

River King

Poetry Supplement

Vol. VI No. III Autumn/Winter 2000

© 2000 River King Press



Al Says

She showed up in a college poetry writing class at age seventy-four and announced that she wanted to write poetry and did not want the students or the teacher to "treat her like a silly old woman." For her writing poetry was a serious business. "And anyway," she said, "I get enough of that nonsense in other places." That being said, she asked, demanded that her writing be examined critically and then set out with manuscript in hand to improve in many cases what she had already done well.

Her husband had died years earlier. "So long ago," she said one time, "I can't even remember what he looked like." By then her children were not only grown, but had reached middle age, and freed from the burden of family, she spent most of her time traveling around the United States, England and Wales to poetry workshops and writing seminars. She absorbed whatever was available, that might be used, and then attempted to use it.

During this time she also ran her own workshop (until 1998) and sponsored poetry writing contests among local grade school children. All the while she wrote, published in small magazines throughout the country, and produced three chapbooks, *Yesterdays & Tomorrow*, *Homely Flowers* and *Dare to Dream*.

In 1991 she won the Southern Illinois University Fine Arts Woman of the Year award and in 1995 was named to the *RKPS* staff as Editor Emeritus. On occasion she attend *River King* workshops (when her health permitted), and submitted poems to *RKPS* for publication.

This issue of *River King Poetry Supplement* is dedicated to Valeda Evans (1904-2000).

Again *River King* is obliged to the Illinois Arts Council for its generous support in a year 2000-2001 grant. This is the fourth consecutive year the IAC has made financial aid available to *RKPS*.

Apologies and condolences to David Clewell for having his poem "We Never Close" heavily plagiarized in "Late Shift Waitress at Wanda's Grill" which appeared in the Summer 2000 issue of *River King*. The lines used were good both times.

In Front of My Mother's Vanity

not the best mirror. If you're not thin at 12 you learn which stores flatter, which pull thighs wide as corn fields so if some thing looks ok in them, it's a knock out. The powder on the vanity is a dusting of snow, not the deep drifts that will bury boxes of coins, perfume, photographs and letters. My mother still looks up Arthur's name and address in any city we're in, as she will close to her last day. Her head tilted under the wide brimmed black felt hat she knows becomes her, her lips rose red. After she comes back with the mail, she'll tuck her skirt up into underpants I can never believe will be stained, will terrify. She will half dance around the apartment as she sweeps and vacuums. She is singing to Cab Calloway or the music from Brigadoon and tho my sister and I "Oh Mother" her, embarrassed, she will leap to a table, tap dance on the stool red paint already is worn from when we bring home friends. We don't imagine years from then people will say "Your mother was so much fun," tho I've already read in her college year book about all her phone calls, her men. My mother's legs are good but we don't see why she won't keep them covered tho later I'll wear mini skirts long after most women don't. Now I know my mother dances with air because my father, even when he moved thru our rooms as if to take her by the waist and waltz her, won't, as the man I marry will scowl "it's the same as to fuck." I take ballet and pointe to feel I'm moving to music as my mother did, kicking to balalaikas and strings, not needing a partner, loving her own legs in five inch heels or sneakers, knowing they will take her where she has to go, that nothing about her is unlovely as I will finally make peace with mine tho it takes me so long

—Lyn Lifshin

A Princess Stoops

If I remember it correctly you found me underneath a rock. What was it that possessed you that you turned it over - trodden as it was? Heaven knows the day was beautiful enough, the sun could not stop kissing you, your Modigliani neck, raspberry lips, your wondrous bare back, your baby hair still crawling sweetly to the nape. What could have piqued your interest in that dull slab, with all of nature, many men, in love with you?

Well I had hidden there, it's true, and chose the site because it was so fitting to my state of mind, quite suitable for one as ill-formed, graceless, unregenerate as I, a grump, nay-sayer, gruff, unprepossessing as a toad. Imagine my surprise, so used to closure, slugs and shade, to look up and be blinded by your smile. And I was borne to light. And though I never metamorphosed, see how you've made my scales grow bright.

—Earl Coleman

Matrix

after Soyinka

The sanctuary is a mystery,
a taut string's tremble come to rest,
the nave a path in rain, at worst
a shrine of quiet pain.

Building this cathedral, stone
masons poured forth their arms
and framers pounded wrists.
The heavy sepulcher was born.

Its gestation branded on the heart,
form wanders with the spires.
The great days of an empire
tattooed on its ornate walls,
the crypt a deadly contract,
its chronicle is sealed within.

—Leonard Cirino

Time Song

Time, vagrant fiddler, clothed in rag and patch,
coat washed and stained with mottled verdigris,
low tones unspooling such brief harmony
downy and regulated as that catch
jerking the ring-dove's throat. Raising a latch,
he prompts dull, hooded-crow cawed threnody -
percussion's plastic bags caught in a tree.
Dry minutes, drifted smoke off smouldered thatch.
Rarely, a dropped sound lets the decades stall,
an alley forms a nocturne, in torchlight
of eighteen twenty-one, and link-boys call.
Such slipped notes, over in an apple bite,
leave me dry lipped, sere in the fiddler's thrall -
ancestors gleaming on the edge of sight.

—Deborah Tyler-Bennett

picking mulberries with Abraham Lincoln

juice gathers in the fruit in June I pick
knowing that birds will not go hungry I
cannot pick them all and he belonging to
the ages picks with me since he is
taller he picks the higher ones puts
them in his hat his great black boots

stained with berries as if with blood

we are silent intent on picking I wonder what
one should say when one has a chance to pick
berries and converse but we are silent shy to
start a cardinal feeds on an upper branch and
bees hum nearby he stops to dump his
hat into the bigger pot our hands are

stained with berries as if with blood

—P.F. Allen



River King Poetry Supplement is funded in part by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency.

Tomorrow Is Sunday

The whole damn thing starts over
With car engines running
The businessmen sit
Talking to smoking mufflers
While the garage doors closes

—Jason Braun



—Connie Cannon

Letter From Hawaii to David Ray

"Some dead
turn to fodder
for the poems"

Dear Dave
first thought best thought
Kerouac said here's what
I want to tell you

forget that grief group you let slip
you are in
no one there will tell you

you will be permanently sad and stricken and at times
unaccountably tearful and perplexed and ravaged
beyond the slightest sweet remorse at what
could you have done better

more things will happen in between
but you will never get over it
not poems or let's face it wonderful wine or the sour
calvinist avoidance

or music or orgasm or chemical derived from poppy
or coca or cannabis or collection of new writing
though most of these are quite fine and well sought

but after these and during and certainly in between
you will be stricken
with pure wordless sadness because Sam is dead

good popular words like heartbroke or arcane solace
like buddhist definition that birth is pain
death is pain
life is birth and death

or oklahoma christianity or particle physics models
of energy exchange or whatever anyone finds useful
will be useful
enough in their run

wanted to tell you
as we rode around Hawaii those weeks
past the pineapple fields on the high plain of leilehua
past the tropic lightning barracks
of James Jones you knew back east
or at the thin waterfall on the hana road
we paused for you to drink from
as the dark folded in
everyone solicitous
your son dead
the entire counterclockwise spin in Hawaii
your sorrow palpable

your friend
Tony

—Tony Quagliano

Sahara the Burmese Cat

I am thinking of wild places and hard living
when Sahara the Burmese cat with supple wrinkles
ridged on her shoulders brings in another bird.
Yesterday's was featherlight and downy,

carried through the porthole and up the stairs
of this house where I am a guest. Today's bird lies

on the kitchen floor, one wing extended
like a capsized yacht. Sahara crouches, bites

the blood-open breast, then turns to a saucer of milk.
My thoughts of uncompromising and harsh places

always turn first to Karamoja, African plain
of scrub and thorn, where tall men walk with spears

and painted shields, with matted sculpted hair
and head-rests like two-legged milking stools,

where women nurse their babies within fences
of thorn, stockades to protect bony cattle

that children guide by day in the lean and stony land.
I wonder if their language knows a word for comfort.

And now I remember the milk mixed with blood
taken fresh from the neck of the cow.

Milk and blood frothed pink in a gourd.
I do not remember its thick taste. Meanwhile,

at my feet, Sahara performs her feline ritual,
with feral crunch and domestic sip.

—Judy Ray

Sweat

Itself moldering & stuffed with junk
of every description—
blonde bleach, artificial tears, box wine and the like,
the drugstore clung with fungal persistence
to the edge of town.
At some past point, the pharmacist had fallen victim
to gravity, and her belly undulated
under sagging breasts.

And it gets stranger: the proprietor, her father,
was a man of habit.

Every morning at 6:45 he ate one pancake,
an egg, a pinch of salt & pat of butter,
then a cup of coffee followed by an apple
for lunch.
He could count ribs & veins in his torso,
and each Christmas on the Eve the pharmacist
found, wrapped in a red bow & fine paper,
a health club membership
in the center of her desk.
It made her perspire.

And it gets stranger still: one summer
when the pharmacist was away,
the compassionate old man put her dog down
(did it himself, in fact, to save money & trouble).

She found dog dish, collar, and rubber toy
tied precisely in a shopping bag.
A note on store stationery reminded her the dog
was overfat and arthritic, could scarcely walk.

Then for the sake of exercise, they took a walk
through the woods
to a patch of freshly turned ground.

He placed a bony arm on her shoulder,
laid it there like a two-by-four.

A bird sang. She remembered a boy
who fell asleep among carrots & woke
with yellow eyes.

—David Huntsperger

She Has A Name, His Daughter

She has a name, his daughter
does. But thinking of her, speaking of her,

it's *my daughter* he calls her,
possession being for him nine-tenths

of the law. Seeing her after a long
separation he'll ask, So how's my

daughter? And her answer, her hands
on his shoulders as if to steady

and thus to focus his face, will distance
herself from herself. Your daughter

is fine, she'll say, or Your daughter
is tired, but fine, or—when the day

is too dim to be denied—Your daughter
doesn't honestly know which way is up.

He'll call her Laurie then, because
her hand in his no more possesses

than acquits, and he'll welcome her
as always she has been welcomed

home.

—William Kloefkorn

I Have Learned

Put ice on it! mother shouted
pointing to the place on my arm
blackier than I'd ever be, where
I had just been burned, after she'd
shoved me against that old, wood-
stove. I was like my old man
she reminded me, *his eyes, and
his looks*. She was almost always
led to believe that I was on to
doing something, evil; only, I was
trying to avoid being ambushed
by her words, her anger, those licks
in the only home I had ever known
while I was learning to hate *my
eyes, my looks*, that image that
looked back at me, each time
I peered into the mirror, and
hating that daddy I never had
of whom I had never even
seen a photo, to compare.

—Willie James King



River King

Poetry Supplement

RKPS is a periodical of
contemporary English language
poetry and brief articles
on poets/poetry.

Editor: Wayne Lanter
Associate Editor: Donna Biffar
Art Editor: Philip Miller
British Liaison: Sam Smith

Submission should be accompanied by a SASE and
sent to: RKPS
P.O. Box 122
Freeburg, IL 62243

(618) 234-5082 • Fax: (618) 355-9298
e-mail: riverkng@icss.net

Art submissions should be accompanied by a SASE
and sent to: Philip Miller
1841 Pendleton
Kansas City, MO 64124

River King Poetry Supplement is published by River
King Press, a non-profit corporation with offices at
109 North St. John's Drive, Smithton, Illinois 62285.
RKPS does not take subscriptions, although dona-
tions are acceptable, and is offered free of charge
to libraries, schools, writing groups and persons in-
terested in contemporary poetry. Submissions and
inquiries must be accompanied by a SASE. RKPS is
published three times a year, in April, August and
December, with a press run of 5000. All rights re-
vert to the authors. RKPS does not assume respon-
sibility for views expressed by contributors or for
lost or damaged manuscripts.

Suspended Sentence

for Galway, Orion, and Jesse

"And Jesus was a sailor
when he walked upon the water...
and when he knew for certain
only drowning men could see him
he said All men will be sailors
until the sea shall free them..."

—"Suzanne," Leonard Cohen

1
It was June, and the Root River, which you
could usually walk across, was swollen
by weeks of rain. I was in a solo canoe, and
my son, the Eagle Scout, and stepson (Tenderfoot)
were in another. In rapids, my canoe
flipped like a plastic bathtub toy.
I went down in roiled water and saw
my gear, half afloat, about me. I surged
to the surface, tried to grip the gunnel-
too slick, no purchase. A breath, and down again.
When I surfaced, I heard my son yell
"Are you o.k.?" "No!" I blurted
as I clawed at rounded fiberglass.
Down again. For the third time,
with rank water in my mouth.
What level of Purgatory might await me?
Will I come back as a Pekinese, or
a toadstool or a mayfly?

2

If I give up
what will I be giving up? My life?
My son will drag my sodden carcass
from the river, use his training to bring me back.
But the panic... if, in breathing and pounding
life back into me, he fails—what then?
That memory will anchor him to Hell
for all his days. My stepson has already
lost two fathers—what will his understanding
of fate become? And my sweet baby, just three,
his father ripped untimely from him.

3

As I struggled up again I remembered
the thwart, and grasped it, and kicked,
my way to shallows. My breathing
was shallow: my asthma had kicked in.
I found my soggy knapsack, opened it,
and hurled the roll of sodden toilet paper
into nearby branches, raging at myself.

4

I do not swim, cannot even float—my specific gravity
such that I sink slowly and settle on the bottom.
When I tell this to my friends they scoff and say
"anyone can float"
so we travel to the river and commence this
baptismal parody.
Yet I never wear a life preserver, and a seat belt only
under duress.

I was born on an island, have lived
much of my life surrounded by water.
When I was in 4th grade, in Newfoundland,
we considered renting a house near Topsail,
on the beach, owned by a man named Kenneth
Drowns.
My mother said she'd have no part of it.

None of the men in Newfoundland could swim.
Men who spent their lives in dories, in the fog,
in squalls on the North Atlantic, fishing for cod.

At school, we'd just seen *David Copperfield*—
the Topsail house, a dead ringer for the cottage
on the sea at Yarmouth, scene of many drownings.

As a boy, I liked to test thin ice, and often fell
into boggy slime to my waist, or worse.
Once, a friend and I walked across the
St. John's Harbor, and the ice pinged and
boomed, making me jump like a bad cartoon.

The day I turned 21, after drinking beer all day,
I chugged a quart of Gallo red on a dare, then
sinking into blackness, I punched out
a Jeep windshield and friends held me back
until I passed out. They tossed me in a canal
to cool me off, revive me, but, in yellow button-down
and white ducks I sank to muddy silt
resting like a catfish. When this registered,
one of them dove in and rescued me. I came to
with no recollection of this dousing.

5

I have fallen from high places,
been suspended in *that* medium, too.
I have walked for half a day
through parched air at 13,000 feet
without water, and would have drunk
my own blood, had it come to that.

6

Wind has scoured me, and my body, wracked
by hypothermia, has come back.
Fire has surrounded me, then passed by.
I have been swallowed by the earth,
then disgorged, like a fast-forward Jonah.
But until now, water has been my element.
Under the sign of the crab, I was pulled
feet first, by five doctors, into this world,
from the comfort of amniotic waters—
"The hardest birth I've ever attended"
one doctor told my mother later. My
unwillingness, my denial, started then.

7

What happens when your lungs fill with water?
Those who have survived it and remember
say that you become ecstatic, that it is lovely
to be at peace; home in the sea within.
One friend told me that he drowned at 14.
In a tidal pool, on the coast of Wales,
he saw himself from a distance, and the light
spilling through the water was beautiful
and he wondered at having lived so short a life.
Nearby, a roly-poly postman crossed the bridge,
heard shouts on shore and hauled him out.
It was 6 p.m. He came to at 5 the next morning.
Or maybe the human brain, deprived of oxygen
fulfills its fantasies, turns manatees to mermaids.

8

Yesterday I experienced my body as a rusty tanker
at anchor in the bay, leaking and in need of repairs.
My inner voice said "My friend, unless you
do something soon, you will be gone in five years.
Today, I take this stand—to you, my old son, my
young son, and my stepson, to make myself
seaworthy.

To learn to swim, and then to swim. And to the rest
of you that I will be here beside you, around you.
No longer will I hold my breath and flounder on
the bottom.

How many of you have almost drowned before?
I will be watching, and if I see that look in your eyes
just before you slip below the surface, I will
swim out to you, and take you to the shore.

—Ken McCullough

Wealth And Position

Willie Joe has four cars
Sitting in his yard.
None of them run,
But all of them are his.
His banker only has two cars
And hides them in a garage.
Willie felt sorry for his banker
And offered to trade two of his
For just one of the banker's.
His banker just looked at him
Like Willy was a rusted Chevy -
One sitting on four concrete blocks.

—Edward Michael O'Durr Supranowicz

Learning the Truth

(Not a Nice Little Poem)

Ah, that little aneurism of a memory has burst
and all of me that gushes out into the goblet
of my skull cannot make it pleasant now.

There are no "simple phone calls," Mom,
and the value of truth is always weighed in tons.

Balls of lightning rampage across the horizon
and the heat refuses to vanish, rain or no rain.

Family must always be stretched on the rack.

If you really must know, let me tell you how:

Ease back the crank, tilt the bed, let it set
slack while you tie off the feet, hands and neck.
As you noose up your mother, imagine you nursed
her pain as, yes, as you took the sum
of what she had, wholly, utterly, once.

—Robert Parham

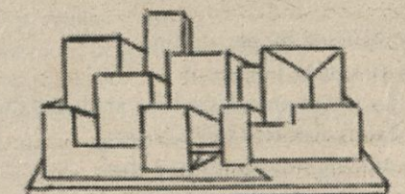
Possum Eyes

It stands erect in the headlights,
as if peering directly at me.
Rubber squeals, and I wrestle the wheel,
but there's no place to go:
Stuck in the middle,
an eighteen-wheeler to my left,
a soft shoulder to my right.

I flung myself out of bed last night,
ripping my mind from sleep,
still feeling the thuds,
again, again, again,
the body underneath, working bumper to bumper.
It stood on its hind legs, eyes gleaming:
It's show time.

Outside, the sun is scorching
the barren wind of summer.
The kid next door is kicking
his dog in the mouth.
I hear its familiar, clipped yelp
as it tries to eat.
I bury my head in the pillow,
searching the darkness
until I find the possum's eyes.

—C.S. Fuqua



—Connie Cannon

Surface Reaction

The last thing that he saw her touch
was the cut-glass cruet.
Afterwards he searched its angles for
a fingerprint
to prove there was some corner
where identity persisted
in loops indisputably her own.

Could he crystallize the essence
of this touch of tissue?
Or with scientific tricks succeed
in drawing out
its spirals, like a spring,
to recreate her double helix
and make himself less hellishly alone?

A dozen prisms
caught his speculation
and split it to its simplest colours,
whose names he would formerly have known.

—Michael Bartholomew-Biggs

Immortality

A person loses his innocence when he realizes he doesn't have to forgive.

—MR.

I wander through life like my mother's first child born without a name, half a lung, and no liver. My sister's never spoken of. Why should anyone talk about that baby whose name was just chosen for the headstone? My own history is a bottle cap half buried in sand. It's there on that man-made beach on Lake Erie with its water I almost didn't get into; it's in that 72 Skylark heading down back roads, past near naked children playing hide-n-seek behind the frame of an old Ford pickup while chickens pecked at mud-crusting toes; it's here, on this porch, in these hands which are too rough to caress my wife with.

I'm forty and still haven't seen the headstone my sister's name is carved on. I wonder if she was buried in a Sunday dress, something with ruffles on the sleeves, around the neck, and matching socks with ruffles, and black shoes still smelling of the box they came in; or maybe nothing so sophisticated. Maybe she's in a pink sleeper with a zipper up the back and plastic on her feet. I wonder if my mother returned all the gifts given to her at the shower, just as she gave her daughter back to silence. That must have been difficult: to ruffle through all those boxes of clothes and thin paper, the styrofoam peanuts and good luck cards, the rattle, the pacifier, the hand built crib.

Afterward, I'm sure she returned to the routines she swore off as a child, just to make it through the long days and nights that spun out like buoys in a body of water. She'd get up, clean the apartment, go to work. I've read that the cells of each child stay in the mother's body, distinct, intact, share space in that holy darkness—my sister and I, named and unnamed, cautious of our liquid edges and still moving in, one small step at a time.

—C. Rohrbacher

The Persistence of Impermanence

Not everything is understood but everything is available

in a microsecond

the emptiness travels from either-or to both-and

deeply afflicted by perception unable to nudge beyond it

I want to eternalize the varnished door fixed over two file cabinets serving steadfastly as a desk

in times of troubled dust

at least two years after the great unbonding she in the silvery long hollows of her skirts persisting in the silent angle of the table lamp gone like last year's rages the watery mucks and septic fears scouring the intersection of Magnolia Place deep atop the avenues of Frederick

so close to supermarket dreams crisp tortillas and avocado rinds

faultless like a philosopher's sphere the goddess on her way behind the gray-backed mules axles rattling on the steep ascent.

You can't save this moment from oblivion because that which perpetuates itself in this minute linguistic artifact becomes itself a moment needing to be saved.

—Askold Skalsky

River King apologizes to Henry Livingston and the family of Henry Livingston whose work "Twas the Night Before Christmas" (which we've never printed, but have often recited) was apparently stolen by Clement Clark Moore.

Ugandan Goodbye

To Charles Angoyi

In this last picture airmailed and glued to standard filler information and beneath two names - one his own the other a gift - he's still not smiling still no white-toothed grin even the eyes hold no humour the mouth twisted and pursed and pursed as if

One tentative hand rests on a slender hip the other, loose and free against his outer thigh and crisp, peach-pink shorts beneath a blue cotton shirt the bottom button undone

There's more meat on those legs those knobby, just-bowed fore-shortened limbs ending in two strong feet that, through all the years of cards and crayon sketches remain dusty and bare

But this is different, this one last picture. He's not scowling his aspect menace his purpose veiled - there on his lips and in his tentative hand is the hint of a question and I know I will miss wondering about his meaning

—Ruth E. Walker

Language

Shucks, the old woman said. He said: Shucks is nothing more than a euphemism for— No, it isn't. Yes, it is. Isn't. Is.

You old fuck head, she cried. I accept that, he said triumphantly, ducking as a piano stool flew past his head. Strong little bird, he murmured.

—Raymond Mason

Seventeen

High school football team sliding in the rain. Hand me my helmet again!

—David Ray

The Answers, At Last

As it turns out, the odd feeling you would get That so alarmed you was only the tensing Of a muscle in the back of the neck, Despair just a tremor in the shoulder, and Shame a cramp under the rib. That sweet sense of melancholy You used to cultivate until it turned on you Was only a spasm in a ligament after all, and The gnawing ache that made you cry months later, when you turned out the light and lay Face upward in bed, was, in the end, Only a small, flat bone settling in its socket. But fear! You were right about fear all along; You knew the slow, silent eddying of blood that flooded the empty chamber.

—Nancy Burke

Thailand Journal: Journey through Air

After many hours over water I wonder why I ever agreed to travel through date lines and a void of cold space, strange as the moon,

but then I remember a time my small son called for me. But now a grown man with gilt-gold eyes has taken his place.

Lost among aisles and hard-cushioned seats, I search for him. I look out blank windows and find nothing—but perhaps in Thailand we will recognize each other. We will be at home again, in a kitchen, with hours to sit together while scissor-tail birds explode from reeds

in the yard. Maybe I will dry laundry along the porch rail and listen to neighbors work in their garden while I write a journal. Maybe he will ride a motorcycle down the lane to fetch noodles and beef, stir-fried, and we will eat dinner late and talk as though we have the same memories, as though thirty hours of dark wind do not lie between us.

*

I journey away from everything known, like the warmth of my husband's legs when we sleep, and his broad back. Roses bloom somewhere in the garden where I do not sit. I leave him again as the plane descends over Osaka. Mountains and villages surround the harbor. A boarding pass leads me farther away from skin, from sweet scent of his breath.

In the plane over the Pacific I doze and confabulate long stories of what we have done these years since we met, how we touch, how every dawn he is as essential as that first glimmer of light.

—Denise Low

The Big Tease

Sheri was a classic. She'd do what it took To get a rise, then Leave you bulging, aching In plain view of the world. Of course, I resented her antics. So did a lot of guys. Anyhow, she married well - A local corporate executive. He laid her, then laid Off 500 people at one time. Somehow, the ache in our crotches Reminded us of her.

—Edward Michael O'Durr Supranowicz

And Even If . . .

And so it is . . . the world's a cage and time's the bars, and we're graffiti on the walls of all we see— passing emblems of any age.

And even if we hoard a wish to stay a cigarette's persuasive pull we still reach out with automatic hand and do the thing we hate to do

but love to do in spite of all. Reason plays no role in this grim game, nor thickened veins, memories of malignancy; these are too effete to stop the call

of something stronger than we care to say. And each compulsion splits into single ones where sitting out our time is all we really share

or not in equal measure best.

And even if we mean to do no harm we hurt where hurt hurts most and grieve soon enough by a hurt one's grave whose endless rest leaves us no rest.

But finally for us, too, they come: the sage; the master-eraser, the couldn't care lesser; the pardoner; all understanding . . . who bend our bars . . . and all our doings, left-behinds are as nothings, mere graffiti or less than scribbles on a page.

—R.G. Bishop

passing trees

"An evil man cannot pass by a fine tree without saddening its leaves."

—Norman Mailer

The Gospel According to the Son

he passes by and makes them sad the leaves the bark the branches he walks in wingtips and suit and leaves hoofprints not like Pan more

mephistophelian he makes deals and kisses babies and says he will save the trees and invented the internet and Segal wrote love story about him but

watch him stand watch him walk watch the trees watch him the trees know

P. F. Allen

Headmaster

At nine my thin-lipped mother caught me in a desperate relationship with sin, her righteous virtue crimsoning her cheek. She limned for me the see-saw clash forever raging in our hearts, good always on the verge of being overwhelmed by bad. Like Sisyphus, good had to struggle up the scree. And worse. Bad always held the overlooking height. My mother was an expert, having had a loveless marriage, four abortions, but no sin. Or so she told herself and me.

I've had no luck with my morality since then. Instead I veer and yaw in existentialist perplexity, since in this marketplace of money and pursuit I've tried to calibrate minute degrees of probity, abstain as often as I can from coveting my neighbor's wife, cheat not too blatantly at tax abatement time. Perhaps it was the afterlife my mother had her eye on. It's there she now resides. I hope she's found it is a place where her mistakes are rectified with an apology, no more, for she and I were always color blind, and from our rainbow palettes there was singularly missing gray.

—Earl Coleman

Neighbors

The whore next door blamed the first grade teacher for all

her son's tantrums. Men came and went, some by day,

some by night. A few waved to me as they went in,

as they came out of the whore's house next door.

And they waved too, both her boy and her girl, off to school, some

mornings given a ride by the man of the moment, if lucky her man of the week.

—David Ray

Kafka's Book

It should wound, drive its insults deep into bare tissues, serum soft and blood bubbly, bruising the temples with the thin blue ache of a concussive scar, eyeball starting to turn across the frozen waters of its gaze, print happy, sunny-lipped in our dumb drowsiness, the everyday rehearsals of rage we've learned to swallow like an old stew in its cold pot.

It must be an ax that splits our foreheads, intelligently high and wisdom-wry, so mad Athena can jump out swinging her bloody shield, snakes coiled around her waist, hissing like a furious gorge with her sharp teeth.

Let the eagle come too between its stiff covers and peck our skeptic livers out, our disbelieving hearts.

—Askold Skalsky

Routine

As the heads were not impaled on poles along with the flags and the bloody bodies were not laid out on the floors

of both Senate and House, gun control was again voted down, and the gentlemen gave the old reasons. Also,

their own children were grown, and no one of late had murdered a president. And therefore, "however many it takes"

is the price they are still willing to pay to bow to the will of the N.R.A.

—David Ray

5

American Gridiron

at your school they didn't have a team but playing sandlot you had an instinct for it to hit and be hit especially to run with the ball escape artist from the beginning you had a natural sense to stutter-step and cut back leave them in the dust

finally there was a chance to play organized ball in college the people you played against had at least 4 years experience on you whatever your sense of it it didn't measure up

you were 2nd or 3rd string fullback play 31 was right up the middle between right guard and center 32 the mirror image

scrimmaging against the first team your wiry little quarterback would call that play shove it in your guts as you ran past the first string line would be waiting with "open arms" linebackers coming over the top and plugging the holes you had to summon whatever waning instinct might still be left... the grunts and lunges clunk and crunch of pad and helmet mayhem of torsos, legs and arms, heads lucky to make it to the line of scrimmage

one of the few times you got in a game they put you in at end for which you didn't know the plays blindsided *tout suite* went down like a ton of bricks

by the time it was over you had lost whatever easy-going acceptance of roughhousing knocked right out of you

that spring you took up tennis a more civilized game playing 3rd or 4th man against other seedy teams on lost rain-soaked courts

but now, almost 40 years later, on native frost-bit mornings when a storm is brewing up and the fates are muttering their implacable curses, you have strange memories and premonitions of being in the 3-point stance looking up the bore of some poor center about to be massacred the quarterback hunched against him as from the cold starts to call the cadence like quotations from the stock-market the wind whistling mournfully up your arse, still the 3rd string fullback running on that line... they are waiting for you with outstretched arms

—Chuck Miller



—Meredith Miller

Eagle Beach

Pedaling there, so little has changed that the bridge looms like a mirage, less real than the vivid past: the low-slung, tire-ringed, tar-smelling ferry, the jeeps and cargoes, the GIs and those witch-capped women balancing chickens, greens, misshapen roots and mysteries from the market at Huê, 20 clicks and a world down the road, where this morning, after *phô*, we started on our clunky bikes.

Once over the surprising long arch—the wake-scrawled bay behind us—we plant our feet and breathe, scanning the village toward the sea. Nothing. Nothing familiar. My 19-year-old Danish friends, curious, wait. They know little of history, and less of me and this island: just that I said, There's a beautiful beach.

Under pale clouds, shifting in the sea wind, we ride to the toll gate, lean down the sand-swept lane. There are no yards with palms and feather pines, no thatched-roof houses of friendlies. Low concrete huts, tea-spotted, crowd the road. Squads of young men, VC, keep staring at Viking-blond Dorte.

At last a dark green grove and then the sea, in sudsy fury, raving from the horizon charges a stretch of trash-strewn sand. We halt, breathing the wind. Anders sports his market find, a Hô Chi Minh T-shirt, carmine, which ripples around his sapling torso, flapping like a flag.

So this is it! I feel like my dad, having schlepped his kids to a chilly beach in Normandy, where he got misty-eyed, embarrassing us. Tired, riding to beat the storm, we duck into the island's lone café. I sweat, half swooned, over rusty soup. A faraway boombox, through the rain, belts Swedish rock. "Rock Around the Clock." Plymouth Rock. Bunk.

A man in Nikes and black jeans skips in, keen to practice English; young, until his eyes' blood-flowers loom. —Long time (stained smile) Americans were here. I fish my muddy snaps: wooden watchtowers, nicknamed hootches, a minigolf course in the sand, like an outpost of some warrior kingdom—Champa, perhaps, or the Chinese dragon.

For Hôa, it's 25 years ago. He and his adviser, Captain Anderson, traded American slang, brothers, though afterwards he never wrote. —You Americans... Then he brightens, peers hard at my girlfriend Lan. Yes, yes, she's familiar; she had American children.

A woman with plum-dark eyes, waiting like him for the ODP (a slower leaving than ours, like sucking a bittersweet leaf that never gets softer, sweeter), agrees. She stares at me, a stranger's mom herself. —But where did she go? I ask. On a boat, they say,

maybe Philippines... maybe she die.

I apologize to my left-out friends. Dorte demurs: No, no, this is history, it's the best part of our trip. Hoà says that he teases his younger son, brown-haired, calling him: *the American*. From his loser's ID card, a bright-eyed lieutenant smiles: —Girls, girls turn and look me then. The rain quiets. We say goodbye. We race the clouds across the bay, big gray puffs, scudding towards Huê.

Notes: *Pho* [fuh]: noodle soup. ODP: Orderly Departure Program for Vietnamese with proof of prison sentences or other penalties as a result of wartime employment by the U.S.

—Jim Fairhall

Christ Taters One When It Counts

Way back when I was no more than a kid I saw Jesus Christ play baseball in the old Salvation & Damnation League before they let holy men into the bigs and sages rode shitty buses all through the sun belts corn belts bible belts sansabelts

ate fat ham sandwiches out the back doors of cafes run by half-assed saints hung out with whores who had hearts of gold or polished-shiny copper at least practiced bare-handed to save their shared leather for the game pitched potatoes to spare balls likewise

Godalmighty a man who can groove a spud with speed develops an arsenal of junk make you cry for joy

I kid you not that same golden day Bhodi-dharma wild-eyed loaded for base-oh-boro bear hurled a whole game in 27 pitches barefoot and hungover 13 from the right 14 from the left all the while with a butterfly sleeping in his mouth only to fly out on his last pitch with a chuckling puff at the precise moment St. Olaf flied out towering high but short to Jesus at what else the hot corner

And that Jesus now that Jesus Christ he had a swing on him ugly as sin like driving big square nails into hardwood hard but he never missed by accident mercifully punting fair fly balls disguised as sweetly as parables they were just gentle candies to his backpedaling opponents help them with their fielding until it was that time to scratch up the sand of that sorry lot and lay to rest the idea of extra innings

Clawing a hold into the actual clay of the world with supple toes perfectly capable of throwing a pair of dice or sewing seeds into a lei he swings his two cubit club a couple times and flattens corn clean out to Kansas

Of course the pitcher (left-handed saver up green just this week from the kibbutz-club Miles City Pharisees

by way of saving a infant from baptismal drowning in a drunk-wrecked car yanking the gurgling urchin free right when a celestial scout looked his way sent him winging up with a bare prayer) tries dusting him off and when that doesn't work pitching him out

only thing is on that fourth pitch the Big J invents ballet leaping like a gazelle across the plate and gets all of it taters that pill so thoroughly we can only watch it rise and rise and rise and rise and rise and rise

and even now skinny-headed scientists theorise when the orbit will decay sufficiently for the second coming of Christ's homer and I sit quietly in a lawn chair when I can spare the time with a dog and a papercup brew glove on one hand listening to baseball on earth as we know it 108 stitches in a baseball 108 beads in a rosary ready

—Paul Shreve

for my father

(John Miller 1908-2000)

another time's dime-store wind-up clock late afternoon ticking autumn's slanted light

old clock bent clock funny clock fucked-out clock —woke you with its tinny rattling on inscrutable grey mornings for terrible slave-jobs that you worked to survive

clock which ticked your cheap time through bare mattress and dust-mote and Brownian movement afternoons—as you grasped the living presence of sundance moments

whose blank unreadable sun-dial face kept improbably going as you woke sweating in the arms of your lover who has now disappeared into other dimensions of time

whose mechanism not built to last throw-away clock thrown away life into the dustbins of history

clock, clock, clock now reflecting, and giving back (but also, not so? having taken by thievery of our real subjective time) absurdly and grotesquely a few brief moments of time

your clock stops —Chuck Miller

[i wanted to ask her]

i wanted to ask her a question that she would sayes to. but she won't answer—just look down, smiling, eyelashing me.

—Don Moore

Alan Brownjohn

Lidia Vianu—I believe you, Alan Brownjohn, to be one of the chivalrous desperadoes of poetry at the turn of this millennium. When did it first occur to you to breathe into poetry?

Alan Brownjohn—At the age of five, the poems my mother read and/or sang to me (Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" remains my favourite poem) and the poems one schoolmistress read to us—these seemed to me to have sharper, clearer, more beautiful images of the world, real or unreal, than the actual world. Mrs. Palmer (the schoolmistress) made the dog in Walter de la Mare's poem "Silver" sound better than a real dog, a perfect representation of a dog. How wonderful it was that you could hear and see a dog in words and did not have to go out into the street and look for a dog.

Shortly after those experiences I began to realise that it might be possible for me to make the words which would preserve those pictures—and stories—for me, and provide them for other people. That is how "breathing" in poetry began for me. Anything "baffling" comes much later. At the beginning, everything was simple. Not easy, but simple and clear.

L.V.—Your poems abound in words synonymous with "blank." Do you imagine that whoever reads you will be fooled by this veil of shy blankness?

A.B.—I feel sure that I derive some of my understatement (which sometimes borders on the negativity of early Eliot) from Eliot, the poet of our time, first read when I discovered modern poetry. I have always tried, or felt I have done best when I tried, to let the strength of a poem (if it has any strength) emerge at a second or third reading, not a first. I do not believe in violently direct, or shocking, poetry (or prose for that matter). I hope that the inner turmoil—which is indeed there—will be apparent when readers think carefully about what I am saying. So, if you like, what you cite as a "shy blankness" is a veil which I hope the readers will feel persuaded to lift. The idea of a veil irresistibly brings to mind Keats' great passage about the goddess in *The Fall of Hyperion*. Veils are used to conceal interesting mysteries which should be clear when they are lifted.

L.V.—You are a novelist as well as a poet.

A.B.—I am not sure that fiction and poetry have come closer in recent years. There have been superficial changes in the form of fiction, although fundamentally the task of a novel, or a fiction—call it what you like—is to tell a story; or that's one of the main tasks which writers ignore at their peril. Poetry must be primarily about catching the essence of something, not necessarily via narrative.

By implication a "poetic" novel has less of a story to tell, is more like an extended poem. I don't find the fully poetic novel very interesting. I don't find the indulgence of formal "originality" in fiction very fruitful, unless those basic elements—story, character, place—are still indubitably there (as they were in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or even Nabokov, and certainly in Anthony Powell—and Proust—Saul Bellow and John Updike).

Isn't the answer simple? Poetry comes in a small, concentrated bottle, fiction is a much larger one, to be drunk more slowly—but drunk completely to obtain the full effect. I make both items sound like medicines. I don't mind that. The world can be a sick and strange place, and the arts, as well as giving pleasure, can be medicinal. I won't get deeply into matters like catharsis...

L.V.—Would you subscribe to any literary label of your own free will? I have called contemporary writers "desperadoes," because everyone is trying to be his own trend.

A.B.—One does not get a chance to dispute literary labels (or one does, but one disputes them in vain!). But I cannot complain about any that have been applied to me. For example, "post-Movement," to describe poets who followed the 1950s "Movement" in

British poetry, were influenced by its attitudes and forms and yet were crucially different. When I look in my mirror—or look over past work and try to understand what I was doing and, more significantly, whether I understood what I was doing, I see (or I think I see) a label like "moral concern" stuck to it, and under that heading, "attention to detail" and "striving for truth" and "irony" and "comedy" appearing in the smaller print of the list of contents/ingredients. I don't think giving a name to trends is a heresy—it's inevitable, anyway. Of course we more and more need the labels so as to gain a grip on the volume and variety of what is being written—with the labels in our minds we can then start to read, and think, and differentiate for ourselves.

L.V.—What is your relationship to T.S. Eliot's poetry? You quote him here and there. On the other hand, your concealing (though apparently candid) verses seem determined to push him away.

A.B.—T.S. Eliot provided my own introduction to modern poetry—I read the first cheap edition of his poems while on holiday with my parents in summer 1948 or 49 (whenever it was it was my last full holiday by the sea with them). Eliot made an immediately overwhelming impression, an excellent illustration of his own dictum (only found much later) that "true poetry can communicate before it is understood" (quoting from memory). His rhythms and images (diluted versions of them) were in my own early verse, only gradually yielding to influences like Dylan Thomas and William Empson (a very little) and Philip Larkin (much more). I took up Eliot's diffidence, and have never wholly lost that, in poetry or fiction. My "everyday" words are my own kind of code, I suppose—Eliot's reticence but not much of his tone. I never consciously rebelled against Eliot, and I don't feel many later poets have (as they did against Yeats, for example). Probably most poets just left Eliot aside and listened harder to other great poets of their period. I've never felt I had to "make peace" with Eliot—I'd never had his politics or religion, so there was no intense acceptance followed by a rejection. He is just always there as a magnificent, exemplary poet (I do still read him and would like to think he would have time for my work if he were still alive). I still find—unfashionable view, increasingly, his criticism valuable also, the rather puritanical drift of it.

L.V.—Do you think you belong to any group at all, or are you alone in the world of literary trends?

A.B.—I feel I am "post-Group" (the London "Group" of the fifties and sixties) and post-Movement.

L.V.—What present poets do you relate to? Whom do you value, whom do you feel akin?

A.B.—As an older writer I look mostly to my own seniors—but get pleasure from the work of younger contemporaries in England/Britain like (some are fairly new names) Paul Farley, Douglas Dunn and Seamus Heaney (both "of course"), Ian Duhig (a wonderful and serious intellectual joker), Conor O'Callaghan, Paul Summers—some are very new poets I've been reading recently.

L.V.—How far from Eliot have you travelled? Can he be said to be the skeleton in the closet of your poetry?

A.B.—We don't revere Eliot enough nowadays!

L.V.—What is the future of poetry?

A.B.—Poetry has a future as long as it retains a tough core of imagination and honesty and doesn't surrender to either ideology or populism (populism is now the greater danger).

L.V.—If you were to start all over again, would you still be the writer you are, or do you have new strategies in mind?

A.B.—I would simply try to write more, and better, and concentrate on creating. There have been too many distractions!

L.V.—Have your readers ever made you feel happy you are a poet?

A.B.—When they clearly understand what I am saying I am happy—whether they like the poetry or not.

L.V.—Has your attitude to language changed, as compared to Eliot's or Joyce's?

A.B.—I don't see language as a vehicle or opportunity for experiment—but as a means of understanding the world and the things in it. Heaney has a good sentence about poetry "as a representative of things in the world"—very simple, terribly true.

L.V.—Is reading still popular or do you feel drowning in a world of screens and scripts?

A.B.—I don't let myself be drowned by screens and scripts. I know very few poets who do that. In the end, you are alone with the words and ideas, however you put them down on paper or screen, and however you transmit them to an audience. (I believe the book will always be with us.) ■



—Phil Miller

After the Dark Ages and a Day of Work

My car smokes toward home, and my girl, small town, street-wise, medieval, purer than the fairest maiden, steps toward the windshield's glass, her eyes blue as the sea is mad, her whitest face now gray and sick

with love. It is true she wears a weave of her own golden hair, the finest tunic by my hand, mother, queen, a servant still, and trusted.

She faints three times and lifts one frail, pale hand toward a tournament next door where our black-haired beast romps with a poodle. In a garden. Walled.

Here is a love stronger than Tristan and Isolde, Amadas and Ydoine, Fresne and Gurun.

And across the yard the neighbor man, shotgunned and modern, a most handsome peasant, knows my girl and I have no lord, the sunbeam of his anger strikes me square in the eyes. And if he'd turn that gun on me, I'd give my finest white bread, my salted flesh, my flesh—but the virgin is there, and the dogs are horsing around, so I sign the cross and call "here Fritz, here" to our errant beast, and he leaps the wall and gallops toward my fair daughter's arms, himself his steed, our colours flying.

—Donna Biffar

Joanne Lowery

Donna Biffar—In your latest book, *Double Feature*, you write from a male *Rogue* perspective. What made you choose a *Rogue* as your vehicle of expression?

Joanne Lowery—Did I choose the *Rogue* or the *Rogue* choose me? One of my heroes is Mick Jagger—oh, I know he's probably not a very nice person, but I'm fascinated with the way he became a symbol of rebellion when he was still a fresh-cheeked lad. I admire the way he offended just about everyone in the sixties, but even more, I respect his commitment to his art. When he sings, he IS his art—and that's the way I'd like to write.

He's the epitome of arrogant men, and I've known a few arrogant men. Plus my own rebellious streak, which runs very deep and usually stays hidden. In some ways, the *Rogue's* postures are my own, or at least attitudes with which I sympathize.

I'm not much concerned with the *Rogue* being male. Many of my poems assume male persona, and I'm not sure why that is. I'm heterosexual, not particularly androgynous, I don't think. But I prefer a stronger poetic voice rather than a softer, feminine voice, so I gravitate towards male figures. For these poems, I did picture Mick and his two counterparts.

Did I mention Jesus? I think Jesus was a *Rogue* too.

D.B.—You mention Jesus, and you use his persona in a few pieces. Some poets really like to use religious imagery.

J.L.—Poets use religious imagery because poetry employs all the language and experience we humans have, and religion is a big part of the picture.

I like to use Christian symbolism in unusual ways or different contexts but also because I simply enjoy many of the symbols and those beautiful, familiar words. Part of my definition of *Rogue* is how the person rebels or flaunts conventions knowing full well that he will pay a price: he proceeds with his maverick actions and pays the price willingly. Sometimes that price is alienation or loneliness, but in Jesus' case it was a lot more, and he knew exactly what he was doing. It always amuses me that a conservative religion developed from someone who was so independent and unconventional.

D.B.—Tell me a little about your "Misters." Are they all *Rogues*?

J.L.—The *Misters* aren't all *Rogues*—I was using male persona to develop a number of themes, though I suspect individualism underlies each of them. Comprising an unpublished book entitled *Seven Misterys* are Mr. Lord, Mr. Voice, Mr. Eunuch, Mr. Encore, Mr. Wall, Mr. Believe, and Mr. Dead. Mr. Eunuch is my favorite, though he tends to make some people a little nervous. He serves as a symbol of loss. Mr. Voice is more literal—about the power of voice. Mr. Encore is about the way things repeat in life. All of them, in sequences of seven to ten poems, are pretty abstract and surreal, not as realistic as the *Rogues*. I really enjoyed writing them, though they bordered on obsession.

D.B.—Any other obsessions?

J.L.—I have to confess that Jack was the most obsessional of my series. I wrote sixty-four Jack and the Beanstalk poems in around two months and finally forced myself to stop, though I didn't feel done at all. I've always liked the fairy tale, but when I started getting into it, I realized how strange a story it is: a boy disobeys his mother but is rewarded, a boy does something stupid and is rewarded, a boy gives away the family fortune and is rewarded, a boy steals and gets away with it, a boy steals and then steals two more times, a boy kills the victim of his crime and is lauded

as a hero. Talk about a *Rogue*—Jack's one for sure.

At the time, I was about to leave a dead-end job and was looking for another. I identified very strongly with going who-knows-where, clinging to an unknown entity, determined to go up, illogically persistent and deeply dissatisfied. I talked about Jack with other people trying to figure out the paradoxes of his nature and his story. Once, over lunch, a friend looked at me and said, "You're Jack, aren't you."

Quite frankly, I don't think those poems, forty-five of which are in an unpublished book, rid me of my fascination with the story and the images. Jack and I still spend a lot of time up there hanging on, watching the panorama below, speculating on what awaits us. We don't give a damn about the harp and the goose—it's the climb we like, up there among the scratchy leaves and stars.

D.B.—What's the background of Mr. Lord?

J.L.—I'm fascinated by power, both historically and individually. It amazes me how easily some people assume their roles as leaders, enforcers, and inhibitors. Though I don't consider myself a feminist or want to write from a female perspective, I think you'd have to agree that most of these powerful individuals are men, and the Mr. Lords are personifications of male attitudes, real and imagined. Since I tend to be a creature of self-doubt, I'm astonished by the ease with which men assume they are right. Mr. Lord is an anti-*Rogue*—he's the top dog stomping whoever gets in his way. And yet I have sympathy for him too, and I hope some of that comes through in the poems. His is a different kind of loneliness than the *Rogues*'s, but it's still lonely at the top.

And of course who is more deluded about power and right than the writer? And what poet does not have a generous portion of arrogance?

D.B.—Why thematic writing? Is there some comfort? Some of us just thrash about on the page until a poem "happens."

J.L.—Oh, I've done my share of thrashing, and actually, I prefer to write single poems. But I keep getting caught up in these series. Sometimes there's just a handful, but occasionally the series runs much longer.

From time to time I've tried not to write thematic series, but it seems to be part of the kind of poet I am. I hold something up in my "mind's eye," then turn it a little until it looks a little different, so I write that poem with that twist, and then I find myself looking for still another angle. And so it goes—variations on a theme, or else a failure to say it all the first time. Recently, with some chapbook-length series, I write out a list of related poems beforehand, then write them one at a time. That makes it easy—I know what the next poem will be—but it can also cause me to lose the momentum from that first bolt of inspiration.

My work has always been characterized by going a lot of different directions: I've written personal narratives, nature poems, love poems, historical narratives, religious poems, and miscellaneous topics and styles. I like collections that are a mix of subjects, yet at the same time I think some collections are strengthened by having a common theme. Writing a series gives me a tremendous sense of purpose, but I don't know if that comes through.

D.B.—Have you written many formal poems? Do you think it's important to a writer's development to write in form?

J.L.—I don't think I've ever written a formal poem—not even a sonnet. I admire and like forms and think it would be wonderful to write them, but it never happens. I've read books about various forms to learn the

technicalities, but they seem to roll over my head. This is a regrettable deficiency on my part, but I think while on one hand it's good to push in new directions, we as poets cannot be other than what we are—how we write is built into us; it's a reflection of how our brains are wired. I'd rather be a fiction writer than a poet, but when I try to write a story, poetry comes out. And when I write poetry, it's Lowery poems that end up on paper.

D.B.—Poe called writing a "demon in my mist," and Hemingway called it his finest virtue and his worst vice. Do you think writing is a curse? Is it something you MUST do?

J.L.—For me it is a question of MUST. I've tried to give up writing, but I don't try that anymore. I once wrote a poem called "Why I Quit Writing," which even got published. From time to time I may experience a little lull, and I think, well, it's gone, burned out, but the next day, whamo. I've been writing seriously since I was nine years old, so writing is very much a part of me. I think that's true of the majority of fiction writers and poets who have more than fleeting publication success. Others, however, seem to stop writing, and I find that puzzling. I'd have to say that they aren't really writers at all—if you're a writer, you write, and you write as if your life depends upon it, because your life DOES depend on it.

If I weren't so invested in my writing, I would have pursued a career and earned a lot more money, so the curse of writing has kept me from conventional successes, and sometimes I think it would be a relief not to have the writing monkey on my back. Nevertheless, for me writing has been a blessing. One year when I was teaching part-time at a college, I kept asking aloud in the faculty lounge, "Does writing save us?" I got lots of stares, few answers. I realized that my own answer is Yes. Yes. Yes.

D.B.—You mentioned making a list of related poems when you're writing a series. Does this mean that you already have a metaphor in mind when you sit down, or does the metaphor evolve as you write?

J.L.—A little of both, I guess. Sometimes I write the title first, so I must know what the poem is going to be "about." But I think the poem generally goes its own direction. I've noticed other poets saying the same thing. And though frequently I have the first few lines in my mind before I write, I can never compose the whole poem in my head. The very act of pencil in hand seems to create the poem. By the end, it's frequently someplace I wouldn't have predicted.

D.B.—That's not uncommon, is it? You know at one time Frost said he never revised anything. Let's talk about how you revise your work.

J.L.—I have a friend who talks about editing a book in which poets explain how they revise. I keep encouraging him to follow through on that project—it's something I think is badly needed, and I for one am curious about how and how much other poets revise their work.

I've read that some poets revise their poems continuously, even after publication; this sounds noble in the pursuit of perfection but impractical. After a while I'd lose interest in the poem or forget what impulse prompted me to write it.

D.B.—Yes, well Yeats thought a poem was never finished, only abandoned.

J.L.—Generally I write a poem straight through, then go back and re-read it, tweaking along the way. For me, the biggest problem is always the last line or two.

Beginnings seem etched in stone, but where the poem goes from there is what demands hard work, to make it hang just right, with just enough tension. After I have a complete draft, generally at one sitting, I put the poem in my Magic Yellow Revision Folder and let it incubate for at least a month. I love to revise poems and look forward to pulling a crop of five or ten from the folder to polish up. For me, revision is not only fun but also the most satisfying part of writing.

D.B.—That's what Yeats was implying.

J.L.—I write in pencil and cannot understand how anyone can write poetry in ink—or on computers, though I sometimes make a few last-minute adjustments when I'm entering my work into the computer. I erase and erase and erase, and if the paper gets thin, I tape a new piece of paper over the thinned lines. If the whole poem seems problematic, I photocopy it, and usually at some point it swerves in another direction. I "listen" to the poem in my head and adjust for sound, prune adjectives, look for repetition and harshness, adjust articles, watch verb consistency. But none of that explains the inner sense of getting a poem right. I can feel a wrong line or word snag as I read the poem over, and I wait for just the right feel from the last line. It's not uncommon for me to rewrite a last line fifty or hundred times, changing it back and forth, jumping out of bed at night with yet something else to try.

When the poem seems done, it goes back into the folder so I can reread it several more times over a period of days or weeks. When I'm satisfied it's in its final form, I enter it into my computer and print copies to send out. Occasionally I'll take an editor's suggestion and change something minor, but usually the poem continues its journey to publication as is.

I have no idea how this process compares with that of other writers. When I read "bad stuff," I tend to think the writer hasn't revised at all, but that may not be true.

D.B.—Do you think one has to have read a great deal of poetry to write?

J.L.—Sometimes I've wondered about academic poets with their lit doctorates and asked that same question. I suppose some young writers have the talent—that amazing gift—to use language without having studied the craft. The rest of us seem to need to learn by sitting at the feet of the Masters and imitating them or taking notes. I majored in English at the University of Michigan, and I tell people that I use my undergraduate education every day of my life. It was there, in survey classes, of all places—hundreds of us in an auditorium, that I had little epiphanies about what poetry was and what it could do. I remember the first time I read Browning and understood dramatic monologue, a form I frequently return to. I memorized Hopkins' "The Windhover" for the music of the language and puzzled at his images. Yeats also had a profound effect on me, and I can't imagine writing poetry without having read and studied those poets. A few months ago when I wrote a series of poems about devils, Milton came back to me even though I hadn't read him in thirty years.

Now I read only contemporary poetry and a great deal of contemporary fiction. I also read the *New Yorker* faithfully and think I've learned a lot about precise and clear language from their prose. I'm always watching words, in advertising and journalism as well as literature. The more words I take in, the more words I am able to write.

D.B.—How do you distinguish between good and bad poetry?

J.L.—An awful lot of what we respond to as "good poetry" is a matter of taste. The older I get, the more I think personal preference plays a huge role in determining what poems rise to the top. I can accept that there are good poems that I'm simply not going to

respond to but still respect. What I'm talking about, however, are poems that I can't imagine anyone finding interesting because their language is flat and ordinary, their perspective uninspired, and evidence of imagination scant. The greatest deficiency I see is unimaginative use of language: poems that don't use language to reflect/create experience; poems completely flat and devoid of "voice"; poems where clichéd description substitutes for imagery; poems that have never been pruned of unnecessary adjectives, adverbs, and commentary. I hate to say this, but most of these poems are written by women and who seem overly concerned with perceptions of their youth and their female sensibility. By trying to be sensitive, these women writers sacrifice spine and verbal craft. I'm astonished that so many of these poems get published.

The other thing I see is poetry with eclectic or arcane references or a jumble of images with nothing hanging them together. I'm not sure what the point of these poems is other than to display virtuosity. The only experience they communicate for me is confusion. I feel like those students who sit in the back of the room rolling their eyes, mumbling "what's this mean, why do we have to read this dumb stuff."

D.B.—You've published an incredible number of poems, and you were poetry editor of *Black Dirt*. What are your thoughts on the small press world?

J.L.—The small press world has been very good to me, so I tend to be more positive about it than other poets, and I get annoyed at Poets-&Writers-variety whininess about fairness. First, let me explain that when my poems started appearing in the mid-eighties, I wrote completely in isolation. I have never belonged to a writing group nor had an academic affiliation other than being a part-time instructor. Therefore, I am proof that it's poems that matter, not the trappings or connections. At the same time, I have to admit that reputation and recommendations do affect selection at some magazines. I worked very hard to be the writer I am. No one helped me, and only a few people encouraged me. It speaks well of a system that allows someone like me to publish an "incredible number" of poems.

I was lucky to be a poetry editor for a few years, and I learned a lot from being on the other end of the submission process. I was surprised how hard it was to be completely impartial as long as there was a name on the manuscript. I learned that I had my own biases and prejudices. I almost uniformly rejected any poem about childhood, and how was the poor poet to know I would react that way? I discovered that it felt good to be cultivated as a peer by other editors and to develop my own set of connections. I was surprised at how much my own tastes ruled, and I think most people underestimate the importance of taste as a factor in contests and publication in general. But you're not going to change the inclination to have preferences any more than you're going to legislate fairness in any human arena. The editors I know work very hard to be equitable, but they like the writers they like, because that's what editors do.

As far as contests, they should be judged anonymously—taste will still rule, but reputation and favoritism can be eliminated. When I culled the entries to *Black Dirt's* first chapbook contest, the names were removed beforehand, though I still recognized some manuscripts by the poems in them. Still, one of the five finalists was a poet who I disliked and had refused to publish. I was irritated that he was a finalist even though it proved the process had been fair.

I would agree that friendships, affiliations, prizes, and the pull of MFA program staff do corrupt the system. But I think people overlook other factors, one of which is that the game now has a huge number of players compared to ten or twenty years ago. It's harder to get published, so with a stack of rejections, it's difficult for a good, dedicated poet to explain being excluded. I've been very persistent, and that's been a big factor in my "success." I keep writing, keep submitting, and I encourage other writers to do the same.

But let me join the grippers in complaining that the

situation of holding submissions for unreasonable lengths of time is getting worse. It's no longer unusual for me to get a return on a submission after two years. The percentage of magazines who never reply despite an SASE has increased. If any editor can't process incoming manuscripts in a timely manner, he or she should be replaced. If a magazine advertises for submissions in every issue of *Poets & Writers*, they are responsible for returning the avalanche they get. I think sloppiness is a problem more easily solved than fairness. Submitting and accepting poems is tough on all concerned—let's all try our best to make the system work and to treat each other respectfully.

D.B.—What are your writing plans? Any big themes?

J.L.—Currently I'm finishing up two thematic chapbooks, so I'd like to get away from series for a while. I'm always looking for a new direction, and I always want to see if I can cultivate a new poetic voice. I'd like to write some grittier, riskier poems with more edges. And like any writer, I'd like to think that my best work still lies ahead.

Double Feature is published by Pygmy Forest Press, Eureka CA.

Mr. Lord Takes His Due

Under *droit du seigneur* he gets first dibs on the girl after the party's over before the business of love sets in. The fool groom seethes outside ungrateful for a hundred future acts wanting instead to be the first to pierce her. But Mr. Lord is top dog and hierarchy will have its way. He peels her pink skin, her white skin her blue, her violet to the inner red. His superior member paints her womb with the cloven mark of a stag.

She doesn't cry out and no one speaks when what happened shuts the door. Mr. Lord goes home to father four sons the oldest having the right to do the same. Meanwhile the groom and eventually others work to repair her from the bottom up. When they are done her heart is sealed with candlewax and kisses. She folds over, wrinkles, dries into something no longer worth remembering.

Mr. Lord Listens

He loves to hear all those prayers said in his name mixed with Jesus

to be told he is mighty perfect as an idea lamb and jehovah maker, savior.

Women flatter him: father and father though he had nothing to do with their red lips, their broken hearts their aspirations through a glass ceiling.

Though he would if he could cleanse their hearts and cripples' too smiling upon a stainless world.

Their pleas provide an entertainment he can't enjoy. Words: with a wave of his hand

blue skies again, something new to complain about and beg.

Mr. Lord shakes his head, hums, fiddles with a wispy cloud.

—Joanne Lowery

When Mr. Lord Decides

Mr. Lord hangs on to what's his.
To stomp or not to stomp the bug
beneath his black shoe begs no question.

Poe lets him pull back the pendulum
while the wimp screams. Then swish
thud. Silence reigns.

But he's also the nice guy
waving okay to a lane change
or holding open a woman's door.

He turns off the t.v., picks up
a guitar, pitches strings with his fingers.
After his favorite song silence reigns.

Right before he comes
a lover's name flies from his lips
to ruin what he thought was over.

—Joanne Lowery

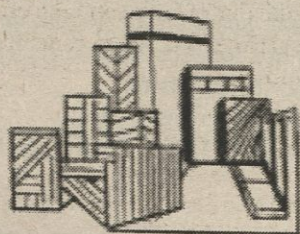
Mr. Lord Measures the Universe

Who can be any larger?
Mr. Lord opens the gates of his greatness
with *noblesse oblige* to welcome
those who crawl in dust
on their faithful bellies.
They will never touch his toes
turning instead into more dust
for their children to slither through.

After a while he gets bored watching
so many subservient S's.

His eyes grace what's straight ahead:
blankness filled with gas and orbit,
luck stretching eternal.
Earthy others fall back where they've been
looping towards their nether selves
while he waves aside the Milky Way.
Everything is his beyond heaven
and Plato's cave, spanning infinity
as caliper by caliper he claims each star.

—Joanne Lowery



—Connie Cannon

Trotsky's Double at Moscow Station

When Zinoviev tapped his watch
I stepped onto the Pullman's landing,
its small proscenium cowering my head.
I filled my lungs with Moscow air,
the station's smoke and steam, as if it
were my last. Always trains, I thought.
Lenin at Finland Station, the icy years
of civil war chugging to battle beneath
the Urals' white gaze. True, I was a
quick study, but this was improvisation.
I had to sense what he would say at any
provocation. A man cried, *Don't leave
us!* I am at peace with my fate, I said.
I go, tending the spark of permanent
revolution. *When will you return?* another
shouted. Who can say? I asked back. What
we face is not a Czar's howitzers but a
part of us that longs to sleep, content with
past victories. A final state turns to kiss
us with hemlock on its lips as if we were
poets who loll in their last lovely vision.
And what lived in the words has flown.
In that moment, I turned into him. *Good
work, Zinoviev whispered, you've given
them a vain dream to waste their lives on.*

—Bill Tremblay

The Seen and The Unseen

No one notices
That the resurrection fern, after rain,
Stands upright,
Dances on the oak branch.
No one sees the flutter of her green skirt,
Or hears her click castanets.

Many people visit the tree,
Many,
Many bring their children,
Point out a man was once hanged
From the long limb.

—Duane Locke

San Gimignano

Alone, walking on the pale orange sand
Of an Atlantic Coast beach, I noticed
Sea lichen spread over coral.
The lichen, a pale green, the same color
As the shoes she wore in San Gimignano.
We awoke to hear the sounds
Of a donkey walking on cobblestone.
Surrounding were crows with raindrops
On the blue of their wings.
In background, swallows speckled the sky
With orange wings. I see my white car
Parked behind sea oats, I wished
My car had hooves instead of tires.
I wished my car could neigh.

—Duane Locke

Lightnin' Hopkins

passing through dusty midnight Oklahoma to Texas
driving at night so the engine stays cool

before I left she asked "you're nearly fifty,
why do you always have to be illegal?"
she never understood poetry
why that's all there is

so shouldering my bag, leaving her smoke behind
I followed the high beams
just me and your ashes in the backseat
static and slide-guitar

—David Gross

Kent State

It was warm and young as springtime ever is,
and we were all around Saigon;
we were all at home;
we sat in class while May filled the window
with warm winds and lilac,
and we sat watch in rain
with heavy breath of death shuffling the forest's
lurking leaves, heaving in the night.

We were fifty;
we were twenty-one;
we were in love, and we were lulled;
we were students, teachers;
we were guardsmen on the hill.

We were silent,
and we screamed into the wind
while tiny specks of quartz sat dark
in veins of gray marble
before we cut into our core
to call them forth
and fit the tiny polished bits
to shine beneath the common sun

that shone above Ohio
and the fields of Khe Sanh.

—John P. Kristofco

moon bear and blast

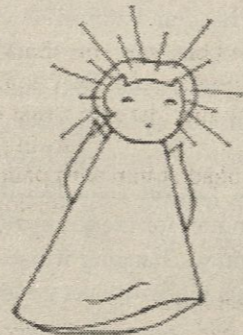
after Richard Hugo's "Farmer, Dying"

we are all the farmer dying
watching his geese fatten without us
his morning deer drinking at our creeks
his bear tapping at our window
killed slowly by something autumn

we hide in what we read
the moon full orange pales to white
fat on the horizon grows small
sick and pale with grief
we are hunters drunk around your fire

he calls from the grave
a voice blasting through
are we gone forever is your voice still heard
you stand on the cusp to guide us
we live you in ourselves

—P.F. Allen



—Shelley C. Smith

Letter to My Brother in Savoonga (St. Lawrence Island, Alaska)

I haven't seen you in over a year,
have begun to trudge through your absence
daydreaming the darkness I know descends
upon you for weeks, even months,
where you are. Winter is failing here,
the fields muddy, and the timber
ignited by robins and wrens.
My explorations are limited to their nests
heavy with powder-blue shells.

Yours, however, is the more romantic
notion. During my Saturday naps, I conjure
you in a flapping parka, the stench of seals
and the village rubbish pile attracting
an Arctic fox, the stray jaws
of a passing polar bear. I haven't a clue
how you tolerate it, wonder where
your own mind goes when the blasts
rise from over Russia—

Do you settle into sleep like a field,
listen to the cornears flush in the hush
that is always predawn, dew crazy in the silk?
Dad says you wouldn't, that your hatred
would sever the stalks. On the phone with him.
I stare out my office window, remind him
it was his shame we were born with,
and his restlessness you dredge from the sea,
carry back to your cabin, and examine

by the fire.

—Hans P. Bremer

Mine

There are lovers who set booby traps
and bury them under feather pillows.
They toss grenades onto wedding cakes,
duct tape trigger wire to garden hose
that wraps around suburban homes.
In this language, claiming ownership means also
to destroy. One misstep of the intended victim—
a wandering eye or stray hand
ignites an explosion while driving
home from a dinner party.
It's as if we want a god so badly
we'd dynamite our own churches,
bust noses, and burn the land.
We'd kill to keep
what we never had.

—Jean Prafke

we will live again

your mother
her memory slipping and mental powers failing
has resurrected the dead
claims that she is at her mother's house
rather than her own
but puzzles "I haven't seen her
yet though"
as if it were exceedingly strange
to be there in her mother's domicile
and yet not see her, still nevertheless
retaining some sense of checking things out
with her faculties

shuddering at the mind's disintegrations
by wet right are such things visited upon us?
remembering your friend's account
of taking care of his daddy during his last days
he had resurrected his whole family
as though they all still lived in some twilight zone
together

finally one day
after his father had blethered on about them for weeks
your friend in a moment of frustration lost his temper
"don't you understand," he said "that they're all
fucking well dead"
his father just blinked at him with pained
incomprehension
and surprise

you remember years ago
the one time you had seen their family all together
at some rare and unique reunion
it was like watching "Long Day's Journey into Night"
how they tormented one another

all this gives added impulse
to live now
without holding back
however we twist around each other
in some dance of mutual incomprehension

—Chuck Miller

The Big Cat

for Dave McCain, Senior

Now I know why we seek the hills in spring.
A slough spills from her womb, snakes
come alive, the lion in the woods smells
out its spoils, sneaks the neighbor's dog.

The wind across the ridge could char
a blacksmith's tongs. Highways ripe
with blood, in the pasture two does
and three fawns rub hips on high grass.

The world is a turmoil of calm things.
Change appears, everywhere unnoticed.
A music in the air collapses stars.

The lion scrapes her feet on leaves.
*Approach, I say, the taste of flesh
Will not sate your hunger.* The big cat leaps.

—Leonard Cirino

The Fado Singer

after Soyinka

Plucking crescendos from stones
and dirges from the moon, the woman
tells of storms that fall through sky
to land on soil-hardened bones.

Not quite a stillborn moan, not yet a song,
her blues-breath roams among the room
of strangers who strangle cocktail glasses,
syringes on their minds. The floor moves,

then come the dancers, but they don't
candle to the singer's flame, her throat
a torch bound by wretched words
she never says but crowns with thorns.

—Leonard Cirino

Valeda Evans (1904-2000)

Ezra

At the book fair
I bought a Pound
for a mere pence.
Now as I read
his words begin
to make sense.

W.W.I. Fiancee

I was one
who waved goodbye and hoped
to have you back by Christmas.

Jenny's boy returned,
he coughs — the gas —
and one leg is gone.

I see your name
on the stone shaft on the village green
and on the bronze tablet in our chapel.

Some read and remember,
I read and miss you.
The long years slowly pass,
... I envy jenny.

My Maple Rocker

My old
rocker's
my best place for
dreams

of things that used
to be,
when I
nod

my chair
dreams of the tree
it was and sways
with me.

Letter to Nancy

I'm thinking of you tonight
and feeling homesick for Wales.
It's after midnight, a strange time
for letter writing.

The wind was rising when
I went to bed I slept
for an hour before wild wailing
in minors roused me.

Across the time warp of years
I reread your letter of other
wailings when the Nazis
dropped that bomb on Cwmparc.

Rising and falling of wind sounds
like you described air-raid warnings
brought pictures of you huddled in
the cubby-hole under the stairs.

I'm feeling calmer now,
I'll go back to bed soon,
but, first I'll do what you did,
remember?

You wrote — "When we heard the ALL CLEAR,
We decided to go back to bed after
we had a nice cup of tea!"
I raise my cup to you.

Last Christmas

That Christmas was different,
we knew it would be her last,
no one mentioned that.

We spoke of the weather
or Christmases past,
we thought this one too spring-like.

We appealed to her
to taste the dressing we were making
... isn't something missing?
Another pinch of thyme?

The day passed.
We kept the charade.
We even planned when to make
the fruit cake next year.

Gold Earrings

Grandma, chubby, small,
always dressed in black,
summer and winter, a black presence,
with shiny gold earrings.

I saw her often
but I was just one
of seventeen grandchildren.
She never remembered me.

Now, at her funeral
the church was dark and cold.
Mother took me up the aisle
to see Grandma once more.

She didn't look much different
lying in a black box,
the black clothes seemed the same,
the earrings still in place.

I whispered, "Will they bury
her like that? Can't you take off
the earrings? I'd like to remember her,
I could if I had them."

No one seemed to hear me,
no one paid attention.
The earrings kept shining
in the dark coffin.

Love-Lies-Bleeding

The seed packet bore
its fancy name and promises
of fanfare in my garden
with flourishes of showy bloom.

I got busy with ordinary
hum-drum things.
I pushed the packet
to the back of the shelf
ignored it,
and did not think of it —
until today.

I've had coffee and
the morning paper.
I've just read the obituaries.

Why did those amaranth seeds
stay in the packet?