke clear

across the pasture, horse

broke clean loose

and cleared the fence. Didn't you

tell me, *don't put the cart*

before the horse, didn't you

tell me, *get out in front, girl, get out*

in front while you can—

down past the fence, past

the river bend, the horse

got clear of the house, clear

out of sight—

and didn't I cut that horse

loose, fast as any knife—

2

It's always good to get out in front,

you told me once, girl, get out

in front, but don't put the cart

*before the horse—*and my horse

was a chest of knives, and wasn't

my horse slick as any knife

and fast and sleek—and my horse

was sleek as your knife, I mean

your knife flat against my cheek

I mean didn't I get out in front,

my horse, out in front,

and could you catch us then,

SUSANNAH NEVISON

could you stop us—
and didn't you tell me
 the river is a snake, girl
but even a snake can drown.

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Good Poems

John Rosenwald

B. H. Fairchild, *The Blue Buick: New and Selected Poems*

(New York: W. W. Norton, 2014, 346 pp, \$29.95 hardbound)

Kirun Kapur, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* (Denver, CO:

Elixir Press, 2015, 117 pp, \$17 paper)

More than a decade ago, Garrison Keillor published an anthology of work featured on his "Writer's Almanac": *Good Poems*. I liked its conceptual simplicity, implicit self-confidence, commitment to history. I liked the contrast to tomes (tombs?) often encountered in the academic world: *Flying Blind: Ornithological Imagery and Growth of the Imagination in Early Works by Chester B. Jaythwacker*. No, not that. Just "good poems."

In his introduction, Keillor outlines criteria for selection: "[s]tickiness" or "memorability," "narrative line," "clear pictures of the familiar," "love of language" (which equals "love of truth"), no "stuff that is too airy," work that is "of use," "beautiful," "entertaining and easy to understand," that manifests "a conspiracy of friendliness."

While I don't necessarily share his aesthetic or always appreciate the poems Keillor chooses, I cherish his effort to articulate poetic values, for that remains the most important task of editing a poetry magazine, identifying what we as an editorial board desire to acknowledge, to honor, and to print: "good poems."

This review had its origin in my own sense of two good poems, one I wish the *BPJ* had published and one we did: B. H. Fairchild's "Beauty" and Kirun Kapur's "At the Tiki Lounge." This initial enthusiasm led me to two new volumes, Fairchild's massive retrospective encompassing his career as a male poet rooted in the Midwest and Kapur's significant first volume exploring her world as a young woman raised in Hawai'i, currently a resident of New England, and yet an inheritor of the complex history of the Indian subcontinent.



I don't think I knew of B. H. Fairchild before I encountered his third book, *The Art of the Lathe*, published in 1998 here in Farmington, Maine, by our neighbors, Alice James Books. Once I had read and appreciated this slim volume, and especially its opening poem, "Beauty," I enjoyed watching the expanding string

of awards affixed to the cover of subsequent printings. And I valued greatly his public reading at the University of Maine at Farmington just after the turn of the century. He's a big man with a rich voice, well suited for the oral presentation of extended narrative poems that are his most substantial fare.

The Art of the Lathe has at its heart manual laborers and a machine shop run in Kansas in the early 1960s by Fairchild's father. Such a workplace and workers appear from the very beginning of the poet's publications. At first they seem retrospective experiences he wishes to escape, "pushing everything . . . behind" him, awaiting, as the title of his first book announces, *The Arrival of the Future*. That book begins, in a poem not reprinted in this new collection, in a shop filled with "junk. / Hunks of iron." The boy who observes them sleeps and "dreams," imagining, as the poet will later articulate, that "life / is somewhere else." To be sure, "[t]he afternoon sun" pours in and "the shop becomes a world of light," but the men cast "long shadows" and for now at least they leave the shop behind.

By his second book, *Local Knowledge* (1991), Fairchild pays more explicit tribute to the world of physical labor. In "Toban's Precision Machine Shop" he describes "lathes leaning against / their leather straps, grinding wheels motionless / above mounds of iron filings." In "Work" machine parts are massive, animate, and treated with respect: "tools rest like bodies dull / with sleep." Negative images, however, still predominate: "The lathe shudders and / starts its dark groan. . . . [T]he gin poles / screech in their sockets like grief-stricken women." Yet the "blaze of a sun" occasionally appears, and the sunlight

seems to lift lathes
and floor at once, and something announces itself,
not beauty, but rather its possibility

Garrison Keillor would recognize why I fell in love with "Beauty." Its point is simple, easy to understand: the absence of any explicit articulation of beauty in the culture of the poet's youth. A clear narrative travels back to this childhood culture from a moment years later as Fairchild stands with his wife looking at Donatello's "David" at the Bargello Museum in Florence. The poem contrasts and then links the glory of that Italian moment with what the poet comes to see as complex beauties of his

youth: the mass and muscle of the machine shop; his father's quiet compassionate treatment of two exhibitionists who show up looking for jobs; a machinist so afraid of the misplaced loveliness of the exhibitionists' bodies that he would attack them if he could with an iron file; the poet's sad but witty recognition that in this environment one could only use the word "beauty" to refer "to a new pickup or dead deer." In retrospect, however, we arrive even here at enlightenment. Fairchild ends by linking the sun-blazed "great dome" of Florence with "the way / the metal roof of the machine shop . . . would break into flame late on an autumn day."

Although the role of the machine shop diminishes as *The Blue Buick* traces the poet's later writings, description of the physical world, especially of the Midwest, maintains its importance, even if in elegy:

The clapboard stores, slats long ago sand-blasted in dust storms, bleached or ochre now, gray, the faint green and yellow of a Lipton Tea ad on red brick. . . . Not even decline, but the dawn of absence. Architecture of the dead. The lives they housed are dust, the wind never stops.

Beauty and the search for it dominate Fairchild's poetry. Given the hardscrabble life of his early environment, it is hard to imagine even the search for beauty, let alone the possibility of discovering it. In his second volume, he at least recognizes that possibility; in his third, in "Beauty" and elsewhere, he acknowledges the presence of the beautiful, both past and current. In "The Blue Buick," the long retrospective poem that provides the title for this new volume, and earlier centered his fourth book, *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest* (2003), the poet confesses his early discomfort concerning "beautiful, a word I wasn't easy with back then." By the end of that fourth volume, however, he is "astonished. . . . the beauty . . . is overwhelming."

In his first three volumes Fairchild demonstrates a mastery of sophisticated prosody masked by casual narrative language. In a brief comment [BPJ, Winter 2010/2011] on a poem by him included in *The Best American Poetry 2010*, I described in detail and praised his ability to create formal music in deceptively informal lines. I could do so again here but wish to place

elsewhere my emphasis on technique. In his fourth volume, in *Usher*, his fifth, and in the new poems included at the end of *The Blue Buick*, he at times moves toward formal experiments—prose poems, stanzas, rhyme, even a sestina. His greatest musical strength, however, emerges from within his informal narratives. For me the best writing among the new work occurs in “History: Four Poems,” which begins with the rich music and vivid description that has carried his writing through the past three decades:

First, the fluttering of screeching birds,
 their sudden plunge and climb through manic,
 spiral flights, chickens squawking in the backyard,
 and then doors slamming and the air grieved
 by gusts of prairie dirt as I look back
 to see the sky turn sick with darkness

When crafting the second poem of this series, “Shakespeare in the Park, 9/11/2011,” the poet sometimes shifts to blank verse that feels less vigorous than his informal prosody:

Above Lear’s absent crown the moon had paled
 to little more than real estate where men
 have walked. A poplar waved the stars away.
 An army of cicadas sang the old mad song.

Yet overall, this set of four further commentaries on the past viewed from the present provides ample evidence that Fairchild continues to create strong poems, especially the third, “Economics,” in its terse tribute to the Occupy Movement in the context of Woody Guthrie and the survivor of a 1930s Oklahoma bank robbery:

His voice hardened into something thin and brittle
 for *suddenly*, he said, *suddenly* back then, he knew,
 in that flat Baptist land of bad deeds and worse money
 where preachers raged against all forms of sin
except the greed of the sleeping kings of poverty,
 that the scabby hand of vengeance was alive
 and real and moving slowly through the fields
 and burning streets of little towns like this one because
 the third thief placed the barrel of his Remington
 beneath the bank president’s chin and said,
*This, sir, is what happens when banks are built
 on the broken backs of the people*

I assume B. H. Fairchild, or “Pete” as he calls himself, has a private life that corresponds to the life in his poems but does not duplicate it. For us as audience he creates a public life by writing poems about that life. By imagining, by envisioning in retrospect the beauty of the past, the poet creates present and future beauties as reflections and extensions of that past, though at the time it was merely the chrysalis of what would become, for him, beautiful.



Kirun Kapur also appears to be creating her life by writing it. I certainly did not know her poetry when in 2008 I opened an envelope containing what I remember as the first work she sent us. Our editorial board chose three poems from that manuscript. Two years later, we accepted two more from another set. Of the five, the one that stays with me most powerfully is “At the Tiki Lounge.”

In it Kapur subtly describes the interaction between a woman and an army veteran who has apparently “lost his . . . leg.” She begins with his pick-up line, “*You’ve got a pretty face,*” but he soon moves to a compelling description of an event in Basra, Iraq, where he and his mates joined a local meal and were served “*Hot stringy meat, some gritty // Sauce. Worse even than our Army shit. . . . It might be camel balls or some real toxic shit,*” perhaps even, one soldier later suggests, “*Parts of kidnapped journalists.*” As the narrated scene becomes more complex, more threatening, the woman, though free to leave, stays and listens, until his fingers grasp her arm, holding her and yet pushing her away. Her tolerance of his hand allows us also to experience the intensity of the soldier’s past and current life. I know no other poem that conveys for me so effectively a sense of post-traumatic stress disorder in a commonplace social situation.

“At the Tiki Lounge” appears in the fourth section of Kapur’s book, near its conclusion, in a cluster of work that expands the Indian/American geographical and cultural vision she has earlier created. As the epigraph from Amitav Ghosh asserts, “It happened everywhere.” Other poems than the one that captured my attention remain more central to the poet’s work as a whole; their comprehensive complexity makes this collection remarkable. What Fairchild continues to accomplish over a

lifetime of publishing, Kirun Kapur has compressed into a single volume.

Like many a first collection, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* begins conventionally: An "Anthem." Then "Family Portrait, USA" for her mother. A poem of similar length for her father. A second poem for her father balanced by another for her mother. One that begins with both her father and her uncle. Kapur, however, knows where she's going, and it *ain't* conventional. She creates a family narrative, but one so unusual, so unpredictable, that conventional structure seems almost necessary. We need to know the characters, and the poet, if we are to understand what follows. Keillor's desire for "clear pictures of the familiar" dissolves in Kapur's worlds, in complex situations involving the unfamiliar.

We first encounter the poet's mother when the young woman lived in New Mexico as a Benedictine novitiate. We meet her father as he "played look-out" while his brother swiped mangoes from a Punjabi neighbor and "stopped passers-by // with made-up Shakespeare, breaking news / of Gandhi-ji, until the coast was clear." By the time we reach the fifth family poem, focused on her uncle and father, we're not on conventional family turf. The title begins with "History," which might lead us to suspect the narrative will continue, but the full title is "History (with a Melon Cleaver)." And the cleaver is about to descend. We're no longer in "Family Portrait, USA" but in Lahore, in 1947, just before the monsoon season, when the storm is not (as Kushwant Singh's epigraph tells us) meteorological but political: the creation of "the new state of Pakistan" and the subsequent flight of ten million people, with "almost a million" soon to be dead.

They stood in line to buy a slice of melon—
My father and my uncle, in cantaloupe season.
When the boy in front reached out to pay,
The melon seller waved his cleaver.

Formally, the poem is a pantoum, and as the lines repeat themselves with subtle changes, the situation also changes, for the hand holding the cleaver is not the dangerous one: "*With the other hand, he stabbed the boy with a dagger.*" Nothing has prepared them for the future, for what happens next. When he tells the story, "My uncle's voice was full of wonder. . . . As if a comet had passed overhead."

As this unexpected comet passes overhead, as the Indian subcontinent roils in its division and subdivision, the biographical poems prepare us for the meeting of the poet's mother and father, the ex-novitiate who "knew / exactly what to do" and the Hindu who "quotes Frost as easily as Ghalib." Soon we move beyond the personal, into the mythic, with "First Families: Cain and Abel." Just as father and mother follow the snake of temptation, the pursuit of the forbidden, the linking of east and west, of Christian and Hindu, the poet and her brother follow their "instinct . . . to love each other / viciously." And the daughter, disobeying her father as Cain must his parents, holds up the "cut snake" of her "braid" for her father to see, even though she is unable to articulate verbally what she has demonstrated visually.

The family, yes, remains a literal family, following on a mythic level some actions of the biblical first family, yet in verse so fresh that what might be cliché is more like revelation. As the book's epigraph from Willa Cather reminds us, "two or three human stories . . . go on repeating themselves." The language and the sentences stay simple:

It was a beautiful spring in Rawalpindi
When a Muslim dhobi warned his hostel full of Hindu boys.
While his eye flashed like a camera on the city,
My father escaped before the mob arrived.

This simplicity masks the complexity of both individual and collective lives: Kapur's grandfather leaving for what will become India while his brother remains; her father surviving with his Hindu classmates when a Muslim laundryman warns them to leave Rawalpindi; herself encountering Indira Gandhi's palmist or the intensity of an army veteran experiencing PTSD.

To understand the author's circumstance, the mythic leap from actual family to Adam and Eve will not suffice. If biblical mythology contributes to her mother's vision, her father's decisions depend on stories from the east, from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Two-thirds of the way through the book, in "First Families," the longest poem of the collection, we travel with Arjuna, Prince of the Pandavas, as he confronts the need for action knowing that any action he takes will have fatal consequences. We travel, however, not only with him but also with the poet's father as he transgresses against the Hindu sanctity of beef cattle,

her mother as she passes “the US ambassador’s house . . .
completely free / of anyone’s control,” the veteran as he recalls
a night in Basra. Finally we feel an urge for “liberation,” to reject
“philosophy” and choose, with Arjuna, “the fruit of action,”
though recognizing we later could hear

a note that might resolve
into a laugh

of ghostly princes

or of sight-seers
who would come after us . . .

and wonder. . . .

*Who’s been here? . . .
what have they thought or done?*

As Keillor might wish, Kapur’s work presents a strong narrative, this time not one easily followed on first read, but as we grow into the poem, and the book, a compelling one. Her experience remains one individual story among many powerful tales, as she becomes the chosen one, whether she wishes it or not, to visit “Indira Gandhi’s Palmist,” designated to connect the entire history. Her aunt hisses, “[I]t’s *your honor to look for all of us*,” but Kapur asserts, “I wanted to look away. Wanted to cry. . . . *I am afraid I’ll spend my life under a hand that I can’t stop or hold.*”

Arjuna, whether he wishes it or not, must confront the decision either to kill or to allow his cousins to die. Despite the palmist’s bromides that Kapur will make “a fine wife, a fine mother of fine sons,” the poet decides to recognize the power of that hand, the hand of the veteran, the hand of history. In response she opens her own hands, commits to action of her own. The world may be Maya, illusion, but confronting that illusion provides a mechanism for moving ahead. As the volume’s final poem, “For the Survivors,” concludes: “Begin. Ring your self.” Like the poem that led me to love Kapur’s work, the entire book presents a complex world, one full of grief, yet well worth living. Life is not, as the young Fairchild once imagined, “*somewhere else.*” It is here.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

When falling in love with a moment, a gesture, a poem, I always wonder whether the love will extend beyond that first impression. Picking up *The Blue Buick* and *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* I felt some apprehension. Laying them down I feel great satisfaction. B. H. Fairchild has extended his search for and discovery of beauty; Kirun Kapur has traced a memorable individual and collective story to her present situation. Both of them write, as my colleague Lee Sharkey would say, "poems that matter": Good Poems.