

# **THINK**

**A JOURNAL OF POETRY,  
CRITICISM, AND REVIEWS**

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## *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 and appear biannually in fall and spring.

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.

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**SUBMISSIONS:** Submit only previously unpublished poems via Submittable.com.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. Rights revert to the poet on publication. Please give attribution on subsequent publications. Query the editors about book reviews and critical essays.

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## *From the Editors*

### **A Few Definitions**

Young people dream big. Somewhat chastened by time if not yet chaste, I now keep in view dreams which might seem small to others but which still loom large to me. Preeminent among these is the desire to repair one small rupture in the vocabulary of poetics. I speak, of course, of the assumptions underlying the silly question, asked even in supposedly sophisticated circles, of whether or not a poet writes “formal poetry” or “free verse.”

Upon hearing this question enter the atmosphere or seeing it appear in print, I believe that Apollo and the muses, exhausted by their long literary career, weep. I imagine the god turning to them and saying “Right. Is it hotter in Athens or in the summer?” Calliope, laughing through her tears, responds “Do you walk to Helicon or carry your lunch?” They then discuss decamping to a more hospitable location, like Venus.

I cannot end world hunger, cure cancer or prevent war. I can, however, defend the Republic and make a stand here for truth. I can do no other. I hope what follows is either entertaining, or annoying, or both.

“Poetry” is not a technical term of composition, but rather an expression of value. This is clear in the word’s etymology and even still in much current usage outside the self-advertising halls of ac-

ademe. “Poetry in motion” is not about verbal art, nor is a “tone poem,” or “the poetics of cooking.” Poetry, while we may use the term colloquially to apply to all writing in verse, is, more precisely, the passing of judgment that something is memorably beautiful. It is a critical term, not a technical one. It should not need saying, but always does, that most poetry is verse, but most verse is not poetry. When someone says, “I write poetry,” people who aspire to do so with more substantial ambition should squirm, as the speaker has just become a self-anointed judge and jury in one. It is like saying “I write literature.” Well, maybe—though probably not. Many of us may be trying to write poetry, but in a strict sense, the decision about whether or not we have succeeded is not up to us.

“Verse” is a technical term of composition, not of value. Verse is literally and technically what we write when we write in intentionally turned lines. The language always knows more than we do. We speak of “poets and writers” because poets, in general, compose in a different way than writers of “prose,” which is also a technical term. “Verse” derives from Latin and refers to the *versus*, originally the turn a ploughman made at the end of a field, and a term again very much alive in English: reverse, inverse, obverse, universe, introvert, convert, converse, the Bills versus the Rams, and so on.

Of course, all writing is verse. Prose is a contraction of “pro-” + “versus,” a verse that only turns forward, or does not turn, like a mad ploughman who ignores fences and charges across the world. A sociopath. Yes, verse comes first, and in the end, it’s all verse.

The accurate technical distinction to make is therefore, first, between verse and prose, and then between “metrical verse” and “free verse.” In English, “metrical verse” has come to refer to accentual-syllabic verse. Other systems, e.g. stress-based imitations of classical quantitative meters, syllabics in the tradition of Elizabeth Daryush (Marianne Moore, Dylan Thomas, W. S. Merwin, etc.),



the non-alliterative stress-based counting of Jeffers and many others, the ballad stanza in the folk tradition and then as employed by someone like Auden in “Victor,” loose iambics, Williams’ “variable foot” (a mistaken concept, but that’s another discussion), and so on. These all depend carefully on measurement (“The crux of the issue is measure,” as Williams said), but when deployed in our era, they are metrical experimentation, and could all be considered forms of free verse, or related to it in practice.

As this suggests, and has been pointed out in the past in slightly different terms, free verse is a form (or a collection of forms) of verse, not a form of freedom. Indeed, free verse, like the prose poem, post-structuralism, and the entire French avant-garde tradition, is a Gallic practical joke which Americans have taken far too seriously in ideological terms, comparable to the way the French take Jerry Lewis. Free verse is serious, but came into being as an understandable attempt to untie the various cultural straitjackets of the Académie Française. It was a Molotov cocktail, not a philosophy, and it doesn’t translate well as a method into English. “Open form” isn’t much better, as syllabics, for example, aren’t exactly open except with regard to the placement of stresses, in which sense they certainly are “free.”

In any event, the only alternative to “formal poetry” is not “free verse,” but rather “formless poetry,” and nobody claims to write that. “Formal poetry” is an unintentional redundancy, “free verse” an intentional oxymoron.

Further, the purpose of all such versifying is to awaken not only the linguistic faculty, but also the apprehension of measurement, which is thereby fused with language. The only question, free or metrical, is if it works. But that’s a longer story.

So, let us have a little common sense. If we are going to have a serious discussion about how to write, “poetry” is not a technical term of verbal art, but rather reflects a judgment of value. When we

are talking about certain genres of art made out of words, e.g. the epic, verse drama, or the lyric, most that rises to the level of poetry is written in verse, though most verse is not good enough to be called poetry. Verse and prose share a common Proto-Indo-European root, and verse comes first, but verse differs technically from prose because, no matter what kind of verse it is, it turns. At this late date, in English, the two broad categories of verse are metrical verse, by which in English we generally mean accentual-syllabic verse, and free verse, which includes a wide range of wonderful and powerful ways of making verses, incorporating everything from stress-based imitations of classical quantitative metrics, to Whitmanian versicles, to syllabics, to loose iambics, to sprung rhythm, to concrete poetry, the variable foot, and on and on. Such free verse is just as formal as metrical verse, though neither technique guarantees poetry, for none can. Finally, the only alternative to formal poetry is not free verse, but rather formless poetry. “Formalism” is thus an empty term (outside of discussions of a particular and fascinating school of Russian criticism), because all aspiring poets of all backgrounds need to learn as much as they possibly can about all the forms of verse if they hope to have any chance of producing anything worth a damn in this art, just as all cooks need to learn recipes and all architects must study geometry, which, for goodness’ sake, does not mean they are “formalists.” At this point it is possible for a strong poet to write either free verse or metrical poetry, or both, as many have and do. And what all this suggests is that anyone who talks about the distinction between formal poetry and free verse as if such a distinction is even remotely coherent is either walking away from Helicon or has finished eating lunch.

The strongest poets have always understood the importance of thinking clearly about what verse is, how it works, and why it matters. I give the last word here to W. S. Merwin, who published a poem on this theme in his Pulitzer Prize winning *The Shadow of Sirius* (2009):

## The Long and the Short of It

As long as we can believe anything  
we believe in measure  
we do it with the first breath we take  
and the first sound we make  
it is in each word we learn  
and in each of them it means  
what will come again and when  
it is there in meal and in moon  
and in meaning it is the meaning  
it is the firmament and the furrow  
turning at the end of the field  
and the verse turning with its breath  
it is in memory that keeps telling us  
some of the old story about us

Perhaps getting these terms right is not such a diminished thing after all.

This issue of *THINK* is several months late, for which we apologize. Over the course of last spring and summer we have switched all of our fulfillment services (subscriptions, printing, and mailing) over to our own providers, and this has taken time. We are deeply grateful to Caleb Seeling and Conundrum Press for helping the journal as it made the transition to Western's Graduate Program in Creative Writing and taking on those services for several years. We have learned much from him about how to do this, and we wish him all the success in the world in his new venture, in which Conundrum has now become an imprint of Bower House, a new publisher on track to become an independent powerhouse in the Rocky Mountain region. Caleb also led the Certificate in Publishing in the Graduate

Program in Creative Writing at Western State Colorado University (where this journal is housed), for several years and did an outstanding job there as well, repurposing the entire curriculum, and we are grateful. As always, I am grateful to Managing Editor Susan Spear, who keeps both me and this journal on track.

Tardy as it is, we know the issue will satisfy. Last spring, we felt we had strong poetry and prose, but felt the need for more, so we put out the call. The response was gratifying. We received strong poems from Rhina Espaillat (our featured poet), Ned Balbo, Catherine Tufariello, Wendy Videlock, Rachel Hadas, and Jennifer Reeser, to add to strong poems by a number of newcomers to our pages, along with another superb verse essay by Christopher Norris, an essay by Emily Grosholz, and Russell Davis's extended interview with Fred Turner.

There is a lot of verse in this journal. Much, though not all of it, is metrical. More importantly, we think that much of it may be remembered as poetry. Enjoy.

—David J. Rothman, Editor

## Celebrating Rhina

In June of 2010 I attended the West Chester University Poetry Conference for the first time. I had recently returned to writing poetry, and found myself, introverted and ignorant in an air-conditioned auditorium, listening to panels about which I understood only a fraction. I thought ‘dipodic’ was the scientific name for Big Foot . . . ? Only a few faces were familiar to me.

As I took notes at these panel discussions and readings, I noticed a small woman who sat near the front. Erudite and smartly dressed, she asked incisive questions and offered comments. Everyone seemed to know her, and she knew them. That evening I listened to this tiny, mighty, keynote speaker: Rhina Espaillat. She began by sharing what she had discovered when she “Googled” her own name for the first time. Unpretentiously, with grace and humor, she connected with the audience. I was in the palm of her hand.

Later I did my own Googling. As I read a sampling of her work, I found finely crafted poems, which are difficult enough to execute, but Espaillat’s poems also tackle the full range of human experience and its emotional richness, each one with clarity and seeming effortlessness. Why had I not heard of her before? At the time, the poem “On the Avenue” (2005) captivated me, and it still does. This blank verse narrative is Job-esque. The speaker of the poem converses with God while walking down the street in New York City. “I said to God” . . . after looking at some “dejected” horses “I’m sure you could arrange something more suited to their speed and grace. . . .” The speaker moves on to speak on behalf of a “gray hag” and some young break-dancers. But, the speaker is decorous, she informs God: “I tell you as a friend, / but there are those who say the cosmos proves / You have grown callous to our sort of pain. . . .” As in the book of Job, God is silent, but when he speaks he releases not words as he

does in the sacred text, but a list of items: “a spate of starlings, and a peal of bells . . . and stacks of books on sale at Doubleday . . .” The speaker boldly continues that “we” should be angry with God because he takes our friends like “books borrowed forever.” But the speaker ultimately decides “. . . what’s friendship for if not forgiveness? / So I let it pass. . . .” God then opens his mouth again: “fountains, grass, Johann Sebastian on steel drums, and more / genial evasions.” Who can resist a poet who challenges God—“as a friend”— concerning the injustices on New York City’s streets?

Back in the chilly auditorium, I found that Rhina was not only a class act on the stage, but she was also a magnanimous human being. This diminutive woman was interested in all conference participants and took time to chat. I felt as if she had pronounced a benediction over me when she said, “I wish you the joy of grandchildren.” (No, not yet).

Reading Rhina Espaillat’s poems makes me want to be a better poet; meeting Rhina Espaillat made me want to be a better person. We are delighted to feature five new poems by her in this issue of *THINK* 7.2. We simply could not pick among them. Winner takes all.

—Susan D. Spear, Managing Editor







# POEMS



RHINA P. ESPAILLAT

*Portrait*

Germany, Schwerte, 1945.

One of the G.I. buddies he befriended,  
a fellow survivor, took this yellowing black-  
and-white of my late husband. Still alive!  
Grainy vegetation guards his back,  
but he's unarmed, taking it easy: done.  
He smiles broadly, and squints; does summer sun  
blind him, or is it joy? The fighting's ended!  
He's healed—though no longer the unhurt  
boy who enlisted, or ever again  
as deep a sleeper. Not yet twenty-one,  
he dreams of girls—we meet six years from then—  
and hungers for the honeycake he likes  
from mama's kitchen. Outlined in the shirt  
pocket of his worn fatigues, a pack  
of something I suspect is Lucky Strikes.

## *A Rondeau for Rachel*

*for Wendy and Jonathan*

In Rachel's room the books are stacked  
at random on tall shelves, and packed  
three layers deep, with items piled  
criss-cross on what's beneath—a wild  
Tower of Babel all knick-knacked:

Here, Chinese puzzles; there, a cracked  
jewel-case that begs to be ransacked;  
and who's this sunny, curly child  
in Rachel's room?

Rachel herself, crookedly tacked  
beside one shelf, caught in the act:  
smiling, as years ago she smiled,  
and now for me, the guest beguiled  
by girl and print and artifact  
in Rachel's room.

## *Nothing*

*for Y. K.*

“Nothing,” she says, “nothing is wrong. Come in.”

The friend from out of town steps in around her,  
watches her lock the door from the inside,  
as always, and embraces her old friend.

“But what is this?” the guest says, pointing at  
the bandage—makeshift, a handkerchief  
folded and pinned to hide one eye. “Let’s see.”  
Slow, careful lifting of stained white reveals  
a mass of iridescent black and green,  
a purple sac of blood under the closed  
fringe of pale lashes, and a cheek like countries  
in garish hues on a child’s colored map.

“Nothing,” she says again, “I fell, that’s all.”

“Where?”

“In the hall, outside the bathroom door.”

“When?”

Now the blue Polish eye, unsure,  
blinks for a moment. “Not last night; maybe  
the night before.”

“And have you seen a doctor?”

“No! Why? Nothing is wrong with me!” She takes  
the flowers and the book of poems, then sits,  
abruptly, as if waiting for her guest  
to make some further move. Her guarded look,

her stillness under stress, remind the guest  
of her friend's past: how she survived Lwow,  
when those not blond and blue-eyed disappeared  
from city after city; how, escaped  
from the slave labor camp, she made her way—  
starving, but whole—to write again elsewhere,  
learn a new language for what needed saying.

“You know,” the guest begins, “you need to stop  
picking fights with the neighbors!” And they laugh,  
as old friends do over absurdities.

“Well now,” the guest says, “shall I water these?”  
The hostess shakes her head, with a cold glance  
at the straw stems left of her indoor garden,  
dangling from powdery dust in crusty pots.  
The visitor puts back the pitcher, sits,  
wondering what to do. A quiet call  
made from the bedroom to the married daughter  
living in Jersey; surreptitious searching  
to find some doctor's name; the telephone  
crammed with unanswered messages, unheard.

The desk is piled with poems—some unfinished—  
mingled with bills and still-unopened mail,  
and photographs: the son and daughter; infants;  
the dead husband, still young, still smiling.  
“Where have you sent this sonnet?” asks the guest,  
“It's glorious!” Silence, a dazed look;  
and then at last, “I don't remember it.”

“Are you hungry for lunch?” the guest inquires.  
“Of course!” she answers, brightly. “Good! Me too.”

What would you like to eat?”  
“Nothing,” she says,  
but slips into her jacket, and replaces  
the bandage. Fish and rice—her favorites—  
fetched from a nearby restaurant, and then  
the daughter—frightened, anxious—at the door,  
wary but loving; then the hospital,  
whose forms to fill are almost a relief.  
Nurses, a gown, a gurney to a room.

After the doctor comes, goodbyes, a promise  
to *stay in touch*, and then, before night falls,  
the long-awaited visit ends: two buses  
through Queens, polyglot streets where ragged shops  
announce their wares in foreign alphabets;  
the sparkling skyline in the distance; then  
two trains: one over roofs and clotheslines, one  
under the river, to the city’s canyons;  
the hotel room downtown, and home tomorrow.

That night, a dream of rowing, effortless,  
together, one oar each, on waves of nothing.

## *Condolence Call*

I saw her—your *Big Blonde*—the other day.  
Yes, she dropped in on me, as fantasies  
may do, lonely for those who dreamed them up,  
and even for the dull realities  
like me, who are somehow chosen, preferred,  
or settled for.

I offered her a cup  
of coffee and some cookies; what's the harm?  
And even sought to lead her by the arm—  
as if she had an arm—through souvenirs  
you've left me.

Not the doses of morphine  
under your trembling tongue, or now the nights  
conversing with your silence. No, I mean  
those mutual gifts over our sixty years  
and more of sweet and sour together:  
work, children, quarrels, losses, pleasure, slights  
healed or unhealed by tugging on the tether  
that constitutes a marriage.

But she shook  
her non-existent head and backed away,  
refused the tour of all my treasures, took  
one last look, and left without a word.



## *This House*

This house is a fallow field  
at season's close  
where clay and stones are rife,  
but nothing grows,

A graveyard of work begun  
and tools untended,  
since all your joyful labor  
abruptly ended.

What breath can reawaken,  
what pulse restart,  
the beat that once was steady  
in its lost heart?

This house is an old instrument  
no longer played,  
but loud with silent echoes,  
music we made.

MINDY WATSON

*Ecdysis*—

Arachnid desperado dangling by  
A single silken foot—you're Hanged Man hung  
From window frame. Your reclamation nigh,  
Renouncing that to which you'd firmly clung,

You're waiting for the miracle to come.  
You sense its signal suddenly; you're high  
Atop your sylvan web, well-fed and young,  
Arachnid desperado dangling by

Instinctive urge. But then, your compound eye  
Stares down and scans your web for flaws among  
Its sturdy strands. You can't identify  
A single silken foot. You're Hanged Man hung

In chitin's cell, an inmate now unsprung  
From exoskeleton. It's breach or die  
You realize, your consciousness far-flung  
From window frame. Your reclamation nigh,

You disconnect your sheath from inner eye  
And acquiesce, deflating bookish lung.  
You overturn, then bid your shell goodbye,  
Renouncing that to which you'd firmly clung.

Once withered bud, now floral phoenix sprung  
Reborn from shriveled pistil's ash—defy  
Stiff confines; hail submission's strength unsung!  
Ascend through structure's abdication—fly  
By dangling, desperado.

NED BALBO

*Hartnett's Cardinal*

I'm not sure why, after so many years,  
I took it from the box where it was kept—  
The profile of a perfect cardinal  
on textured cardboard, crested guardian  
stored in darkness, sheltered out of sight.  
An impulse: blank walls and a bare apartment  
rescued memory. I'd always meant  
to hang it someday; now the day was here.  
*Always.* What does that mean? From Woolworth's back  
in dimestore days, painted by *R. F. Hartnett*,  
neatly signed, then reproduced a thousand,  
no, a hundred thousand times—who knows?—  
it traveled with me from my parents' home  
to mine, marriage to marriage: checked, admired,  
then put to rest another dozen years,  
a little more forgotten every time—  
even the words I'd printed on the back  
in childish, unsteady capitals:  
MALE CARDINAL MARCH 10, 1969.  
So *always* meant 5th grade. Meant that I'd passed  
by, glimpsed its splendid scarlet on display  
among the racks of cheap commercial art  
and had to have it. Meant my mother bought it—  
Meant she'd reassured me, sure, we'd hang it,  
one day, when we got a frame for it,  
maybe, if there's an extra frame at home—  
Both here and hidden, waiting all that time,  
its lush red plumage otherworldly,

those yellow flowers no species that I know—  
forget-me-nots, some type of asphodel...  
And if I *did* suggest what it was guarding,  
all those years, tucked safely in its box,  
who'd laugh it off, I wonder. Who'd believe...

Now that it hangs, remembered, in its frame,  
do I detect a look of gratitude?  
For what the dark still holds, I give thanks, too.

## *Charlie and The Beach Boys*

*McNeil Island Prison, Washington State, 1966*

How did it feel to stand on deck, paroled,  
a free man on the ferry to the mainland,  
not knowing you'd find yourself, within a year,  
living with Dennis Wilson of The Beach Boys  
and your girls in sunny California,  
strumming your songs, the dream within your grasp?  
(Two girls hitchhiking on the Sunset Strip—  
your girls—would give occasion to connect.)  
How did it feel to watch the dream turn sour,  
the demo sessions stalled, Brian indifferent  
to your off-key voice, the promised contract  
still in limbo, Dennis bearded, bored,  
your flower-child girls oblivious?  
Those dials and switches gleaming on a console  
someone else controlled would serve a song  
that held your truth: *Submission is a gift,*  
*cease to exist*, plus some love-bead clichés  
Dennis would steal because you owed him money  
and record, revised, with band and brothers.  
By then, you'd moved to Spahn ranch, hangers-on  
and homeless kids collecting like the sagebrush  
blowing through a movie, always west,  
to form a family, somehow, as you led them,  
pimp and grifter, prophet of coming war,  
through hash and haze...But what else did you brood on,  
delusions of grandeur fuelled by LSD?  
Maybe that day, still locked up in your cell,

a year before the Summer of Love and Haight-  
Ashbury head shops shocked authority,  
when, static-chewed, over the wobbly wavebands  
of a cheap transistor radio  
you heard the far-off voices of a world  
unlike your own or any that you'd known—  
where strangers—other people—might belong,  
all blended vocals, organ, harmonies  
grim guards might confiscate at any moment.  
You thought, *That should be me out there who's singing,*  
*shaking up the world till it explodes,*  
and though you knew release was months away  
but couldn't know whose lives you'd one day twist  
or ruin or take outright, you hunched in, listening,  
humming along with one thought in your head,  
hair trimmed, clean-shaven: *Wouldn't it be nice?*

STEVEN RAY SMITH

*Mastiff Whelp*

His rhombus hulk is four equal tails—  
a coccyx, a muzzle, lateral right and left—  
that when he wags just one of these he flails  
into a loop-de-loop of deadweight heft  
upon the lawn. Just when my index drops  
to scratch his lambskin pinna, he whips into  
a quantum cloud of salivating chops  
concurrently intent to latch onto,  
to suckle, to lick clean any parts  
that will puppy him as if he knows  
a stern-jawed Molosser must depart  
this soft grass soon, a ward by kismet grows  
to a maleficent warden of all  
inside the boundary of our tribal fence,  
a breathing rampart with a giant maw  
and single tail, six feet rampant hence.

ANDREW SZILVASY

*Asset Division*

About retirement, money, their Dalmatian,  
friends, and associates, neither raised a fuss:  
it seemed an amicable separation  
with little for the lawyers to discuss.

Though tensions briefly spiked when they turned  
to memories, she gave him, to his surprise,  
their wedding, Anna's birth, their anniversary  
in Maui—all palm and kiwi and skies.

All she asked for was Anna's illness, her slow  
ossification. Liberated, he's  
slept sound for weeks, but wakes each morning  
baffled by an imagined cry.



## *Faculty Welcome*

She's like a tiger in a blizzard here  
where olive oil is jade and where tomatoes  
are colors other than tomatoes. Near  
these heirlooms, she is struck by what can go  
for salad: bulgur, chick peas, mint, all stirred,  
yet lacking lettuce. Thinking on the matter,  
she knows the only fare that wouldn't faze  
her father are the newly popped champagnes.

Her mother always told her that the work  
would pay, the hours spent alone in dim lights.  
But what did she know of the stress of fork  
placements, the elements of elegance  
lost on those born where few if any parks  
display the name of local socialites?  
And her peers assume the best of her, she fears,  
because they only know her over beers.

She's smirked through many male peers' lectures, bluffed  
her love of Mondrian, and gently smiled  
at Dad, who smoothly shepherds guests to his loved  
Kinkade he bought online. She rationalizes  
beforehand why she doesn't call enough,  
and trains her face for her apology:  
her family has long since had their fill  
of hearing justifications and bull.

Yet they ask questions for appearance's sake;  
they really want to care but are resigned

that when she speaks, they'll hardly stay awake.  
She knows they find her less than genuine,  
and so she's worked on it. She's tried to make  
herself fit in—their interests don't align.  
She doesn't get “the sports” and hates hot fashion;  
in one ear Gronk, the other, a Kardashian.

Her home friends bore; she calls them still, but their  
brief conversations rarely touch on substance:  
it's mostly stories of a friend's friend's sister  
who has three kids, no time, and who just once  
would like if Tinder helped her land an affair.  
Yet her work peers frustrate her: their insistence  
on every moral failing only guilts her.  
Why can't she just enjoy her hamburger?

This little campus gathering to celebrate  
the appointment of a president offers  
a guiltless night. She can have a cocktail  
and not be asked to proffer thoughts on Chaucer.  
She pours herself Prosecco, sits and waits  
to see if anyone will bother with her.  
She hopes they don't, and takes a sip. It's cheap.  
No shock: the school's financial outlook's bleak.

So she's alone beside *hors d'oeuvres*. Sure, her nights  
are days: restless, lonely, shadows and gray tones.  
No, her monograph's not near complete,  
the midnight hours wasted. Is she dismayed? No.  
She's slowly getting the hang of this. Besides,  
she's waited a long time to taste tomatoes  
that do not crumble, meal-like, on keen lips,  
and drink these bubbles rising ever up.

DAVID LANDON

*Double Triolet of the City*

Why do I think our city's doomed?  
The bars are full, we're having fun,  
The poodles are superbly groomed.  
Why do I think our city's doomed?  
The economy has fully boomed,  
The lights are bright, the busses run.  
Why do I think our city's doomed?  
The bars are full, we're having fun.

Why would I think all bets are off,  
Our day is done, our city doomed?  
The pigs are feeding in the trough.  
Why would I think all bets are off?  
The babes are perfectly perfumed,  
The president is teeing off.  
Why would I think our city's doomed,  
The fun is done, all bets are off?

*A Garden Much Like Thought Itself*

This pathway through the garden I have made  
is a long sentence, turning in, and in,  
with no beginning, no determined end,  
finding its syntax as it goes: around  
a stand of Budleia, plotted to lure  
the lovely Lepidoptera and bees;  
in ovals underneath the oaks and birds  
to see the pink Astilbe and the ferns,  
the Coral Bells, the Lamium in bloom,  
then on to check the roses in the sun  
with all their pretty names; and back around,  
and in and out again, until the seeker stands  
amazed beyond the sense of anything  
but where he is, then goes around again,  
and speaks the word for everything he sees.

CATHERINE CHANDLER

*Multiverse*

*i.m. Beth Davidson Shotton*

*“And though she feels as if she’s in a play,  
She is anyway.”*

—John Lennon, “Penny Lane”

The pretty nurse in Penny Lane is dead.  
She played her part until the curtain fell.  
Or has her troupe gone somewhere else instead?

Although those notes are earworms in my head—  
the trumpet solo and the engine bell—  
the pretty nurse in Penny Lane is dead.

The barber and the banker long since fled  
the roundabout. The fireman as well.  
Can they be working somewhere else instead?

The neighborhood’s a tourist trap, I’ve read;  
no poppies like the ones she used to sell.  
The pretty nurse in Penny Lane is dead.

Or is she? Maybe we have been misled,  
and other Penny Lanes spin, parallel,  
in quantum time, to other tunes instead.

I’m clinging to one final, chronon shred  
of hope. As far as anyone can tell,  
the pretty nurse in Penny Lane, though dead,  
may still be living somewhere else instead.

RICHARD MEYER

*Open Casket*

He wears that same familiar poker face,  
no different now than when he sat upright.  
A silver stickpin keeps his tie in place.  
The suit is old, the vest a little tight.

He holds five cards pressed close against his chest,  
the hand he'll play when called on Judgment Day—  
a final deal for his eternal rest,  
with aces, aces, aces all the way.

DAN CAMPION

*Assistant*

You let yourself be sawed in half, I think,  
to gain the right to liberate the doves,  
make sure the rabbit had enough to drink,  
conduct the mooncalf on with white kid gloves.  
He'd stand there at the center of the stage  
until we seemed to make him disappear,  
or float up toward the roof, or slip the cage  
that nothing could escape from. Year by year  
the pigeons grew more feathery, the silk  
scarves silkier, the velvet tablecloth  
more deft to hide the vanished glass of milk  
so audiences went silent as a moth.  
We played, then, to each other and the fool,  
who made invisibility his rule.

## *Scurvy*

Neglect always goes looking for its limes.  
It shambles through the hold, nose to the boards,  
licks barrel hoops, gnaws holes in oak staves, climbs  
and tightrope-walks a hawser lime tree-wards  
at peril of long fall to deck or sea.  
It breeds prolifically, perhaps in hope  
a future generation finds reward.  
Rechristening itself Economy,  
it seeks without remission wider scope,  
to bind itself to quest with stouter cord.  
Respect is not forthcoming, though is owed,  
adherent to such pure and austere code  
maintained through maze's convoluted route  
while all the time the potted orange gave fruit.



## *Introduction and Allegro*

You wouldn't necessarily recognize  
the harp as harp at once. The radio  
conveys just shimmer. Then you realize  
it's more than the ensemble you don't know.  
How sound is sent, received, and amplified;  
composer, players, key, time signature;  
what fees and royalties must be applied;  
did premiere win bouquets, or cause a stir?  
The coffee in the studio: how strong?  
When these musicians unwind from their day,  
how tuned in do their families play along?  
What language think in? Secrets give away?  
To start not knowing one thing quickly spreads  
till nothing but Ravel's scheme fills our heads.

JEAN L. KREILING

*Suite from Pulcinella*

*after Stravinsky*

*Sinfonia*

This isn't quite the eighteenth century;  
Stravinsky's wit has warped the old traditions.  
Despite the rhythmic regularity,  
this isn't quite the eighteenth century.  
Corrupted chords and twisted trills agree  
with rogue bassoons who've lost their inhibitions:  
this isn't quite the eighteenth century—  
Stravinsky's wit has warped the old traditions.

*Serenata*

The oboe sighs a warm but thin  
complaint, its supple grief akin  
to yours, though you can't really say  
which of your sorrows lilts this way,  
which disappointment sings within  
  
this arabesque, these notes that spin  
in pulsing arcs beneath your skin  
as if it's your regrets that play  
the oboe. Sighs  
  
leave undefined what might have been,  
taste neither rue nor madeleine,  
and cannot mend the things that fray  
or find whatever's gone astray.

But like an empathetic twin,  
the oboe sighs.

*Scherzino*

What game is this that leaps with ease  
through motley moods and mysteries,  
from tune to tune to tune to tune,  
then ends abruptly, much too soon.

*Tarantella*

They say no spider causes this;  
a kiss  
may do it, or a fantasy,  
maybe  
a murmured secret or pet name.  
To blame  
a bug is wrong, the experts claim.  
This frenzy is a courtship rite,  
perhaps bred by a kinder bite:  
a kiss may be to blame.

*Toccata*

Brass, bright as summer,  
announce their virility,  
stifling strings and winds.

*Gavotta con due variazioni*

Take every step as if it counts, as if  
your castle, title, wealth, and dignity  
depend upon this dance—and don't be stiff;

confirm the grace of your nobility.  
With every step, show you can take in stride  
the changing times, or just a change in meter;  
adjust as pace and pitch are modified  
and prove that each new pleasure can be sweeter.  
Another step will take you to a realm  
where flute and horn appear to reign at will;  
their sprightly vigor will not overwhelm  
the man who moves with modesty and skill.  
Take steps to learn the ways of long ago,  
and civilize the modern heel and toe.

*Vivo*

Oh, it was a ridiculous match!  
Yes, each one was a pretty good catch  
and deserved not to be left alone,  
but now, really: string bass and trombone?  
In their shared subterranean range  
they began an immodest exchange  
of one-liners and leers and suggestions  
and improper replies to crass questions,  
and they whispered and tickled and slapped—  
and their pairing proved perfectly apt.

*Minuetto*

Modern, traditional,  
Igor Stravinsky'll  
show you how versatile  
this dance can be.

Decorous déjà vu  
languidly leads you through  
musical dactyls: you  
just count to three.

*Finale*

These final flourishes insist  
once more that time can bend and twist,  
that orthodox chronology  
cannot contain the history  
of art: the new flirts with the old  
to sing a story never told  
before, and those who listen learn  
that “neo-classical” can turn  
an expectation on its ear,  
provoking a desire to hear  
much more, but this finale makes  
its point in just the time it takes  
to tell a clever joke—precisely,  
insolently, and concisely.

CATHERINE TUFARIELLO

*Loss*

“Pray to St. Anthony,” Mom would say  
When one of us lost some precious thing:  
The teddy bear with one loose eye,  
A favorite book, the real gold ring

For which I’d emptied my piggy bank  
Impetuously at nine or ten.  
We prayed with zeal, and often, soon  
The prized possession turned up again,

Although St. Anthony took his time  
Sometimes; he had so much to do.  
We must be patient and wait, she said,  
And in the end, he would come through.

I’m grown up now, and though I know  
She is nowhere and everywhere,  
And that lost people are not things,  
The instinct to ask him is still there.

*Christening Day, 1968*

On the left side the eldest girl, five,  
Mugging with motherly pride,  
Is holding her one-year-old sister  
Hooked by the waist; she in turn  
(The soon-to-be feminist), beaming,  
Is clutching a carpenter's level.  
The girl on the right, a bit older,  
Squirms with a grin in her chair,  
More imp than mommy-in-training.  
Suspended behind her pageboy  
And over the opposite shoulder  
Is a doll she's seized by the hair.

The tableau's central figure has gotten  
All four of her daughters decked out  
In harmonizing spring dresses,  
A kind of suburban fugue  
Of cloud-white and summer-sky blue.  
Even the carpenter's level  
Is blue, though the doll missed the memo;  
Her getup is buttercup yellow.  
Mom, freshly permed, wears a rose-  
Pink blouse with a Peter Pan collar,  
Jaunty brown cat's-eye glasses  
And a lipsticked, jubilant smile.

On her lap sits the newest addition,  
Just cleansed of original sin

That morning, and snatched from perdition.  
Swathed in her frothy white gown,  
Still almost monastically bald,  
She gazes away from the camera  
Agog, with a look half-perplexed  
And half-alarmed or appalled,  
As if she is thinking, “Just what  
Have I gotten myself tangled up in?  
Who am I? Where is this planet?  
And why do I itch all over?”

Looking on, you inhabit the same  
Vantage point the photographer (Dad)  
Had, half a century back.  
What joke has he made to provoke  
Such unruly joy from them all?  
Banish the urge to gaze down  
Like an impotent god from above,  
Wringing your hands, in thrall  
To foreknowledge they’re innocent of.  
They’re happy, whatever comes after.  
To look is to join in the laughter  
Erupting out of the frame.



## *Two Rivers*

This is the underworld of dreams,  
Of buried monasteries where  
Water has threaded through the seams  
Of bedrock and the body's prayer

For faultless love. Like sweat or tears,  
The stream is salt. It leaves the lips  
Still burning, parched. A hundred years,  
A thousand, lime dissolves and drips

From ceilings to the floors of caves,  
Diminishing the air's abyss,  
Till undercrofts meet architraves,  
A pair of dripstone columns kiss.

Each drop is love and loss entire,  
Manna and exile's briny fruit.  
So let us be, through long desire,  
Two trees engrafted at the root,

Two rivers merging underground,  
Two arms extending, stretched with such  
Unbroken longing, up and down,  
That finally the fingers touch.

TIM MURPHY

*Prayer for my Sixty-Seventh Pentecost*

Grow little book, now seventy-seventh page:

. . . . . as I age

you are a sovereign cure for all my pains,  
the rusty chains

that weight my legs and slow my blistered feet.

Lord, I entreat:

support me on my gentle, downhill way,  
bless me each day.

You are the reason I have lived to write

by dawn or night

maybe five days in seven every week

a verse to seek

absolution for my manifest wrongs.

Dictate Your songs.

### *Sonnet at Midnight*

Robins sing me awake me at four a.m.,  
another day to work  
at the high calling which I seldom shirk,  
rhyming, then fall in bed at nine p.m.

This afternoon I napped nearly three hours,  
so midnight I just marked,  
and every bird that through this May day larked  
is fast asleep, netted in Hypnos' powers.

Twenty some hours I have been up today,  
pecking at little keys,  
scratching the eczema that plagues my knees,  
breaking only to nap, to eat and pray.

These lines I augur to a silver bin  
to store against the burdens of my sin.

WENDY VIDELOCK

*Thoughts that Occur While Having Brunch  
with the Duds*

The buddha with a chip on his shoulder  
has seen better days. Pretty tasty,  
the hollandaise. The junco deserves  
a better name. The waiter is acting  
a little like Yoda. All the same,  
I probably should have had a mimosa.  
Outside, the magpie has taken wing.  
I probably shouldn't have made that crack  
about universal eggs  
and bacon kings. Who doesn't love  
a brunchly pun. Who knew there were  
so many ways to say one keeps  
one's house clean and buys things  
and has no use for recycling.  
This is the time  
I ought to be practicing the art  
of listening with sympathy,  
and grace, and tea. It's obvious  
they haven't the same inclination  
to flee. We should wrap this up.  
They'll miss their train, they'll miss their maid,  
they'll miss their things.  
I think I might have said aloud  
I wish I were a sandhill crane.

## *Perplexity*

I count among  
the many things  
that cause me some

perplexity:  
a lack  
of curiosity,

a fervent  
ideology,  
the love

of mediocrity,  
and the meaningless  
apology.

*Everybody's a Critic*

Sunny, yes,  
and a little too windy,

edgy,  
sure,

and awfully trendy,

rhymed, yes,  
like a machete,

earnest, check,  
and a little too friendly,

earthy, yep,  
with airs aplenty,  
lengthy, yes,  
and awfully empty.

RACHEL HADAS

*The Long View*

*tantum aevi longinqua valet mutare vetustas*

—*Aeneid* III.415

Unfathomable, geologic time's  
power to change is too vast to take in  
even if we could perch above the earth  
and spy the mountains shrug, the seas go dry.

We can sit on the grass in Central Park  
this first warm Sunday afternoon in April.  
Here changes are too minuscule to see.  
Latticed in tender green,

life's variegated throbbing look as still  
as scattered nappers felled by the noon sun.  
But half an hour is enough to show  
this soporific pause is an illusion.

The angle of light shifts.  
Picnickers stand up and fold their blankets.  
Unfathomable mutability:  
the baby will be three months old tomorrow.

## *Stride for Stride*

*Aeneas maesto defixus lumina vultu  
ingreditur languens antrum, caecosque volutat  
eventos animo scum. Cui fidus Achates  
it comes et paribus cuius vestige figit.  
multa inter sese vario sermone serebant . . .*

—*Aeneid* VI.155–9

Sad-faced, starting at the ground,  
Aeneas, having left the Sibyl's cave,  
tosses blind scenarios back and forth.  
But not alone. His faithful  
companion is right there by his side.  
Taking their time, conferring in low voices,  
they pace together, worry matching worry,  
stride matching stride.

“Fidus Achates”: my Latin teacher taught us  
to snicker at the epithet as too  
predictable. But that's not how I see it  
now. The companion, the fidelity,  
the sharing of a burden  
too heavy to be carried all alone—  
far from predictable. Precious and rare.  
Your younger brother is your dear Achates.  
Worry matching worry, stride for stride,  
you pace and talk together a long time.



## *Iron Chambers*

*ferrique Eumenidum thalami . . .*

—*Aeneid* VI.250

The iron chambers of the Furies—why iron?  
Because those chambers are forever.  
Discord, her snakes of hair  
bound up with bloody ribbons;  
the false dreams sheltering under a great oak's leaves;  
the sleepless eyes of Rumor  
winking underneath her every feather:  
all these phenomena, however fearful,  
seem organic, perishable, bio-  
degradable in the capacious fullness  
of earthly and unearthly time. But iron?  
Iron doesn't readily wear out,  
doesn't change, and neither do the Furies.  
They're laws, they're principles, like gravity.  
Their *modus operandi*  
admits of no exception. They go to work  
and then retire to their iron bedrooms  
and lie down on their army cots and sleep.  
Their ditsy neighbor in Hell's dormitory,  
Discord: those bloody ribbons that she wears  
in her snaky hair—she's borrowed them  
from the wardrobes in those iron rooms.

CHARLES MARTIN

*Mr. Kees Goes to a Party*

The Wilsons had just moved back into town  
From summering on Wellfleet's Money Hill;  
Edmund was in a very grumpy mood,  
And Ann, who hadn't ever met before  
The author of *Axel's Castle* and much else,  
Was shocked a little by his crabbiness.

There were two people whose names I didn't catch  
(It turned out one of them was Philip Rice  
Of the *Kenyon Review*); I spent half an hour  
Trying to figure out just who they were.  
Wilson repeatedly called Philip Rice  
"Mr. Wheelwright." Unable to surmount  
His own confusion, he demanded,  
"You *are* Philip Wheelwright, are you not?"  
Which may be why Rice asked me, *sotto voce*,  
"Is everybody crazy in New York?"

Mary McCarthy was busily explaining  
Who the real heroine of *The Golden Bowl* is,  
While Natalie Rahv told me what all was wrong  
With Dwight Macdonald, and an argument  
Broke out behind me over the correct  
Pronunciation of Randall Jarrell's last name.  
Wilson burst out with, "Accent on the last  
Syllable!" adding that Jarrell was just  
"An adolescent whose infantile obsessions  
Were all that made his poetry worth reading."

The Wilsons left the party before we did.  
We left with Rice and the man whose name I'd missed,  
Although I'd somehow learned he lived and taught  
In Philadelphia. I asked him what he taught.  
"Until this spring I used to be the head  
Of Romance Languages at Haverford;  
My wife was four months pregnant with our first  
Baby and then she shot herself one day."

Now he spends Tuesday evenings with Auden.  
It seems that Auden's in a bad way too:  
Isherwood's off in Hollywood, translating  
The *Gita* with his Guru, who's a Swami,  
But what he really wants to do, of course,  
Is to write a novel about Hollywood.

"Christopher," said our new, still nameless friend,  
"Was fascinated by '*The Last Tycoon*.'"

## *The Afterlife of Mr. Kees*

*“The phone rang. One of the policemen answered. Then he put the handset down on the cradle and told the others that no one had been on the other end.”*

The phone was ringing and to make it stop  
He answered it. Not what you might expect:  
“It wasn’t nobody,” announced the cop.

Friends of his said that Kees seemed full of hope  
Two days before: did none of them suspect?  
The phone kept ringing and it wouldn’t stop

Repeating its summons to adjust and cope,  
Even as Kees made plans to disconnect.  
“It wasn’t nobody,” announced the cop,

Who yesterday had missed Kees poised atop  
The polished railing, momentarily erect:  
A phone was ringing and Kees made it stop

By tilting forward till he began to drop  
From a vertiginous sheer height, unchecked.  
“It wasn’t nobody,” announced the cop.

Waves still spread out from Kees’ great belly-flop  
At frequencies now harder to detect,  
A phone that rings unheard and will not stop.  
“It wasn’t nobody,” announced the cop.

JENNIFER REESER

*What Old Men Told Me As A Boy...*

Among the European set

They pen a story or a rhyme—  
(In order we might not forget)—  
Beginning, “*Once upon a time...*”

But those among the Cherokee

Who pass along the tale, employ  
A different starting strategy:  
“*What old men told me as a boy...*”

It opens every poet’s tale

Telling on telling, without error,  
Whether the story turns you pale  
With laughter, or with starkened terror.

This, their tradition, this, their habit,

Descends to them from ancient ages.  
They sang about the Great White Rabbit  
The way the English sing on pages.

The prideful buzzard’s head made bald;

The murdered eagle’s vengeful brother—  
All by this selfsame phrase are called  
To mind, another on another.

Far as a redstone pipe, they roam,

And distant as long, wampum strings,  
The myths meander, coming home  
To rest in comforts Legend brings.

And many of their stories, stolen  
From other tribes, are lost in fog,  
For where the Running Stream is swollen  
Is often found a beaver's clog.

Thus, never try to trace their source,  
For Cherokees—they stare ahead,  
Reluctant to the past. Remorse  
Is neither born in them, nor bred.

### *Ode to My Silver Buffalo*

My silver buffalo, let me drink  
So boundless from your depths, I think  
The flavor of your fluids flow  
Transparently as molten snow  
Sprinkled beneath a mountain's brink.

Beside me, slake the baking pink  
Adobe, where I lie and blink  
In bright sun on this patio,  
My silver buffalo.

While meats are sizzling, ice cubes clink—  
This crowd stiff as a skating rink—  
From over the horizon, show  
Me shafts of shoulder bones aglow,  
On shamans brushed with India ink,  
My silver buffalo.

## *Strong Feather*

End of the winter, middle March,  
Waking, I find it beneath my quilt  
Clinging to linens the hue of larch,  
Softer and whiter than milk when spilt—  
One petite feather. Its hollow hilt  
Pointing towards me, is curved and long,  
Slightly translucent, and at a tilt.  
How has this feather stayed so strong?

Dainty enough to inscribe fine parch—  
ment, all through the night, without shame or guilt,  
one fluid plume, as stiff as starch  
rests near the footboard an ironsmith built—  
brave as a lover I cannot jilt,  
diffident whether it's right or wrong.  
All through the day, it will not wilt.  
How has this feather stayed so strong?

Somehow unflinching, and yet, not harsh,  
Dropped from the crown of a crane or stilt  
Wading in some indiscriminate marsh,  
Rid of all filthiness now, grit and silt,  
Bend to my question's quick, echoing lilt,

Grandfather Dashing Stream, Grandmother Song,  
Draw near, reveal, dressed in heavenly gilt—  
How has this feather stayed so strong?







# **VERSE ESSAY**



CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

*An Ancient Quarrel*

There is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry, of which there are many proofs, such as the saying of “the yelping hound howling at her lord,” or of one “mighty in the vain talk of fools” . . . Notwithstanding this, let us assure our sweet friend and the sister arts of imitation that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered State we shall be delighted to receive her—we are very conscious of her charms; but we may not on that account betray the truth.

—Plato, *The Republic*, Book X

Reader, beware: this poem has designs

On you, your thinking, everything you take

As read when you proceed along the lines

Laid down by truth and logic. It can make

No sense at all if intellect confines

Its blessing to those texts that never shake

Thought’s empire in a way that undermines

Linguistic order merely for the sake

Of rhyme and meter. Metaphors condense

Some dubious proposition, while the sound

Is not so much “an echo to the sense”

As what permits verse-music to confound

All governance of reason or dispense

With logic till the fallacies abound,

Tropes multiply in error’s self-defence,

And so we finish up with Ezra Pound

Still ranting in his cage. Let's not deny  
The evidence: take Eliot, Pound, and Yeats,  
Plus poet Lawrence, then consider why  
The life-and-times stuff always complicates  
The issue at some crucial point whereby  
Their ranking with the literary greats  
Strikes us as somehow ethically awry  
Unless indeed the poet's mind creates,

As Eliot said, works that should bear no trace  
Of the mere human being whose travails  
Were their apparent theme. What if the case  
Looks bad for those high modernists, yet fails  
To generalize? Just take another base—  
Line choice of poets and you'll find the scales  
May tip the other way if those you place  
As counterweights are not (let's say) all males

With sexual hang-ups, all completely sold  
On fascist politics, or all crack-brained  
Enough to need some mythic scheme to hold  
Their art and life together. Yet what's gained  
By this defensive move, if truth be told,  
Makes no great odds against the old, deep-grained  
Mistrust that's kept the boundaries patrolled  
From Plato down and zealously contained

Rhyme's threat to reason safely on the side  
Of lies or nonsense. Poetry they deem  
Unfit to warrant reason's bona fide  
Enforced by sundry variants on the theme  
Of "logic rules," in which case woe betide  
The poets, sophists, and their suspect team

Of word-artificers. Though they replied,  
That other lot, with boosts of self-esteem

Renaissance or Romantic in their style  
Of counter-claim, the old charge never quite  
Lost its presumptive right to put on trial  
Whatever seeming truths the poet might  
Rhapsodically convey and so beguile  
The reader as to win assent despite  
Their better judgment. Thus the logophile  
Is torn both ways, between the sovereign right

Of *logos*—that of reason as the one  
And only self-legitimizing source  
Of truthful speech—and all the *logoi* spun  
By word-spell weaving poets in the course  
Of that old logomachia once begun  
By Plato *versus* Homer. So the force  
Of dialectic's marshalled first to stun  
Its rival, then impose the strict divorce

That kept the *logos* properly apart  
From all those errant word-games that betrayed  
The tricky essence of the poet's art  
As simply what allowed them to persuade  
The credulous and bid them take to heart  
Some pseudo-truth or argument gainsaid  
By a mere moment's thought. Yet here we'll start,

Perhaps, to wonder if the points thus made  
In reason's cause by reason's favoured sorts  
Of reasoning, especially points scored  
At poetry's expense, might signal thought's

Old hedgehog tendency to take on board  
Whatever prickly strategy purports  
To keep it safely curled up and afford  
Protection when some metaphor distorts  
The proper sense of things. What they ignored,

Those hard-line literalists, was that which lay  
Within the poets' gift and might require  
The kind of impropriety that they  
Turned to advantage, yet with no such dire  
Mind-blowing consequences as dismay  
The heirs of Plato whose own texts aspire  
To a plain style whereby to keep at bay  
Poetic language-games. Else these might fire

Strange passions of the kind that Plato kept,  
Or tried to keep, beneath prosaic wraps  
Yet hidden in plain view because they leapt  
Off every page in metaphors or gaps  
Of reasoning. The heirs find these inept  
Or blame them on some momentary lapse  
From logic's rule while poet-types accept  
That they're the sort of word-event that taps

Into some language-region quite unknown  
To the plain-sense brigade, or into some  
As yet unregimented meaning-zone  
Where echoes of an ancient quarrel come  
Once more to haunt our thoughts. "What must be shown,  
Not said" would surely strike the Logos dumb,  
According to Saint Ludwig, though his own  
Vast *Nachlass* might suggest he failed to plumb



Such silent depths. The issue takes a whole  
    New spin when Socrates, near death, avows  
That poetry and music charm the soul  
    More deeply than philosophy allows,  
That maybe logic's steely thought-control  
    Has failed him, and that therefore he'll espouse,  
In his short time remaining, the new role  
    Of one whom flute and poem can arouse

To heights of ecstasy unglimped by those,  
    His former self among them, who'd decree  
Such pleasures alien to the sober prose  
    Of philosophic discourse. Here we see  
What happens when one language-party goes  
    Its own way, touts itself as master-key  
To truth, and claims sole warrant to disclose  
    All that's worth knowing to the devotee

Of that vocation. Poetry, and they'll  
    Appeal to image, metaphor, and all  
The ways that poems manage to unveil  
    Truths that deliver us from logic's thrall;  
Philosophy, and likely they'll avail  
    Themselves of some device to reinstall  
Sound logic as thought's organon and fail-  
    Safe method for ensuring one not fall

Into some latest version of the same  
    Linguistic-logical confusions that,  
Conversely, guaranteed one's language-game  
    Turn out nonsensical. Applied off pat  
By partisans each creed distributes blame

And praise by harking back to the old spat  
Billed “Plato *versus* Homer” in the name  
Of some high calling destined to fall flat

On the sharp ears of those whose temperament  
Found ample room not only for the kinds  
Of intellectual stimulus that went  
With exercise of thought for agile minds  
But also for how poets may invent  
New ways to see beyond whatever blinds  
The stubborn literalist or represent  
New worlds beyond the habitude that binds

Our dulled perception to the fixed routine  
Of common usage. Yet it’s still a touch  
Too pat, too neat, let’s say, too squeaky-clean  
As well as sub-Hegelian if such  
A happy settling for the in-between  
Of those twin poles becomes a straw to clutch  
Hopefully at for poet-thinkers keen  
That their allegiance seem not over-much

Committed either way. Perhaps we’d best  
Be less accommodating, more up-front  
Or confrontational if we’re to test  
The poet’s claim to truth and not just shunt  
That issue off into a siding lest  
Those gibes of Plato turn into such blunt  
And heavy instruments that, in the quest  
For virtue, poetry should bear the brunt

Of every charge that reason ever brought  
Against its foes. They ranged from those it cast

As idiots or muddle-heads untaught  
    In logic's ways to those it roundly classed  
As gross corruptors of the laws of thought  
    And hence—the jury verdict goes—as past  
All hope of somehow learning to comport  
    Themselves with more sagacity at last

Once freed from the delusion that led Keats,  
    Absurdly, to promote “beauty is truth,  
Truth beauty” as a formula that meets  
    Truth's minimal demands, or take such sooth-  
Saying twaddle as a dictum that defeats  
    The cold abstractions of the logic-sleuth  
By mere word-magic. Yet if this one cheats  
    The reader by implying “how uncouth

To raise these logic-chopping points when there's  
    So much of truth and beauty to be had  
From heartfelt paradox,” the question bears  
    More pondering when to Keats's lines you add  
Celan's rebuke to anyone who errs  
    So far as to metaphorize the bad  
Reality that hits us unawares  
    Through facts and dates that leave the reader glad

To find a refuge in the usual view  
    Of poetry as handily dispensed  
From rules of plain truth-telling. So if you  
    Take them as less-than-literal or ring-fenced,  
Those passages, by dint of some taboo  
    On facts in poems you'll run up against  
His imagery of smoke or ash as true  
    In the most metaphorically condensed

Yet brute or plain-prose sense. Else you'll have failed

Celan's first test of readers well equipped  
To cope with everything that so assailed

His memory that he must needs encrypt  
Its import not in some discreetly veiled

Symbolic sense but rather in a script  
Whose chiaroscuro characters entailed  
A more prosaic reading duly stripped

Of all such poetry as might distract

Attention from whatever served to fix  
His literal intent. Plain statement backed

By abstinence from anything that ticks  
The "poet" box would, so he thought, bring fact

Back with a vengeance and so knock for six  
Those figural contrivances that lacked  
The will to leave behind the bag of tricks

Called "poetry." Let exegetes refrain

From their old pact with poets of a more  
Compliant character whose usual strain

Of symbol, allegory, or metaphor  
Gives ample scope for comment in a vein

Accordant with the freedom to explore  
New ways and means of finding some arcane  
Significance. This led them to ignore

Such details as would tend, if taken straight

Or strictly à la lettre, to exceed  
In power of utterance all that we equate,

Us adepts of evasion, with the need  
That metaphor provide a buffer-state

Between ourselves and things of which we read  
In its glass darkly so as to negate  
The shock of that which otherwise would feed  
Our darkest terrors. Evidence enough,  
You might think, for the prosecution line  
That has a poet like Celan say “Stuff  
Your poetry,” or anyway define  
His purpose as one long attempt to slough  
Off all that preciousness and re-assign  
The poet’s role as not just acting tough,  
Like vandals set to ruin culture’s shrine  
Or speaking truth to power (though that’s no doubt  
A large part of it), but as what insists  
On writing things down literally without  
The verbal detours or the tropic twists  
That once permitted poetry to flout  
All the fine protocols that truth enlists  
On its side of this immemorial bout  
Of *Denker* versus *Dichter*. Though bare fists  
Have now been put away we’d better grant  
One point to those of Plato’s heirs for whom  
“Poetic truth” remains a phrase they can’t  
But find oxymoronic. If there’s room  
In poetry for sayings that enchant  
And elevate, still we should not presume  
Too readily that some alternate slant  
On kindred themes won’t conjure thoughts that loom

Uncomfortably large across the long  
And still unfolding history of wars  
Provoked and waged through poetry and song  
From Homer on. There's no crusade or cause  
So bad that bards won't answer like a gong  
Or put their tender consciences on pause,  
Extol the right and castigate the wrong  
As if vouchsafed to them alone by laws

Of natural justice allied to the gift  
For moral divination that ensures  
They judge aright when others go adrift.  
Yet it's just this self-certainty that lures  
Them way off-course, like modernists who sniffed  
At all proposals save their drastic cures  
For Europe's malady and gave short shrift  
To wiser, more pacific overtures

Of truth to power that grasped at neither horn  
Of the old fake dilemma. This demands  
"Under which king, Bezonian?" holds in scorn  
All thought of compromise, and understands  
By "truth" a mode of discourse either shorn  
Of metaphor or such that it expands  
To fill all history with fictions born  
In those mytho-poetic hinterlands

Where Yeatsian portents of apocalypse  
And Pound's cage-rattling Rapallo tirades  
Still echo. So imagination tips  
Too quickly into conjuring the shades  
Of ancient warriors or running clips

From epic movies till the war-brigades  
Recall some face that launched a thousand ships  
And once again its poetry invades

Mind, heart, and culture. Then the poet's job  
Is clear enough: keep stoking the old fires,  
Rework those tropes that mobilised the mob,  
Devise whatever myths the age requires,  
And be prepared once in a while to lob  
A metaphoric bombshell that inspires  
The arty types unwilling to hobnob  
With those whose truth-preservative desires

Encourage a more literalist approach  
To any narrative of war and its  
Brute consequences. These require we broach  
The matter in a way that closely fits  
The factual evidence lest myth encroach  
On history by deleting all the bits  
That don't so fit and making sure to coach  
Its adepts with the self-assembly kits

In fiction's user-guide. This says: though *res*  
*Gestae* should not be mixed up with *historia*  
*Rerum gestarum*, still the many ways  
Of plot-construction—from *sic transit gloria*  
To Whiggish narratives—suggest it pays  
To shop around in various emporia,  
Peruse the range of story-lines, and raise  
The joint claim of *poiesis* and *theoria*

To new-found heights. This tempts it to forgo  
That quaint idea of segregating what

Old-style *historia* takes itself to know  
On factual warrant arduously got  
By long research and what its methods owe  
To all the deft contrivances of plot  
And discourse. Hence the shrewdly managed flow  
Of narrative events that shows we're not

Here in the hands of a historian whose  
First obligation is to get things right  
On Clio's terms, but one for whom the muse  
Of poetry requires that they should write  
Such tales as a skilled dramatist might choose  
So as first to astonish, then delight  
(A classic formula) and thus infuse,  
In good Horatian style, some pleasing flight

Of fancy into history's bitter pill  
Of factual discipline. Yet who'll deny  
The counter-claim: that some war-poets' skill  
In verse-technique or plentiful supply  
Of metaphor can't hide the strength of will  
It took to get those poems out and vie  
With other poets' efforts to instil  
A jingo-creed. This prompted some to die

Like cattle, and the others first to kill  
Then die like prize-bulls led to slaughter by  
The far from un-poetic power to thrill  
Responsive temperaments in those whose high-  
Toned rhetoric promised swiftly to fulfil  
Their inchoate desires. Although we try,  
Like this, to sort poetic good from ill  
As if the crucial difference must lie



In some marked feature that the standard drill  
Of Eng Lit Crit should help us to descry  
With reasonable accuracy, still  
The issue is apt to baffle or defy  
(As here) our need to answer it until,  
As theories fail, we're left to satisfy  
The need for grist to our vexatious mill  
With poems no high tone can overfly.



# **ESSAY**



EMILY R. GROSHOLZ

*Poetry and Philosophy: Keats' Forest of the Mind*

Plato was famous for his hostility to poets, though his dialogues are full of echoes of Homer and the (very poetic) pre-Socratic philosophers, and his myths and similes are undeniably prose poems. Aristotle wrote a whole treatise on poetry, the *Poetics*, that focused on tragedy and epic, and helped us to recognize the distinctions among, and importance of, plot, character, and spectacle. He explained the essential role of the moment of surprise or reversal at the heart of a plot (which corresponds to the unexpected complexity of characters and the social milieu in which they act). And his concept of character also shows up in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in the *Rhetoric*, and in the *Politics* as well, bringing all those treatises into relation, and reminding us of the political dimension of poetry. There are many reasons why we tell stories. Lucretius turned the atomist doctrines of Democritus and Epicurus into poems, and Boethius interspersed his prose in the *Consolation of Philosophy* with poems, a theodicy written in prison as he awaited his execution in Rome at the hands of Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king.

It seems to me (though this is a broad generalization) that theology in the European Middle Ages, and then science in the Early Modern period, alienated philosophy from poetry. (However, Donald Davie does a good job of reading certain texts of Berkeley as a middle term between eighteenth-century science and poetry.<sup>1</sup>)

But then poetry returns to the embrace of philosophy around 1800 with Romanticism: Goethe, himself a philosophical scientist as well as a poet, maintained serious exchanges with the dramatist Schiller, the idealist philosopher Fichte, and with Herder and Schlegel, who were both poets and philosophers. Wordsworth, with his

sister Dorothy and his friend Coleridge, went to Germany to study philosophy, and brought the ideas of Kant back to England, where they fed the kind of Romanticism that had already been brewing there, soon to intoxicate the younger generation of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. (Living in Germany inspired Coleridge, but mostly made Wordsworth homesick: he wrote his “Lucy” poems there.)

Idealists, inspired by Malebranche and Berkeley in one sense, and by Kant and Fichte in another, tend to turn the world inside out: what seems to be the outer world proves to be within us. Things are ideas for Berkeley; things are things, but only because the mind organizes and unifies them, for Kant. The first kind of idealism brings the infinite into relation with the finite: the cosmos is infinite, but it is an idea, and so encompassed by our finite minds; an earlier version inspires Leibniz, who claims that every human mind is a mirror of the whole cosmos, so that human thought is an imitation of God. Both kinds of idealism tends to spiritualize the material world, and so too, especially, our terrestrial environment.

So in Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” the poet finds himself in a dark forest, as he wrestles with some unhappiness: “In some melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless.” Failing a glass of wine, or the company of exuberant Greek gods, the nightingale’s song seems to be the best source of consolation. It comes to him, or rather he is conducted to the song, “on the viewless wings of Poesie.” Is the nightingale really there, a real bird, or is it imagined? Is Keats really in a forest or not, as he is inspired to write the poem, or while he writes the poem? Wherever he is, there is no light, “save what from heaven is with the breezes blown / Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.” He must guess what flowers bloom there (hawthorne, eglantine, violet, musk-rose), guided only by their scent; vision fails and he can only smell and hear. “Darkling I listen. . . .” He thinks of death, that other darkness. And he reflects on

the immortality of the nightingale's song: "The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown," which seems to lift the bird and its song out of time and place. But then he seems, in the poem, to evoke a forest, a real forest: "thy plaintive anthem fades / Past the near meadows, over the still stream, / Up the hill-side. And now 'tis buried deep / In the next valley-glades." And yet. The last two lines of the poem, which follow that rather precise evocation of an English landscape, are these: "Was it a vision or a waking dream? / Fled is that music—do I wake or sleep?" Perhaps the nightingale is just an idea, a song, and indeed so too the woods across which its light is filtered and the music disappears.

We might raise the same question about the woods in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," for they are presumably painted on the urn, not real. Keats writes of them: "Ah, happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed / Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu." And the transition from sight to hearing and smell that we noted in "Ode to a Nightingale" here carries us from hearing to some act of conscious reception that is even more refined and mysterious, a sixth sense, since that scene on the urn is of course silent, though it harbors musicians. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on; / Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd, / Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone." The problem with song is that it is temporal, and time sweeps everything away; but pictured music (especially traced on an ancient Grecian urn), he writes, addressing the silent form, "dost tease us out of thought / as doth eternity."

Keats is known for articulating the notion of "objective correlative." Donald Davie notes in a review of Charles Tomlinson's *Seeing is Believing*, that a poet "may proceed from himself outward, starting with a state of feeling in himself and seeking an objective correlative for it; or he may start with perceptions of the objective world, and move inward to find a subjective correlative for them in

a state of feeling he induces or imagines.” He notes that Tomlinson typically takes the second path.<sup>2</sup> Yet this observation depends on the distinction between objective and subjective, which Idealism tend to confound. In some poems, Keats’ poetic idealism seems to turn the world inside out, as if it were a great Klein bottle whose inside and outside cannot be distinguished. The things of the world are ideas, but they are no less thing-like for being ideas. So at the end to “Ode to Psyche,” he writes,

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane  
In some untrodden region of my mind,  
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,

Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:  
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster’d trees  
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;  
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,  
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull’d to sleep;  
And in the midst of this wide quietness  
A rosy sanctuary will I dress

    With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain,  
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,  
With all the gardener Fancy e’er could feign,  
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:  
And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
That shadowy thought can win,  
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
To let the warm Love in!

The trees are “branched thoughts,” that grow in “some untrodden region” of the poet’s mind, a “working brain” that is a “wreath’d trellis” whose flowers are stars. And the poet’s soul is a window, an



open window, “a casement ope at night.” These must be some of the strangest lines of poetry ever added to the English canon, and yet they do after all capture something essential about the human soul. For Keats surely means that those trees and stars are real; and yet, like an open window, the soul has let them in and made them its own.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Donald Davie, “The Language of Science and the Language of Literature 1700-1740,” in *Older Masters: Essays and Reflections on English and American Literature* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), 80-117.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Davie, Review of Charles Tomlinson’s “Seeing is Believing,” in *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (April 1959), 189-195; reprinted in *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977).



# **INTERVIEW**



RUSSELL DAVIS

## *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem*

### *Interview with Fred Turner*

*“Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men.  
Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth,  
now the living timber bursts with the new buds  
and spring comes round again. And so with men:  
as one generation comes to life, another dies away.”*

—Homer, *The Iliad*, Book X, trans. Robert Fagles

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been in love with the written word in all its wondrous forms. From the precise imagery of a poem, to the well-crafted line of fiction, and from the startling admission in a memoir to the deeply satisfying conclusion of a thoughtful article, my life has been one long love affair with the English language. As an undergrad, I principally studied poetics, switching over to fiction more out of a (not unrealistic) fear of starvation than out of a preference for the form. For me, poetry is the primal song of the human experience—a method that allows us to carve out in pure imagery of words our past, present, and future.

Science fiction is considered the literature of ideas, which perhaps explains at least some of my own attraction to it. I’m fascinated by the notion of the writer as a prognosticator of the future of humanity, and the challenge of the genre itself grows harder with each passing day. Much of our daily lives—the Internet, video chatting, smartphones, computers, and so much more—were the elements of science fiction when I was young. It seems to me that the future is closer now, yet harder to predict, as technological change approaches light speed.

Asked to take on the challenge of reading Frederick Turner’s

newest work, *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem*, and then interview him, I must admit to an initial hesitation. This wasn't a grand fictional adventure in the sense of Frank Herbert or Vernor Vinge, but a 300+ page masterwork written in blank verse. That it was published by Baen Books, a well-known science fiction publisher, speaks, I think, to its ability to convey story to every kind of genre reader.

I must add to my confession that after reading it, my deepest fears were confirmed: not only was it good science fiction, extrapolating a believable, not-too-distant future, where climate change has reached catastrophic levels, but it was an outstanding work of poetry—the kind of poetry that always makes me feel like an imposter of some kind, a toddler playing with words at the feet of those, who, like Frederick Turner, have mastered formal verse in a way I can only dream about. Nonetheless, I determined to try and ask him questions based not just on my reading of the poem, but on some of the criticism I'd read about it online, as well. I've interviewed many writers in the past, but nothing prepared me for what you're about to read: a series of incredibly thoughtful and deep answers about the work, the nature of science fiction, the demands of epic poetry, and the challenges of bringing *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem* to the page in a way that would exceed the expectations of even the most demanding genre reader.

**RD: *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem* is unabashedly science fiction—a not unreasonable extrapolation of Earth in the not too distant future, especially in regard to climate change. What challenges does science fiction present in terms of the poetic form?**

FT: The problem with all science fiction is already that of exposition—how does one explain all the science, technology, and socio/historical extrapolation that are essential to the understanding of the

story? One can't just lecture the reader—that breaks the spell of story at once. Of course, science fiction addicts are often more interested in the *mise-en-scène* than in the story, but it's a big obstacle for the general reader. The problem is compounded in poetry, especially now when the more leisurely and capacious kinds of poetry have been largely sacrificed to the demand for economy, compression, and lyric intensity.

My response was to treat the problem as a huge opportunity, a gift. Poetry, unlike prose, has been stuck in a pretty narrow range of vocabulary for over a hundred years, despite manful efforts by folks like Eliot, Auden, and Merrill. The whole firehose of new scientific language, with its wonderful uncouth and barbarous sounds, its indication of entirely new concepts and ideas, its air of grand and terrible mystery, its often Puckish sense of humor, is open and spouting meaning in enormous gouts. We've got a whole new set of runes and glyphs to play with—like Norman French for the Anglo-Saxons, or Latin for Milton. Some of my own favorite bits are the technical ones that shock some of the poem's more orthodox reviewers, as they would once have been shocked by sexual vocabulary. In addition, the American/British language has accumulated a spectacular number of new idioms and phrases and acronyms, used by SF writers but mostly scorned by poets. They're ready and willing to be part of a new linguistic collage, and can suggest backstories in themselves.

Of course, I used time-honored tricks of exposition—as old as Homer, or older—like having a character explain a situation or tell a story to another character, where there's a dramatic tension in whether the hearer will be convinced, and the hearer's puzzled questions, proxies for the reader's, will elicit the nub of the idea. Noah's recruiting of his team gives ample opportunity for this sort of thing, without violating the fabric of the story or having the poet annoyingly buttonhole the reader directly.

A further layer of exposition is afforded by the narrator, Nemo, whose own drama in being recruited for a poetic job for which he feels unqualified adds a further impulse for getting at the ideas embedded in the poem. His animadversions and apologies to the reader add, I hope, a distinct level of comedy and pathos to the story, as he wrestles with the task he has been given and so reveals to us, as Milton does in his many asides, his own spiritual and psychological struggle. More later on this.

**RD: This isn't your first foray into science fiction by any means. In 1978, you published *A Double Shadow*, your only published novel, which is also science fiction. You've also published two other epic poems in the genre: in 1985, *The New World*, and in 1988, *Genesis: An Epic Poem*. What is your attraction as a writer to science fiction, which in some ways, insists that the author is also a prophet?**

FT: Scholars of epic insist that epic deals with the core values and cosmology of a society, the interface between its cultural world and what lies beyond it, and the heroes who guard, explore, or violate that boundary. The scholars are right; for our own society those values, that cosmos, those boundaries and often those heroes are essentially conceived in scientific and technological terms. Science fiction is the genre that takes this assertion for granted, and all science-fiction, it seems to me, is a seedbed of new epic, as old myths, rituals, hero stories, fairy tales, and religious accounts of revelation were the seedbed of the early epics.

The argument has been made that contemporary science and technology have no place in epic (for instance, in the shocked reaction of some critics to my earlier epics, *The New World* and *Genesis*, which have now apparently been accepted into the epic canon). But



Odysseus and Achilles use the full panoply of up-to-date nautical, architectural, agricultural, military, metallurgical, and culinary technology belonging to Homer's time; indeed, Homer anachronistically provides his 11th century B.C. heroes with some gadgetry not available until three or four hundred years after their time. Milton gives his devils artillery, speculates about Galileo's astronomy, and includes copious references throughout to seventeenth-century technology, world exploration, biology, and physics. Virgil and Dante do the same sort of thing. The science and technology of our own time is as essential to our epoch as theirs was to them, and no claim for an epic of our times could be made that ignores the fact that we don't use chariots and bronze shields anymore. Indeed, the artistic challenge is precisely to domesticate the burgeoning new vocabularies and ideas of our own times into the meaningful matrix of epic.

All the really big moral, political, and existential stories of our time involve science and technology: genetics and reproductive science; increased longevity; economic abundance; the challenges of the space age; our responsibility for our planet and its ecosystems; the dangers, opportunities, and massive ethical questions of cyber-based intelligence; the new military technology; the challenges of new scientific conceptions and definitions to the ancient systems and vocabularies of moral values and cultural traditions. Frankly, I'm not sure that any fiction today that does not take science and technology into account can say anything very important. The poet's task as teacher is partly to instruct by making stories that put all the science and technology into play to see how they work.

The scholars point out that the usual epic move, to jerk the reader or hearer out of the ordinary contemporary anecdote or tale and into an *illo tempore* where the fundamentals can be experienced, is to set the story in the distant past. But in this emphasis the scholars ignore the prophetic element of epic, its envisagement of a future

that is just as much a place for the investigation of core values, feelings and ideas as is the distant past. Think of Anchises' posthumous prophecies to Aeneas of the future of the Roman Empire, or Dante's persistent anticipations of the Last Judgment, or, most powerful of all, the Hebrew prophets with their vast prognostications. The prophets—all the way down to St. John of Patmos and his own apocalypse—add to the two great old epics of the past, *Genesis* and *Exodus*, the element of futurity that, with the exception of the promise of many descendants, is only implicit in the founding stories. By their fruits you shall know them, said Jesus, implying that true moral knowledge is at least as much a matter of outcomes—of fruits and their seeds—as it is of roots and origins.

An epic of the future is more than permitted by the epic tradition, but—especially now—demanded by it. We are in a situation where what we do in the next few decades will not only determine the future of our species, but perhaps that of the life of our world. And further, it will retroactively determine what our core values are and were. By their fruits we shall know them. And, of course, science and the technologies it enables are now the medium in which those choices must be made.

This predicament implies further that we can no longer have the luxury of separating fact from value. Facts—the physics, chemistry, biology, and anthropology of the world—are now dramatic actors in the stage of ethics, morality, and esthetics. *Apocalypse* is bent on infusing science and machines with moral and spiritual significance, and on incarnating in hard fact our most ancient and beautiful conceptions of goodness and beauty. This implies a new sort of metaphor, one in which a piece of technology is conceived as a concrete allegory or enactment of a value and an idea. This would be an addition to the current stock of poetic devices. A new “epic simile,” so to speak; or is it an old one? Consider the shield of

Achilles. Here is my explanation of the idea in *Genesis: An Epic Poem*, which is embedded in a description of the artificial wings used by the human inhabitants of a future Mars:

If you have ears to hear. The metaphor,  
This feathered glory I ask you to put on,  
Is not intangible, light though it is.  
Consider how recursive is its order:  
First, the full wing itself, white as an angel;  
Then the wing's wings, which are its fletch of feathers,  
Each with a tuft of warm and gentle down;  
But then the feathers too are feathered with  
The crispy barbs that clothe the inplithed quill  
To form the rigid vane; and these have barbules,  
Which again bear hooklets, set to catch  
Any chance split and heal it without seam.  
(The Sibyl likened wings to our felt time:  
She said that underneath the surface structure  
We knew the time of animals and plants,  
The time of stones and atoms, and of fire.  
So many pens are woven to a pinion,  
The prince's pennon bears his sister's swan.  
Oh fly with it, fly with it, fly with it!)

**RD:** *Apocalypse* is written in blank verse, 10 syllables per line, which is a demanding form at any length. From a writerly perspective, what challenges did *Apocalypse* present, beyond the genre itself, given the length and form?

FT: As I think Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth discovered, the pentameter is a hard form only when one begins working

in it, or when putting together short new pieces after a long time stuck in prose. If one is moderately familiar with the form, and fairly strict with oneself in observing its rules, with a few hundred lines of immersion one begins to think in iambic pentameter, and has to correct oneself in ordinary conversation lest one begin, embarrassingly, to speak in it. Or at least, so I found.

Meter is the best way of remembering language, and if one is writing something one wants to echo and be memorable, it's the natural choice. It's like putting on one's best clothes for a wedding: one would feel awkward in the jeans and t-shirt of ordinary casual speech. My little trick was to put the demotic jeans-and-t-shirt idiomatic language into the meter of ancient grandeur—maybe like a designer who makes an elegant tuxedo out of denim and old leather.

**RD: On Chuck Wendig's blog, *TerribleMinds*, you talk about the importance of having a conflicted narrator, in this case, Nemo. Doesn't this necessarily mean that the narrator is also unreliable to some degree? If so, what is the takeaway then for the reader?**

FT: To answer this question I must backtrack a bit, and ask the question why writers use conflicted narrators at all.

We live in a world that distrusts heroes, and in a nation that for all of its history has believed in democracy and equality. American writers have always struggled with the task of making central characters with sufficient magnitude for great actions and gestures, without arousing ridicule at their fine poses or resentment at their dominating ways and noble rhetoric. The answer that many of our greatest writers have come up with in telling the largest kind of stories about the largest kind of characters is to divide the central figure into two, the doubtful storyteller and the hero to whom the storyteller is reluctantly and critically loyal: Ishmael and Ahab, Nick

Carraway and Gatsby, Jack Burden and Willie Stark. I worried that my central character, Noah Blazo, would attract the sniping of the smart-aleck reader, and so I put that reader into the poem as Nemo, and Nemo took on a reality of his own. For me, Nemo, of all the characters, insisted most upon developing his own story, sometimes to the point where he went much further than I originally intended.

Finding Nemo's voice was essential in being able to write the poem at all. The chief problems I faced in telling this huge story were rhetorical. If the teller of the tale has a big, hectoring, heroic voice, people will find him annoying and find me annoying too—who would believe this blowhard? A related problem was: How can I write something as grand and complex as this story without the full resources of poetry? Prose is a thin and insipid medium by comparison, yet nobody expects stories to be told in verse any more. Another issue was: how can I find a satisfactory stand-in for the reader, who will quite rightly be skeptical and even cynical about the huge claims and actions of the protagonists, only too willing to make fun of the heroes and cut them down to size?

Nemo was the answer to all these problems: he is more or less dragooned unwillingly into telling the story, and is highly doubtful of his qualifications. He is a poet, and has been asked to write the story in poetry, so that's why it's in verse—in a sense the whole thing is a big poetic quotation in an ordinary prose story that doesn't need telling in the prose quotation marks because it's in the poem. *A Pale Fire* without the prose. And Nemo is constitutionally a skeptic and an ironist, so the reader can trust him to reflect his or her own doubts. If anything, I feel that I deflected so much ire from my heroes and heroines by means of the rather wussy Nemo that some readers did not get how remarkably unwussy they are until a second reading. Such readers confused Nemo's voice with mine. Nemo is embarrassed by his story; I am not.

I do think the process of saving the world must have poetry at its center. The thing about a true poet is that despite all his or her flaws s/he carries this huge prophetic truth-telling gift that must be given to the world at any cost. The gift is to again and again struggle to create a language that can contain all human meanings. Only with such a language can people work together. So Nemo, though he himself doubts it, is essential to the story. His unreliability is the reliable proxy of the readers' doubts. We see his biases and (very generous) interests and loves in the poem, his partisanship, his vulnerability to being charmed, and his complaints and disappointments, and this gives us a measure to help us make up our own minds about the actions of the poem.

Through Nemo I was able to escape from my own lyric voice and give it to the poem and its characters. Nemo is not at all like me (except for his qualms about how good a poet he is), and this paradoxically liberated me to be a dramatist rather than a monologist. Bakhtin was utterly wrong about epic in calling it monologic rather than dialogic, as he claims for the novel; one wonders if he had actually read an epic. On the contrary: in epic, major voices speaking major things conflict radically on issues that are perpetually alive; in novels, all the individuals, including the author, talk about parochial things in the same average voice and within the same accepted social context—and get into trouble with their readers when some character speaks in a larger or stranger way. (This is unfair, I know, but it's a forceful way of presenting a maybe different perspective.)

**RD: To me, one of poetry's greatest strengths is in its ability to be precise. Certainly, *Apocalypse* is precise in numerous ways. The diction, word choice, and the imagery are the work of a poet with excellent control. This suggests to me that every character's name was chosen for a specific reason. Would you**

**comment on some of the naming choices you made, and what, if anything, was the motivation behind those names?**

FT: Naming is a fascinating game for any author of fiction. Names are little surprise packages, house gifts, party crackers, a reward to readers who care enough to open them up. So, obviously Nemo recalls the haunted rebel sea-captain/scientist of Jules Verne, the grandmaster of all fictions of this sort. The name means “Nobody” or “Nameless” in Latin, and thus jumps us back another two and a half thousand years to Odysseus, who fools the ogre Polyphemus by calling himself “Nobody” (“Oudos” in Greek). The fact that it’s Nemo who is thus implicitly associated with the great mariner and warrior, and not Noah, is itself an intentional puzzle. There’s yet another parallel. Melville’s storyteller also adopts a pen-name: “Call me Ishmael.” Ishmael was the rejected heir of Abraham (taken up by Muslims as their ancestor). So Nemo, naming himself a “Nobody” and recognizing himself as he does in Book 9 as a sort of outcast, without a future lineage, is claiming a peculiar poet’s role: to be the essential truth-telling outsider who can verify the legitimacy of the insiders. And the question is implicitly raised: is Noah an Ahab? And what is his great white whale?

The name “Noah” is more obvious, but in so naming my hero I had in mind also the different flood story of *Gilgamesh*, and the Noah-figure of that poem, Utnapishtim, who, having been immortalized by the gods, is the oldest living human being—as Blazo evidently is at the end of the poem. Utnapishtim’s test of Gilgamesh as a candidate for immortality, a test that Gilgamesh fails, is the climax of that poem, like the immortality test at the end of mine. “Blazo” is a rare but persistent name (an ancestral name of a poet friend of mine). But I chose it especially because my idea of the potent ritual symbol, that does what it says, is that it is a blaze that the explorer cuts on a tree

or marks on a rock when entering unknown territory, showing how to get back and not get lost, and blazing the trail for others. That idea is not originally mine, but that of the Ndembu people I lived with as a boy in central Africa when I was there with my parents, the anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner. The Ndembu word for “blaze” in this sense is “chijikijilu.” I added the Latin suffix, “o” to the root “blaz,” turning it into a first person present verb, “I blaze.” He blazes trails. And, of course, as the inventor of the solar battery, his work is all about blazing fires of various physico-chemical varieties.

Ala Ifa Eshu: Ala is the Igbo earth-mother; Ifa is a variant of the Yoruba name “Ife,” literally “Love,” but with a sort of pun on “Eve” or “Eva;” “Eshu” is the mischievous Yoruba trickster-god, Alusi in Igbo, Legba in New World Vodoun and Nkishi among the Ndembu where I grew up (and into whose cult I was initiated at 9 years old). As a descendent of Yorubas and Igbos, Ala is a reconciliation of two warring tribes. Her Christian family respects the old naming traditions.

Anneliese Grotius: Anneliese is like the name of a very beautiful Dutch poet I know; Hugo Grotius was the great Dutch political theorist and jurist who devised the international law of the sea.

Barsoomian is an Armenian name that recalls Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Barsoom, Mars, the red planet.

Ellie Tranh: There was an Ellie who was an old flame of mine, and Tranh is the name of an excellent Vietnamese poet I know. “Tranh” means both “image” and “war, contention.”

Sakeru Chamundenda: Sakeru was an Ndembu boyhood friend, Chamundenda a great Ndembu woodcarver.

Chandrasekhar was a brilliant Indian mathematician who helped establish the nature of black holes. “Engineer” is a regular Parsee (Zoroastrian) Indian surname. Gopal Gaya Sohrab Engineer: “Gopal” (“cowboy”) is one of the names of Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu.



Gaya is the city where the Buddha received enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Sohrab was the great Persian hero in the *Mahabharata*.

Peter Frobisher: “Peter” for me recalls the “Blue Peter,” the naval signal flag summoning onshore sailors to the ship from their leave on land. Martin Frobisher was the English explorer and privateer who sought the Northwest Passage and mapped much of the Arctic.

Kalodendron is my own Greek coinage, from “kalon” (good, beautiful, of high quality) and “dendron,” (tree, especially fruit tree: cognate with “deru,” true, in Indo-European).

Wu Liqiu: “Wu” means “warlike.” It was also the Chinese province especially vulnerable to the great floods of the Yellow River. “Liqiu” means “beautiful autumn.”

Enough. Almost every name in the poem has some kind of obsessively detailed backstory.

**RD: One of the things that comes up again and again in your responses is both the power and necessity of language. Earlier, I asked about poetry’s ability to be precise, but one of the things that fascinates me, as a writer, is the notion of attempting to express what is often inexpressible—particularly grief, despair, loss, etc. We may have words for these events or emotions, but most of us would admit to our essential inability to fully capture the (often tragic) human moments in the written word. Would you respond to your sense of the language’s limitations, even as you strive to exceed them, and the reader’s expectations.**

FT: Language, I think, is a world unto itself, but it is also a portal to other worlds. Through meter, it’s a portal into song and lament and slogan and chant and liturgy and the rhythm of the sob, the crow of laughter, the gasp of love. Through logic into the serene or phantasmagoric world of math and the weird structures that subtend

the physical universe. Through the jargons and technical and trade vocabularies, the political and ethnic and age-cohort and gender codes, into our various strange forms of human solidarity. Through memorization and mimesis into drama, theater, oratory, character, wit, tragedy. And through story, especially, into all the emotional turns and shocks that can only happen with a backstory, we identify with figures whose interests and emotional wellbeing we adopt as our own.

As you acutely point out, the abstract words for these realms are useful labels but only pale shadows—we must do the actual work of acquiring the group languages and their loyalties, getting the logic right, building the characters through their actions, and above all telling the story. When Skarpheddin says of his father Njal—as the house at Bergthorsknoll burns down above them, surrounded by enemies Skarpheddin has made—“Our father has gone to bed early, which is to be expected—he’s an old man,” the words are perfectly ordinary but utterly heartbreaking because of the story and because of Skarpheddin’s refusal to break down. It’s not the words themselves, but the words as a simple key to open the gates of pent-up feeling, feeling that has been accumulated by story.

This is why I have been trying in my own work and in my critical writings to resuscitate story—as well as meter, logic, expert languages, patois, drama, etc.—in contemporary poetry. Words are not enough without the realms to which the words can be portals.

**RD: Finally, I want to give you a chance to address something specific to some of the criticism I’ve read about *Apocalypse*. The Society of Classical Poets contends, while being highly complimentary of the work itself, that *Apocalypse* is not an epic poem for several reasons, among them, the lack of a central hero and that the work is secular in nature. How do you respond to these ideas about what constitutes an epic poem?**

FT: Thanks, Russell, not only for your excellent and stimulating questions, but for giving me the chance to talk a little about my conception of the nature of epic. I have done my homework on epic: my treatise *Epic: Form, Content, and History* is actually the first book to systematically compare a large global selection of the great epic poems of the world. The point is, the splendid slice of the epic literature with which European and American readers are acquainted is only a fraction of the riches to be found in this pan-civilizational genre; and definitions of epic drawn only from that slice are revealed to be partial and in some ways misleading. Epics in general don't necessarily have 12 books or start in medias res or use epic similes or have invocations or have a single hero, although many do. Much of the Western epic canon itself doesn't have a single hero: *The Iliad* has several, the *Nibelungenlied* has two, *Njal's Saga* has three, *Jerusalem Liberated* has half a dozen, and *Gilgamesh*, the oldest, definitely has two. Though *Exodus* has one, the oldest biblical epic, *Genesis*, has a whole series of them.

And in fact, *Apocalypse* does have a central hero, Noah—or at least among several other heroes and heroines, a primus inter pares. But Noah is a modest, unassuming fellow, with the wry self-mocking reserve of the traditional Texan—think Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call. Only occasionally does he reveal the poetry in his heart. And he is being represented here by Nemo, who loves him but is as ambivalent about him as one is about one's own father. So one has to look at Noah's actions to perceive what is heroic about him. And one has to be able to find a very old man heroic, when the genre seems to call for a young brawny chap. But genres are there to be subverted, as long as in some higher sense they are reaffirmed. Noah goes on being young at heart, after all.

To say that the poem is essentially secular is puzzling. "The Sermon on the Sun" by my Pope Francis III in Book 8 has actually

been used for a devotional purpose by one pair of readers, and the extensive affectionate, critical, sympathetic, and respectful references to many religions, not to speak of the more mystical passages of spiritual experience, attest to a full embrace of the idea of the divine. One might legitimately argue with the poem's radically immanentist theology, but it is a theology, and one much closer, I believe, to the Judeo-Christian sense of the divine as embodied in time than to the Platonist reconstruction of the earlier full-blooded theology, which placed God outside time, passion, and life.

The review cited a particular passage as evidence that the poem denies the creatorhood of God:

Not even nothingness is absolute:  
Zero is just one possibility  
Among all others, so its likelihood  
Is infinitely small upon the spectrum  
Of Cantor cardinalities, themselves  
Infinite and yet further multiplied  
Upon the hybrid Hamiltonian plane.

The reviewer, who by the way is a fine writer and good critic, took the lines this way: For what do the 7 lines add up to? They are a sophisticated way of saying—without being that direct—that God does not exist! That “nothing” existing is unlikely in the scale of all possible numbers; so existence exists, voila, because there is no improbability that it couldn't.

This comment misses the possibility—suggested throughout the poem—that God might be the very process that out of all the inchoate possibilities of different universes, selects whatever kinds of order might have a future and hang together in such a way as to be productive of richer forms of being. That is, God is evolution itself, including at its later stages biological and cultural evolution. I

take that process to be love, or at least its precursor. One can imagine God as transcendent, and outside the physical universe, as the Platonizing religions do; or one can imagine God as immanent, as being inside the world, a different construal of it than the “worldly” one. The poem imagines God in the second way, without denying the advantages of making a clearer break between the divine and temporal existence.

As a boy in Africa about 62 years ago, I had a sort of mystical experience of nature that confirmed me as both a poet and a religious person (I had previously been a sort of humanist atheist, I think). So for me the divine is everywhere and immediate, like color or sound. The idea of having to prove it is absurd—how would I prove that green exists? For me, we’re all neurons in God’s growing brain—as St. Teresa said, “Christ has no body but yours.” But this view of the matter implies that the divine is not someplace else, manipulating everything like the Ed Harris character in Peter Wier’s *The Truman Show*. The divine is here.

But what about the dark and terrible side of mortal existence—death and evil and suffering? The end of *Apocalypse*, where the intrepid adventurers discover that the past is not ever dead and gone, suggests that the destructive side of our experience may ultimately be an illusion. I’m not denying that there is such a thing as tragedy: to be something at one moment means to not be something else and not be at any other moment. And those limitations can be agonizing, as for instance being in love with one’s friend’s spouse, or being for good reason far away from one’s home, or never again being able to have an experience for the first time, or failing at some task or goal that one really chose. Identity itself carries within it the seeds of suffering—that’s unavoidable. But loss through time and destruction may ultimately be healed or even reversed; not only will we be able to prolong our lives indefinitely, we will be able to revisit fully our

previous experiences and those of all the dead.

The moral implications of this would be mind-boggling. Perhaps if we were able to truly mull over our experience and understand it more deeply before it flies away, we might be able to be in paradise with the immanent pervasive spirit at any moment in our lives. But human kind cannot bear very much reality. . . .

So in the worldview of the poem, death is not something to be feared, but more a challenging adventure. The poem construes the universe as the body of which God is the soul; it is a place of wild and joyful creativity, and it preserves everything that it makes.

Indeed, traditional Christianity comes in for a searching critique in *Apocalypse* (as it does in the epics of Milton and Blake, and even Dante). And the poem refuses to grant special priority to any of the world's religions, including atheistic humanism. It does, however, acknowledge a particular insight of Jesus.

Jesus' discovery is simultaneously a moral and existential one. It was a first in all human religions, though almost all religions since have tacitly or explicitly accepted and incorporated it in whole or part. It is that love is the way to fulfill our human destiny, individually and collectively; that love is the true and correct way of seeing the world and each other; and that love is the life of the universe and of ourselves. The way, the truth, the life. Love is God. God is love. When we love, we are godding. When we are loved, we are godded, deified. What are human beings for? To love the world, to help love it into being, to see it and declare it good, and do so especially by loving each other, loving all those lovers that the world's loving process generated.

It's a huge insight, as unexpected as it is simple. Yes, the human race gets propagated by what? Love. And how does evolution work? By the love of males and females for each other, at whatever level; and even before sexuality, the love of the parthenogenetic mother

for the offspring, for the future of its own kind. Even eating: we love our food. Give us each day our daily bread.

Dante got it: the love that moves the sun and the other stars. The world of physics exists by interactions, shared events: by harmonics and entanglement on the quantum level, by attractions and exchanges of particles on the classical physics level, by the prodigious donations of matter and energy by stars in the macrocosm. The sun burns two hundred million tons of its own mass every second, and gives it away to the rest of the universe.

And as for us, what is the human race for? What else, if not for love? Love requires knowledge and observation; we can't love what we can't know or see, and what we love we desire to know better, so science is a form of love. *Homo sapiens* is *Homo amans*. Human love, over and above the routine love of the physical universe, requires an imaginative empathy and "in-feeling" for what is loved. It requires and demands a reciprocal creative act in response to the gifts it is conscious of having received, so love is essential to art and poetry. Love is a maker, it produces and shares by the mechanisms of industry and markets and money, which translate desire into products and distributes them according to demand. Love invents and entertains. Beauty is our word for what is lovable. And what a hell is it for anyone who cannot or will not love. This is not a condemnation, but a fact. We call it depression, and we must love the depressed enough that we get busy and find a way to heal this most terrible of diseases. Love is, must be, healing. Love is happiness; as long as one still loves something or somebody, there is still happiness even in terrible misfortune. If God is the word we use for the destiny of the human race, what the human race is for, whenever we love we are God.

It seemed to me that such a view of things might indeed fulfill the role played by the divine machinery in so many of the great world epics. Epics surely do deal with the sacred, as the reviewer

implied. But the work of poetry, especially epic, is, it seems to me, the recognition of the sacred in the secular, the *illo tempore* in the temporal, *kairos* in *chronos*. That is, it makes symbols and metaphors, blazes at the edge of the known world.







# **REVIEW**



## *A Diminished Thing*

### *Ornament*

Poems by Anna Lena Phillips Bell  
University of North Texas Press, 2017  
73 pages / \$12.95

### *Just Another Day in Just Our Town: Poems New and Selected, 2000-2016*

Poems by Bruce Bennett  
Orchises Press, 2017  
214 pages / \$24.95

### *Peccadilloes*

Poems by Jan Schreiber  
White Violet Press, 2014  
83 pages / \$16.95

DAVID J. ROTHMAN

I have railed elsewhere against the purported tyranny of objectivity in book reviews, especially in the poetry world, whose unspoken assumption is that one cannot possibly write an objective review of a book by a friend, colleague, spouse, co-religionist, and so on. The counterargument is not that one can in fact do so, but rather that there is no such thing in the first place. All that really matters is the integrity of the reviewer and the quality of the argument. If the reviewer has a relationship with the author, state it forthrightly and move on. Why should this be a problem? Assuming such honesty, let the readers judge. I consider James Matthew Wilson a friend

and admire him—and he has written mixed reviews of several of my books. It is a highly worthwhile conversation. Where, exactly, is the problem here? I disagree with him about all sorts of things, but his honesty would make Diogenes happy. Given how many of us know each other in the American poetry world, almost any other approach is disingenuous at best. We should simply declare our ties at the border and proceed.

I know all three of the poets whose books are under review here. Jan Schreiber and I co-founded the Symposium on Poetry Criticism at the conference *Writing the Rockies*, which I direct, more than eight years ago. We have worked together there and elsewhere on many occasions. I have known Bruce Bennett for several decades, consider him a dear friend, and have even presented him with a lifetime teaching award, again at *Writing the Rockies*. I know Anna Lena Phillips Bell less well, but have visited with her at poetry events and again, she has presented at *Writing the Rockies*. All of them have also published in this journal. These facts are no reason not to discuss their books, all of which include much that is engaging and even occasionally quite powerful. Why exclude critical response to their work because we know each other, as if readers cannot judge for themselves and need protection from such decadent patronage? The opposite is the case. If we are to have poetry worth a damn, we need open and meaningful conversation among the people who care most about it, especially if we know each other, not in spite of it. Let the reader be the judge if I pull any punches.

All the books reviewed here announce by their titles that they address that burden of the past, that anxiety of influence, that seems to make many American poets wonder what they can make of a diminished thing. An “ornament” embellishes or decorates something else, but is rarely if ever the main show; “peccadilloes” are sins, but minor

ones; “just” is a synonym for “merely.” The question is how to make poetry—beginning with such modest ambitions. All three answer that question well, one of them brilliantly.

*Ornament* is Anna Lena Phillips Bell’s promising first book, though she has previously published in fine journals and won many fellowships, awards, and scholarships (this book won the 2016 Vassar Miller Prize). Her craft is sure and careful throughout. One of the longer and more ambitious poems, a 19-stanza Sapphic titled “Piedmont,” first appeared in these pages (Vol. 6.2, Spring 2016). While one might wish for a clearer alignment between stress values and their putative source in the lost mists of classical quantitative metrics, and perhaps some stronger lineation (lines ending with “the” and “and” or “or” to fill out the falling metric do not convince), still the poem is filled with both knowledge of the place and its people, coupled with an overbrimming passion and longing that delight. One gets the sweet sense of a poet striving to couple her language to a beloved home and acknowledging the ancient challenge of doing so:

The name can’t  
name the whole, so one of these facts, symbol or  
soul, becomes facile—

still I edge up sideways, hopeful, gathering  
paraphrases, endearments—*sister, sweetheart,*  
*grandpa, trouble, lives-up-the-road, my honey,*  
*tall drink a water.*

In the poem’s conclusion, she again gives us a beautiful and heartfelt list, proper nouns in this case, along with an *ars poetica* of sorts that could apply to much of the book, and even a joking jab at the state to the south:

It can't be enough; it will be  
plenty. Let my beloved be enigmatic—  
memory's sharpest when the thing remembered  
grows distant from us—

so, swiftly as possible, call each a name  
fit for speaking: Blue Ridge, Oconee, Slate Belt,  
River Bend, Chatham, Abbeville, North and, yes,  
South Carolina.

Lovely and passionate as this is, I want more and believe it is possible to articulate such love, as we will see below. I remain unconvinced that “memory's sharpest when the thing remembered / grows distant from us.” Perhaps, at times, but not always. This is why, thank God, grief can fade.

Bell's skills are strong, and the stronger poems in the collection match that exuberant technique with drama that is not quite so enigmatic as suggested in “Piedmont.” “*Limax maximus*” describes the experience of a home-schooled girl dissecting a slug, giving us both the animal and the situation; “Strapless” gives us the kind of mortification only adolescents can feel when things go awry at a high school dance: “Fearing my nipples would betray themselves / beneath their bodice, I donned a strapless bra.” “Strike” gives us the memory of a father's temper. Still, these poems inhabit an early life that does not yet quite seem fully integrated. “Unhomemaking” tells the story of what sounds like a tent that the speaker lived in for the summer, that is now falling apart as winter comes on, “canvas ripped—not enough / to hold what had been home / from winter air.” Yet we never learn what the significance of this loss of such a home is, and this is the challenge with many of the poems. They



are carefully, even at times magically invoked and expressed, and yet one senses there is more lurking beneath the surface that could come forward out of the mysteries of such memory and the painful love of the places where they were forged.

The Romantic expression of the individual's internal life as the purpose of lyric remains a vivid ambition now. Wordsworth haunts these poems in Bell's loving devotion to the place she names again and again as their source, the Piedmont, and her many elegies to the childhood and youth she both enjoyed and endured there. Even her grapplings with what those memories might mean suggest his long shadow. I would suggest to her that explanation is not the enemy. My hope is that in her subsequent work, she also comes to hear Wordsworth's "best and favorite aspiration," as he expressed it in *The Prelude*, where he "mounts / With yearning toward some philosophic song / Of Truth that cherishes our daily life." In this way, perhaps the enigmas that she faces will emerge somewhat from their obscurity, speaking that much more compellingly not only to readers, but also perhaps for them.

Jan Schreiber is more than a generation older than Bell, and *Peccadilloes* is his fourth volume of poems. He has also published several volumes of translations and one of essays. This book is a stately and measured work, filled with vitality, wit, and the melancholy strong poets frequently articulate later in life.

The first section, "Brief Lives," gives us exactly that. Schreiber quickly and precisely gives us dramatic situations that suggest far more than their lyrical media. Consider just the opening lines of "Closing Time at the Freedom Lounge in Vassalboro":

It's not that bad tonight.  
Scoop was too drunk to fight.  
Sox lost. Nomar's got heart.

Guy owes me rent paid part.  
Buddy dropped by to say  
his daughter's due in May.

The cunning compression of syntax ("The guy who owes me rent paid part of it.") couples both with vernacular speech and meter, even rhyme, all of it suggesting both art and natural speech, the goal being convincing psychology and a good story, in which the narrator describes his own death later that night in a fiery car wreck. This is masterful work.

At the same time, there could be more, and Schreiber could deliver it. These diminished lives seem to call out for augmentation. Here is "For Someone," in full:

On the bright wall shadows  
of leaves stir and recall  
the erotic afternoon.  
All our lives are fleeting  
precision. You most of all  
yesterday were vivid.

Yes, but, there is so much more here, too much untold. One can make the argument that these are lyrics, and hence inherently and intentionally somewhat obscure, but Schreiber has the chops for more, and when he does break through, as in "Notes from the Party," the result suggests wide expanses of humane, textured insight. Strong as many of these poems are, one may still wish for more of the exactness of another Maine chronicler of human passions, Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935), whose ghost seems to hover nearby. In the section "Album," for example, the poem "Prophecy" begins:

Somewhere at this moment  
a woman with a bad

diagnosis holds out  
against her body's treason.  
Her family holds out  
little hope against long  
odds. Against expectations  
spring makes a shy appearance.

But the poem then veers too soon into a meditation on the situation rather than giving us more of the situation itself, leaving us too little of the person. One imagines Robinson nodding in approval, yet suggesting, "Continue."

Some of the strongest poems in the book finesse this problem by coming clearly from Schreiber's meditations on his own life. In this case the dramatic suggestions carry a deeper charge, as each poem connects to the others in a sequence. As with all the poets here, the focus remains somewhat constrained—the section is named for tumbled shards, "Beach Glass"—but the pathos deepens and widens. "Near Sunset," the final poem in the collection, opens:

Now it's full summer and the air's alive.  
We're driving over winding island roads,  
depleted by a tense and strenuous day.  
Preoccupied, we mill the lawsuit and  
the long estrangement of our fragile child.  
Uncertainty and worry dim the scene.  
Each of us has learned a role to play:  
resilient, proud, good-humored in the face  
of disappointment. I am slow to admit  
how hard it has become to seem so steady.

Who would not want to continue? More of this, please, with no turning away, difficult as it may be.

And there is more. In “Musseling,” Schreiber writes “I have been scavenging / in truth down all these years,” and in the strongest sequence of the book, “Short Takes,” he offers one of the best sets of epigrams in recent memory. Many are literally perfect, meter and meaning yoked together with true wit:

“Five-finger Exercise”

Zeno, I pray  
your arrow finds  
its mark someday  
but not while I’ve  
come just halfway.

“The Angler”

Pompous has found a worthy mark at last:  
young and amazed, she dotes upon his airs,  
swallowing lines he’s practiced years to cast.  
She strikes, he reels, as they go up the stairs.

“A Man Is but a Fleeting Flower”

She’d always craved a single perfect rose  
but no one form embodies all perfection,  
so she embraced the dozens that came close  
and knew her heart’s ideal by indirection.

Here, Schreiber’s philosophic song serves him unerringly. Each poem in the section snaps closed like a mousetrap. Donne, Herrick, Pope, Byron, Coleridge, Nash, Cunningham, Dorothy Parker, and the classical tradition on which they depend live on in this excellent

work, which exemplifies a tradition we would do well to rejuvenate. After all, inspired by Schreiber, it occurs to me that:

Strangely gifted on the stump,  
Where reality TV  
Is now the real reality,  
He's our creation: Donald Trump.

Bruce Bennett is a major American poet, and it continues to scandalize that he has not received his due. Over a lengthy career he has published ten volumes and scores of chapbooks and pamphlets, in addition to founding two of America's preeminent literary magazines (*Field* and *Ploughshares*), and teaching poetry to thousands of students. Like all strong verse satirists (including Schreiber), he has cultivated a technical virtuosity that he deploys with both principle and sprezzatura. Unlike many of them (but again like Schreiber), he also extends his skill into serious modes and even heartbreaking subjects.

*Just Another Day in Just Our Town*, a volume of new and selected poems, belies its modest title, focusing so deeply on small, serious subjects that they go off like depth charges. The book showcases Bennett's Horatian wit (and occasionally Juvenalian indignation), but he is also that rarest of lyrical poets, a virtuoso of his own perception who simultaneously attends closely to the lives of others—to our lives—in all their folly, sorrow, and beautiful vitality.

Two or three examples will have to do. The title poem of one of Bennett's recent chapbooks, *Swimming in a Watering Can*, has lodged itself permanently in my memory:

Something was stuck. I thought it was some leaves,  
so I poured out the water from the top.  
There was this lump. I saw it was a mouse.  
He must have tried to drink and lost his balance.

I stood there staring. Just a little lump  
wet on the wet ground. Nothing could have saved him.  
Who could have heard? Who would have heard a mouse  
swimming? And it was outside, in the dark.  
I don't know why the thought of that upsets me.  
Maybe it's all the other stuff. It's just  
that awful image: paddling in the water,  
helpless and desperate, nothing to catch hold of,  
feeling your strength fail, little by little by little,  
paddling and paddling, sinking, all alone.

This extraordinarily precise blank-verse sonnet (note the clear *volta*) is so original and powerful that it seems at least at first to overwhelm all precedents, even Burns. Like a classic, at the very least it reorganizes them in its light. The conversational grace of the syntax suggests Auden in the *Musée des Beaux Arts*, the theme Auden again but also Emily Dickinson's "Grief is a mouse," the willingness to fully articulate a painful dramatic conception perhaps a poet like Hecht, but the commitment and clarity are completely distinctive. Bennett does not evade or soften any aspect of the contemplation of suffering here. His craft a sure vessel, he conveys to us the full, pure cargo of agony and consciousness of it in another. The poet Milosz, in one of the strongest poems about cats, "To Mrs. Professor, in Defense of My Cat's Honor, and Not Only," muses that:

. . . after all, we know that only consciousness  
Can for a moment move into the Other,  
Empathize with the pain and panic of a mouse.

And such as cats are, all of Nature is.  
Indifferent, alas, to the good and the evil.  
Quite a problem for us, I am afraid.

All honor to Milosz, but in Bennett's poem, we actually sense that consciousness move, rather than merely characterizing it. As William Meredith once put it in a memorable review of the great Colorado poet Belle Turnbull's *The Tenmile Range*, "We feel the experience in this poem because we are not allowed to generalize it away...the 'message' of the poem can only be apprehended dramatically, because that is the only way it is stated." Such clarity coupled with craft and deep feeling comes only to a very few, and then usually only after decades of work.

Bennett hits this note scores of times, although there is a concentration of such lyrics in *Swimming in a Watering Can*. He can even do it in astonishingly small space. *Small Town Haiku* first appeared in *Here and Now*:

"I said Hello.  
I always say Hello.  
I know it irritates him."

Not exactly a haiku, of course, but as Alfred North Whitehead once supposedly observed of Plato, wherever you're going, you meet him on the way back. This anti-haiku turns Zen observation on its head, replacing observation of nature with the delights of amoral malice. Both a satire of the haiku tradition and an epigrammatic observation about how we actually live, the quotation marks seal the dramatic deal, again conveying truth while eschewing philosophy. The mark of a master: he leaves that work to us. Such poetry may begin by appearing to be just a diminished thing, but Bennett is obviously and everywhere always after larger game.

The book does have one flaw, or perhaps one-and-a-half. Bennett is so fluid that he can spin out lyrics of almost any genre, form, theme, and tone with ease; this occasionally gets the better of him. The section "Loose Cannon" contains almost 60 parodies. While

every single one is well-turned, and collectively they reveal his own influences, and many of them can stand quite well on their own, it is too much. Here is the opening of “The Cult of Eating,” a Bishop parody:

The cult of eating isn't hard to master.  
You start with something savory, like a peach,  
And chew it slowly, then you chew it faster.

In a lesser poet, such play would amuse, but given the quality of Bennett's primary work, both serious and satirical, half as many of these would have been enough here.

Bennett's more original satirical work is memorable and rich. To pick one almost at random, “The Moral Order” turns the pantoum's obsessive repetition against itself and us, particularly our youthful selves, as Bennett perhaps remembers being a student. The whole poem:

I stayed late after tea to ask the question:  
“Is there a Moral Order?” I had to know.  
The world stood still. I waited for his answer.  
Outside the day was gray. It had been raining.

“Is there a Moral Order?” I had to know.  
He stood and looked at me. I heard the clock.  
Outside the day was gray. It had been raining.  
He cleared his throat. His wife was in the kitchen.

He stood and looked at me. I heard the clock.  
I knew that it was late. The pause was awkward.  
We were alone. His wife was in the kitchen.  
I sensed that he was searching for the words.



I knew that it was late. The pause was awkward.  
“Is there a Moral Order?” I had to know.  
I know now he was searching for the words.  
I stayed late after tea to ask that question.

Take that, Philosophy! The teacher could not find the words, and yet the more mature poet now can, and as the lines and reality slowly shift, the world not exactly standing still, the answer comes in the little details: the tea, the professor, the staying late, the rain, the clock, the wife, the awkwardness. There may or may not be a Moral Order, but there is certainly a human and poetic one, and here it is, like a miracle. As we wait for the answer that can never come, life itself emerges, social, dramatic, and, in that sense, indeed moral, filled with ethics that are no less meaningful and real for being impossible to rationalize in any other order than verse. There is a moral order, but its name is poetry. That is the order that gives the speaker his winning sympathy so many years later: “I know now he was searching for the words.” What did he eventually say? Another piece of the brilliance here is that Bennett knows that matters less than what was happening then and there.

The strongest books of poetry exude a presiding spirit from each page that conveys a sense of coherence quite hard to describe. Bennett’s pungent yet gentle Horatian mockery of himself and of philosophy in “The Moral Order” could stand, like many of the other poems here, for a version of the whole. While he can rail with the best (his Trump poems, most of which are not included here, singe the eyes), his view of human beings, indeed of all living things, is clear-eyed yet compassionate. Our lives may be small, but the stakes could not be higher. Again and again, he shows us what we might make of such a diminished thing: a vibrant, richly dramatic world where everything that might touch a human being, even death, seems to be alive.



# **CONTRIBUTORS**

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