THINK

A JOURNAL OF POETRY,
REVIEWS, AND CRITICISM

FALL 2014
VOLUME 5.1

THINK: A Journal of Poetry, Reviews, and Criticism

THINK was founded in 2008 by Christine Yurick, who published ten issues across four volumes, with the last, Vol. 4.1, appearing in 2011.

In 2013, Western State Colorado University acquired the journal. It is now housed at Western and is affiliated with Western's MFA and MA in Poetry with an Emphasis on Versecraft. Issues began in Fall 2014 with Volume 5.1.

In keeping with its original mission, THINK publishes poems that emphasize craft and clarity. We are looking for metered, rhymed poems, in received or nonce forms, or free verse with a clear organizing principle. The language we admire in poetry and in prose is both intellectually precise and emotionally rich. We welcome work from both established and emerging poets.

SUBMISSIONS: Submit only previously unpublished poems via Submittable.com. Please include a brief bio and all contact information, including mailing address. Payment is one copy of the journal. The rights revert to the poet on publication. Query the editors about book reviews and critical essays.

SUBSCRIPTIONS: conundrum-press.com/think-journal/

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WESTERN STATE COLORADO UNIVERSITY
Learning, Elevated.

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From the Editors

When Christine Yurick approached me about 18 months ago and asked if the Poetry Concentration in Western State Colorado University's Graduate program in Creative Writing would be interested in taking over THINK, I was astonished. This journal, like all great small literary journals, was an unlikely achievement. Christine founded it when just in her early twenties and I first learned of it when she found my name, wrote to me out of the blue, and invited me to send her some poems. She had apparently done the same with many others associated with the West Chester University Poetry Conference, a loosely organized flock of poets and critics interested in reinvigorating meter, rhyme, narrative, and clear, accessible yet sophisticated non-academic criticism.

I sent Christine some material and in short order realized I was dealing with a formidable young talent. Her energy, discipline, and good taste quickly created one of the best small poetry journals in the country, a touchstone of excellence, a demonstration of just what is possible when an editor puts her mind to an ideal. For many years, it has been one of the few journals I read cover-to-cover almost the day it arrives, as the sense of a unifying vision and high standards permeates its pages.

I understand how much work it is to found a journal, as I have done it myself and have seen many other efforts. Few last longer than a couple of issues. THINK, on the other hand, is in its twelfth issue, and

with the generous support of Western it should now have a secure future for some time, though we also hope that in this security it will retain the distinctly independent streak that Christine brought to it at its founding. That independence is mission-driven. Christine created a journal that combines poetry, interviews, reviews and criticism to treat poetry as a living, non-academic art, one that speaks to the way we live now. Her approach was always thoughtful—reflecting the journal's title—but she always published work that synthesizes that thoughtfulness with measured and graceful language. This is as it should be. Poetry is not merely a series of positions, statements, or meanings. It not only conveys meaning, but also is meaningful, somehow conveying more than what it merely says propositionally. We hope to provoke thought because the poetry we publish includes thinking, but also more than what is called thinking. The title is an imperative: an action.

Under the stewardship of Western, THINK will continue in the tradition Christine inaugurated, publishing established and new poets who value clear thoughts and clear feelings; graceful language and supple temperaments; powerful truths and the cunning craft of beauty new and old. These are the principles around which we have built our graduate program in poetry at Western, and now we have a journal to match it.

This issue, our first under the new dispensation, is a strong expression of Christine's foundational commitments. Some of the material came in while she was still editor, other pieces during the transition. We are pleased to present poems by such well-known poets as Julie Kane (a former Poet Laureate of Louisiana), Anna M. Evans (the Editor of *Raintown Review*), Jan Schreiber (co-founder of Western State's Symposium on Poetry Criticism) and the widely published Maryann Corbett, along with some of the strongest newcomers we know, including three from Colorado, Charles Doersch,

Uche Ogbuji (who just won a Colorado Book Award), and Therese Samson Wenham. There are new translations of Rilke by Len Krisak, a substantial group interview with Kathleen Snodgrass, and two essays from "The Critical Path," the annual Symposium on Poetry Criticism held at Writing the Rockies, Western's summer writing conference that concludes our summer intensive each July at the campus in Gunnison.

Every strong journal, like every good school, fulfills a need and forges a community. If you share our commitment to craft, to passion, to intelligence and to art, we hope you will join us, subscribe, submit (via Submittable.com) and help us to advance what we can do and be when we come together to THINK.

I am deeply grateful to many for their help, including Mark Todd, the founding Director of the Graduate Program in Creative Writing at Western, who led the effort to acquire the journal for Western; Caleb Seeling, the Publisher and Editor of Conundrum Press, who is responsible for our subscription services, production and distribution; my colleagues David Yezzi and Ernie Hilbert, who offered invaluable advice and support along the way; the other faculty and staff at Western, along with the graduate students in our program who have helped in many ways; and especially to Christine, for trusting us with her journal. My greatest debt of thanks goes to Western's first Poetry MFA Concentration alumna, Managing Editor Susan Spear, who did the lion's share of work on this issue, and without whom it would not exist.

David J. Rothman, Editor
Director, Graduate Program in Creative Writing
Director, Poetry Concentration
Western State Colorado University

When I scroll through this issue of THINK, gratitude wells up inside of me: for Christine's tremendous effort and success in founding a journal dedicated to quality of content and craft; for all I have learned over the past ten years which equips me to take on this challenge; and, for the joy and hard work which lie ahead. Words matter, especially words crafted into the rhythms and sounds we call poetry.

Writing poetry connects writers to themselves. Reading poetry connects people to others: "We read to know that we are not alone" (C. S. Lewis). Producing a journal creates community across all lines of demarcation. This issue of THINK, the first produced from its new home at Western, took time (perhaps too much time) to transfer paper and electronic files, to reconnect with submitters, to select new poems, to make difficult decisions, to compile and format, and to proof and print. The final stages of this process were completed during a time of personal sorrow and loss for me, and the words I read over and over reminded me in a myriad of ways that I was not alone. Poetry matters, in ways we can articulate and ways that we cannot.

My hope is that you savor these poems and the accompanying criticism and prose, and that you will sense your important place in this literary community, for poetry matters. I am humbly grateful to be a link in the chain that brings these words to you.

Susan D. Spear, Managing Editor

POETRY

Austin Macrae

Blinds

No matter where I move, they're there already,
hanging round the place to greet me, filmed

with dust and ticks of moth-tracks. They're always slightly
skewed or flipped or cracked, off-white with dangling

magic sticks. You have to work with them
for weeks before they see your point of view.

The point is not to look at them as such.
You have to tilt your world a little, let

a second set of slats emerge, composed
of this—and that—the gaps—intensified—

by gaps. You have to love the view for what
it lacks, miraculously tragic now

it's hacked. You have to wrestle with the leaps
and fractures, like a string of words that chops

your neighbor's pit bull into thirds. You have
to let them cut you whole no matter how

the sun is slit, or if it turns you cold.
You have to grasp the light and dark at once

and open up a room inside your heart
for blinds, then let them blow you inside out.

Carol Hamilton

The Last Word Is Stars

The reviewer reminds that Dante
ended Heaven, Hell and even
Purgatory, surely our dwelling place,
with the word stars. We have nearly
blotted them out with the glare
of our own preoccupation.
I move onstage in the spotlight,
and the audience is really
only a theory I play to.
I know they are watching me,
though only Orion is big enough
and has enough chutzpah
to let me know he is there,
so I act out for him and expect
applause when the curtain falls.
Today the sky is gray and dripping.
I have traveled to far places
where darkness still reigns,
and there the multitudes of stars
only confuse me, too thick
to comprehend. I tell you, Dante,
I, too, am in need of a guide.

Anna M. Evans

Is This It?

Promises are often broken.
Trashy baubles catch our eyes,
and the truths we should have spoken
suffocate in webs of lies.

But after the rain has washed the forests clean,
the fragile ferns unfurl their hopes in green.

Hopes are dashed in stormy weather.
Bricks and mortar cage us in.
Silky skin wrinkles to leather,
precious metals turn to tin.

But in the street the children's laughter rises,
reminding us love grows in many guises.

Love's a flame that shrinks to embers.
Food we once loved makes us sick.
Tragedies the world remembers
strike the century, fast and thick.

But every spring the song of mating birds
affirms that truth is ill defined by words.

Thomas Duddy

Situation Vacant

We needed to have with us today
someone who was part of the crowd
but who stood a stride or two back
from the rest of us, in the shadow
of the roofless chapel,
on a ridge of high ground.

We needed someone to take note
of the vestiges of snow still bright
in the sunken places where growth
is rank, half-lodged, yellow-stemmed.
We needed someone to tell a story

truer of ourselves than our own
self-seeming, truer of the place
than all measures of ordnance,
truer of the world itself than the laws
crystallizing in the brooches of ice
held together by dead grass.

Nathan Whiting

Hear

A hush, snow falls and sun falls
together. Later, night here, snow melts.
No argument wakes earth but at dawn
shadows show passion-murmurs
of a debate by secret cold.

Sun rays have erasers on one end
and green to write with on the other.
Seeds, not understood, open
so light can be received and put
to work in a leaf's monastery.

A genius sits in light and won't
be God or want God or know God,
mind lovely in a lonely body. There:
a failed hush and knowledge fall
together. The genius knows where.

Charles Doersch

The Word to the Bride

Have butterflies, instead. They are by nature
        a maculate version of wishes
        going further than matzoh and fishes.
Reliable, too. They'll rise again if needed
        or not, and lovelier, to be sure.
Promise, though?—That's a wish with a pin stuck through it.
You want a promise (as though that would do it).

Gary Glauber

Happenstance

The beauty of uncertainty
is part of the allure,
the faces look familiar,
yet a million times unsure.
The voices clamor destiny,
a resonance of chance.
Push and pull, eventually,
one learns this foreign dance.
The signs resist interpreting,
coincidence and fate,
the plot marries the setting here,
the seasons match the date.
A hint is dropped, a verbal cue,
and so the world begins:
two strangers, not a single clue,
and seven deadly sins.

Jean L. Kreiling

The Painter's Shoes

(after Vincent van Gogh's "Shoes," 1888, oil on canvas)

As he leans over to untie his shoes—
old leather dappled with this morning's dust—
he sees in them both history and news.

They reek of years, kilometers, and clues
to climate: pollen, soil dried to a crust,
and bits of grass. He leans, unties his shoes,

looks closely, and decides that he can use
the dirt that might make us turn in disgust;
he recognizes history and news.

Beyond the browns and tans, he sees the blues
of irises and skies. He's learned to trust
his eye, and so when he's untied his shoes,

still seeing where they've taken him, he'll choose
a canvas and a brush, and he'll adjust
our visions of both history and news.

To paint the present and the past, he'll fuse
fresh gold, well-seasoned ochre, and old rust.
Because he looks as he unties his shoes,
we too will see both history and news.

Therese Samson Wenham

Becoming Van Gogh

First degrees of dark experimentation
Charcoal for wet seaside stained in gray
Net-mending women kneeling on the quay
Portraits respecting a lower station
Then colors, vibrant moods in French salons
His bold bouquets of zinnia explode
Until health turns him south, another mode
New portraits come to life, reds dull to bronze
Soft yellow cafés, cypress twining skies
And golden fields roll in Provençal light
Divided for the work the land must do
At home at last with color in his eyes
Vincent imagined past the dark of night
All the way through folding stars, to you

Jennifer Reeser

Bourbon Street Love Sonnet

Averse to leave you, never to forget
the one alone in whom I am complete,
I have withdrawn to lawless Bourbon Street,
called on the Creole sun, and watched it set.

Though having left you, I shall not have let
you go; but, making light, and being sweet,
I listen to the crowds as they repeat
clichés, and to the snare, and clarinet.

Amid these French faces, this wrought lace iron –
one hundred hardened hustlers in attendance,
perhaps a figment of my memory—
I've stopped in shops opposite the siren,
to count the cost and change of independence:
a horned horse in a made menagerie.

From the French Quarter

A few things I have found grow ever sweeter,
remaining fresh and free, and never tiring:
the Yankee yelling, "Stella!," down St. Peter;
the cayenne and Tabasco peppers firing
my palate with humidity and heat;
the washboard bands with fiddlers playing Dixie;
the chimes from balconies on Chartres Street;
the living, silver figures—linen pixie
with painted, stiff tuxedos on the Square;
the artist with his easel on Rue Royal;
these sounds one won't encounter anywhere
but here—exotic, soulful, loud and loyal,
which strike me, by their age, as always new,
like Giza, and the pyramids, and you.

Janice D. Soderling

The New Bicycle

He was riding way too fast on that steep hill.
Loose gravel on the road, a hairpin bend.
Looked like he lost control, head-dived. Boys will
ride reckless. Bikes and cars. It was the end

of June. Tasseled corn, honeysuckle wind.
He was riding way too fast. On that steep hill
through Mason's forty acres, young boys tend
to ride hell-for-leather. They do it still.

Late evenings you can hear the whippoorwill
call mournful in that hollow. Friend,
he was riding way too fast on that steep hill.
His neck broke clean. All that long weekend

the neighbors came and went. They had to send
Doc Jones out to his ma. It damn near killed
her. An only child. Some things won't ever mend.
He was riding way too fast on that steep hill.

Jan Schreiber

Other Summers

It is a graveled lane
from the tourists' highway
through weeds and wildflowers
to the house of memory.

I have come down the years
wearing experience
to see our ancient days
unfold again into sense.

Behind, the harbor village,
its population swollen
with those impelled to return,
keeps ambiguous noon.

But in this yard, the seed
of other summers sprouts,
amazes air. The stems
sway with small, lively spirits.

I'm in your house, your room,
walls thin against the distance.
Time that exacted much
has given you small quittance.

Eros by your side
toys with mirror and brush.
Color springs in the sumac,
drains from stalk and husk.

Each shadow is a grave,
Mother, each grave a door.
I in the guise of a child
survey death from a stair,

watch the gathering ghosts,
squires of the distant hills,
convene again in the parlor
glowing as darkness falls.

Once more the intricate dance,
voices betrayed in gesture,
the tongue of light on the lawn,
the smile, the unasked question.

They throng from room to room.
Undone by death and yet
not done and doing still,
they are vivid as breath.

Those in the crowd who will leave
embrace the soon-to-be-left.
Porch lamps touch the dark cedars.
"Goodbye, and don't forget."

The scene dissolves. Only
the risk remains to grasp.
A frame against a tree line
sinks into the past.

What's left is only day.
Late afternoon's clear sun
erases cloudy remnants
of folly, trust, and dream.

And from the tourists' highway
motive and purpose sound.
The wily apparitions
scatter, return to ground.

Senex to Eros

Not that I don't enjoy
awareness quite as much
as you, my burning boy,
but Morpheus's touch

I cannot do without.
The mind-erasing god
grants me the grace to flout
time's unrelenting plod

and for a magic hour
slumber untethered to
the obsessions that devour
my days. While I renew

myself by fleeing the sad
sameness of it all,
the spirit I once had,
breaching sleep's porous wall,

reanimates my wit.
Though I still come up short
I have no wish to quit.
No, that's untrue. I court

oblivion like a girl
who leads a lover on
and tempts him with a swirl
of skirt, and feigns a yawn,

delaying, longing, fearing,
reveling in duration,
moment by moment nearing
the brink of consummation.

Barbara Lydecker Crane

Harbinger

I used to know exactly how to fly
at night. I'd revel in the weightless ease
of springing up into a moonlit sky,
banking my shoulders round the crowns of trees.
The gabled roofs below were open books
on chests of sleeping houses. I could rise
and soar, or swoop to revel in the looks
from bedroom windows—wide, astonished eyes.

I feared that dream was lost until I spent
a moment of last night again aloft,
drifting through the dark, my arms spread wide.
But then began a helpless, slow descent,
as if my wings were tied. Night air was soft
but earth came hard and cold against my side.

Richard Meyer

Passer Domesticus

(the common house sparrow, also known as the English sparrow)

They dress in frowzy jackets,
They twitter strident tongues—
Unduly coarse in most respects,
Mere balls of lint with wings.

They do not mind a gutter,
A chimney pot or eave;
They loiter through inclement weather
Without the sense to leave.

They roister in the roads,
They litter every lawn;
Their shanties ruin neighborhoods,
They inundate the town.

They squabble over crumbs,
They lack civility—
To feed and fight and fornicate
Their sole philosophy.

Promiscuous and rude,
They wrangle, loaf, and beg—
This rabble of the English brood,
Plebeians from the egg.

Julie Kane

Nebraska

Five of fifty states
I've lived in,
and each one had a coast,
an ocean.

Even my second country,
its beaches strewn with amber,
was conquered for its harbors
by landlocked Russia.

Looking at that state
in the middle of the map
feels like sitting at a table
in the middle of a restaurant,

the servers
bumping into my chair.
How on earth
could I live there?

It takes a leap of faith
to choose a middle piece
before the jigsaw puzzle's
edges are done.

Claudia Gary

A Piece of Work

In my imagination's handiwork
a surreptitious pattern's being woven:
I want so much to think that you're a jerk

whether or not you are. Misgivings lurk
upon the loom but cannot quite be proven
by my imagination's handiwork.

What will it take to navigate the murk
from filament to fiber, for the heaven
I want so much (thinking you are a jerk)?

There's bound to be a qualifying quirk,
a warped woof. I will find it. I am driven
by my imagination's hand, to work

at reinventing memories that irk
my brain, and—why not?—even join a coven.
I want so much to think that you're a jerk

I'll weave you as a villain with a smirk
upon his face, with hooves furry and cloven.
In my imagination's hand I work
at wanting just to think that you're a jerk.

Susan McLean

Pay in Advance

To wind up unscathed by your years spent in schools,
you need to attend to a few simple rules.
Are you plain? Are you shy? Kids can tell at a glance,
and if you are different, you pay in advance.

If your accent is strange or your skin of a hue
unlike those around you, no friendships for you!
They can't see you clearly while looking askance,
and when you are different, you pay in advance.

If you're clever or bookish, then don't let it show.
You'll increase their resentment the more that you know.
You may later win scholarships, accolades, grants,
but now you are different: you pay in advance.

If you stumble at reading or can't say your r's,
if you wheel in a chair or have visible scars,
if you're subject to fits or have holes in your pants,
you're marked out as different: you pay in advance.

A bully can always assemble a crew,
and name-calling's easy, but shunning will do.
You'd better be good at surviving mischance,
for if you are different, you pay in advance.

If you're skinny and tall or you're stubby or fat,
if your nose is too big or your chest is too flat,
they've taken your measure and don't want to dance.
Whenever you're different, you pay in advance.

If you come off as sensitive, girly, or gay,
if they think you're too butch or you swing either way,
expect some dead ends on the road to romance,
for if you are different, you pay in advance.

When you've had some successes and decades have passed,
don't assume your old classmates will like you at last.
Prejudgment's a prophet who never recants.
You pay all your life once you've paid in advance.

Jean Free

On Seeing an Old Friend with Whom You Have a Lot of Baggage

A flaw in the pattern of strangers, the surprise
familiarity triggers a scream;
your mundane gaze travels, stops—your eyes
respond to mine as if the same fogged dream

is clarified by a corrective lens.
We're standing by the corner candy store,
an angel carved in ice, and goats in pens—
the more absurd the setting is, the more

appropriate. It's the hug I've read about,
seen acted on TV—the kind you fake
because it's fictional—but real. I'm out
of time and try to reference a mistake

that's been removed. There's nothing deep to say:
"we'll get together," but we never will.
The stunted part of me stuck in delay
re-animates, as though its waited 'till

this moment, this affirmation of the loss,
then strings a phantom bridge to move across.

J. D. Smith

Working Farm for Sale

The hives have gotten through another year—
I'm sure you've heard of the alternative.
Buy soon and you can have the Holsteins here.
No guarantee of how much milk they'll give.

Tobacco had the soil worn out before
Some fallow years and compost brought it back.
The orchard yields enough to eat and store,
Or make a batch of your own applejack.

Of course, a price like this can't buy perfection.
Feel free to ask me questions and take notes.
You get the feed lot's smell from that direction.
The stream is muddied by a neighbor's goats.

Let's step inside. The gun rack's over there.
This far from town, you'll want a gun somewhere.

Jane Blanchard

Bygones

It takes a while, at least for me,
to sort through parents' property.
First, photographs that verify
times past. Should these live on, or die
with those who made each memory?
Next, papers, all filed properly—
bills, statements, and returns—debris
or not? Since taxes might apply,
it takes a while.
Last, the heirlooms, a recipe
for trouble if one fails to see
real value in relation. By
and by, I settle for a sigh,
then let resentment go scot-free.
It takes a while.

Avowed

You know I'll take good care of you,
whatever happens now or later.
For better, worse, my word is true,
you know. I'll take good care of you—
wealth, health, or not—and do what's due,
to show my love could be no greater.
You know I'll take good care of you,
whatever happens, now or later.

Kenyon

The multitudes arrive on Saturday,
the third in June, more than eager to learn
from well-reputed masters who can turn
mere water into wine for modest pay.
Words multiply throughout the week as loaves
and fishes come to be the daily fare
of those who gather with/without a prayer
of worthy work, then move around in droves.
All meet for class each morning; most come back
for evening readings, followed by ad hoc
exchange of praise. Some take the middle track
of dirt that cuts through campus; others try
the concrete walks, blown clean, that run right by
the gray-stone chapel, closed to one stray knock.

James Nicola

Moving Days

Beyond this attic door lay treasured troves
this morning, sealed as tight as any teen's
unspoken diary: tokens of lost loves,
scribbles of past lives, shards of might-have-beens.

They were worth nothing, summoning dust, tucked
in dormant cells of the house's brain, the part
that's never accessed but which, when unlocked,
recalls the corresponding unused heart

which I've just traded in for not quite forty-
seven dollars, in change. Change—ha! I thought
I'd spend the pingling proceeds on a party

but cannot think of whom I should invite—
The attic is so clean, so bare. I've got
to celebrate. When I move. Not tonight.

Luke Stromberg

Visiting Hours

I'll admit I stayed away.
We all know it. I prayed.
Sure, I prayed, but stayed away
From you, the shade of what you were.
No one wants to see his brother
That way: shrunken and afraid
Behind a hospital tray. I tried
But couldn't handle it.
I stayed away. Hid from it.
I was afraid. I thought
I might delay what would happen.
The fast approaching day.

What's there to say? You hit
Some tender spot. You lay there,
Half the weight you used to weigh.
I stayed away. I didn't want to hear
The way your voice was all unmade.
I couldn't stand to think of it.
We played blackjack. You'd hardly
Say a word. I shouldn't have been that way,
But how could I convey my love?
You lifted your lids only half-way
To watch the nurse carry
The get-well bouquet away from you.

Charles Hughes

Opening of Business

"Such horrible things can happen," she'd pronounce
A couple times a week. Her newspaper
Would sink beneath her chin at my "good morning,"
Her eyes lift just above her glasses. "Yes,"
I'd say, not slowing down. "I guess they can."
Lame. But when those exchanges started, I
Had been there months, she decades—she the firm's
Typecast (everyone said) receptionist,
Her outsize desk serving as stage for short,
Tight, wavy, silver hair, long earrings, brooches,
Same glasses dangling, during business hours,
From a gold chain. And then, post-surgery,
An abscess almost killed my wife. And then,
Likewise, a febrile seizure our small son
(The doctors couldn't break it). I began
Stopping, coffee in hand, to shoot the breeze—
And kept on stopping by till she retired—
Some mornings—when I could—only a moment—
As the prompt, dutiful day unlocked the doors.

Catherine Chandler

Resonance

Swinging is self-limiting: you can't go past the horizontal in front or in back
—Dr. Stephen A. Lawrence, *Insights into Physics*

The summer when my father nearly died
from polio, and I was six years old;
when, though she tried to hide it, Mother cried
at night because she couldn't be consoled,
I found some comfort on our chestnut's swing.
I'd pump and chant into the arc's peaked crest
where angular momentum let me fling
toward light-spangled leaves.
It was the best
of amplitudes—this go-for-broke reprieve
from gravity—because I knew she'd fret
me down from momentary bliss. Naïve
to think I'd charmed my father home, I'd let
go, flying from the damping pendulum,
which soon regained its equilibrium.

Silverweed

Silverweed, also known as cinquefoil, is the symbol of maternal protection of a beloved daughter, as the leaves will bend over the flower when it rains.—Cable Natural History Museum

Telephones that ring at three a.m.
mean bad news.
Yet you must answer them.
You lose
your voice, then find a stratagem,
your shoes,

your cell, your cool, your car keys, certitude.
You must believe.
You mustn't come unglued.
Don't leave
the rosary beads behind. Saint Anne. Saint Jude.
You weave

along the autoroute at blinding speed
and though you make
a deal with God you need
to shake
that weighty metaphor for silverweed.
Or break.

Wendy Sloan

Intimations of Mortality

I didn't realize it would hurt this much:
the calls to say you're staying home today
(some minor flare-up, maybe just a touch
of worsening arthritis, held at bay),
the mounting limitations and the words
just past your reach—that beckoning cliché.
Endurance fades, and my own endurance girds
me for a darker future. It's dismay
and wonder, Mother. This approaching end
won't end our somewhat witless repartee.
I'll hear your voice cajoling me, depend
on my own imaginings of what you'd say,
and count myself among the lucky few
following not so very far from you.

James Matthew Wilson

Nevermore

After Paul Verlaine

Old dreams, old images, what do you want with me?
In Autumn, when the thrush falls in the vacant air,
And the sun slaps her rays down—a dull monocular
Vision of yellowing wood kissed farewell by the breeze—

We walked, in solitude with one another, dreaming,
She and I. Our thoughts, like her hair, blew in the wind.
Just then, she turned her trembling eyes on me and in
A voice of vibrant gold asked, "What gives this life meaning?"

So broken and deep-ringing, that angelic tone!
A weak smile was all I could give—and that alone,
Before I kissed her whitened hand in dedication.

The first flowers with such levity give up their scent;
And so it seemed, with its enchanting susurration,
The evanescent yes she never said but meant.

Uche Ogbuji

Touchpaper

A warm color signature
Of excitation indicates
The overdue east;
Soon a fuse-lit strip beckons the eye
To horizon, bake-risen from
Salamandrine yeast.

As the threat of blindness turns
My head opposite, toward the
Ungloaming Front Range,
Rock fold formation shadows gull-wing
To mark the deliberate morning's
Angular all-change.

No such opening in the mystery
From yesterday when, all casual voice,
My father called;
Pressed for his message he asked to wait
For me to find a private time:
It seems he stalled.

The old poets of Europe described
Sunrise in terms of rose and gold,
A manuscript
For their era's illumined noon,
A whole day's circumstance struck into
One moment's writ.

I find myself at leisure past
Midday, unencumbered except
By weight from others—
What degree of burning sky
Should yield the clue into mock-light
Outreach from fathers.

Rose Kelleher

Milk Carton

All children disappear.

Maryann Corbett

Reburial Rite

The grisly S-curve of the spine says yes,
this is the man who might have been a monster
and killed his brother's children to be king.
Or not. Contentious scholars grind their teeth
on that snaked backbone, dug from a parking lot.
I knew a boy with such a crook-back, once.
Not even vaguely monstrous. "Knew" is wrong, though -
In the way of children whose parents were young together,
we were marooned in one another's company
at holidays or on vacations, hostage
to grown-ups' diplomatic preparations
for marching upon the kingdom of their past,
plundering it, and falling back with spoils
of memory and leftover lasagna.
He was an only, I a firstborn—both
insufferable know-it-alls, with barely
a shared enthusiasm. Thus it was
that, banished to children's tables in the kitchen,
we stumbled on a unifying interest:
those parents, and the distant, mythic era
that was in some strange way our origin.

We knew a little. Washington, DC,
was home to their shared time, before the chapters
of marriage and suburbia. DC still
was where our fathers worked, in squat gray buildings
bristling with silence. Above all, we wondered
about that mammoth silence called The War,

whose great convulsion had thrown them there together,
abandoned in its wake, weird ocean creatures
writhing and pulsing, searching for the tide.

Like all boys then, he memorized equipment:
The planes, tanks, weapons, battles and campaigns,
the classes of all ships, the names, he knew them.
He had a knack for drawing torpedo blasts
in chalk, sharpened by solitary hours
in a stiff brace. But of our actual fathers,
when we compared our fragments and lacunae,
we knew no more than "Italy" and "Hawaii,"
grim-faced, single-word, distracted answers
all we could wheedle out before they'd turn
back to their beers and ballgames. Mothers talked,

waving their cigarettes in brilliant gesture,
but blew past the particulars. And photos
were unavailing. Who were these prodigies,
shirtless and muscular and hairy-chested?
those pincurled beings, channeling Betty Grable?
Whether we said this in so many words
is doubtful. But I think we shared the sense—
a sense my memory clutches—that some force
unnamable, Leviathan in size,
had shape-shifted them—with or against their will?
witching them far from everything they were
so that they wavered, wanting and not wanting
to have it back. Which selves then were the changelings?

Over the years, we garnered little else,
finding our questions more and more deflected—
bent back like the worsened curving of his spine.

The friendships sagged to an awkward costume drama.
Our high school history books said, Here be dragons.

This is the spot where chroniclers break off.
I saw him last before I left for college,
as he would, bones now surgically corrected,
no odder looking, in those final Sixties,
than the more standard-form monstrosities
(pants pegged, skirts microscopic, hair in eyes).
We made a few brief feints at conversation,
parents left to their undiscovered country.
Now we would own ourselves and live the stories
that children are not told, except as glossed
by documentaries, texts, or alcohol.

The fresh gore of the past dries stiff and brown.
Even the picked bones that I think I've sorted
lie in a jumble, and our children say,
"You're just not storytellers." Here is a story:
If you were to unearth all mysteries—
if science swore, These are the very bones—
they still would tell you nothing. Let them lie.
Whatever monsters have been here are dust.
Leave them in peace. Rebury them with honor.

TRANSLATIONS

Five Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke
Translated by Len Krisak

The Temptation

They didn't help—no, though their barbs were sharp,
ripping his lusting flesh, thorn after thorn.
His pregnant senses had begun to warp
and buckle under; prematurely born

screaming were crooked, cross-eyed, creeping, grim-
faced imps and flittering things he brought to birth.
They gathered eagerly, with fiendish mirth,
this brood, and made a plaything out of him.

Already though, his senses' spawn had spawn,
because that pack was fecund in the night.
Still gaudier, more maculate, they'd grown
a hundred-fold, fouled-up, and full of spite.
His greedy hand grasped at a cup of blight
that from them all, his mind had somehow drawn.
Their shadows, like a pair of thighs, then opened on
him, warm and clinging, ready to excite.

And since he screamed out for the angel—screamed—
the angel came in all his glory: there
he was. And then he drove those demons
back inside that saint, for that was where

he'd wrestle them again, those devils he
had struggled with inside so many years,
and so distill, out of his roiling fears,
the god who for so long he could not see.

The Garden of Olives

Then he went up beneath their leaves of grey—
all grey—and in the olive groves all lost.
Deep in his burning hands he went to lay
His wholly dusty temples, dust to dust.

After all this. And now, this was the end.
I must go now, while I am going blind.
Why must I say You are? Why must I bend
to You, when You are Him I Cannot Find?

Now I can't find You in me; You're unknown.
(You're not in them; You are not in this stone).
I cannot find You now. I am alone,

alone with all the grief that man can name,
which through You I have tried to lift and claim—
You who are not. Oh, unspeakable shame . . .

Later on, they said, an Angel came-—.

Why an Angel? The thing that came was night,
and through the trees, it leafed indifferently.
Dreams would not let the stirred disciples be.
Why an Angel? The thing that came was night.

The night that came was nothing vast or great;
Hundreds like it have been.
(Dogs sleep through them; in them, stones lie in state.)
Oh, any night is sad when it must wait—
wait through itself till morning comes again.

For Angels never come to such—no, never.
And nights, around such prayers as these, don't loom.
All leave the self-abandoned to their doom.
Their fathers disinherit them forever.
And they are barred forever from the womb.

Pink Hydrangea

Who would have guessed this pink? And who knew, too,
it gathered in these umbels that it filled?
Just as things underlying gold un-gild,
these pale, as if from all that they've been through.

To think that for such pink they charge no fee!
Does it stay theirs, still smiling in the sun?
Do angels take it in there, tenderly,
when like perfume, its generous life is done?

Perhaps they yield it up so it will never
know how it feels when something fades away?
Below this pink, green hears it have its say,
and fades now, knowing everything forever.

Last Evening

—by permission of Frau Nonna

Then night, and all the troops were moving toward
the far-off front. Their train dragged past the green.
But though he looked up from the harpsichord,
he played on, and—as if there could be seen

reflected in her youthful face, his own—
he gazed at her. Her features proved she knew
that she was showing all his sorrow, too,
more lovey and seductive with each tone.

But suddenly, this blurred and fell away.
Nerves racked, she stood there in the window bay,
the drumming of her heart just half held back.

A breeze came up; he would no longer play.
And on the mirror-table, there it lay,
death's-head pinned on: the shako, strange and black.

Love Song

How shall I keep my soul so that it never
touches yours? How shall I ever raise
it over you to other things? Oh, gladly
I would hide away my soul forever
in darkness, with some thing that's been lost badly;
where in some far away and silent place
it can't respond when yours is trembling madly.

What touches you and me blends us as though
the two of us were played on by a bow
that draws a single sound from double strings.
across what bridge have we been tightly bound?
What violinist's hand makes such sweet sound?
Oh, how it sings.

INTERVIEW

Alyssa Shaw, Amanda Wagner,
Lauren Tilghman, and Roxanne Geylani

Confessing About the Confessional: An Interview with Kathleen Snodgrass

As undergraduates at Drexel University in 2013 and enrolled in a course entitled "Readings in Poetry: The Confessional Poets," the four of us came together to collaborate in an unusual project: we had the opportunity to interview Kathleen Snodgrass. A soon-to-be permanent resident of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, Kathy has, for many years, translated several contemporary Mexican poets, most recently, Fabio Morábito. Kathy's husband, W. D. Snodgrass, was the first confessional poet. Not only did W. D. Snodgrass usher in the modern confessional movement, he was also our favorite of the poets we studied. Our professor, Lynn Levin, who had previously corresponded with both W. D. and Kathleen Snodgrass, put us in touch with Kathy. De and Kathy were married for nearly twenty-eight years; their marriage ended with the poet's death in 2009 at the age of eighty-three. Kathy was a gracious correspondent and generously shared about her husband's fascinating life and work. Eager to assist us in our academic endeavors, Kathy responded diligently and quickly, providing us with invaluable insights into the life of the poet we had come to greatly admire.

A notable scholar in her own right, Kathy received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Delaware. De introduced Kathy to the work of his friend, Hortense Calisher, whom Kathy subsequently chose as the subject of her doctoral dissertation. Strangely enough, Calisher and Snodgrass passed away on the same day, with their obituaries and photos opposite each other in the New York Times. Currently, Kathy is working on a manuscript of photographs and

epitaphs translated by De from The Merry Cemetery in the Transylvanian region of Romania, a project the Snodgrasses began over 30 years ago.—Alyssa Shaw

How did WWII affect Mr. Snodgrass's view of American society and values?

De's two-year stint in the Navy changed his life's course; it is no exaggeration to say that his life divided into pre- and post-war. He had grown up in a small western Pennsylvania city, Beaver Falls, about an hour from Pittsburgh. His father was a successful accountant with his own business and his mother was a homemaker. It was a comfortable, thoroughly respectable, upper-middle-class world. De writes about it eloquently in his book of autobiographical sketches, *After-Images*. At the time he was drafted, De was attending Geneva College and was hoping to become a professional tympanist one day.

Well before he arrived on the island of Saipan where he was stationed during the war, De's sense of the world and of his place in it changed radically. He was on a troop ship crossing an ocean full of German and Japanese submarines prowling the waters. It was a miserable situation: five thousand men crammed together, urinal troughs filled to overflowing, abominable food.

Growing up, De had been a devout United Presbyterian. He had never experienced any real doubts, any crisis of faith, but everything changed for him on that troop ship. He knew that if they were torpedoed and the ship sank, there would be thousands of men clawing and drowning each other. With that realization, he lost all faith in a benevolent creator and a meaningful universe. Years later he would label himself, tongue-in-cheek, a born-again pagan. In fact, he was anything but a hedonist. I have to say that I have never known a more moral human being.

He did not only lose his faith in God, he became thoroughly cynical about the motives and actions of his elders. De wrote two poems—"Ten Days Leave" and "Returned to Frisco, 1946" (both of which appear in *Not for Specialists: New and Selected Poems*)—about his radical shift in perspective. Some years later, in After-Images, he wrote: "Eventually, the atom bomb ended the fighting, the Marshall Plan was announced as a humanitarian project toward a brighter future; just one day later it was revealed as a weapon in the new war already begun. What had been masked as concern for the hungry and homeless proved merely a willingness to starve out any who did not vote our way, would not make themselves our market. I think I have never felt a more basic betrayal."

So far, I have been emphasizing what De lost because of his WWII experiences. It is more important to emphasize what he gained. It is hard to put into words, but essentially, he realized that a meaningful life was only achievable through self-knowledge and action. He came to despise comfortable half-truths and clichés.

In contrast to some of the other confessional poets, even in times of deep despair Mr. Snodgrass managed to maintain a certain optimism and joy of life. What do you think allowed him to maintain hope even during the darker moments?

I think I would question whether De always managed to hold onto a "joy of life" or, in fact, if he would ever have embraced that phrase. I believe he always felt that happiness was tempered by loss and failures, large and small. I know he fought fiercely to survive great loss and sorrows by understanding and coming to terms with them as best he could, but I also know he had dark periods, as do we all.

De detested the label "confessional," often remarking that the word made him think about religious matters of confessing and

repentance or confessions of sexual misadventures. He was not interested in either one. He was determined, however, to write as honestly as he could. I always thought him one of those rare writers who possessed negative capability, what Keats described as a writer's ability to exist "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In other words, confronting experience, feelings, and actions without theories or preconceptions that would explain away uncomfortable truths.

Maybe the fundamental difference between De and some other so-called "confessional" poets is the blessed fact that he never suffered from a serious mental or emotional disorder. Lowell and Sexton were manic-depressives, Plath a suicidal depressive. All three were hospitalized and medicated on and off. De went into deep psychoanalysis while in his thirties and forties in an ongoing attempt to understand himself: his feelings, his motives, and his actions as clearly as possible.

Writing was a way to make something out of life's welter. That's not to say that writing was comfort, but being able to craft poems out of painful experience was action in the face of helplessness, an act of creating when life was chaotic or painful, or both. "Heart's Needle" is perhaps the best example. When De first showed the sequence-in-progress to Lowell, his teacher's reaction was one of dismay and disapproval. He actually said to De: "Snodgrass, you've got a mind; you can't write this kind of tear-jerking stuff!" However, just a few years later he wrote to tell De that he was taking "Heart's Needle" as his model for *Life Studies*, which was published the same year as *Heart's Needle*. De won the 1960 Pulitzer Prize and Lowell, the National Book Award.

De's response to Lowell was that he could not not write about what he saw as the loss of his daughter through divorce. He had to write about what was the most important fact of his life. The same impulse was behind "Remains," the cycle of poems about his family

and the death of his sister. There, again, strong emotion and helplessness in the face of a family tragedy compelled him to understand it through the poems he wrote.

For De, writing, or more to the point, endlessly revising, was an act of discovery, an often deeply unsettling process of unearthing painful or shameful truths about himself, others, the world, and not looking away or explaining away what he saw. I would say that he took raw material and crafted something beautiful and, let's hope, lasting, something that while personal spoke to others about our shared experiences.

I think De would be the last person to say he was optimistic. In our marriage, I took on that role. I would say, though, that he had tremendous energy and commitment. Regardless of how he felt, he sat down at his desk every day for a couple of hours. Nothing might come of that time—or at least nothing tangible seemed to come of that time—but he was dogged and persistent. When I look at what he achieved, I see that it exists in large part because he did not wait to be "inspired," a word he despised. He just sat down to work.

There is a short, pithy phrase of Freud's that sums up De's code for living. Freud said there were only two things fundamental to happiness: love and work. De absolutely believed that and lived by that. I am happy to report he had both until the end. A week before he died, he finished his last poem. He could no longer write, but he could dictate changes to a poem, "Unconfessional," that he was determined to finish.

Were you a fan of your husband's work before you met him, and were you reluctant to enter into a romantic relationship with someone known for being a pioneer of confessional poetry?

I am embarrassed to admit that I had not read De's work before we met. I was finishing up my doctoral work at Delaware and we would

bump into each other in hallways, but it wasn't until I went to New York to see a stage adaptation of *The Fuehrer Bunker* that I remember thinking I needed to read his work. In my own feeble defense: I was steeped in modern and contemporary American fiction. Of course, I took poetry courses as both an undergraduate and graduate student, but only the ones I absolutely had to take.

I love the implications of the second part of that question and can just imagine the laughs De and I would have over them. De did write about failed love affairs and failed marriages but he was usually discreet in both his poems and his autobiographical sketches. He was not out to humiliate anyone; writing a poem was never a vengeful act. Even in "Heart's Needle," where it is clear that he and his ex-wife are at war, he does not personally attack her. I remember when he sent the book of autobiographical sketches to his editor, who wrote back asking for a more detailed account of his friendship with Anne Sexton, De refused. He had no desire to write about all the unpleasantness in detail, even though his editor thought that a tell-all about Sexton would boost sales considerably.

I can honestly say that even if I had known De's work when we got together, it would not have made any difference whatsoever. For one thing, we did not exactly have what you would call a courtship. Two dates and we were living together. When lightning strikes, you do not have time to think about much else. Actually, you do not have time to think at all.

Do you feel that your husband's poetry changed throughout the time you were married?

I wish I could take credit for De's evolution as a poet, but from the very outset of his career, he was always changing, never content to repeat what had proven successful. After "Heart's Needle," for

example, he experienced another wrenching separation from his second child, Russell, after another rancorous divorce, but he didn't write "Heart's Needle II," having already done it. If you look at each successive book, I think you see real and fundamental changes in subject, style, tone, and form. De was a master of form but was not content to repeat himself there, either. In fact, he devised original forms, intent on creating the perfect vehicles for particular subjects.

I am reminded of another statement that, along with Freud's, De lived by. Some years ago, we were watching a TV documentary on Miles Davis, the famous jazz musician. At one point the interviewer asked him about his changing styles, specifically about his tendency, early in his career, to emulate or downright imitate this or that jazz great, to which Davis replied: "Man, sometimes it takes you a long time to sound like yourself." I do not remember which one of us ran for pen and paper, because we both knew that he had gone to the heart of what it is to be a writer of any worth.

In an early essay, "Tact and the Poet's Force," De wrote about the essential need to sound like yourself and nobody else, which is not to say he was advocating eccentricity or idiosyncrasies for their own sake. He thought the real miracle of human existence was that however alike we are, whatever the generalities we can make about experience, each one of us has his or her distinctive bead on the world, or at least we should. Too often, we buy into received wisdom, clichés about the self and the world, comfortable and comforting belief systems. De believed our real work was to know our own distinctive selves as thoroughly as possible but not, à la Oprah, to automatically embrace and love that self. In psychoanalysis, De discovered any number of painful truths about himself, but he would not have chosen otherwise. If you do not like what you see, then work to change it, but first you have to see yourself.

Mr. Snodgrass wrote poetry about you and poetry inspired by you. What are your thoughts on these poems, especially compared to his previous, darker poetry?

De once half-joked in an interview that it was wonderful to be happy and in love but it was hell on poetry writing. After we got together, he continued to write dark poems. I am thinking of the sequence, "Nocturnes," and, above all, *The Fuehrer Bunker*, which he was still revising in the last years of his life (nothing darker than those terrifying monologues). However, he did write a number of lighter, more whimsical poems in his later years. In 1981, the year we got together, he started what would be a long, productive collaboration with the painter DeLoss McGraw. They would go on to publish two books of paintings and poems. He wrote about what he could not help but write about. I will always treasure the poems he wrote to and/or about me. One, in particular, had its genesis in something I said to him one day, not too long before our eleventh anniversary. I was then 40 and it occurred to me that all of his other wives, all three of them, had divorced him before they reached my age, so I let De know that I was his oldest wife. It gets funnier when you know that I was 24 ½ years younger than De. Some weeks later he showed me the poem, "Anniversary Verses for my Oldest Wife," that begins:

> I vowed and vowed again
> I'd marry me no more;
> I hadn't met you then.
> I reswear all I swore.

After his death, I found fragments of poems that are as precious. One, in particular, I found in a folder of poems started but never finished. I

have hanging on the wall in front of me:

Name: Brown, Kathleen Ann
Name: Brownie, Kathy, Katy
Name: Snodgrass, Kathleen
Name: Dr. Browngrass

What's in a name?
None of us gets to choose
Their name, their nickname
Except for women when they wed.

My father said we shouldn't choose
But make the name we have
Respected

I never did respect my name
Until you chose it.

What do you believe your husband sought to accomplish by publishing his work and sharing it with the world? Do you think by doing so it helped him to cope with the stories he told through his poetry?

The short answer is: the work itself. De despised the idea of writing as therapy. Equating the two is simply self-indulgent. He had no agenda, no grandiose message. If he thought a poem was successful, he felt as though he had achieved something, but he had no illusions about poetry as a kind of salvation. It was the work itself he felt drawn to, the work to which he dedicated his life. He had absolutely no belief in personal immortality; his one hope was that his work would live on.

What would you like readers to remember about Mr. Snodgrass?

This is a frustrating question to answer. I could give you five hundred facts but you would not be any closer to knowing him. I could go on at length about his many fine qualities (well, I guess I already have!) that made him unique, but he would not be any more alive and I would just feel increasingly inadequate to the task.

If you want to hear his voice, read the poems and the prose. Having said that, I can say that there are probably misconceptions out there that I can dispel. Given his long (and often unruly) beard, he may have looked like the quintessential hippie poet. He was anything but. He was never a Beat poet, many of whom scorned him as an academic poet, and he did not live the lifestyle. It was not that he was prudish; he just did not have any interest in bongo drums and love beads. His interests ran to classical, especially early, pre-Baroque music. He played guitar and lute, made hundreds of singable translations of Troubadour and Trouvere songs, as well as Eastern European folk ballads. He had a lovely, strong singing voice but was still insecure about singing before other people.

His love of folk ballads translated into a love of folk art and in middle age he took up chip carving. As a result, the house is full of beautifully carved furniture. As many hours as he spent chained to his desk, he was not a couch potato. As a young man and well into his 70s he was a fine tennis player. In other words, he was not some parody of a poet who spent his days scratching on a notepad with ink-stained fingers. He had a real zest for life. You've only to read his poems, especially what we used to call his bird and tree poems, to realize how alive he was to the world around him.

Finally, I have to quote the English writer Henry Shulman who reviewed the British edition of *Not for Specialists* in the *Times Literary Supplement* a few years back. If only De could have read it, not just

because it is a laudatory review, but because Shulman gets at the very essence of who De was in life and on the page without ever having met him. I remember weeping from sheer joy when I came to the last two words of the review, amazed at their uncanny accuracy: "If Snodgrass goes on being read, it will be because of what he has in plenty: uncommon tenderness."

ESSAYS

From *The Critical Path*, Western State Colorado University's
Annual Symposium on Poetry Criticism

Introduction

Since 2010, Western State Colorado University has hosted an annual symposium called "The Critical Path," devoted to poetry criticism and analysis. Eight scholars or critics who are also poets convene each July to present papers and engage in spirited discussions with their peers and with other interested persons, many of whom are participants in the university's low-residency MFA program. (In 2014 we also introduced several sessions for those who teach poetry to secondary school students.) Over the years the resulting articles, ranging from discussions of works by neglected poets to inquiries into the effect of sound and rhythm on readers' perceptions of poetry, have appeared in various journals, in both print and electronic form. As a contribution to the important work of bringing this on-going dialogue before the public, each issue of **Think** will carry at least two of the articles generated by the symposium. Readers who are intrigued, stimulated, or provoked are encouraged to consider attending the symposium, part of the annual WRITING THE ROCKIES Conference at Western State Colorado University, which takes place each year during the final weekend of July.

—Jan Schreiber and David J. Rothman, Co-Directors

Past symposium participants have included: Kim Bridgford, Thomas Cable, Natalie Gerber, Emily Grosholz, Ernest Hilbert, Joan Houlihan, Simon Jarvis, Marilyn Krysl, David Mason, David J. Rothman, Jan Schreiber, Marilyn Taylor, Frederick Turner, James Matthew Wilson, and David Yezzi.

Emily Grosholz

Golden Slippers: Space, Time, and Poetic Form

Poetry, like music, is an art that is inherently temporal. Just as we must hear a melody in time, so we must read a poem in time. I hum the melody to myself as I recall it, and say the poem over to myself, half out loud. Like a melody, a poem is never all there at once: we must run through it. Yet in many respects time is inimical to discourse: its irresistible, irrevocable flow, the river of time, carries us all away. A poem can't be merely temporal; to be art and to be remembered—to be memorable art—a poem must resist temporality or make something of it. How do we do that? Our experience, so thoroughly temporal, would be a mere flood too (and so we wouldn't have any experience at all) unless we could remember events and classify things, and organize the world by telling stories and offering explanations. In the flood of time, we remember backwards in reflection and project forwards in action, using discourse; and we build things that are stable, houses and chairs and books. So our experience is really a side-eddy in the river of time, close to the mossy or stony bank, where past, present and future are held together by awareness. Time circles, impossibly, in that side eddy.

How do we make time circle? In fact, of course, we never do: time goes on flowing. But because we can remember and because the world is organized, we can recognize some events as repetitions of past events and hope or fear that they are harbingers of future events, and we can see that some things, including ourselves, continue. Time itself never repeats, but things in nature persist and natural events recur and human consciousness perceives that stability and return. So we recognize and codify ongoing periodicities and occasional repetitions in events, and name the constancies and systematic relations and predictable changes among the things engaged in these cultural and natural dances. Our discursive and artful or scientific

ways of recording the dance are typically cast as spatialization: the circle of a clock, the rectangle of a calendar page, the tabular results of an experiment, the cube of a cathedral, the array of notes on a page strung between the treble clef and the bass clef, the stanzas of a poem. Poetic stanzas are typically rectangular, whether they are written in an alphabet or in characters, whether they are written right to left or left to right, horizontally or vertically. Such spatialization is especially useful because in a schematic way these artifacts display everything together, *at the same time*, and this makes organization and serial orderings easier to understand. By the same token, however, they misrepresent time itself, its evanescence, its irrevocability. The French Revolution happened only once; but I can reread *Les Misérables* and *A Tale of Two Cities* as often as I like.

We can revisit a poem once we have written it down or committed it to memory. But many things are written down and only some of them are revisited by many people over long stretches of time; only some of them express the shape of a culture, and bring it to life even after the culture has disappeared. A poem must be memorable: thus the lineation of a poem, based upon a standard meter or syllabic convention (or a convention involving characters), is essential to its existence as art, a bastion of memory against the flood of time. Lineation makes a poem periodic: blank verse, for example, sets up five iambs over and over. Against the background of that fundamental periodicity other periods or repetitions find their place and register their meanings; they in turn contribute to the music of the poem, to its formal beauty. The complex interplay between the repetition of sound and the repetition of sense, between the formal parsing of the line by a foot and the parsing of grammatical phrase, between the end of a line and the end of a thought, makes the meaning of lines deeper: it intensifies meaning.

What can a poet do with lineation? A poet can respect lineation

quite strictly, so that the end of a line corresponds to the end of a grammatical unit (a clause or a sentence seconded by punctuation), and the end of a thought; he can even make sure that internal caesuras correspond to phrases and are flagged by commas. He can mark the end of the line with full rhyme (or not), using those emphatic Anglo-Saxon words that complete a line with a satisfying thump! (Thump is one of those words.) This tendency often goes along with a predilection for words that incorporate various stops: b, p, d, k, g, t, sounds that stop the line in its tracks or make it pause before going on. In such poems, the spatialization of the poem, its rectangle, looms large, and so too themes of enclosure and location and materiality. The poet often walks through a landscape as the poem progresses, a trajectory that can be taken in, altogether, in retrospect. The city block lends itself to this kind of poem.

By contrast, a poet can try to outwit lineation and use enjambment so that the line persistently rushes across its endpoint and into the next. Then the relations among formal line, grammatical unit, and unit of thought typically become very complicated, so that they outrun or fall short of not only the line but each other: this results in a kind of polyphony as formal periods are superposed upon but slide over other kinds of periods created by grammar or meaning or the placements of caesuras. Here the poet often chooses feminine rhymes or half-rhymes, or conceals full rhymes mid-line; she has a predilection for liquids, sibilants and internal nasals, sounds that keep the line flowing (and that when combined with a stop soften its impact), and her sentences and thoughts run on and on. In such poems, the temporality of the poem looms large and so do themes of process and non-localized awareness. The progression of the poem is not spatial but rather bridged by inference, association and conceptual play. Everything flows; thought escapes us or takes us higher. Rivers, oceans and the sky lend themselves to this kind of poem.

These two tendencies lead to different metaphysical errors. Parmenidean (and Spinozan) metaphysics holds that time is not real and that all change is an illusion, so that the truly real does not arise and pass away, but is always *there*: time is just an aspect of space. Heracleitean (and Whiteheadian) metaphysics holds that only time is real and that all permanence is an illusion, so that everything flows: space is just an aspect of time. Most poets who feel the tug of one or the other of these tendencies do not go to such extremes; nevertheless the tendency marks their verse. In the next sections, I will use poems by W. S. Di Piero and Eleanor Wilner to illustrate and explain my point. Both these poets, like me, are from Philadelphia. Eleanor is a transplant, but she has lived in central Philadelphia for a long time, and I have visited her sporadically in her townhouse on 12th Street for almost 35 years. I don't think one could infer from her poems that she lives on 12th Street, or even indeed in Philadelphia or on the East Coast of the United States. Simone Di Piero was born in South Philadelphia; I was born in the suburbs on the Main Line. Though I've known him for almost as long as I've known Eleanor, and though his poems return as faithfully to his old neighborhoods as mine do, I've only visited him in Bologna and New York City and in California, where he now lives.

Eleanor Wilner is the Heracleitean. I have been bemused by her long, long, flowing sentences cascading from line to line under the spell of an always thoughtful and nuanced habit of enjambment, ever since the Hudson Review sent me her first book, *Maya*, to review in 1979. Here, from her 2004 collection *The Girl with Bees in her Hair* (Copper Canyon Press), is a poem, "Moon Gathering," representative of her work.

And they will gather by the well,
its dark water a mirror to catch whatever

stars slide by in the slow precession of
the skies, the tilting dome of time,
over all, a light mist like a scrim,
and here and there some clouds
that will open at the last and let
the moon shine through; it will be
at the wheel's turning, when
three zeros stand like paw-prints
in the snow; it will be a crescent
moon, and it will shine up from
the dark water like a silver hook
without a fish—until, as we lean closer,
swimming up from the well, something
dark but glowing, animate, like live coals—
it is our own eyes staring up at us,
as the moon sets its hook;
and they, whose dim shapes are no more
than what we will become, take up
their long-handled dippers
of brass, and one by one, they catch
the moon in the cup-shaped bowls,
and they raise its floating light
to their lips, and with it, they drink back
our eyes, burning with desire to see
into the gullet of night: each one
dips and drinks, and dips, and drinks,
until there is only dark water,
until there is only the dark.

Nineteen of the thirty lines are enjambed, and most of the enjambments are grammatically rather radical: whatever / stars; of / the

skies; clouds / that will open; let / the moon shine through; it will be / at the wheel's turning; when / three zeros stand; paw-prints / in the snow; crescent / moon; from / the dark water; hook / without a fish; something / dark but glowing; no more / than; take up / their long-handled dippers; dippers / of brass; catch / the moon; light / to their lips; drink back / our eyes; to see / into the gullet; one / dips and drinks. The more radical the enjambment, the more you have no idea how to complete the meaning of the line until you go on to the next, and so the more quickly your thoughts spill over the end of the line, and the sentence you are reading with them. Moreover, the whole poem is only one sentence! It has three semicolons and one colon and one phrase set off by dashes; but the colon, two of the semicolons and one of the dashes are buried mid-line, establishing a caesura; and the one semicolon that ends a line underscores that all-important word, "hook," to which I'll return shortly.

And to make the sentence flow even more intently, Wilner uses a preponderance of sibilants, liquids, and nasals that slide the phonemic surface along and keep us from pausing as we read. The central image of the poem is a well, around which some gather: Whose well? Where is it? Who gathers? Why? We are never told. The surface is

> . . . a mirror to catch whatever
> stars slide by in the slow precession of
> the skies, the tilting dome of time,
> over all, a light mist like a scrim,
> and here and there some clouds
> that will open at the last and let
> the moon shine through . . .

So even when the end of the line is punctuated with a comma, the hum of the repeated 'm' and the hiss of 's' and the lilt of 'l' carry us

past them almost without notice. Whenever a stop shows up, it is almost always softened by an accompanying sibilant, liquid, or nasal: mirror to, catch, stars, precession, skies, tilting, mist, scrim, clouds, last, let. And what are we looking at? There is a well; we suppose we are (with the poet) standing next to it and staring down at the dark water, where we see the crescent moon reflected. But no, that can't be right; the crescent moon is a hook that stops the flow of the poem midway, twice (at line 13 and line 18) both because it comes at the end of the line and because of the stop 'k' that nothing softens. It is the hook that reverses the poem and the reader with it.

What we see "swimming up from the well, something / dark but glowing, animate, like live coals" is "our own eyes staring up at us, / as the moon sets its hook." We are in the well: we are submerged; perhaps we are drowning. Up is down. But then who are they, above us, gathered by the well?

> . . . and they, whose dim shapes are no more
> than what we will become, take up
> their long-handled dippers
> of brass, and one by one, they catch
> the moon in the cup-shaped bowls,
> and they raise its floating light
> to their lips, and with it, they drink back
> our eyes . . .

The ghostly presences loom and dissolve in the watery phonemes until we get to "drink back," and then we realize that we are, alas, sunk:

> . . . they drink back
> our eyes, burning with desire to see
> into the gullet of night: each one

dips and drinks, and dips, and drinks,
until there is only dark water,
until there is only the dark.

With our eyes drunk back, we have lost our spatial orientation: is it we or they who burn with desire to see into the gullet of night? Who can tell, if up is down, if the dark water in the deep well is the darkness of the night sky? Indeed, we are being drunk, over and over as the stops in the back of the throat accumulate, "until there is only dark water, / until there is only the dark." If you aren't scared by now, you should be; just read the poem again.

And in case you think those drinkers might be something reassuring like, say, grandchildren, Wilner is careful to disabuse you of that idea in neighboring poems. So, for example, in "Sidereal Desire," from the same collection, we follow a disillusioned actress or tired hooker down the street, attracted at first by her golden slippers.

Star struck following this latter-day Aphrodite
as she clatters down the street high heels
with gold glitter on her tired feet sparks thrown
from the friction of dream against the rough stone
of the real

She stops on a bridge; it is night; she looks down at the water and the same reversal upends us all, the girl and the reader. She stares down at the dark water, "on which a galaxy or more / of stars have fallen" and we too see (read it aloud to yourself to feel the way the sentence flows):

the veil! A glowing scrim of shifting moiré silks,
silver asterisks set in motion by a wind a blur

of stars like a stir of bright wings in a dark air
and the water that was once a mirror
is now a swirl of veils again

But wait: the girl has vanished and we have, once again, lost our orientation: up is down, the stars are gods, wearing our faces, and who are they, behind the veils?

the stars the gods are taken back into the stream
what wore our faces in an old design
drawn down return once more to the elements
that called them forth—
    the veils play across the surface
of the stream are whirled along until they pause
some other place a million years downstream from here
and there the fleeting forms take shape again
though not like ours or anything we knew.

Those shapes are not like ours or anything we knew; the metamorphosis invoked here is so thoroughgoing that analogy fails. Everything has been swept away except for the sweeping away itself. That would be, I suppose, Chronos, who devours all his children, or, as Edna St. Vincent Millay once wrote, echoing Catullus,

Death devours all lovely things:
Lesbia with her sparrow
Shares the darkness,—presently
Every bed is narrow.

Millay's quatrain is one sentence, half the lines enjambed, a colon and a dash, a predominance of liquids and sibilants, which also temper

the stops except for the first two: "death devours," the toll of the "d" repeated in case we didn't get the message.

Simone Di Piero is the Parmenidean. Here is another bridge, perhaps the very same one in Philadelphia, but we will never know, because Wilner will not tell us. In Di Piero's poem, "Leaving Bartram's Garden in Southwest Philadelphia," from *Shirts and Slacks* (Knopf, 2001), the poet starts from Bartram's Garden (54th Street and Lindbergh Boulevard, the eighteenth-century home of the botanist and naturalist John Bartram) and moves across Spring Garden Bridge, which takes Spring Garden Street across the Schuylkill River not far from the Philadelphia Zoo.

> Outside the gate, the scrawny trees look fine.
> New-style trolleys squeak down Woodland
> past wasted tycoon mansions and body shops.
>
> There's something I wanted to find,
> but what? Roses two months from now
> on these brambles? The same refinery fires
>
> lashing over the Schuylkill? The adult hand
> that held mine here so many years ago?
> None of this happened. Across Spring Garden Bridge,
>
> zoo elephants clicked past my window—
> birds jumped from dust igniting on their backs.
> Inside Bartram's house, elephant-eared
>
> cure-all comfrey leaves hung above the hearth.
> A redbird gashed the sunned mullioned glass.
> I'm in the weave. The brown-brick project softens
>
> in the sun. Stakes in its communal garden catch
> seed packets and chip bags blown across the rows.
> Tagger signatures surf red and black

across the wall, fearless, dense lines
that conch and muscle so intimately
I can't tell one name from another.

He is back in Philadelphia because his mother is dying, as the surrounding poems tell us. The river is definitely not the issue, and we know where we are. Di Piero will disorient us too, but in an entirely different way. (Or what's a poem for?) Of the 21 lines in the poem, 11 end with punctuation, and most of the enjambments are not grammatically radical; there are 14 sentences, four of them questions, which give a reader pause. Outside the garden gate, the poet observes,

New-style trolleys squeak down Woodland
past wasted tycoon mansions and body shops.

Every second word holds us up with a stop, and we can see where we are. He remembers summer roses and visiting the zoo, the elephants and birds that "jumped from dust igniting on their backs." He recalls what he has just seen over the hearth in Bartram's house, "elephant-eared // cure-all comfrey leaves," and a redbird that "gashed the sunned mullioned glass."

And then the poem tightens around us, becoming both more precise and more mysterious.

. . . The brown-brick project softens
in the sun. Stakes in its communal garden catch
seed packets and chip bags blown across the rows.
Tagger signatures surf red and black

Across the wall, fearless, dense lines
that conch and muscle so intimately
I can't tell one name from another.

The communal garden of the brick-brown project catches seed packets and chip bags (18 stops in so many syllables), debris catching against the growing plants, and then the flourish at the end. A tagger is a certain kind of graffiti artist. Thanks to Di Piero's poem, I learned this vocabulary word from the website of the Edmonton police: "Tagging is the simplest and quickest [style of graffiti], involving only the marking of the tagger's initials, symbol, or alias. This may be in the manner of unreadable writing or initials, often made with spray paint in large rounded bubble style letters. They can also use markers to place their initials or 'tag' on a variety of surfaces. These taggers are called 'writers.'" Although these letters "surf," there is no ocean and they don't evanesce: they conch and muscle, curling into each other boldly on the walls, like a surfer riding eternally under the curl of the biggest wave ever: Garrett McNamara surfed a 78-foot wave on May 8, 2012 off the coast of Nazare, Portugal, as the Guinness Book of World Records tells us and YouTube reproduces in a minute played over and over on about fifty different posts and almost infinitely viewed. But we can't read it; and Di Piero never answers his question: "There's something I wanted to find, / but what?"

There are, however, answers to the two question posed in the first and second parts of the elegy on his mother's dying, "Cheap Gold Flats," from the same book. Though the poet knows where he is (in his old house and at a bar just around the corner), the answers and the enclosed, well-defined locales don't dispel a mystery, that the relationship is undying even when the parent dies and long afterwards. (I've written a poem for one or the other of my parents

about once every five years.) In the first part, "Philly Babylon," the question is posed by a girl looking for a hook-up, Hazel, against the background of the bartender "tossing cans, cooler to cooler" while outside "iceworks canal the pavements." (Punctuation closes 17 of the 20 lines.) She asks, "What's my horoscope say today, honey?" And the poet's answer, after seven sentences break up the first two-thirds of the poem, is one long thwarted lament, in which the stops bunch up and then disperse in the unknown:

> Dear Hazel, dear Pisces, don't be hurt,
> leave me alone a while, my mother's dying,
> I've been beside her bed for several days,
> today she had an extremer monkey look,
> her forehead shrunk down to the bucky jaw,
> and when she looks above her head, she groans
> to see whatever it is she sees, so here,
> take my paper, go home, forgive me.

His mother sees whatever it is she sees, so the poet can do nothing but offer a gift, which after all contains the answer to the question.

In the second part, "Finished Basement," the question is "What will she / be laid out in?" His mother loved to dance, and so does the poet, so she should be buried in her dancing shoes.

> Charm bracelet, definitely, the one
> she hardly wore, and cheap gold flats
> that made her look young and men look twice.

There are the golden slippers again, and the memory of his mother when she was young, beautiful and vain, so different from the unconscious bone, "its used-up flesh helpless / on the pillow." And instead of singing, a death rattle. So there is another mystery:

I hear it behind me, too,
the disposal upstairs, a drainpipe clearing,
whatever it is, I feel it coming closer
to finger my hair and stroke my neck.

Like Wilner's "hook" and "dark," so Di Piero's "stroke my neck." A stop in the flow of language, after all, stops the breath.

We are all in our sixties and seventies, Simone and Eleanor and I, so I suppose it isn't surprising that the mystery our poems raise so often now is death, and that the heart of darkness is presented without romance or sentiment, often in a manner that terrifies at worst and at the least unsettles. The poems that I just discussed, for all the divergence of their prosodic means, are sublime rather than beautiful; they raise the little hairs on the back of my neck and give me the shivers. And yet how endearing they are, these poems, with the bee "half-drunk /on the nectar of the columbine," and the stars clustered like "burning knots / in an openwork of stars, the galaxies / like torn lace curtains blowing / in an empty room." And in South Philadelphia, "a casual fall / of light that strikes and spreads / on enameled aluminum siding, brick, / spangled stonework, fake field-stone / and clapboard, leftover Santa lights, / casements trimmed in yellow fiberglass." Odd how we can't help caring about these things and words and creatures all the same, and even though time goes on passing, something of us, of them, sometimes our poems, still remains.

Marilyn L. Taylor

May Swenson and the Absence of the Absence of Form

The poetry of May Swenson (1913-1989), which has been called luminous, innovative, and exuberantly erotic, has earned, overall, consistent acclaim from many of the most exalted critics of the last century, and continues to do so for a new generation of readers. Anthony Hecht has unequivocally proclaimed her "one of America's finest modernist poets." Robert Hass refers to her as a "wonderful and not very well-known poet . . . in the quirky tradition of Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop." John Hollander has marveled at how "[h]er verse itself—rhymed, free in various modes, internally rhymed with un-notated rhythmic patterns, playing to eye and ear at once—confound[s] trivial classification."

But for all the critical accolades, it must be added that widespread celebrity for this "not very well-known poet" and her achievements has been elusive. Despite her having won several of the most prestigious awards in American letters, as well as fellowships from the Ford, MacArthur, and Guggenheim foundations, it is only in recent years that Swenson's innovations have become widely acknowledged as the works of virtuosity they are.

Like a number of literary artists whose brilliance took root in a somewhat unlikely setting—other examples might include Whitman, Millay, and Brooks, among others—Swenson's background is not particularly auspicious. She was born in Logan, Utah in 1913—a year that put her in the chronological center of that great "middle generation" of poets that included Roethke, Nemerov, Lowell, and Berryman, as well as Elizabeth Bishop, who was later to become Swenson's close friend. She was christened Anna Thilda May Swenson,

and was the eldest of ten siblings. Her parents, Dan and Margaret Swenson, were Swedish émigrés who had converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints before leaving their native country. Dan taught woodworking at the local agricultural college; Margaret tended to her considerable domestic duties, often relying on her eldest child for help.

Clearly not contemplating a future for herself in this environment and eager to broaden her horizons, May moved to New York City in 1934, shortly after graduating from Utah State University. Once settled, she took on a variety of jobs that included temporary stints as a stenographer, secretary, interviewer, and editorial assistant. She wrote poetry at night, but it was more than thirteen years after her arrival in New York that her work was finally published in *The Saturday Review of Literature*.

Her first book, *Another Animal*, came out from Scribner's in 1954. Five more collections were published during her lifetime, and three additional volumes were released after her death in 1989. Her body of work also includes three books of poetry for young readers, a collection of essays, a one-act play, and translations of the work of the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer.

Swenson became the editor of New Directions Press in 1959, but resigned in 1966 in order to devote more time to her own writing. The move also gave her time to serve as writer-in-residence at a number of American universities, including Bryn Mawr, the University of North Carolina, UC-Riverside, Purdue University, and her alma mater, Utah State. She eventually settled in upstate New York, where she spent the remainder of her life.

Swenson wrote a number of sexually oriented poems, and many critical treatises maintain that aspects of her sexuality permeate many, if not most, of her poems. Yet John Hollander sees her poetic output in an entirely different light, emphasizing her mastery of "al-

legorizing, ... formal invention, interplays of genres, and powerful emblematic vision."

Reconciling the variety of takes on Swenson's output can present a challenge to the contemporary scholar. Ought she to be viewed primarily as a lesbian poet, or as a poet with a memorably idiosyncratic prosodic technique? Not surprisingly, Swenson herself never weighed in on the issue. Instead, she once wrote that it was "inspiration" that motivated many of her poems, which she called "received poems." (Among them: "The Pure Suit of Happiness," "A Navajo Blanket," and "Bison Crossing Near Mount Rushmore.") In an unpublished essay titled *A Poem Happens to Me*, she discusses the phenomenon of being "seized" by "a poem that demands to be given voice"—and how the act of getting it down on paper is akin to taking dictation. "I feel my hand writing," she claims, "as if it were not part of me, but as a tool, held and directed by my mind." And then—almost parenthetically but quite tellingly—she adds: "The rest of the poem may then be born quite consciously, simply through a logical, workmanlike persistence."

One could argue that this very persistence on her part is what gives so many of her poems their singular distinction. It can be further alleged that in Swenson's case, the more scrupulously crafted the poem in question, the more successful and memorable it tends to be. Many of her best poems are, in fact, heavily influenced by the time-tested conventions of traditional English prosody: rhyme, rhythmic regularity, and/or careful patterning on the page.

This is not to suggest that Swenson was a formalist in the orthodox sense. She made this clear herself, in a 1977 interview in the *New York Quarterly*, during which she was asked if she had ever tried her hand at writing a sonnet, or a villanelle. She replied flatly that she had not, nor had she at any time consciously set out to invent a form, or a system of her own, for a poem in progress.

We can conclude, then, that the formal elements in Swenson's work probably got there by virtue of what she had internalized over a lifetime of exposure to traditional verse. She was, of course, deeply familiar with the English and American canons. This familiarity is frequently reflected in her versification, even if the presence of traditional elements was more the result of intuition than intention. As Anthony Hecht has pointed out, Swenson "delights in writing experimental poetry, aiming for the unexpected and the surprising, [yet] she can be perfectly traditional when she chooses."

This observation can be illustrated by examining her traditionally end-rhymed poem titled "The Blindman" (from *New and Selected Things Taking Place*, 1978):

a	The blindman placed
a	a tulip on his tongue for purple's taste.
b	Cheek to grass, his green
b	was rough excitement's sheen
c	of little whips.
c	In water to his lips
d	he named the sea blue and white,
d	the basin of his tears—and fallen beads of sight.
e	He said: The scarf is red;
e	I feel the vectors to its thread
f	that dance down from the sun. // I know
f	the seven fragrances of the rainbow. //
g	I have caressed
g	the orange hair of flames. // Pressed
h	to my ear,
h	a pomegranate lets me hear
i	crimson's flute.
i	Trumpets tell me yellow. Only ebony is mute.

From a thematic perspective, the poem's vivid diction evokes all that the blindman ostensibly lacks—specifically, the ability to perceive color. And yet even without sight, or perhaps especially without sight, Swenson shows that the blindman is actually able to "know" the world's colors simply by turning to his other senses—taste and touch in particular. Admittedly this metaphorical conceit is not an unfamiliar one, but the poem still succeeds, and does so primarily because of the poet's highly honed descriptive sensibilities.

The poem also owes much of its success to the presence of traditional prosodic devices. First, Swenson presents a set of nine precisely rhymed couplets. Second, the poem features what is a basically an iambic rhythmic profile until the last two lines, at which point the cadence abruptly changes, turns emphatically trochaic, and produces a veritable fanfare of an ending:

/ /
crimson's flute.
/ / / / / / /
Trumpets tell me yellow. Only ebony is mute.

Thus the finale capitalizes not only on conventional rhyme but also on traditional feet, which together provide definitive closure. This effect is particularly striking when the poem is read aloud.

"Almanac" is another of Swenson's poems deeply informed by tradition but not restricted by it. Woven through with internal rhyme, the poem is only a syllable or two away from blank verse, which the opening lines can illustrate:

> The hammer struck my nail, instead of nail.
> A moon flinched into being. Omen-black,
> it began its trail. Risen from horizon

on my thumb (no longer numb and indigo)
it waxed yellow, waned to a sliver that now
sets white, here at the rim I cut tonight.

I make it disappear, but mark its voyage
over my little oval ceiling that again
is cloudless, pink and clear. In the dark
quarter-inch of this moon before it arrived
at my nail's tip, an unmanned airship
dived 200 miles to the hem of space, and
vanished. At the place of Pharaoh Cheops'
tomb (my full moon floating yellow)
a boat for ferrying souls to the sun
was disclosed in a room sealed 5000 years.

Reaching whiteness, that moon-speck waned
while an April rained. Across the street,
a vine crept over brick up 14 feet. And
Einstein (who said there is no hitching
post in the universe) at seventy-seven turned ghost.

Note that we're also only a line-break or two away from end-rhyme, especially in the closing stanza. Perhaps only a poet blessed with Swenson's unusually musical ear would dare rhyme with such bravado, and weave it lavishly through 21 lines of nearly regular verse, not unlike an operatic leitmotif. The work also features a startling turn at the very center of the middle stanza, where the metaphorical fingernail-moon abruptly becomes the destination for a journey into outer space—an electrifying flight of the imagination.

Even though, as here, the poet moves well beyond traditional versification, Swenson's innate awareness of the conventions remains apparent. This becomes particularly obvious when she consciously chooses to subvert them by experimenting with radical shapes and

configurations for her poems. In the words of Karl Shapiro: "It is strange to see the once-radical *carmen figuratum*, the calligraphic poem, spatial forms, imagist and surreal forms—all the heritage of the early years of the century—being used with such ease and unselfconsciousness." It seems, in other words, that Swenson simply knew when to go for innovation, but also when to stop. For example, her iconographic poems—and there are many of these—are never so inscrutable that they become obscure. Never do they favor concrete design over theme, radical form over insightful content. On the contrary, the special effects succeed in underscoring the poem's poetic impulse, as opposed to obliterating it. Some that are available online include: "Come in Go out," "I Look at My Hand," "Evolution," and "Night Practice." All are engaging and accessible. Devices like a vertical caesura slicing down the center, a wavy margin, or a stair-step stanza arrangement only underscore their clear thematic intentions.

Swenson's well known and widely anthologized poem called "Question" can also serve as an example of how the elements of traditional prosody can work in a poem's behalf:

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen

Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount
all eager and quick
How will I know
In thicket ahead

is danger or treasure
when Body my good
bright dog is dead

How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye

With cloud for shift
how will I hide?

This poem has been subjected to a great deal of thematic analysis, but actually there has been very little discussion of its formal elements, which are so subtly realized that they might have sprung from the pen of John Hollander himself. Specifically:

1. The poem is a stunning example of accentual verse—probably the oldest rhythmic tradition in the language. Two strong stresses are clearly evident in each of its twenty-one lines—no more, no less. The result: a certain not-quite-subliminal rhythmic pattern with a forward pulsation, vaguely anapestic, which seems to pick up speed as the speaker's anxiety increases.

2. The poem capitalizes on the iconic effects of sound. Alliteration and assonance are everywhere. The former is evidenced most notably in the first stanza's breathy initial /h/'s: house / horse / hound—and the latter in the many internal rhymes and near-rhymes throughout: do/you, without/mount, danger/treasure, lie/sky/eye/hide, among others.

3. Third, the omnipresence of anaphora—what will I / where will I / when will I / how will I, etc.—lays a syntactic grid

over the entire poem, lending it structure and symmetry.

4. Finally: the gradual piling up of unanswerable questions is a potent way of communicating the speaker's profound uncertainty and fear. In this unusual context, no "stage directions" in the form of commas and question-marks are needed. They might, in fact, serve as dispensable distractions. This avoidance of punctuation anywhere in the poem (until the very end) was clearly a conscious stylistic choice on Swenson's part, and serves the poem well.

Although these few short examples certainly cannot be viewed as conclusive evidence that poems featuring formal conventions are always among May Swenson's best, it is difficult to deny that many of her finest works—even if otherwise untraditional—owe a considerable portion of their success to their rock-solid underpinnings: their borrowings from the time-tested traditions of English versification.

REVIEW

Obsession: Sestinas in the Twenty-First Century

Carolyn Beard Whitlow and Marilyn Krysl, eds.
Dartmouth, 2014. 168 pp.
$27.95 Paperback, $85 Hardcover, $24.99 ebook
Reviewed by Laura Stuckey

Undertaking an anthology project that represents poetry of any kind in the twenty-first century, when arrays of poets and schools of poetry abound, presents a daunting challenge. Sampling from the vast field of voices that exist today necessitates strategic limitation. Editors Carolyn Beard Whitlow and Marilyn Krysl narrow their project to one verse form, the sestina, but then cast their net wide for contemporary examples. The result is a dazzling showcase in which the sestina emerges as a nimble verse form well-suited to the variety of hands that attempt it.

It will strike the reader that poets of all stripes, not just formalists, share the common obsession of tinkering with the sestina's fixed pattern. The play of six repeating teleutons across six stanzas and a three-lined envoi becomes a dance for both poet and reader. The challenge for the poet is to manipulate the teleutons, either subtly so they barely stand out or directly so they stress or cajole. Yet, it is not just a matter of craft. Also integral to the dance is the poet's subject. As Krysl explains in her introduction, "The sestina's repeating thoroughness is designed to discover what is buried deepest in us, and the teleutons keep asking us one more time to go beyond what we imagined was conclusive." Perhaps this skepticism toward conclusiveness is one reason this fixed form appeals to poets today. The repetitions allow poets to rethink and even undermine their own subjects as they approach them again and again from multiple

perspectives, or occasionally, multiple voices.

Most chapters in the anthology are organized thematically with poems displaying a range of voices as well as technical approaches. For example, "Americana," the opening chapter and among the most compelling, contains sestinas addressing various aspects of American culture and history. Alex Cigale spoofs American culture in "The Paul Bunyan Sestina." Part of the set up is the playful attention the poet calls to his end-words. Paul Bunyan's full name serves as a two-word teleuton, but in some stanzas it is the name of a juke joint, while in others there is a Chaplinesque shifting of characters who do not quite live up to Bunyon's folksy ideal. The speaker, who is out partying with a Cherokee woman, is pulled over by the police: "I haves me a suspended license and a joint. / I pull over on the shoulder, park the Chevy. / He's right behind, like I'm Paul Bunyan. / He scuffs the gravel, thinks he's Paul Bunyan . . .

At the other end of the spectrum, Marilyn Nelson employs a formal tone and an iambic line in her beautiful poem, "Keeper of the Keys (1740)," a sestina contained in her book-length verse narrative about the first American slave to document his life as a slave. Despite its historical content, the poem feels quite contemporary, partly due to its pronoun-teleutons which change across stanzas in order to establish shifting points of view as the slave speaker attempts to reconcile his situation and his selfhood. In one stanza, he recalls the words of his father: "*Trustworthiness and honor are riches / no one can steal. Let men have faith in you*." In the next he speaks in first-person as he describes resisting his master's values, despite having changed his name: "Here, there was a true, essential I." And in the next, third person creates a more, sweeping, historical outlook as the narrator recalls the capture of his father and other slaves:

In Barbados, the surviving unpurchased riches

were barbered, washed, and oiled. After a year
of misery and homeward yearning, they
were marched to market, sold, and given new names,
their present strength and their futures under white control,
their traditional beliefs toppled under Christian values.

In Nelson's capable hands, the sestina serves as a powerful vehicle to give voice to an oppressed speaker, proving that one need not sacrifice form for a contemporary project.

Variety abounds in this collection, and because of the quality of the poems, it is a variety worthy of study and conversation. How do some of our best contemporary poets tackle a verse-form made famous by French Troubadors? The multitude of approaches provides not just a window into the contemporary sestina, but into the contemporary poem. In the "Art" chapter, Alicia Ostriker takes a subtle approach in an ekphrastic sestina about Rembrandt, "RVR: Work and Love." The narrator speaks directly to the artist, creating a feeling of tribute: "Your coach leaps forward like an act of love / From pious Leiden to Amsterdam, where you eye / The action, bankers and beggars, wealth and art, / Fishwives and Jews at market. . . ." In subsequent stanzas, Ostriker interchanges the teleutons "love" and "work." More interestingly, the teleuton, "pink-and-green," a reference in the first stanza to the artist's face as a young man, changes in subsequent stanzas to chrome, light, gold, brown and black, respectively as she discusses his work. In the envoi, color is absent as the narrator references Rembrandt's eyes, "Shadowed by trouble, fortified by love, / looking me in the eye,...." These changing teleutons amid four other stable teleutons—eye, face, defeat, art—create a richly detailed yet inventive texture, an appropriate homage to the artist.

Other sestinas employ even more radical variations. Catherine Bowman's "Mr. X," which begins with the short line "All my Ex's,"

employs teleutons containing the letter 'X' throughout her rollicking poem. Nikki Blak's moving poem, "For Black Girls" is not consistent with its repetitions of teleutons, but uses them more like ghosts that move in and out of the poem. Like a few others in the collection, Blak's poem is also a double-sestina, but she includes both envois at the end of the poem. Despite these innovations, these sestinas still retain their form as sestinas. Perhaps because there is no rule that sestinas must rhyme or make use of strict metrical patterns they adapt more readily to experimentation.

Indeed very few poems in the anthology adhere to a metrical pattern. Yet, manipulating the teleuton, although the major challenge of writing a sestina, is not the only challenge. In any form, there is always the poetic line to consider. As Lewis Putnam Turco notes in his afterword, ". . .the editors and I are bemused by the fact that writers of many of the sestinas seem to have either no regard or ear for meter." A quick scan of "The Index of (Loosely) Metrical and Syllabic Sestinas" reveals that only a handful of more than a hundred poems in this anthology are metrical. The sestina need not be metrical; yet, it does seem that in the best of these poems the poets tinker very deliberately with the force of their lines. Without tight lines that create a strong, horizontal force the vertical movement of the teleuton-based pattern is less a dance and more of a sprint to a finish-line.

Most of the poems in the anthology's "Love and Sex" section are anything but traditional in subject as well as approach to the line. In Kelly Cherry's sestina, "Wintering," the phrases are so tightly tied to the speaker-writer who lives and loves in books, that it is hard to imagine them being expressed in any other way. Early in the poem, the lines follow imagery, each one giving us a view of a reductive, winter landscape outside the speaker's window: "The asparagus, the ivy, and the anonymous / summer vines, unleafed, snarled in snow, / lean

against the wire dog-pen." Then, by the final stanza, as the speaker delves into her interior world, the reduction of the landscape is also at work in the enjambed lines themselves, particularly in the first, shortened line: "It's no / secret that one who reads can occasionally fall / to thinking how life in books / is so much more exciting and enlightening / than her real life, in which she's penned / up, isolate, and anonymous." Interestingly, the word "no" on the first line of this passage is a truncated form of the teleuton "snow." The play with the teleuton combines with the contemporary line to create a cohesive, innovative, bind between form and subject.

Bruce Meyer creates horizontal structure by using two-word lines throughout "The Lover's Sestina," until arriving at the envoi, where the lines are six, three, and six words, respectively. From the opening lines on, this rhythm creates many singular moments of hesitation throughout the inevitable spill forward into what may be the most traditional love poem in this section: "Am I / this song / celebrating you, /each drawn / breath praising / the world?" This shortened approach to the line accentuates the effect of the pattern of teleutons as the poem moves forward. Yet if readers expect traditional romance from a sestina, they might be taken aback by this chapter. The take on love and sex is truly contemporary, as speakers in these poems examine topics such as gender identity and homosexuality. Poems dealing with sexual abuse, which would be more fitting in a chapter on violence, are also included in "Love and Sex." Regardless of how poems are categorized, however, it would not make sense to criticize their inclusion mere "political correctness." Many of these poems are among the most moving and the voices and experiences they express will resonate with and impact readers. It may be difficult to read Honor Moore's poem, "The First Time: 1950," for example. Yet, as the speaker addresses the baby-sitter who raped her as a child, a crucial voice speaks back to the aggressor in a poem that is

masterfully controlled. The speaker narrates events with the detailed objectivity of the journalist: "In the back bedroom, laughing when you pull / something fawn-colored from your black / tight pants, the unzipped chino slit. / I keep myself looking at the big belt / buckled right at my eyes...." The poem becomes an important achievement for poet and reader alike, and the sestina's form helps to hold the experience up for examination.

"Arguments about whether fixed forms would be varied were moot: variations were happening," says Krysl in her introduction. Evidence of experimentation is true throughout the thematic chapters, but a few chapters are not thematic and instead represent the form of the sestina itself. A couple of chapters, "Sestinas with Irregular Teleutons," and "Unconventional Sestinas," contain the most experimental sestinas. Another, "Sestinas About Sestinas: Metasestinas" contains a half-dozen poems in which poets address the act of writing a sestina head-on, and especially approaching the sestina as an assignment in a creative writing workshop. Among its highlights are Anne Waldman's, "How the Sestina (Yawn) Works," and F. Keith Wahle's humorous instructional, "How to Write a Sestina," which employs deliberately flat language to deliver advice: "You must also write with great feeling. / Otherwise you will give your reader the feeling / that he is reading a very dull sestina." There is great humor in this section, along with skepticism, about the sestina itself, but especially toward the way poets have come to function in the academic poetry world.

The sestina is a verse form that will hold almost anything and then illuminate it back to us. In the hands of the skilled poet, it allows for complexity of voice, narration, subject or mood. In the hands of the attentive reader, it turns like a gem, revealing bold and hidden facets of an artifice that reflects back on ourselves and our world. If the poets in this collection are any indication, obsessions with craft

and form are not out of place in contemporary poetry. Readers who spend time with this anthology may find such obsession contagious.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jane Blanchard studied English at Wake Forest before earning a doctorate from Rutgers. She lives and writes in Georgia. Her work has recently appeared in *Healing Muse*, *Penwood Review*, and *Rotary Dial*; it is forthcoming in *Mezzo Cammin*, *Raintown Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*.

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Maryann Corbett lives in St. Paul and works for the Minnesota Legislature. Her poems, essays, and translations have appeared widely online and in print in many journals and assorted anthologies and have won the Lyric Memorial Award, the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize, and the Richard Wilbur Award. New work appears in *Barrow Street* and *Southwest Review* and is forthcoming in *Raintown Review*, *Measure*, *Mezzo Cammin*, and *Angle*. Her books are *Breath Control* (David Robert Books), *Credo for the Checkout Line in Winter* (Able Muse), and *Mid Evil*, forthcoming from The Evansville Press.

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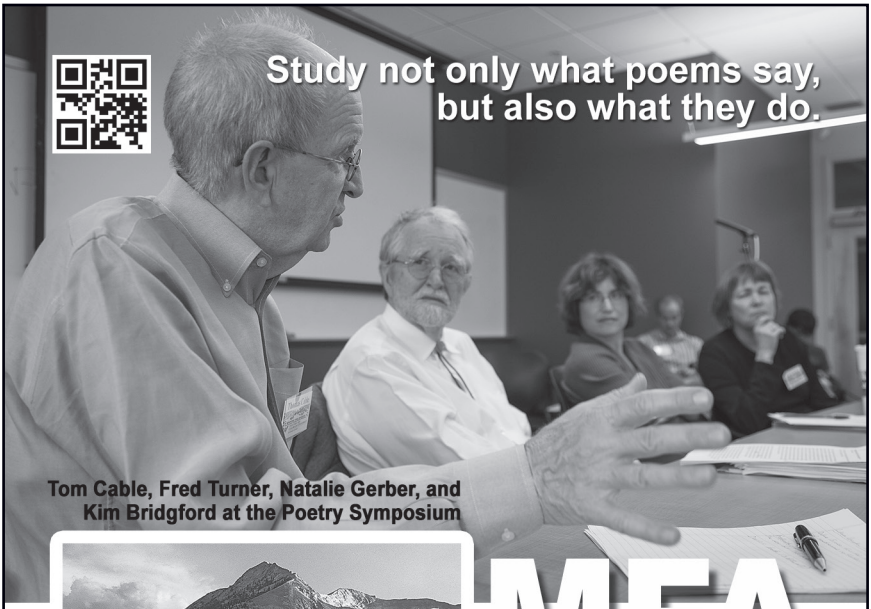

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