

BPJ

BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL VOL. 61 N°4 SUMMER 2011

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COVER

Mary Greene, design

Du Juanhu, “King Wen of Zhou Visits the Wise Old Man,”
painting, Xing Ping, Shaanxi Province, China



An arrow at the bottom of a page means no stanza break.

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 Jeff Crandall, Garth Greenwell, Peter Pereira, and Brian Teare (June), Jenny Johnson (July), and Tracy Zeman (August).

ARTHUR BULL

After Lu Yu

Old Tom took a room and never came out.
Jimmy the Waste faded, said to have moved in with a taxidermist.
One evening Granddad Wu went where he couldn't hear us calling any more.
Even the rabbit hound Edward, who could only cough
Instead of barking, was gathered to his ancestors.
For myself, I must be made of iron to still be here,
Leaning on the back fence, looking out over the green hills as they enter
evening.

BRIDGET LOWE

Blue and Red Ink Picture by Nijinsky in the Asylum

The crossed angry eyes,
the double tusks.

Not in a child's hand
because not a child's story,

though perhaps the exact darkness
a child at night

in a bedroom knows,
a child's mind alone—

the bedroom a broom closet,
the child's body the broom

and the straw of the broom like hair
cropped close to the skull.

FADY JOUDAH

Tenor

To break with the past
Or break it with the past
The enormous car-packed
Parking lot flashes like a frozen body
Of water a paparazzi sea
After take off

And because the pigeons laid eggs and could fly
Because the kittens could survive
Under the rubble wrapped
In shirts of the dead

And the half-empty school benches
Where each boy sits next
To his absence and holds him
In the space between two palms
Pressed to a face—
This world this hospice

MICHAEL BAZZETT

Solitude

The notes murmur and stir,
moving like a bag blown across a field, touching
down only between gusts

and if you looked through the doorway and saw the girl on the bench
you'd probably be surprised that she
is the one drawing such sounds from the piano in the front room,

its endless teeth always waiting
beneath that dark and polished lip.
She lifts the lid and plays while the cat watches,
green eyes narrowing into slits as it approaches

sleep or perhaps bliss—its expression as inconfundible as the music
or the sun falling through the window—
there are dust motes floating in that shaft of light, stirred by the music in
the air

and I know exactly how the cat feels,
lying there in the shaded room as it grows warmer outside,
but I'm not sure you do—

which is a problem, frankly.
You're probably still hung up on inconfundible,
which I'll admit is a poet word if ever I've heard one,
but what if I told you it's precisely

the right word and falls flat only because you don't happen to speak
Spanish?

You're going to insist
that I should have signposted it for you
through the use of italics, as is the convention,

but what if every time I challenge you a bit
I lapse into italics? Wouldn't you'd feel as if I were talking
down to you, from my incredibly ornate chair on a raised platform,

or, to put it another way, my *throne*.
The fact is, it's too late for italics now—
you've already read the word twice without them,
and if I were to go back to that room, and the sunlight and the music
and the girl

and somehow change it, right behind your very eyes,
that would clearly violate incontrovertible laws
of time and space, revealing powers I'm not ready to share.

Consider for a moment
what would be demanded of me by a hungry populace,
how I would be commandeered,
all the petty concerns that would be laid at my feet:

“Mistakes were made, my youth was misspent, please
unmarry me, allow me to erase what I spoke in anger, why couldn't
she just be
alive for one more day?”

You see the difficulty.
These are not powers to be treated lightly,
and I am unprepared to enter such a realm.
I would need a cape, a suit of invulnerability,

perhaps a fortress of solitude,
and even then I'd still be as lost and alone as that young girl playing piano,
not certain what was moving me, not even a cat to keep me company.

ALEX QUINLAN

Like Snowmelt Swarming the River

after Millay

enough of this grasping after purpose
when the black racer twines through the ivy
swerves toward the brown cup of the cardinal's nest the eggs
it holds the life in it and the life-taking
require no explanation nor does the glistening
of the scales when later sated the snake basks
on the white stone the light beating the rough skin risking
hawks and hands nor do the hands
one holding a saw for cutting ivy
the other weasling behind the sleeping head
to bring the snake to the child show it to her
nor does her look of busted glass sparkling need to be explained

yet in crown-most delight when the oaks loose
clusters of rust catkins stinking up the place
when the wisteria's thousand fetid hands swarm what's nearest
the daffodils and violets bloom in unison and I catch
myself looking for an idea to ascribe to the complementary
relationship between the colors an idea in itself

I get turned around come out babbling
like something missing teeth that beauty will in the end if only
because it has to suffice at least
when the weather thrills and does not last

COLLEEN O'BRIEN
Plato's Metaphors

When he spoke
about Lachesis, Clotho, Atropos

when he spoke of them as women

at a loom—not three points defining
an infinite plane, slicing any thing

man, monument, mountain, the sun—

not wall, nor floor, nor constellation,

when he,
before solid geometry,

before space-time, believed in *is*

and still incarnated in air the women
turning whorls studded with planets, was he

condescending
even to his spiritual sons—or had he come in fact

to ecstasy, to a region

where reason's heat
passes blue and

shatters into gods?

JENNIFER BURD

Venus

And then when I was fourteen
I discovered hunger
for the second time:

it didn't take
me but I kept it
like a secret

never before having
imagined more than need's
blunt response

I had a new question

leading me
to a foreign country
within myself

land of my own
discovery and naming

the scraping-ache
left when you choose
against satisfaction

having an altogether different
meaning but with all the

colorflavortexture

I rubbed my hunger
like a worry-stone

held it and it didn't change
like fear to anger

still hunger
still my very own

blade
I used to cut myself

JENNIFER BURD

from the family snapshot
the perfect adolescence

all summer long climbing
the trellis of my to-do lists loving

the expansiveness
growing inside me

the hidden abundance
lunchtime refusals
the game of it

long walk-run-bike afternoons

honing myself alone
against the evening sky
aching azure

sky with just a single star

GARY FINCKE

Watching *Californication* to See My Daughter's Painting

The painting, my daughter explained,
Is in David Duchovny's bedroom,
Just watch, and when the first nude woman
Rises from the designer sheets,
I follow her body past a wall
Of unfamiliar art. Somewhere else,
I think, and soon, because he fucks
A succession of women in that bed,
His teenage daughter often nearby,
She, too, sees those women naked,
Entering like a maid, all of them
In that bedroom with my daughter's painting
That doesn't appear in episodes
One or two, David Duchovny
Bedding those women in Los Angeles
Where my daughter lives with her daughters,
Seven and three, who ran naked,
This summer, under the sprinkler
In my central Pennsylvania yard.

I fast-forward through each external shot,
Hurrying toward my daughter's painting
In David Duchovny's bedroom,
The naked woman in episode three
A creative writing student
Like those I teach, nineteen or twenty,
Sliding one step to the side so
I can see the chairs suspended
In the tumultuous blue sky
Of my daughter's rented painting
On either side of that girl's bare shoulders.
She talks and talks until, at last,
She turns into profile, her breast
The focal point of this artless scene,
The painting completely exposed,
Half of the dark chairs silhouetted
By the faint light my daughter allowed
Behind that storm of identical chairs
In David Duchovny's bedroom.

NICELLE DAVIS

I Wrote You This Love Letter, You'll Think It's Gross

It's not the herpes that cause problems, them I can accept
easy as sea-monkeys—like the ad in Mad Magazine says,
a biological novelty turned into a reality.

I name the pink translucent marks Bob & Wanda. Always
Bob & Wanda to avoid any feelings of loss between
rejuvenations. This isn't to say I don't

notice you layer on sleepwear, incessantly wash,
beat an itch like fisting the sting out of a new tattoo, to
avoid any contact that chances me catching you. We lie

in bed, together, thinking how long it has been since
the last shock of entrance—like a ninth grader, you
canoe-roll over to my side of the mattress. We dry-

hump like summer-camp kids, quite sure/not sure,
how much better it would feel without clothes on.
Nebular wads of toilet paper appear in the bowl. When

I ask where the floor rug has gone, you say it needs
washing, *accidentally peed on*, but we both know it
wasn't urine that you on(ed) the carpet with. After

weeks of not having sex the word in syllables starts
to sound like *her piece*—the Other virally stringing you
along, just as the slight hope that she may

reallyreallyloveyou prompted a mid-day break-up fuck.
For a week you wrote yours & Other's name together,
hoping she'd show up like a care package full of cookies.

We lie awake together with Other between us. I think
to myself how beautiful you are overandoverandover,
licking my own tongue, imagining kiss after slimy kiss.

MOLLY CURTIS

After Touring the Body Room

I couldn't eat for days.
I couldn't keep my hands off you

and for a time wherever you touched me,
no matter how softly, I bruised.

So *museum*, in the right light,
sounds like *mausoleum*.

Torso and *torsional* sound like *torn*.

See, this one's muscles braid blindly
in sinuous currents, just like that one's:

with no discernible face, no encasing, no skin.

I have tried to say that
at times I miss your enclosures,

your protrusions, your aquiline face.
And that to feel my own body, obsolesced,

in the colors of a crushed plum
was to evidence a life under your touch.

WESTON CUTTER

Water over Water

We're closer to ocean than the limits of sky but it doesn't feel that way—I'm three hours from a woman who whispered *I'll miss you* in a language I barely speak, five from anything I'd point to if asked *What's home?* In the seat next to me a young man cradles a woman he didn't have to leave in a country he never dreamt he'd dream so often about. She stirs, he shifts, we bump arms. They're maybe five years younger, eight, than I was when I believed I could take my love with me anywhere—a darker side of town, a different country—yet here I am, miles high, still wanting love to be more like wine: close at hand, plentiful, in containers which, once opened, stay opened until every drop's consumed. *Sorry*, he smiles, I smile, then turn again to the window. I suppose there's an ocean down there beneath the oceanic clouds, and beneath that ocean there must be whole whorls of life gone undocumented—creatures uncatalogued, imagination-boggling monsters of shadow and privacy. We believe the monsters are down there waiting for us and our nature documentaries, believe the monsters will wait. His sigh is massive, big as a time zone, and we both look at the woman restlessly resting in his arms. Fatigue pocks his face but I want to whisper *We have to keep letting each other go to hold on. Our only real discussions are tactile, our only stories of longing* and for months it was magic, her fluid and strange words, yet now all I want is to understand her when she says *I'll miss you*. Something's important in the hearing of it. His finger grazes the tiny cup of water on his tray and he brings his pregnant finger to his girlfriend's lower lip, rubs the small wetness in. She doesn't move but to me he whispers *She's burning up; she's been like this since Umbria*.

The first night. Dim hills stretching darkly beyond the house's clay walls. The hearth lit with so much fire it seemed ceremonial, even our shadows trailed smoke. The kitchen dark after our long meal—mussels, bread, wine—the bedroom upstairs with sheets turned down and pillows arranged, but, for now, we sat in an old stone room off her kitchen. Wide screenless windows, long cool benches, the night gathering around and around us. Bats swooping among hills and her hand smooth, calm on mine. *The windows* I pointed.

→

What if they get in? The bats? We could just barely
 communicate, had traveled from Madrid to Trieste with a window
 always nearby—view as sketch pad, pictorial
 dictionary—telling our stories to each other, stripped and un-
 elaborate: the barest bits of self, just enough.
Bats? she asked, and I pointed to the dark shapes beyond
 in the dark sky, used my free hand to mimic
 a wing, some flying thing. She shook her head and rubbed her nose
 on my cheek. *No come in.* We watched
 a handful of bats swoop, glide pale-bellied almost within
 reach, right past the window, and she was right.
An unseen screen, I thought, *something Italian,*
 and we sat together, letting our silence seep
 and our exhaustion deepen, watching bats fling themselves
 through dark before we finished the wine, spread
 the fire to embers, climbed the stairs to the bed in which she
 above me whispered *All the love* and I beneath her
 didn't say or think a word of translation.

She groans, he shifts again
 into me. Ten minutes ago the pilot told us to look down, that
 we were above the deepest trench on the planet.
If you flipped Everest over, shoved it down there, it still wouldn't reach bottom.
 Her cheeks are flush, eyes for a moment wild—
 she didn't expect to wake up this far from the ground.
Are you okay? he asks her and I hold my breath,
 translate, practice. *Siete buono?* Nods. Smiles. *It's so hot* she says
 and though he already must've known—his own
 love as oven, there in his arms, of course he could feel—her saying it
 changes something. *Here,* he says, brings the water
 to her lips. The plane shudders. Now is the moment to fear, to clutch
 at anything stable. Shudders again—a throat readying
 to shout, a surface broken by a pebble—then we stabilize.
 We look at each other, the young man and I, then
 at the woman in his arms. She says *Water over water,*
 settles deeper into his arms and chest.
 With a different faith I might believe, though both float
 so seemingly easily across great gashes of night,
 that there's some difference between our tin cradle
 and the changeling moon way out, gibbous
 and ghostly. He sets the water back down,



the cup's nearly empty. There's a story she keeps trying
to tell me, about her father and mother, some boat trip they took
and ended up stranded, some island. *They burn*
the boat she keeps telling me; it's not metaphor or story but true,
I've looked up all the words, for burning, for boat,
for stranded. Two nights and their only warmth the burning bits
of what should've carried them back.
How long? asks the girl in his arms, the girl next to me. Out the window
there's so much distance to the next cloud, far light, it's hard
to believe there's such a thing as touch, arrival: *How long until we're back?*

JENNY JOHNSON

Aria

1

Tonight at a party we will say farewell
to a close friend's breasts, top surgery for months
she's saved for. Bundled close on a back step,
we wave a Bic lighter and burn her bra.
At first struggling to catch nylon aflame,
in awe we watch as all but the sheer black
underwire melts before forming a deep
quiet hole in the snow.

Sometimes the page
too goes quiet, a body that we've stopped
speaking with, a chest out of which music
will come if she's a drum flattened tight, if she's
pulled like canvas across a field, a frame
where curves don't show, exhalation without air.

Then this off-pitch soprano steals through.

2

Then this off-pitch soprano steals through
a crack that's lit. A scarlet gap between
loose teeth. Interior trill. We're rustling open.
Out of a prohibited body why
long for melody? Just a thrust of air,
a little space with which to make this thistling
sound, stretch of atmosphere to piss through when
you're scared shitless. *Little sister, the sky
is falling and I don't mind, I don't mind,*
a line a girl, a prophet half my age,
told me to listen for one summer when
I was gutless, a big mouthed carp that drank
down liters of algae, silt, fragile shale
while black-winged ospreys plummeted from above.

3

While black-winged ospreys plummeted from above,
we were born beneath. You know what I mean?
I'll tell you what the girls who never love
us back taught me: The strain within will tune
the torqued pitch. In 1902 the last
castrato sang "Ave Maria."
His voice—a bifurcated swell. So pure
a lady screams with ecstasy, *Voce
bianco!* Breath control. Hold each note. Extend
the timbre. Pump the chest, that balloon room,
and lift pink lips, chin so soft and beardless,
a flutter, a flourish, a cry stretching beyond
its range, cruising through four octaves, a warbler,
a starling with supernatural restraint.

4

A starling with supernatural restraint,
a tender glissando on a scratched LP,
his flute could speak catbird and hermit thrush.
It was the year a war occurred or troops
were sent while homicide statistics rose;
I stopped teaching to walkout, my arms linked
to my students to show a mayor who didn't
show. Seven hundred youth leaned on adults
who leaned back. We had lost another smart kid
to a bullet in the Fillmore, Sunnyside,
the Tenderloin. To love without resource
or peace. When words were noise, a jazz cut was steel.
I listened for Dolphy's pipes in the pitch dark:
A far cry. Epistrophe. A refusal.

5

A far cry. Epistrophe. A refusal.
A nightingale is recorded in a field
where finally we meet to touch and sleep.
A nightingale attests
as bombers buzz and whirl
overhead enroute to raid.
We meet undercover of brush and dust.
We meet to revise what we heard.
The year I can't tell you. The past restages
the future. Palindrome we can't resolve.
But the coded trill a fever ascending,
a Markov chain, discrete equation,
generative pulse, sweet arrest,
bronchial junction, harmonic jam.

6

Bronchial junction, harmonic jam,
her disco dancing shatters laser light.
Her rock rap screamed through a plastic bullhorn
could save my life. Now trauma is a remix,
a beat played back, a circadian pulse we can't shake,
inherent in the meter we might speak,
so with accompaniment I choose to heal
at a show where every body that I press against
lip syncs: *I've got post binary gender chores . . .*
I've got to move. Oh, got to move. This box
is least insufferable when I can feel
your anger crystallize a few inches away,
see revolutions in your hips and fists.
I need a crown to have this dance interlude.

7

I need a crown to have this dance interlude
or more than one. Heating flapjacks you re-
read "Danse Russe," where a man alone and naked
invents a ballet swinging his shirt around
his head. Today you're a dandier nude
in argyle socks and not lonely as you
slide down the hall echoing girly tunes
through a mop handle: *You make me feel like. . . .*
She-bop doo wop. . . . an original butch
domestic. The landlord is looking through
the mini-blinds. Perched on a sycamore,
a yellow throated warbler measures your
schisms, fault lines, your taciturn vibrato.
Tonight, as one crowd, we will bridge this choir.

MARTY MCCONNELL

when your grandmother mistakes your girlfriend for a man

do not rise up over the dinner table
like a sequin tornado

or a burning flag. it is Christmas.
though the forks

curl their tines into tiny silver fists
and the frost-

rilled windows blink in embarrassment,
focus on your lover

as she clears her throat, extra low, passes the salt
to your grandmother

who thanks the young man with the strange
haircut and delicate

hands. this is no time for declarations and no one's
seemed to notice

though the milk's gone solid in the pitcher
and your father

is suddenly fascinated by the unmoving air
in the other room.

your mouths do not move, except
to chew. this is family,

this is holiday, there are no affairs, no
addictions, your family

crest reads in elaborate embroidery
the less said,

the better: though your father did offer once
to pay for your therapy

back when no one you knew was in therapy
and there was no way

you were going to talk to a stranger about things
you'd never say

to your mother, even drunk, even on Easter. so
to say something now

about what might be a mistake, or just the easiest way
to explain a mohawk

would be bringing sand to the bank. unprofitable
and a little bit

insane. you study your lover's chin. the tweezers wince
under the sink.

she could be a boy, you think. apocalyptic Christian
emails aside,

maybe your grandmother is progressive. astute
in her own

Southern, incidental way. your voice offering her
the butter is a punk band

playing an abortion clinic. all feedback
and nobody wants you.

she's your grandmother. she's nearly 100.
your uncle

took thirty years to get sober. your grandfather died
still owning the manual

to every piece of machinery he'd ever owned.
you still

don't know how to make any kind of pie.
there are no

family recipes. in the far corner of your liver
your other grandmother

MARTY MCCONNELL

looks up from her patient sectioning
of a grapefruit,

offers you a chunk of your own atrophied
tongue, trembling

at the edge of her serrated spoon.

STEPHEN MALIN

Absent Absence

Unexpected and interrupting
in your wet boots on my
grandmother's antique Persian,
you have once again taken
from me your absence,
a thing I have come to treasure
and one whose loss grows
harder to bear than
once your absence was,
and these are only five
of the quick and small
of why,
henceforth,
I hope to help you
to perfect a perfect
non-attendance record
at this address.

MURIEL NELSON
With a big simile

she wrote *he warped his arms around me*
and tickled me. Soon all I *liked* was not
a hymn's "I know" inflection,
guilt perfection, or some
hissing blessing, but errors.
Airs. Apparent selves
of steam. When large birds fooled
through blowing firs, the white
gulls vanished into greens
and came back clouds. Black crows
of crows. They lit where taillights
stared at their red ice. Then flew
where now a sharp arc goes weathering
across the whole blue psyche like . . .
a fighter's contrail. But
it doesn't disappear. Dove-white,
it widens. Whiles. Smiles.
And still it's there. Sky-sized
it's warped to one vast quill
feathering.

MARGARET AHO
The Will Loses Its Object

. . . and now
removes redoubts around the tented
I-don't-know: the
circumflexed [dear] unpronounceable [valuable]
behind the breastbone. Still,
it comes round: the will—
not numb: nummular, circular. . . . I dream
I'm fingering the sternum: hers, my mother's. As if it held,
hid there, something crimped, something finely-folded.
A small fan, perhaps. Black. With mackled
markings. With sleek ribs. In full
splay. Making the case for concealment, effacement, the mew
need, the new moon.
And its rattailed-handle? A dark root: glänzend, glossy . . .
hard to grasp.
Ceremonial, then: a formal flabellum. High German?
I don't know. Here, feel this: see? It has missing & snapped
brins. So frangible. Such a small
gust of wind. And breathless now. No beat, beat, beat. No
flutter. As if to **be** this hide-bound-brokenness
is her bequeathment.
No fanfare. Death. Such a round living thing. I mean it rays
out. *You mean in the dream?* I mean here.
Right now. Shy &
careful & *Zartgefühl?* Yes, that. That
tact-of-the-heart, that taut
delicacy: hers. It rays out, unspoken.
Something breatheable.

REBECCA DUNHAM
Untranslatable

The mourning lily's
black-veined face.

The unmown fields
I trespass

daily. The iris's slack-
jaw mouth. Ruffles

of blue lip webbed
by a spider's stintless

hours. The quiet.

REBECCA DUNHAM

Restoration

I will not re-leaf
unmarked by this my
season of alteration.

Swells of sweet
pea, my witching hazel,
I am nothing

you would recognize.
Unruly, I teem—

moth-powder & mouthless.

Velvet-blank
the little faces ghost
their old green galleries.

RANJANI NERIYA

Workshop

slacken those jute-strung almanacs
blow-dust those shellacked urns
finger the flaky diluvium
of fragrant panniers

tread tenderly, it is a churn
of Minton, molten with star-fall
and tinted thimblefuls from
a bedewed belvedere

how brokenly it gathers
whole, this whispery coda
annealed in a fire
of anecdote

of kenaf tethered, roof
osiered, ashlar river-whorled
blue plink of adze, chintzy
all smoothed to life's music

how we slapped linen
at the rill, how we fired
a stone of joy
stoned a fire of grief

it's all about longings
as they say, be a drop
in the ocean to find
the ocean in a drop

the varied aggregate, mind-body
electrum, thirstful of the
damson trail, resinous fume
breath alight with ballade

fill the mazer, tipple and flow,
in the crook of heart to know how
one leaf it is mints the whole green glade
one nimbus wheels this cosmic clay

SUSAN TICHY

That Most Heart-Exciting of Earthly Things

'Wind and thunder cross my threshold'
Child masturbating on the edge of a door
—any moment in which to practice *calm*
'With your own body carry yourself'
Though we were less strong
than stubborn
Writing with gloves on, burning scrap
Freeing a doe with her hind leg caught in a fence
'If you don't wash your clothes
you can carry smoke'
scribbled inside my copy of *High Path*
'Roads appear and disappear'
'We walked upon the very brink'
Large, therefore, is spoken of
Tea settles in a dirty cup
And a few pennies left
for the news
'War horses graze by the city walls'
'Seed pods ripen to brilliant red'
Trim the wicks, so the lamps burn brighter
Leave the window open
for company
The car high-centered in knee-deep ruts
Ridge-tops shining by starlight
As the master says: impossible
to set a mountain before your eyes

TRACY ZEMAN
Grass for Bone

Small cakes of lily-seed an assembly
of swallows branch-bound assembly of
clouds burst your face washed
in pigment no *sati* under pitch
under night & timber heat
skin burnt to blister living into
atrophy or *enclave* the mouth of a horse
tells the beginnings of the age
of grass of red spearfish shale & black hills
a reconstructing reckless this getting
& becoming lost you the figure
of crouched skeleton under gaze
how bounded the boundless
new area of contestation

■

Red crowned field sparrow
trills in minor-key in minor places
cut forests now shrubland of
fences & abandoned pastures
sieve of redbud leaves sewn together
like a length of rope engineer a noose
pink-billed new-world song plaintive
& unceasing during the search for another
noise herded into rows & hoof-prints
where old railway decays into foxglove
stream carves into gully into dusk into
bodies boiled in lye then scraped clean
turning bones into rusted machinery
a stand of pale orchids no longer

■
A tomb constructed of bark this remainder
covered with branches with lichen & rock
painted yellow & decorated with emu feathers
contains three figures of straw & one man
arms tied with a thin sheet of wood
a still creek flat & frozen
corpse placed with head sunward
the direction of origin of ancestor
miles & miles & miles & miles
life that we called *yours* on a good day
on a good day this love for you
a “house of wooden fingers”
house wren in a tree hollow
tree hollow occupied with bone & straw

■
Two rivers “ticking softly into one”
leaf-cutter chronicle a fern frond left
in a bath of sedges & blackbirds
our “machine in the garden” over &
over slash of green sweep of
gray thought beneath so slight
a field of white-lipped peccaries
under the piha’s ascending whistles
& screams the chronicler the echo-
maker “we must not worry
how few we are & fall from each
other” a boat-like shape in the dark
of the milky way a way of knowing
brings the world forth as not

■

Trade horse for tea & tea for horse
this cobblestoned knowing brings us
into being we must worry we must
a clutch of red & cream white eggs
silly goose mud-caked & barefoot
among dry sticks trash & moss
an occasional sentinel how to occupy this
desert world our little camp
our little home inside where a lamp burns
uncertainly yellow then white then
wild plum or peach leaf willow & smartweed
we feed our horses with cottonwood
upon this spotted plain
an open grove a glitter of flint

■

Arabian ostrich Atitlán grebe
black-faced honeycreeper endemic &
no more our trail canopied in wild
grape & sunflowers did I say *counterfeit*
or *crabapple* *coneflower* or *copy*
prairie after heavy rain will soak
a man on horseback up to his waist
water clinging to bluestem
grass clinging to wind & sun
an “ache in the bone” a litany in negative
we stand at the river’s edge to watch
the fish swallow what’s left
of you this *keno* a bathing place
for the after & the rest also

■

Red buffalo pushes the hardwood east
trees & wheat & dust
an ache in the rind after a summer storm we are
without the way defined by absence by
presence of great feats a morass this
place of ours fire licked grasses & rushes
define the treeline we share
with the rest carrion cardinal compass-flower
bringing a way of being with
not against into rivers oceans empty
into oceans rivers splinter a continuum
that sparks this consolation of *sow*
& *form of joint & oxbow* you empty
into this & splinter into that

■

To wander in restless want & penury
to wear a necklace of green herbs
to keen over the corpse embalmed
with honey & washed in water of chamomile
of blackened faces for thirty days of
water poured on the roots of the nearest tree
of *feasting & footbridge* of being sewn in
a mat of threadbare linen day at its most
long its most blue sky knit with clouds
mountains crowded with long-needed pines
lying flat & still on a good day this love
stopped with cloth & cardamom
a plumed chimney reduces the muscles
to ash a fern in a summer fire

■
A wire cage of fledglings bluish-white eggs
of the California condor yellow-faced then
red extant & permeable “a member of
the cloud” & cliff the boundary between this
world & that thought to be impermanent
at times grasses grow in the rain
shadow of the Rockies islands in a sea of steppe
a tract for dying a good death for dying well
anoint with the right thumb eyelids ear lobes & lips
ovenbird catbird warbler wren
what of the marker between
the human & all else misplace a howling
experience skins drying over coals
smoke broken into silos & rings

■
Mountain as adaptation quick clouds
rags of mist wolf elk bison bear
creatures of grass plains & burrow
contained a skull wrapped in woven cotton
ancestor figure fashioned of wood & mud
of one shepherd or another principle of
center of dislodging to introduce other
order old skin over this
truth as bald as cold as middle
no meddle every settlement had a house
set apart for the dead new way of burial
as manipulation as a tactic for conversion
funeral as cover for war “a month’s mind”
untenable the red deer the cordgrass

■

Summit or *sun* living rock
to which the heart is given by obsidian
skeletons disarticulated & tied into bundles
before the ossuary furthest part of the world
must be *sunset* & *sea* mouldering the order upset
loggerhead shrike peregrine falcon
black footed ferret the Missouri river hems
the Big Horn Mountains a hinge between
one land & another an effigy was made
of wood & wax verisimilitude will have to suffice
for aspen for sage-thrasher for pipit
stalks burnt like feathers convoy of
corn & flesh hope to graft the present to
the predicament to all my tenderness

■

Canary's corpse copse of false
Solomon's seal rivets of stars & sharp notes
the men were "found slain
with their mouths stopped full of bread"
beneath the blue lupine & wild strawberry
by springtime only a hundred were left
having subsisted on dogs cats rats & mice
gust goes obscured by the storm entrust
hope inherent & lashed tincture of snow
some shrieking O & you no longer
named what you were a handful
of farm buildings behind the windbreak
wheat planted in alternating fallow strips
how the cinder draped the field then

■

Wasp's nest found inside a skull
the tiny clay pot of the mud dauber
dispossessed island of trees & people
wilderness makes it hard to be
"unregarded & unburied"
bodies decaying in the hedgerows
after surviving on only oysters for eight weeks
ineffable slight the land not an after
thought ember or tinder particular disaster
headed for half-lives for we are tied
to the place that made us no ledger
for that map mouse-nest eggshell
slaughter cellar sequester root out
what as remedy for this condition

■

Vanilla grass & sage brush flank the hills
a gleaner an ax an owl a honeycomb
knee-deep leaf-rot a certain joylessness
a cage of ribs apple trees leafing on a slope
a chance to still the worst of it
wreck of thaw encampment of charred wood
pheasant quail hare what of plenty
of mending or maelstrom private burials
disallowed for fear of covering up
the "violent context of life"
flocks of cranes landing on a bank
filament fissure sawgrass
surely we'll survive if apprehensive
if fixing the outside within the frame

In recent years the BPJ has published a number of memorable poems whose beauty and boldness are inextricable from their overtly gay perspective. With that in mind, we extended an invitation to four poets whose work we admire to discuss what might constitute a gay sensibility or poetics. What follows is a much-abridged version of the email conversation that ensued. We invite you to join that conversation as it continues on our blog, the Poet's Forum, during the month of June.

—LS, JR

JC: Clearly a gay sensibility exists in poetry. There are nuances, references, and shared experiences which can be expressed in poetry that straight people will never glean, but that a gay man or woman would recognize instantly. The hetero world is so very man/woman oriented that everything it looks upon is seen through that filter. When a gay male poet writes, "We met in the park / at dusk" it means something very different than if a straight man or woman wrote it. . . . But the intense, raw pain of Paul Monette's *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, to cite just one example, is simply human. There is nothing gay about the experience of losing someone you utterly love. Why is a line being drawn across human experience because that love is man/man vs. man/other?

BT: Jeff, I think you go right to the heart of the matter with ardent clarity, the matter being the question of gay poetry: What is it? Does it exist? If it does, how so? If it doesn't, then why do people act as though it does? At the heart of your response, I see you potentially arguing for a universal humanism that both trumps historical context and posits an implicit scale of value: "human" > "gay." If I choose to play devil's advocate in response to your question, please know that I don't intend to single you out. I think you're articulating a powerful question about art's relationship to political experience—a question I almost daily ask of myself and my work as a poet and critic. But I wouldn't myself say that there is "nothing gay about the experience of losing someone you utterly love" to AIDS, in the U.S., in the '80s.

Reading Monette for me now is not just to revisit my own memories of losing my partner to AIDS-related complexes in 1999—which was, to be historical about it, a very different death than it would have been had he died in the '80s. For me to read Monette in 2011 is also to be immersed in recent history that is finally just far enough away to be history: a specific era whose politics, activist actions, and emotional atmosphere were dictated and circumscribed by the very

particular cultural and economic leadership of the U.S. government, moralizing and panic-driven public attitudes toward gay male sexuality, limited medical knowledge of AIDS itself, and a paucity of ways of treating it. So while I totally understand what you mean about the universality of the loss of the beloved, the cultural and historical context at work in Monette's autobiographical poems not only leads me to read them as representative of gay experience of a certain time—it insists that I do. I think that this is Monette's particular form of literary activism: he refuses altogether the binary between "human" and "gay," but not by erasing the particulars of gay experience or the specifics of gay history. He insists that though there is no difference between "human" and "gay," the record nonetheless must stand.

Of course, I don't meant to imply that you're arguing we should erase these particulars from our writing. If your acute articulation of this question has called out my own ardency, it's because this is an issue I've worried over for a long time, the relationship between universal humanism and specific political histories—and because it's generally a contentious issue. By insisting on keeping these two terms in tension with each other rather than choosing or valuing one over the other, I do not intend to diminish literary work in any way, or to "draw a line" needlessly across human experience. To keep "human" and "gay" in tension (as, I would argue, they are in our culture) is both to point out that the lines are often already drawn for us by others and to honor the fact that sometimes these are lines drawn for battles in which we lose each other to history.

All of which is to beg the question: what is gay poetry?

JC: I wholeheartedly agree that the context of Paul Monette's work is indeed very, very gay. As you say, a gay man losing his lover to AIDS in the '80s: it doesn't get much gayer than that. However his content is not very gay at all. Imagine you are reading Monette's "No Good-byes" for the first time, without knowing who wrote it, when, or what book it is from. In the first forty lines of this forty-four line poem the poet reveals his passion, his love, his terrible loss. But nowhere are we given a hint as to the writer's sex or sexual orientation. Only in the final four lines do we get a clue: "and please let your final dream be / a man not quite your size losing the whole / world but still here combing combing / singing your secret names till the night's gone." If we replace that one little word "man" with the non-sex-specific "lover" does the poem lose its power? Is the gay poem suddenly not gay?

I have the dubious distinction of being published in *Between the Cracks: The Daedalus Anthology of Kinky Verse*, edited by badboy Gavin Dillard. Reading through the works, I am trying to ask myself, "Which poems are gay poems, and why?" Is a homoerotic poem necessarily a gay poem? If a poem about the sumptuous beauty of a female body is written by a woman, then is it gay? If the same poem were penned by a man, does that turn it suddenly straight?

I think we will have to arrive at multiple definitions of "gay poetry," one that considers context, one that considers content, one that considers the biographical poet. Can straight people write gay poetry? Or is their poetry just "gay-acting"? (Yes, I'm being a little silly here.) I think you make a very important point, Brian, when you say that "the lines are often already drawn for us by others." The straight Judeo-Muslim-Christian world has worked hard for centuries to draw the lines around gays in murderous and abusive ways. I think that a fundamentalist Christian's definition of "gay poetry" would be very different from one we came up with ourselves.

PP: It all gets pretty slippery, doesn't it? For instance, I am thinking now of a poet such as Mary Oliver, who is gay, but her poetics are decidedly not gay, are instead quite mainstream and best-selling. And then there are poets such as Tony Hoagland, who are not gay, but whose poetics could be considered quite gay (I am thinking in particular of his book *What Narcissism Means to Me*).

So, if it exists, what is a gay poetics? Apart from identity politics and activism, I would like to posit a few other aspects of a gay poetics, or a gay sensibility in poetry, if such a thing exists, and I think it does. In the same way it is hard for me to describe art, I feel like I know it when I see it. Of course, none of the following are exclusive to a gay sensibility, but together perhaps can be seen as facets of it:

1) A transgressive stance: poetry that goes against the current, that is in your face like a drag queen on a rampage (see the Stonewall Rebellion). This may include sexual content, as in Garth's poem "Portrait in Hood and Bindings" or Brian's poems in his first book, but it is also about defiance, appropriation, thievery, mash-ups, seizing the canon and turning it upside down and shaking it. I am thinking here of Adrienne Rich, Allen Ginsberg, Eileen Myles, and others.

2) A love of hidden and/or codified and/or transformed language:

word play, anagrams, erasures, redactions, dictionaries, etymologies, and ornament. I see this in the work of James Merrill, Randall Mann, Richard Howard, D. A. Powell, Mark Doty, and others. Speaking in code, or in hidden texts within texts, is not unlike the colored handkerchiefs and secret hand signals gay men (and women) have used as subterfuge to meet and match up in more closeted and discreet times.

3) An obsession with form: rhyming, palindromes, villanelles, sonnets, etc. When one's sexuality, one's life, is outside the norm, I think one can paradoxically become focused on given rules, laws, orders, systems, and the worlds they create. I am thinking here of the work of David Trinidad, Marilyn Hacker, Rafael Campo, and others.

4) A sense of humor, irony, camp: I mean really, two men (or two women) together? You've got to have a sense of humor, a well developed sense of irony, to make it work. I am thinking of Jeff's poem "Hybrid" that I chose several years ago as guest editor of *In Posse Review*. This poem could easily have been written by a straight woman, talking about a failed or unrequited relationship. Still the poem, with its amphibian metaphors, would have, in my mind, a gay sensibility. As Jerome Murphy says in his blog "For Southern Boys Who Have Considered Poetry" in a post about "What Makes a Poem Gay":

To me, for a poet to be "gay" with conceptual quote marks is a matter of imaginative dexterity—of fully exploiting the double vision bestowed by existence as a variant on the sexual norm. To be, in other words, amphibious. To be deviously sensitive to whatever borders your culture has drawn around gender and to actually enjoy those restrictions for the acts of creative subversion they allow.

GG: I second Jeff's notion that there will be—must be, should be—multiple and coexisting definitions of "gay poetry," a category that feels to me important to preserve even as any attempt to nail it down seems objectionable or unsatisfying. For instance: it's not clear to me that every work by a writer who self-identifies as queer is therefore "gay literature." I'm not sure that Auden's "Shield of Achilles" falls within my sense (but what is my sense?) of a "gay poem," and one of the most beautiful recent gay novels I know is *Call Me by Your Name*, by the straight-identified André Aciman. I want to assert that the imagination isn't limited by—that it promiscuously disregards—these kinds of fixed identities.

Nor does it seem true to me that only works with overt and clearly stated homoerotic themes or narratives qualify as “gay.” To think again of Auden: “Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love,” one of the most beautiful poems I know, never makes explicit the fact that it was written in response to a same-sex erotic experience, yet the experience described is particular (which is not quite to say exclusive) to a species of non-normative and devalued sexual encounter characteristic of gay lives in a certain place and time. I don’t think this limits the poem, which expresses sentiments that surely are “universal,” if there are such sentiments, but I would resist any attempt to lift the poem from the specificity of experience it describes or to claim that its gayness doesn’t in some crucial sense matter. Limiting the poem’s resonance to its local circumstance does a violence to the poem; so does grasping hold of something we identify as universal at the expense of historical specificity.

The tension in poetry between “local” and “universal,” between “context” and “content,” is a vivifying one, and I find myself resistant to most attempts to resolve it. Surely this flickering between local and universal is among the pleasures of art, and surely we don’t have to claim one of them as essence and dismiss the other as accident. So, Jeff, I can absolutely agree with you about seeing Monette’s book as a universal cry of grief and rage, but I can’t think that universality comes despite the specifically gay content of the poems, which I fear would require valuing lines that can be read without the specificities of gendered eroticism while devaluing the book’s specifically queer content. And it does seem to me full of specifically queer content, and quite assertively so.

None of this gets me any closer to a definition, even a partial and personal one, of “gay poetry.” And there’s a reason I’m resistant to articulating such a definition. A definition of gay poetry would require (wouldn’t it?) a definition of gay identity itself, and such definitions seem to me unlikely and undesirable when both things—gay identities, gay poetries—keep proliferating and transforming, taking on new circumstances and shapes, promiscuously refusing to be fixed.

BT: I would like to add a question about our involvement with/relationship to gay community politics and activism: how involved have we been? If so, has that involvement inflected our work and/or our conception of the purpose of the work? And has the inflection changed over time? If not, how has that shaped our conception of the work?

I ask because my own initial sense of poetry's relationship to politics was conflicted. I came out before I began writing or studying poetry, but reading gay and lesbian poetry was a big part of my coming out, given that initially it was easier and less frightening for me in small-town Alabama to find queer books than to seek out queer people. Joan Larkin's and Carl Morse's anthology *Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time* was very important to me, likely more as a social document than as poetry—but that distinction didn't matter much to me then. The work they gathered together answered a lot of questions I had about what it meant to "be gay" in the U.S. in the late twentieth century, and the experiences the poems recounted mirrored many of my own.

When in my junior year of college I came to poetry, I also came to activism, and it was then that I most acutely experienced a conflict: "political poetry" was verboten in the creative writing classes I took, where it was universally ridiculed for its alleged lack of craft and bald utilitarianism. On the one hand, I felt that my education asked me to disavow my connection to the work that had helped me and others so much; on the other, I was actually interested in the work of the poets I was learning about in school, though it was hard to miss the fact that all of them (except E. Bishop) were straight. So rather than writing directly about politics or activist action, I took to writing about queer desire and sex, subjects invariably seen by straight people as political anyway; it was a way of keeping myself from being shamed by my education while still insisting on sexuality as a charged and necessary subject matter.

JC: I have never intentionally entered poetically into gay community politics and activism. When I was "out, loud, and proud" in my early twenties, I did join the local Gay Democrats and marched on Washington in 1987 with hundreds of thousands of amazing others. But none of it ever directly entered my poetry. Anytime I have tried to write poetry with a political agenda in mind it has invariably failed, coming across as monodimensional and didactic. When I think of "gay activist poetry," Adrienne Rich comes to mind along with Judy Grahn, whose work I adore. Then, of course, Allen Ginsberg and on down even to Walt Whitman. I have written many political poems (anti-war, mostly), and I am rabid about many gay political issues—especially the continual denial of gay marriage. But I've never pushed my poetry into that route, mostly, I think, because I would be preaching to the converted.

PP: I think time and place and circumstances definitely play a role in what poems speak to us at a given moment. In response to the AIDS crisis, 9/11, and the war in Iraq, people turned to poetry in droves—for solace, for answers, for wisdom, for an expression of deep feeling, for remembering. Perhaps a certain kind of poem best suited those times. But rather than prizing one form of address over another, I see it as a dialectic, or a continuum, and where we locate ourselves (as a reader or writer) changes over time—in a gay context, from the more narrative and/or activist mode to the more aesthetic and/or oblique. You see this in the greater poetry community, as Ron Silliman describes in his binary of post-avant and School of Quietude. I do though fear sometimes that shying away too much from being “out” in one’s poetry, from including the more narrative and autobiographical elements, might be a step back into the closet, rather than a step forward.

GG: The question of the relationship between literature and activism has been a vexed one for me. When I first came out I did so almost entirely without books and the possible models for self-fashioning they might have offered, and I remember the great relief and gratitude I felt when I first encountered novels like *A Boy’s Own Story* and *Giovanni’s Room*. In college I encountered the first poets I fell in love with (all of them women: Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Lucille Clifton), who thrilled me with their commitment to activism—by which I mean their embrace of the utilitarian aims derided in Brian’s graduate workshops, as in mine—and with their aggressive assertion of identity. At this same time I was asserting my own identity as aggressively as possible, or so it seems to me now, a project of which the first poems I wrote were a part. (As a sophomore in college I sent a packet of those poems, my first submission and all of them awful, to *BPJ*. It was returned to me with the standard rejection note, along with, quite rightly, a single word neatly handwritten in the bottom corner: “No.”)

My training in literature led me away from this kind of assertiveness, teaching me to value instead an ambivalence and ambiguity that seem to make certain kinds of aggressive assertions difficult to sustain. This led, for several years, to a rejection of those poets I first loved, which was also of course a rejection of that earlier self that loved them. Poetry came to seem to me something above activism, an arena for the exercise of uncertainty and self-doubt and shame, all of them incompatible with a political program associated above all with

pride. I don't think these are false virtues for poetry to claim, and my sense of poetry (of the poetry I most value) has long cherished it as intimate, self-doubting, even self-undoing, speech, open to history but cut off from public programs of all kinds.

But this sense of things has shifted since I left the academy and the Northeast, where it was easy to feel little sense of urgency around an LGBT political agenda. Teaching high school students, I've been surprised by how quickly that sense of urgency has returned, and by my own sense of rage when seeing my students' fear, their anger, and the shame they have been made to feel. My gay students here in Sofia, Bulgaria, grow up in an environment where coming out is all but impossible, where powerful public figures warn of "faggots" on mainstream news programs and where last summer a man was killed in Borisova Gradina, Sofia's largest park, by nationalists who said they were "cleaning up the queers." Every time I go into the center, I emerge from the Metro to see, graffiti-ed on a wall in front of me, ПЕДАЛ = ПОДЧОВЕК (faggot = subhuman).

Teaching young people generally, and especially teaching them here, has made me consider again the place of assertiveness in literature, the presence of which, of course, may largely be less a question of text than of reader. I teach gay writers now for their literary qualities, for their beauties and ambivalences, and also for what they assert, above all for their insistence upon the full dignity of gay lives, even or especially when that insistence requires a raised voice.

I recently read Mark Doty's poem "Homo Will Not Inherit" with my poetry elective here, a class that includes students from 10th to 12th grades. In its formal and imagistic deftness, the poem argues (and if the argument has become banal it hasn't in any way triumphed) that the distinction between assertiveness and aesthetics is in no way final and may in fact be facile. Doty's poem is an activist text, and I have no doubt that it has helped me live my life, giving eloquent voice to necessary assertion, or that it has helped my students. It is also a poem that continues to command our attention as its historical moment passes. And so it presents me with a challenge: to articulate an aesthetic that acknowledges the value of its particular assertiveness as consonant with the other virtues I claim as the special province of literary speech.