



# POETRY

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*November 2012*

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*November 2012*

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## POEMS



ELIZABETH SPIRES

---

*Pome*

From flowering gnarled trees  
they come, weighing down  
the branches, dropping  
with a soft sound onto  
the loamy ground. Falling  
and fallen. That's a pome.

Common as an apple. Or  
more rare. A quince or pear.  
A knife paring away soft skin  
exposes tart sweet flesh.  
And deeper in, five seeds in a core  
are there to make more pomes.

Look how it fits in my hand.  
What to do? What to do?  
I could give it to you.  
Or leave it on the table  
with a note both true and untrue:  
*Ceci n'est pas un poème.*

I could paint it as a still life,  
a small window of light  
in the top right corner  
(only a dab of the whitest white),  
a place to peer in and watch it  
change and darken as pomes will do.

O I remember days....  
Climbing the branches of a tree  
ripe and heavy with pomes.  
Taking whatever I wanted.  
There were always enough then.  
Always enough.

HAILEY LEITHAUSER

---

*Mockingbird*

No other song  
    or swoop (part  
    quiver, part swivel and  
    plash) with  
tour de force  
stray the course note  
    liquefactions  
(its new,  
bawdy air an  
    aria hangs in) en-  
thralls,  
    trills, loops, soars,  
    startles, out-warbles,  
out-brawns, more  
    juicily,  
    lifts up  
the dawn, outlaws from  
    sackcloth, the cool  
sloth of bed sheets,  
    from pillows  
and silks  
    and blue-quilted, feminine  
bolsters, fusses  
    of coverlets;  
    nips as the switch  
of a juvenile willow, fuzz  
    of a nettle, to  
window and window  
    and window and ever  
    toward egress, to  
flurry, pollen  
and petal shed,  
    to wet street  
and wet pavement,  
    all sentiment intemperate,



all sentience  
ephemeral.

VIJAY SESHADRI

---

*Sequence*

I. HELL

You'd have to be as crazy as Dante to get those down,  
the infernal hatreds.  
Shoot them. Shoot them where they live  
and then skip town.

Or stay and re-engineer  
the decrepit social contraption  
to distill the 200-proof  
elixir of fear

and torture the ... the what  
from the what? And didn't I promise,  
under threat of self-intubation,  
not to envision this

corridor, coal-tar black,  
that narrows down and in  
to a shattering claustrophobia attack  
before opening out

to the lake of frozen shit  
where the gruesome figure is discerned?  
Turn around, go home.  
Just to look at it is to become it.

## 2. PURGATORY, THE FILM

He was chronically out of work, why we don't know.  
She was the second born of a set  
of estranged identical twins. They met,  
hooked up, and moved in with her mother,  
who managed a motel on Skyline Drive.  
But always it was the other,  
the firstborn, the bad twin, the runaway,  
he imagined in the shadow  
of the "Vacancy" sign  
or watching through the window  
below the dripping eaves  
while they made love or slept.  
The body is relaxed and at rest,  
the mind is relaxed in its nest,  
so the self that is and is not  
itself rises and leaves  
to peek over the horizon, where it sees  
all its psychokinetic possibilities  
resolving into shapely fictions.  
She was brave, nurturing, kind.  
She was evil. She was out of her mind.  
She was a junkie trading sex for a fix,  
a chief executive, an aviatrix.  
She was an angel  
to the blinded and the lamed,  
the less-than-upright, the infra dig.  
And she was even a failure.  
She went to L.A. to make it big  
and crept back home injured and ashamed.

3. PURGATORY, THE SEQUEL

They put him in jail, why we don't know.  
They stamped him "Postponed."  
But he didn't mind.  
The screws were almost kind.  
He had leisure to get his muscles toned,

mental space to regret his crimes,  
and when he wasn't fabricating license plates  
he was free  
to remember the beauty  
that not once but a thousand times

escaped him forever, and escapes me, too:  
ghosts of a mist drifting  
across the face of the stars,  
Jupiter triangulating  
with the crescent moon and Mars,  
prismatic fracturings in a drop of dew ...

4. HEAVEN

There's drought on the mountain.  
Wildfires scour the hills.  
So the mammal crawls down the desiccated rills  
searching for the fountain,

which it finds, believe it or not,  
or sort of finds. A thin silver sliver  
rises from an underground river  
and makes a few of the hot

rocks steam and the pebbles hiss.  
Soon the mammal will drink,  
but it has first  
to stop and think  
its reflexive, impeccable thought:  
that thinking comes down to this—  
mystery, longing, thirst.

CASEY THAYER

---

*The Hurt Sonnet*

Dark days when I awaken so I slump  
back to the swamp of his armpit, a whit  
from the arachnid he inked to the stump  
that's left. So close to the vestige of it,  
the danger he's a reliquary of:  
tattooed noose to venerate the fist  
of a slug buried still in his butt above  
a white cross for the men he didn't miss.  
If only I could strip off the black map  
I sleep against and be his liniment,  
gloss over the explosion, the mishap  
phantom he feels in a forearm itch.  
He won't leave the long tale his tattoos read  
for me, so I amend the story.

*The Visitor*

Does no dishes, dribbles sauce  
across the floor. Is more dragon  
than spaniel, more flammable  
than fluid. Is the loosening  
in the knit of me, the mixed-fruit  
marmalade in the kitchen of me.  
Wakes my disco and inner hibiscus,  
the Hector in the ever-mess of my Troy.  
All wet mattress to my analysis,  
he's stayed the loudest and longest  
of any houseguest, is calling now  
as I write this, tiny B who brings the joy.

*La Prima Victoria*

She expects nothing but to witness our lives  
and find kindness and why shouldn't she  
but for the boiling water my partner spills  
on my arm and the FUCK'S SAKE  
that escapes my mouth now the snout  
of the spitting mammal in me.  
If there's a craft to the failing of simple  
expectations, I have mastered it  
and majestically — but when there's something  
that must be said, it must to be said,  
Lispector says of a woman entering  
an empty room and finding a version  
of herself so dark it makes her pause  
and really see it, how she's no better  
than the cockroach in her closet  
and so she eats it.





DONALD REVELL

---

*Borodin*

When the world was loveliness I was  
A composer, Borodin, my left eye  
Level with the floor beside toy men.  
Wild work and havoc they made,  
Being glad. I could draw a line  
Would run straight through the minds of men,  
Being a sociable angel,  
Music before and after, blushing.

Heaven is a nonsense entirely sensible.  
I was a child on the floor beside you,  
Making music, becoming small in the rosy  
Embrace of God's best messenger.  
I loved your havoc and your hair.

KATIE FORD

---

*The Soul*

It disappeared.  
It reappeared  
as chimney smoke  
that burnt through carcasses  
of swallows stilled,  
and that it portrayed no will  
was why I followed that smoke  
with this pair of eyes.

It was that it didn't need  
or require my belief  
that I leant upon it  
as a tired worker  
upon  
a gate.

*Foreign Song*

To bomb them,  
we mustn't have heard their music  
or known their waterless night watch,  
we mustn't have seen how already  
the desert was under constant death bells  
ringing over sleeping cribs and dry wells.  
We couldn't have wanted  
this eavesdropping  
of names we've never pronounced  
praying themselves towards death.  
I try to believe in us —  
we must not  
have heard  
their music.

*Speak to Us*

For all of my years, I've read only living signs —  
bodies in jealousy, bodies in battle,  
bodies growing disease like mushroom coral.  
It is tiresome, tiresome, describing  
fir cones waiting for fires to catch their human ribs  
into some slow, future forest.

My beloved, he tires of me, and he should —  
my complaints the same, his recourse  
the same, invoking the broad, cool sheet suffering drapes  
over the living freeze of heart after heart,  
and never by that heart's fault — the heart did not make itself,  
the face did not fashion its jutting jawbone  
to wail across the plains or beg the bare city.

I will no longer tally the broken, ospreyed oceans,  
the figs that outlived summer  
or the tedious mineral angles and  
their suction of light.

Have you died? Then speak.  
You must see the living  
are too small as they are,  
lonesome for more  
and in varieties of pain  
only you can bring into right view.

JIM HARRISON

---

*The Present*

The cost of flight is landing.  
On this warm winter day in the southwest,  
down here on the edge of the border I want  
to go to France where we all came from  
where the Occident was born near the ancient  
caves near Lascaux. At home I'm only  
sitting on the lip of this black hole, a well  
that descends to the center of the earth.  
With a big telescope aimed straight down  
I see a red dot of fire and hear the beast howling.  
My back is suppurating with disease,  
the heart lurches left and right,  
the brain sings its ditties.  
Everywhere blank white movies wait to be seen.  
The skylark dove within inches of the rocks  
before it stopped and rose again.  
God's toes are buried deep in the earth.  
He's ready to run. But where?

*The Girls of Winter*

Out the window of the bar I'm watching  
a circle of girls stretching and yawning  
across the street. It's late January and 74  
degrees. They love the heat because  
they *are* a moist heat. Heat loves  
heat and today is a tease for what comes  
with spring around here when the glorious birds  
funnel back up from Mexico. The girls  
don't care about birds because they *are* birds.  
I recall in high school a half dozen  
cheerleaders resting on a wrestling mat  
in short shorts in the gym, me beside them  
with a silly groin ache. What were they?  
Living, lovely, warm meat as we all are  
reaching out of our bodies for someone else.

JOANNA KLINK

---

*Toward what island-home am I moving*

Toward what island-home am I moving,  
not wanting to marry, not wanting  
too much of that emptiness at evening,  
as when I walked though a field at dusk  
and felt wide in the night.

And it was again the evening that drew me  
back to the field where I was most alone,  
compassed by stems and ruts,  
no light of the fixed stars, no flashing in the eyes,  
only heather pared by dry air, shedding  
a small feathered radiance when I looked away,  
an expanse whose deep sleep seemed an unending  
warren I had been given, to carry out such tasks —  
that I might find *nothing dead*.

And it was again the evening that drew me  
back to the field where I could sense no boundary —  
the smell of dry earth, cool arch of my neck, the darkness  
entirely within myself.

And when I shut my eyes there was no one.  
Only weeds in drifts of stillness, only  
stalks and gliding sky.

Come, black anchor, let us not be harmed.  
The deer leafing in the dark.  
The old man at the table, unable to remember.  
The children whose hunger is just hunger,  
and never desire.



DAVID YEZZI

---

*Cough*

I see you once I've got you down to size:  
a two-day-stubble squatter; jailbait eyes;

the bottle-headed trophy mom; the mentor  
always angling his face down from the center

of his universe to shine a light on yours.  
The fated anorexic, whose allures

shimmer in the mirror for her eyes  
only, denying what her denial denies.

Once you become a cliché I can hate you —  
or, treat me tenderly and let me date you.

But that only retards the writing-off  
that comes with boredom, amour propre, or (*cough*)

irreconcilable differences, i.e.,  
those things about you that are least like me,

yet just slightly different, my foible's homophone,  
so in hating yours I really hate my own.

This keeps the focus where it wants to be —  
On whom, you ask? Invariably on.... See?

I didn't even have to say, did I?  
I love you so much. No need to reply.

LISA WILLIAMS

---

*Torch*

*when I beheld a fire  
win out against a hemisphere of shadows.*

— *Inferno*, Dante (tr. by Allen Mandelbaum)

If I could hold a fire against  
a hemisphere of shadows, hold it  
close, not so that damage  
finds my hands, but so fire scatters  
galvanizing strands, my pupils  
responsive to the flames' unbridled  
tutelage as they tell me  
*nothing but these little jumps  
out of your definitions, small  
or large or leaping, sinking, slumped ...*  
If I could hold a fire against  
that latticework of shadows, standing  
close to flames pivoting without  
being singed or riveted or convinced  
it is the only spirit, like a god,  
making me something nailed to wood  
then keep my head, then coolly draw  
some backbone from that dazzle.

**POET PHOTOS**





Harriet Monroe and Rover



“Not much in the way of pictures around here— There’s this one of me pregnant in Paris”; Marie Ponsot, 1957



“My youngest daughter crumpled this — but my husband can’t print another soon — so I’ll send it on and replace it later — it was taken this summer”; Ruth Stone, 1955



Margaret Danner





Gwendolyn Brooks and family; Milwaukee, 1945

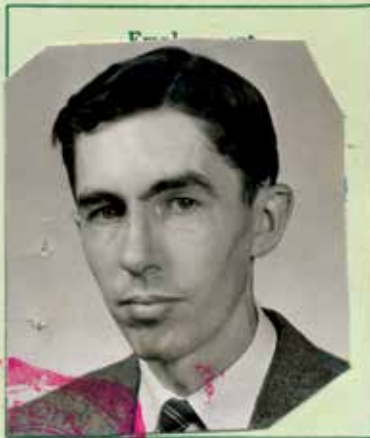


Calvin Forbes and Aengus; Hawaii, 1969



“Ch. Buckthorn Black Jack R 11 218 by Cinnibar Rags ex Ch. Buckthorn Sal bred, owned, and handled by Yvor Winters. Note the instress of the inscape. This dog is a finer work of art than are most of the poems published in *Poetry*.”

Carte N° 232,343  
Card



Signature du Titulaire  
Signature of holder

Gael Turnbull  
GAEL TURNBULL  
% YOUNG, 22 BEDE BURN ROAD,  
JARROW ON TYNE, CO. DURHAM, ENGLAND

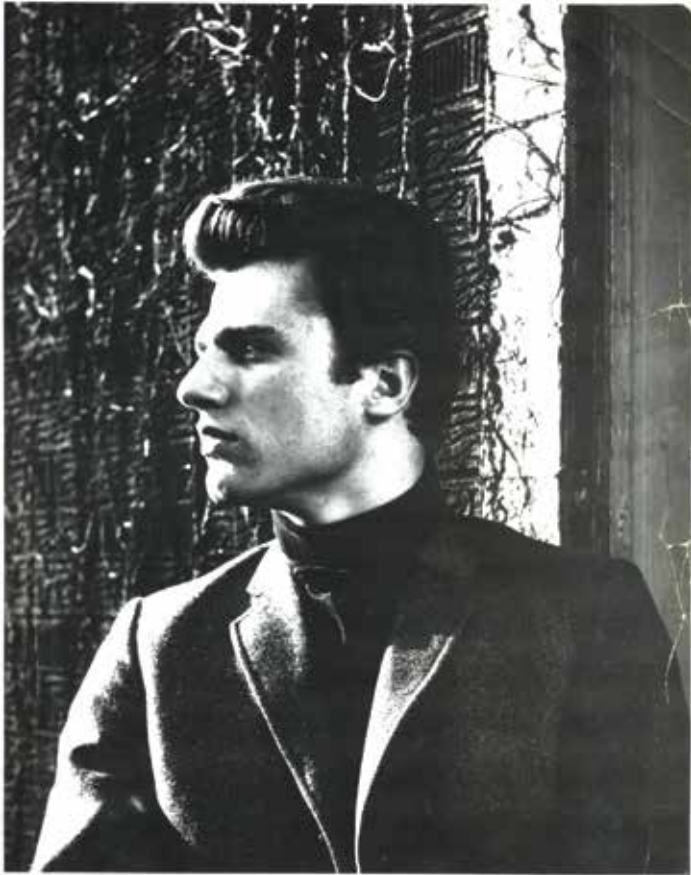
Gael Turnbull



Bobbie and Robert Creeley, 1961



Landis Everson



Gerard Malanga

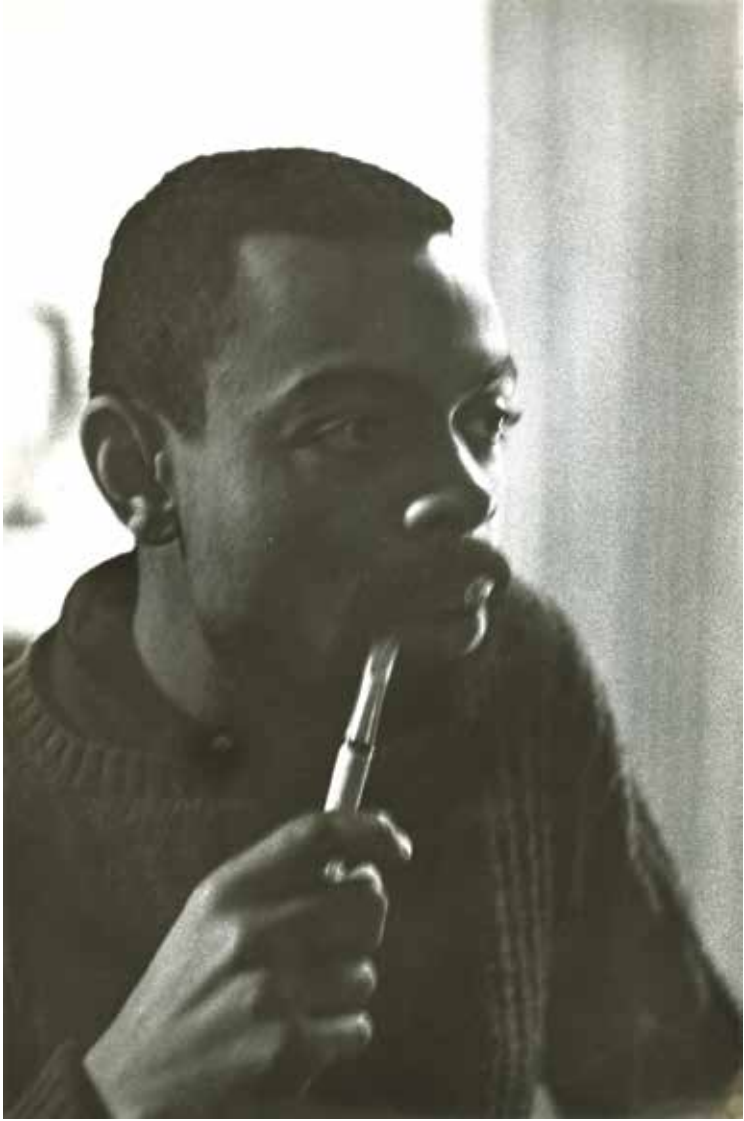


Tomáš Šalamun, 1973





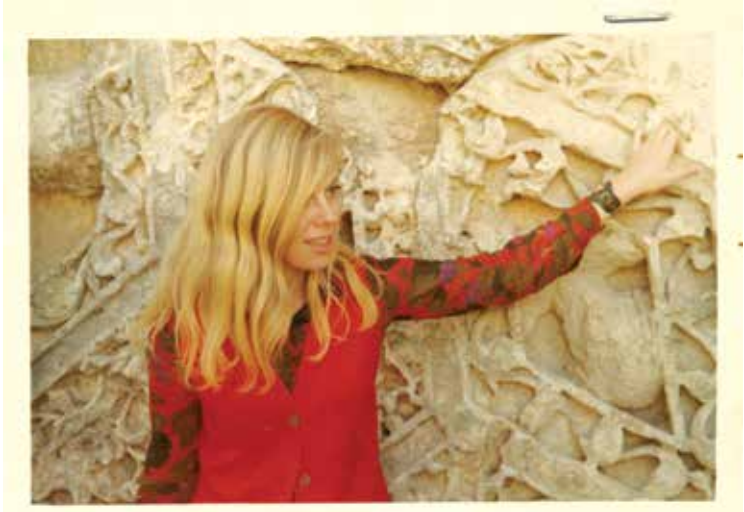
Michael Hofmann, 1981



LeRoi Jones, 1962



Paul Blackburn, 1964



Erica Jong



Suji Kwock Kim, 1994



Sharon Bourke, 1960



“Part of the medeavil [sic] wall on which the tower is situated!”; Tom Pickard, 1964



Lewis Warsh, 1966





Robert Pinsky, 1969



Louise Glück



Diane Wakoski, 1961



Larry Eigner, 1959



Ronald Johnson, 1963



Addressed to: The Sleaze, *Poetry*, 1018 N. State St., Chicago, Ill.

## Notes

From its earliest days, *Poetry's* editors have always requested that each contributor supply an author photo of some kind. Rummaging through the many thousands of photos on file in the office, it occurred to us that this collection constitutes something of a family album. The photos included here are part of a much larger exhibit on display this month at the Poetry Foundation. The captions are from the reverse of the photographs.

Harriet Monroe founded *Poetry* in 1912 and edited the magazine for twenty-four years. In her autobiography, *A Poet's Life*, she describes Rover (pictured here with Harriet) as a setter who was "the earliest of my canine playmates, a hero whose exploits would fill a volume."

The picture of a pregnant Marie Ponsot was taken in Paris, where she had met and married a painter who was a student of Fernand Léger. The couple had seven children before they divorced. Marie raised them herself, writing all the while.

The photo of Ruth Stone was taken by her husband Walter, shortly before he committed suicide. She, too, was a poet who wrote while raising her children alone. Having published thirteen books of poems during her long lifetime, she characterized her work as "love poems, all written to a dead man."

Margaret Danner was a Chicago poet who became an editorial assistant at *Poetry* in 1951, then associate editor in 1956. Devoted to what she called the "social conscious," she later founded Boone House in Detroit to serve as a cultural center for black writers, musicians, and artists.

Gwendolyn Brooks first appeared in *Poetry* in 1944, the year before this photo was taken. Surprisingly, given her lifelong connection to the city, her contributor's note says: "she lives at present in Chicago."

Chicago poet Calvin Forbes is shown here as a young man in Honolulu in 1969, living that year, he tells us, "more or less hand

to mouth.” He’s posing with his dog, Aengus, who was named after Yeats’s poem, “Song of the Wandering Aengus,” during what Forbes calls “my Yeats period, which I never quite outgrew.”

Yvor Winters sent in his chastening photo in 1947. In a letter reproduced in our July/August 2009 issue, Winters noted that he was an “an Airedale fancier. In my capacity as a teacher, I correspond, I suppose, to a professional handler at a dog show.”

The Scottish poet and physician Gael Turnbull started the famed Migrant Press to publish Modernist poetry.

Robert Creeley is shown here in 1961 with his first wife, Bobbie Louise Hawkins. The photo was sent in on the occasion of *Poetry* accepting his poem to her, “For Love.”

Part of the Berkeley Renaissance of the fifties with such better known poets as Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, Landis Everson dropped out of poetry for a while but was rediscovered in recent years. His first collection of poems, *Everything Preserved: Poems 1955–2005*, won the Emily Dickinson First Book Award from the Poetry Foundation. Though something of a loner, he was friends with the likes of Farley Granger and Eva Marie Saint.

Readers might not recognize him from his author photo, but the poet, photographer, and filmmaker Gerard Malanga continues to be known for his own creative work as well as for his epochal collaborations with Andy Warhol.

The Slovenian poet Tomaž Šalamun, championed by Robert Hass and others, has gained a wide readership in recent years; but the photo here was taken early in his career, not long after being jailed on political charges and publishing his first book in a samizdat edition.

Michael Hofmann is seen some thirty years ago, wearing a jacket that had belonged to his father, the writer Gert Hofmann, and posing in a photo booth, he tells us, “in Germany (probably) or some railway station in England.”



LeRoi Jones is shown here in 1962, three years before the assassination of Malcolm X led him to change his life and, eventually, his name.

Paul Blackburn is also shown here in the early sixties, some time after befriending Ezra Pound, through whom he came into contact with Robert Creeley, and eventually Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, and Cid Corman, all fellow *Poetry* contributors.

Most readers know Erica Jong as the author of *Fear of Flying* and other novels, but she has published over a half-dozen books of poetry. When Jong first appeared in *Poetry*, Suji Kwock Kim, shown in the next photo, was only two years old.

Sharon Bourke's photo accompanied her first appearance in the magazine in 1961. Though she didn't appear in our pages after 1963, she has gone on to become a successful visual artist.

Tom Pickard, shown here atop a medieval wall near the Morden Tower in Newcastle upon Tyne, was first published in *Poetry* in 1965. He was just eighteen years old, and had only published one poem before having work accepted by *Poetry*.

Lewis Warsh is shown situated in a less ancient setting — New York City — in this photo taken by fellow poet Anne Waldman.

We're not sure where this 1969 photo of Robert Pinsky was taken — he says now that “the photo credit should be ‘Coin-Op Instant-Photo Machine.’” His only published book at the time was a study of Walter Savage Landor's poetry, based on his dissertation.

Louise Glück's portrait was sent in for her inaugural appearance in the magazine in 1966; according to her contributor's note, she had “thus far only appeared in *Mademoiselle*,” and had a “one-man show of oils and drawings” at a New York gallery.

Diane Wakowski was photographed at either the Bronx Zoo or the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, holding a single flower. Living on Bank Street in New York City that year, 1961, with the avant-garde composer La Monte Young, she recalls now that her life then “was poetry and nothing else.”

Larry Eigner, a long-time contributor, was born, as he put it, “palsied from hard birth” and composed his poems on a 1940 Royal manual typewriter, using only his right index finger and thumb.

Ronald Johnson, shown here in coat and tie, became an influential concrete poet, famous for his erasure poem, *RADI OS*, composed by blocking out words in his copy of *Paradise Lost*. He also composed a long poem, *ARK*, twenty years in the making—and a number of highly-regarded cookbooks.

Last but not least are some gentlemen from Milwaukee who called themselves “The Rejected Generation,” circa 1960. We don’t know much about them, but the picture includes Ray Peekner (AKA Ray Puechner), John Schmidt, and Jay Robert Nash (who went on to write *Dillinger: Dead or Alive?*). Their poems were never, as far as we can tell, published in *Poetry*, but they’ve made it into the magazine anyway in the end.

## **RUTH LILLY POETRY FELLOWS**

*Through the generosity of Ruth Lilly, the Poetry Foundation and Poetry magazine award five annual fellowships of \$15,000 each to young writers.*

*For more information, please visit [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org).*

Reginald Dwayne Betts's "For the City that Nearly Broke Me" first appeared in *Tikkun Magazine* and "At the End of Life, a Secret" in *New England Review*. Nicholas Friedman's "As Is" and "Not the Song, but After" first appeared in *PN Review*. Jacob Saenz's "I Remember Lotería" first appeared in *Great River Review*. Rickey Laurentiis's "You Are Not Christ" first appeared in the *Collagist*.

REGINALD DWAYNE BETTS

---

*At the End of Life, a Secret*

Everything measured. A man twists  
a tuft of your hair out for no reason  
other than you are naked before him  
and he is bored with nakedness. Moments  
before he was weighing your gallbladder,  
and then he was staring at the empty space  
where your lungs were. Even dead, we still  
say you are an organ donor, as if something  
other than taxes outlasts death. Your feet  
are regular feet. Two of them, and there is no  
mark to suggest you were an expert mathematician,  
nothing that suggests that a woman loved  
you until you died. From the time your body  
was carted before him to the time your  
dead body is being sent to the coffin,  
every pound is accounted for, except 21 grams.  
The man is a praying man and has figured  
what it means. He says this is the soul, finally,  
after the breath has gone. The soul: less than  
\$4,000 worth of crack — 21 grams —  
all that moves you through this world.

*For the City that Nearly Broke Me*

Knots like two dozen fists  
swayed with want from the boy's  
kaffiyeh, that black and white scarf  
with its useless hands clapping  
against the wind in protest  
against this boy and his somebody  
lost, against their own swaying  
in a dance the lost body has lost.  
A boy. A somebody lost. A body bodied  
in the lights of inauguration night  
when every light in the city flared  
with hope. Always losing, always  
a boy left with a dozen weights,  
small circles on strings pulling  
his head down to the ground.  
Downcast. Drop your bucket here  
and make the city yours and all  
that jive keeps him from running.  
Escaping the pavement, where  
bodies finally fall to rest.  
The kaffiyeh keeps him from  
bucking against the wind,  
hurtling himself to the Grey-  
hound or Amtrak or I-95  
with a book bag and hitched finger.  
His head shrouded in the black  
and white, the knots keeping  
his eyes down as he traverses  
neighborhoods with names like 3rd  
World, with names like a nation  
falling. And the coffin-voiced  
boy is who god tells us he will  
save, and so those swinging knots  
must be a kind of redemption,  
a way to see the bullets that bury

you, constantly, as if death is  
the disguise hiding your wings.

### *A Postmodern Two-Step*

Some people say prison is *the country*  
*where life is cheaper than anywhere else;*  
you wouldn't think that watching us take leave,  
our caravan three deep and black against  
the wine-dark asphalt, and two of three  
are nothing but escorts: four uniformed  
shotguns (off safety) leading and flanking  
our coffle, all intent to keep us here,  
and not wherever shackles and cuffs run  
in this dead of morning, less than fifty miles  
from where Nat Turner dug a hole and lay  
for weeks. Virginia, something noose-like then  
and some say still, except for all the shit  
we did to land in this here hull and cul-  
de-sac. The guard, he say "die, but don't run"  
when one of us begin to cough his lung  
up in sleep. And this is ruin. Damn these chains,  
this awkward dance I do with this van. Two-step,  
my body swaying back and forth, my head  
a pendulum that's rocked by the wild riffs  
of the dudes I'm riding with: them white folks know  
you ain't god body, what you commune wine  
and bread? Where you from son? Red lines?  
To what Onion? My eyes two caskets though,  
so the voices are sheets of sound. Our van as dark  
inside as out, and all the bodies black  
and voices black too and I tell my god  
if you have ears for this one, know I want  
no part of it, no Onions and no tears.  
I tell no one, and cry my dirge.

This place,  
the cracked and scratching vinyl seats, the loud  
loud talk of murder this and blanket fear  
around the rest, is where I'm most at home,  
but it's beyond where prayers reach, a point



something like purgatory. I lean back  
and drift in sleep as someone says, his voice  
all hoarse and jacked, all broken songbird-like  
all revolutions end with a L-note.

NICHOLAS FRIEDMAN

---

*The Magic Trick*

Half clown, half Keebler elf, he works a throng  
of meth heads and young mothers who peruse  
the storefronts, tugging surly kids along.  
The pant legs bunch around his wing-tipped shoes.

When a couple walks up to his TV tray,  
he hands them each a tattered business card.  
*Who wants to see a magic trick today?*  
He grins and cuts a deck: His hands are scarred,

but seldom shake. The two confer, agree,  
and fidget as the magician fans an arc  
of cherubs laced with flips of filigree.  
The man inspects them for a crease or mark,

but they look clean. I've watched him do this trick  
for weeks now, each time to polite surprise:  
He hams it up; he lays the charm on thick.  
(As always, haughty jacks materialize.)

The woman smiles and nods in mild content.  
Another trick: He pulls a wrinkled bill  
from his lapel and folds the president,  
explaining how *a wise investment will*

*turn one buck into ten* — et cetera.  
He taps twice on the bill, a modest “one,”  
unfolds it square by square, and then *voilà!* —  
the bust of Alexander Hamilton.

They clap as the magician takes a bow.  
He's greasy, but he's on the up-and-up,  
and magic tricks are good enough for now.  
The woman floats a dollar to his cup.

*As Is*

Just north of town, a quaint Sargasso Sea  
for bric-a-brac: the barn, itself antique,  
spills over with a grab-bag panoply  
of outworn stock revalued as “unique.”  
Typewriters tall as headstones fill the loft  
where they’ve been ricked away like sacks of grain;  
a coffer yawns the must of oak — gone soft —  
when one man, squinting, lifts the lid to feign  
intrigue. Nearby, his wife surveys the smalls:  
art deco bangles bright as harpsichords,  
a glut of iron trivets, Christmas balls,  
Depression glass and warping Ouija boards.  
One man’s junk is another’s all the same.  
They don’t buy much, but that’s not why they came.

*Not the Song, but After*

Now everywhere the pageantry of youth  
is on display:  
The squeal of bike chains spinning through the gray  
plays fugue to puddle-froth;

The punctual blitz of hyacinths in April  
ushers spring  
with lavender dripped from the upturned wing  
of wind-swept Gabriel.

A youngish pair walks wired at the arms —  
she casually ribbing  
him, he lightly brushing her breast, jibbing  
their step to spare the worms

stranded along the road. Too soon, their laughter  
rises and goes  
drifting toward silence. And now the young man knows  
love's not the song, but after —

like the mute, remembered chorus of the rain  
that stains the walk  
long after falling, or the lifeless stalk  
still hoisting its head of grain.

Uneasy now, she loosens from his hand.  
Their dark familiars  
stare back, reflected by the passing cars,  
with speechless reprimand.

Before the chill, each chartered hell grows hotter,  
yet every burn  
will teach him how to run — and how to turn  
her wine back into water.

RICHIE HOFMANN

---

*Fresco*

I have come again to the perfumed city.  
Houses with tiered porches, some decorated with shells.  
You know from the windows that the houses  
are from a different time. I am not  
to blame for what changes, though sometimes  
I have trouble sleeping.  
Between the carriage houses,  
there are little gardens separated by gates.  
Lately, I have been thinking about the gates.  
The one ornamented with the brass lion, I remember  
it was warm to the touch  
even in what passes here for winter.  
But last night, when I closed my eyes,  
it was not the lion that I pictured first.

### *Imperial City*

From the outset I hated the city of my ancestors.  
I was fearful I'd be put in the dungeon below  
the cathedral. The best example of the Romanesque  
a guide was saying in German in English in French  
where are buried eight German kings four queens  
twenty-three bishops four Holy Roman Emperors  
all of whom used this bishopric on the river as the seat  
of the kingdom. On the old gate at one end a clock  
told an ancient form of time. I sulked along behind  
my parents as the guide gave facts about the war  
with the Saracens about the place where the Jews bathed  
about the child like me whose father the Peaceful  
having already produced an heir by his first marriage  
could marry for love.

*Keys to the City*

Didn't rain choke the animal throats  
of the cathedral sputter  
against the roofs of the city didn't the flight  
of stairs rise up above the cobbled street  
didn't the key clamor  
in the lock flood  
the vestibule with clattering didn't we climb  
the second flight  
toward the miniature Allegory  
painted on the ceiling  
and touch the flat-faced girls  
winged part animal  
who did not flinch and did not scamper

JACOB SAENZ

---

*I Remember Lotería*

I remember nights of playing  
*Lotería* w/Mom & Big Manny  
as a way to learn the Spanish they spoke  
to each other but not to their kids  
who caught on to certain words  
like *cállate, cerveza, chicharrón*;  
little nuggets I ate up  
like the pinto beans we used  
instead of the blue chips  
Mom kept in her Bingo bag  
she carried every Friday night  
when her & Tia Shirley  
went to the Moose Lodge,  
her hair & coat reeking  
w/the smoke of all who lost.

I remember *El Borracho*,  
the man always holding a bottle  
& about to fall over yet never does  
like Big Manny stumbling home  
late at night after a payday,  
breath & belly full of beer,  
who one time took a piss  
in our bedroom.

I remember *La Garza*,  
not for the heron it is  
but cousin Tony & his kids,  
nights of sleepovers & pizza,  
PlayStation on a 40-inch TV,  
the night he & Lil Jesse sneaked  
bumps of coke in the bathroom  
& I rubbed numb my teenage teeth.



I remember *El Musico*,  
not the chubby man clutching his *guitarra*  
but my brother Dave loading crates  
of records & a dual turntable case  
like a coffin into the back of a van,  
the same set I hit my back on at ten  
when I fell out of the top bunk bed.

But I prefer to remember *La Sirena*  
back when her breasts were free  
of the seashells she now holds  
to cover them in water so blue  
& cold, her scales so red,  
her name clung to the tongue  
like *dulce de leche*.

*GTA: San Andreas (or, "Grove Street, bitch!")*

I play on Grove Street,  
live on Grove Avenue.

Find me in the streets dressed  
in greens like groves.

On the avenue, I'm a blue  
jeans type of guy.

In the streets, never leave  
home w/out my omm.

On the avenue, always carry  
my pen & wine key, in case

some fool blows his cork.  
My UZI sings songs in

the streets — rat-a-tat-tat.  
Birds chirp-chirp-chirp

in trees on the avenue.  
Rolling down the street

w/my lady — what she wanna do?  
"Let's do a drive-by."

Rushing down the avenue  
w/my baby: "I'm hungry.

Let's do drive-thru."  
I'll punch punks purple & blue

in the streets, bleed 'em w/bullets.  
On the avenue, I'll leave punching

to punks dressed in blues, reds,  
et cetera & mind my own.

*Blue Line Incident*

He was just some coked-out,  
crazed King w/crooked teeth  
& a teardrop forever falling,  
fading from his left eye, peddling  
crack to passengers or crackheads  
passing as passengers on a train  
chugging from Chicago to Cicero,  
from the Loop through K-Town:  
Kedzie, Kostner, Kildare.

I was just a brown boy in a brown shirt,  
head shaven w/fuzz on my chin,  
staring at treetops & rooftops  
seated in a pair of beige shorts:  
a badge of possibility — a Bunny  
let loose from 26th street,  
hopping my way home, hoping  
not to get shot, stop after stop.

But a 'banger I wasn't & he wasn't  
buying it, sat across the aisle from me:  
*Do you smoke crack?*  
*Hey, who you ride wit'?*  
*Are you a D'?*  
*Let me see — throw it down then.*

I hesitate then fork three fingers down  
then boast about my block,  
a recent branch in the Kings' growing tree;  
the boys of 15th and 51st, I say,  
they're my boys, my friends.  
I was fishing for a life-  
saver & he took, hooked him in  
& had him say goodbye like we was boys  
& shit when really I should've

guttled that fuck w/the tip  
of my blue ballpoint.

RICKEY LAURENTIIS

---

*Southern Gothic*

About the dead having available to them  
all breeds of knowledge,  
some pure, others wicked, especially what is  
future, and the history that remains  
once the waters recede, revealing the land  
that couldn't reject or contain it, and the land  
that is not new, is indigo, is ancient, lived  
as all the trees that fit and clothe it are lived,  
simple pine, oak, grand magnolia, he said  
they frighten him, that what they hold in their silences  
silences: sometimes a boy will slip  
from his climbing, drown but the myth knows why,  
sometimes a boy will swing with the leaves.

*Swing Low*

We aren't the solid men.

We bend like the number seven.

Dig at corners, eat cobwebs, we  
are barefoot and bare-legged.

We hang like leaves in autumn.

We aren't the stolid men.

We scribble in familiar ink  
about sunfalls and night. We  
see the white in the sky, and sigh.

We lie with penciled grins.

We aren't the men, any men.

We rip at the neck and wonder why  
while rattlers roll in. Bent  
as a number, crooked, sundered,  
we aren't the idle lightning

if black thunder.

*You Are Not Christ*

*New Orleans, Louisiana*

For the drowning, yes, there is always panic.  
Or peace. Your body behaving finally by instinct  
alone. Crossing out wonder. Crossing out  
a need to know. You only feel you need to live.  
That you deserve it. Even here. Even as your chest  
fills with a strange new air, you will not ask  
what this means. Like prey caught in the wolf's teeth,  
but you are not the lamb. You are what's in the lamb  
that keeps it kicking. Let it.



**COMMENT**



*A Stretch of Verse*

A stretch of verse can have quite a high yield of quotable moments but we still might not think of it as being in one piece, as something coherent and ready to be recited or even learned by heart. This rule of thumb can be brutally dismissive, but all too often it meets the facts. Nobody except a prisoner serving a life sentence learns Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" by heart. To think of it as the one thing, like any other poem you know and admire for itself, you would have to be sitting an examination. Yet it is well sprinkled with quotations. The distance between them gives us a measure of how long a stretch of verse can go on discouraging quotation without wrecking the poem in which it appears:

The Rainbow comes and goes,  
And lovely is the Rose.

Occurring in the poem's second stanza, the line about the rainbow became famous enough to be raided, in the following century, for the title of a book by Lady Diana Cooper, *The Rainbow Comes and Goes*. Most people who bought the book would have known that it had a title from a poem, even if they didn't know that the poem was by Wordsworth. But nothing as catchy shows up in the next stanza or the next. "Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song" is so banal that it sounds Wordsworthian in the sense we have learned to dread, and "Land and sea/Give themselves up to jollity" is of interest only because he is saying the world is merry while he isn't. "I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!" The tip-toed ecstasy would be pretty hard to bear if we didn't suspect that he was preparing us for the revelation of a contrary mood lurking underneath. The mood breaks through with a quotable couplet:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

*The Visionary Gleam* has been borrowed for a book title on occasion, but to no very stunning effect. William Manchester did

better with *The Glory and the Dream*, which he used as the title of his “Narrative History of America.” He would not have lifted the motto if it had not already become proverbial. The moment got into the language and so did several other of the poem’s moments, even if they were only a phrase long. The “Immortality Ode” is the home of the phrase “the vision splendid,” and there is yet more splendor in the couplet that begins to sum up the poem near the end:

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower.

The key phrase, a truly delicious mouthful, was the title of Elia Kazan’s big film of 1961, *Splendor in the Grass*; and it was thus, while watching Natalie Wood resisting the perils of sex with Warren Beatty, that I finally got interested in Wordsworth, after several years of being bored by him. In my experience, poetry often gets into the mind through a side entrance. When, as a student, I saw a production of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* in Sydney in the late fifties, I went home with my head ringing to the cadences not of Eugene O’Neill’s dramatic prose, but of Ernest Dowson’s lyric poetry, which is quoted often throughout the play, but could never be quoted often enough to suit me. “They are not long, the days of wine and roses,” I told my bathroom mirror. Yes, it was Wordsworthian, but every phrase was begging to be said. Dowson liked to keep things short: short and tight.

The “Immortality Ode” is laid out like an essay. It has an argument, which can be paraphrased. But it also has moments that can’t, and as we read we find it hard to resist the conviction that those moments ought to be closer together. We tend to deduce that even a poem that is laid out like an essay is trying to be a short poem. It just might not have the wherewithal. This wish for the thing to be integrated by its intensity seems to be fundamental, although it might be wise to allow for the possibility that it has taken the whole of historic time for the wish to become so clear to us. Reading the *Aeneid*, you would like the whole thing to have the compact intensity of the Dido sequence. But that idea plainly never occurred to Dante, who worshipped Virgil; and still less could it have occurred to Virgil.

•

In 1813 Byron, still only twenty-five years old, wrote a letter to his protectress and surrogate mother Lady Melbourne which gives a strong hint of the kind of poet he would be when, in what we call his maturity — he was only in his thirties — he came to write his masterpiece *Don Juan*. In the letter he quotes a fragment of social verse which includes the couplet

A King who *can't* — a Prince of Wales who *don't* —  
Patriots who *shan't* — ministers who *won't* —

And then, straight afterward in the same letter, he tells her that she may read the couplet this way if she likes:

A King who *cannot* — & a Prince who *don't* —  
Patriots who *would not* — ministers who *won't* —

If we count syllables we find the second version smoother than the first. The point here is that Byron himself counted the syllables: he filled in the gaps to make the lines more fluently speakable. In that sense, he was a technical perfectionist from the beginning. It's just sometimes hard to spot because he was so colloquial. In a letter to Henry Drury he mentioned "the floodgates of Colloquy": fair evidence that he was attuned to the impetus of conversation. His best poetry is good talk based on knowledge, and even his finest poetic phrases are something he might have said. Certainly he might have written them in a letter, or in a journal. In the *Alpine Journal* of 1816 we find a glacier "like a frozen hurricane." Armed with this triple ability to observe something, remember it, and turn it to poetic account, he had every right, in a letter to Leigh Hunt, to deplore Wordsworth's tendency to make things up when he hadn't seen them.

•

When he started off as a poet, Seamus Heaney had the inestimable advantage of having been born and raised where hard work was done. The textures and odors of the farm and dairy were in his blood, and they got into his first poetry as a seemingly inexhaustible supply of imagery. Later on, Heaney gave a lot of credit to Patrick Kavanagh as an influence, but it seems likely that he had it by nature, and had it to burn. When he described a spade digging into the peat, you could

see it and hear it. In the long day's work of churning butter, he could see the whole process with a specificity of memory that no literary description could have equaled, except perhaps his. Later on, as he got successful, his work was less impregnated with these memories, and some of us thought that he was running thin. If we were wise, we knew that it was only the difference between gold and beaten gold; and anyway, it wasn't necessarily true. Occasionally he would put in a moment to remind you that his best poems had always been beyond mere notation. He could still do the grand metaphor. In his poem "Shore Woman" he is out fishing for mackerel at night in a low boat when he and his friend suddenly realize they have company:

I saw the porpoises' thick backs  
Cartwheeling like the flywheels of the tide,  
Soapy and shining.

"Soapy and shining" counts as notation: he could have put it in a notebook, had the circumstances been conducive. But "the flywheels of the tide" are metaphorical in the most transformative and connective sense of the word: they make the sea a giant engine. At such a time we have the right, indeed the obligation, to bring out the word "vision." These effects are open only to the visionary poet. And once again we have to ask ourselves whether we are wrong to wish them packed tighter together, with all connective matter compressed or excluded. Such an impulse was probably behind the advent of so-called "Martian" poetry, which seemed like a terrific idea at the time: all climax and no build-up. In the seventies and eighties Martian poetry was the dominant poetic tone in Great Britain: exponents such as Craig Raine seemed to see anything as looking like something else. But after Martian poetry became a drug on the market it grew apparent that it might be better to have the narrator rowing out in his little boat to catch the mackerel, before the porpoises dramatically appear.

•

Keats lived for such a short span — ten years less even than Byron, who, we ought to remember, died tragically young — that it might strike us as absurd when scholars talk of his "development." But re-reading Keats late in my life, I find more and more that everything that came before the dazzling batch of Odes is a development leading

up to them, and everything written after them still leads up to them. Though his first book, *Poems*, was a flop, there were always people who could tell he was promising: to anyone with a palate, the succulence of his phrasing was unmistakable. Yet even the longer poems that were meant to be masterpieces have a tentative air when put beside the short poems of his magic year 1819. To put it bluntly, we might conceivably study *Endymion* in order to read the Odes, but we wouldn't study the Odes in order to read *Endymion*. The smaller structure is the more integrated. In *Endymion* there are some seductive lines about a nightingale but they do not add up to the Ode on the same subject:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

Barely out of my teens, I said it to the same bathroom mirror that had served me so well when I recited Dowson. "They are not long, the weeping and the laughter." Suddenly Dowson's death-knell poem seemed to embody a Keatsian sentiment, one of those fateful premonitions of which the Odes were so brim full, all the more poignant for being packed so tight. In the Odes, if the hero does any languishing, he can do it in a line: in *Endymion* or *The Fall of Hyperion* he goes on for a page.

We can't call this superiority of the short form a law because it isn't always true, and is sometimes conspicuously false. Important though Dante's lyric poems are, we study them in order to read the *Divine Comedy*, not the other way around. But the *Divine Comedy* is not only larger; when taken as a whole it is at least as compact as any of the minor poems. The *Divine Comedy* is a poem in epic form. It is said that there is always someone in Italy who can recite the whole thing from memory, but to believe this you have to take it for granted that someone, book in hand, spent many hours sitting with the reciter in order to check up. Nevertheless the urban legend is indicative of a quality. That it can be got by heart is one of the ways we tend to define a poem. When I arrived in London in the early sixties, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," in a fair copy written in his own hand, was still on display in a glass case in his house. I got it almost by heart — "almost" because it is very tricky to memorize — and can still recognize any phrase from it. It has always been raided for book titles but Scott Fitzgerald picked the plum: *Tender is the Night*. When my mind plays tricks, it assigns that phrase to the "Ode on Melancholy":

my favorite among the Odes, and indeed among all poems by anybody. And he was just a boy.

•

Ungaretti said that the touchstone of poetry was the hammered phrase within the singable scheme. Since he himself occasionally produced poems that were barely a phrase long, we might think that he turned an ideal into a fetish: but surely he was right about everybody else. Poets do their best to pick and mount a phrase so that it will generate music, both within itself and within the structure to which it contributes. Our objection to so much Victorian verse, and to what happened next, is that the phrases went clunk. When they rang clean, that particular small stretch of verse was often singled out later on, in the modern age, as an example of how poetry could defy its time. For just that reason, everyone still admired Tennyson. Eliot, to get his admiration within bounds, had to say that Tennyson had no brains.

Tennyson was a notable example of poetry getting into my mind by a side door. My science fiction phase lasted years and started early: I had SF books piled high long before I enrolled as a student at Sydney University. One of my favorites was John Wyndham's *The Kraken Wakes*, which quotes Tennyson's short poem "The Kraken" as an epigraph. "In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die." I was entranced — it was good, solid, horror-show romanticism, worthy of being recited into the bathroom mirror — and therefore I was very ready to follow up on Tennyson when his *Idylls of the King* got a mention in first year English. I only just enjoyed it, and one of my teachers told me there was a reason: Tennyson's lengthy capital work was stretched far beyond its content, and to see how the same material could drive an epic I should read Malory. He was right. He had also set a teaching standard which I have ever since tried to follow: never discourage a student from reading something unless you can encourage them to read something better.

•

Philip Larkin once said that the influence of Yeats could be all-pervasive, getting into everything like the smell of garlic. Yet although we can recognize Yeats's influence on Larkin's monumental stanza forms (judged by the size and capacity of the stanza, "The Whitsun



Weddings” is a bigger poem than “All Souls’ Night”) we don’t often recognize the echo of Yeats’s voice. The voice that got into early Larkin wasn’t the voice of Yeats or even of Hardy, the poet he loved best. It was the voice of Auden:

So you have been, despite parental ban  
That would not hear the old demand again;  
One who through rain to empty station ran.

—From *So you have been, despite parental ban*

It’s Larkin, but every construction in it is taken from Auden. One way or another, all the poets of the thirties and forties reacted to Auden, either by rejecting him or trying to absorb him. Even Empson, the most original poet of the thirties generation, was driven to parody; but really “Just a Smack at Auden” is an act of homage.

Waiting for the end, boys, waiting for the end.  
What is there to be or do?  
What’s become of me or you?  
Are we kind or are we true?  
Sitting two and two, boys, waiting for the end.

Shall I build a tower, boys, knowing it will rend  
Crack upon the hour, boys, waiting for the end?  
Shall I pluck a flower, boys, shall I save or spend?  
All turns sour, boys, waiting for the end.

In Larkin’s generation, the most conspicuous victim of Auden’s tone was Kingsley Amis. The case is especially fascinating because later on, when he had shaken Auden’s influence off, Amis became so distinctive: a voice recognizable after a single stanza. But in his early work a single stanza was likely to be riddled with Audenesque effects:

But love, once broken off, builds a response  
In the final turning pause that sees nothing  
Is left, and grieves though nothing happened here.

So close to Auden that it sounds as if it might be stolen, “the final turning pause” is one of the many examples in early Amis of fine phrases that tried to cash in on Auden’s knack for a resonant

vagueness. Amis, who had a keen ear for a phrase, probably caught himself at it long before he quit, but he kept doing it because everybody else did. Auden's influence had been so immense that younger poets thought he had changed the weather.

•

It is always as if Auden has just arrived. He was the hero of the most conspicuous recent example of poetry getting in by a side entrance. The movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, which quotes Auden's poem "Funeral Blues," sent a lot of people away in search of more poetry by the same author. Faber made sure that their wish was satisfied. You could say that the film's popularity created an artificial market, but the poem would not have been in the movie if its writers had not been true Auden fans. Similarly, it was out of love for the poems that the creators of the musical *Cats* set about converting Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* into a stage spectacle. My younger daughter, when I took her to see the show, was as happy as any human being I have ever seen. It was her second time, so she had already learned the words, and sang them silently along with the actors. Faber participated in the profits of the enterprise. Any publisher would like to do the same. It's comforting to say that poetry never makes any money but the chastening truth is that when it does it makes a mint.

•

Milton trained himself from early on to clog any passage of his verse with learned references:

Nymphs and Shepherds dance no more  
By sandy *Ladon's* Lillied banks;  
On old *Lycaeus* or *Cyllene* hoar.

By the time he reached the great poems, there seemed no stopping the mechanism by which he crammed into them their high quota of learned unreadability. Yet things could have been different. Near the end of *Paradise Regained*, at the eleventh hour, we find the line:

Aim therefore at no less than all the world.

It is Satan, tempting Christ. Untouched by the italics that denote a classical reference, the line is perfectly speakable, even conversational. Is there anyone among Milton's most diehard admirers who does not, coming across a line like that, wish all of Milton was like that? Among poets I know who profess to admire Milton, I have never found even one who did not quote Shakespeare more often. But this is a dangerous theme. When T.S. Eliot professed to have acquired a respect for Milton to replace his earlier aversion, F.R. Leavis accused Eliot of treason. Leavis wanted Milton's reputation kept down. That was a long time ago, but the air is still smoldering in the corridors of English faculties all over the world. And I suppose Milton emerged unscathed from the battle. Certainly it is powerful evidence of his worth that Harold Bloom once proved to Charlie Rose that he could be given a starting point anywhere in *Paradise Lost* and go on to recite the rest of it. But was there somebody standing by with a copy of the book?

•

Dryden had a name for the happy phrase that came unbidden: he called it a hit. "These hits of words a true poet often finds, as I may say, without seeking; but he knows their value when he finds them, and is infinitely pleased." It is hard to think of Philip Larkin howling for joy except possibly at the sound of a clarinet solo by Pee Wee Russell, but he must have been infinitely pleased when the last lines of "The Whitsun Weddings" occurred to him. That uniquely powerful little stretch of writing is all hits:

There we were aimed. And as we raced across  
Bright knots of rail  
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss  
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail  
Travelling coincidence; and what it held  
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power  
That being changed can give. We slowed again,  
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled  
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Of those three linked hits at the very end, the second one, "sent out of sight," strikes me as the miracle among the miracles, because

somehow it gets in the sense of the longbows being lifted and the strings let loose. At the start of the line, the phrase is perfectly placed. It's a fine example of a phrase finding its poem: the hammered phrase helping to generate the singable scheme.

Being in the right spot can make a phrase powerful even when it might seem frail heard on its own. Consider the placing of Louis MacNeice's lovely phrase "the falling London rain." It comes at the very end of his poem "London Rain" and seems to concentrate all the phonetic force of the poem:

My wishes now come homeward,  
Their gallopings in vain,  
Logic and lust are quiet,  
Once more it starts to rain.  
Falling asleep I listen  
To the falling London rain.

This is the least obvious version of the hit: when ordinary words become extraordinary because they are in the right spot. The most obvious version is when one or more of the words is doing strange work. When Auden saw the proofs of one of his poems he found that the printer had saddled him with "and the ports have names for the sea" when what he had written was "and the poets have names for the sea." He decided to stick with the misprint because it was less predictable.

But the Auden hits that really stun us happen when a whole phrase gets transformed by its new use:

The earth turns over, our side feels the cold.

By a mental mechanism that can only be guessed at, he saw the connection between the Earth turning and himself turning over in bed. With the second phrase, "our side feels the cold," guessing becomes entirely inadequate. Does he mean that our side of the bed is a simile for Europe torn by politics? Better for the reader to just enjoy the feeling of disorientation—or rather, of being oriented toward everywhere, a sliding universality. After the war Auden wrote a masterpiece of a lyric that was all hits from start to finish: "The Fall of Rome." Since there isn't a line in it that does not demand quotation, the poem is a cinch to learn. But few poems are packed as tight as that with memorable moments. Quite early in *Endymion* we come across

Now while the silent workings of the dawn  
Were busiest.

The cadence is unforgettable, but there is nothing else like it for miles on either side. It's a hit. One can imagine a critical work of great length which would consist of nothing but hit moments extracted from poems from the beginning of time, with a paragraph attached to each quoted moment speculating on how it came into the poet's mind. An entertaining book, perhaps, and an enticing introduction to poetry: but as for the critical content, speculation is all that it would be. The truth is that Seamus Heaney had no clue where he got his picture of the porpoises as the flywheels of the tide: it was just something he could always do and the other boys couldn't.

•

Looking back through these pages, I catch myself in a posture about the "Ode on Melancholy." Like any other work of literature, it is my favorite only when I am reading it. One of the characteristics of a work of art is to drive all the other works of art temporarily out of your head. If comparisons come flooding in, it means that the work's air of authority is a sham. No such fears with the "Ode on Melancholy," which, at the time I first went mad about it, I could recite from memory — well, almost. In the matter of memorization, length sets severe limits. Hence the absurdity in the final scene of the movie Truffaut made out of Ray Bradbury's supposedly prophetic dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*. People walk around in the forest reciting *Anna Karenina*, etc. A nice idea, but wishful thinking, even when applied to poems. In the old Soviet Union, where, for obvious reasons, there was a great emphasis on memorizing contemporary poems, the manuscript still counted. People remembered things only until they could get them safely written down.

ADAM KIRSCH

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*Rocket and Lightship*

*Nor rescue, only rocket and lightship, shone*  
— G.M. Hopkins, “*The Wreck of the Deutschland*”

The only copy of Catullus’s poems to survive from antiquity was discovered in the Middle Ages, plugging a hole in a wine barrel. One of two morals can be drawn from this fact. Either pure chance determines what survives, from which it follows that eventually every work will lose its gamble and be forgotten; or else every worthy work is registered in the eye of God, the way books are registered for copyright, so that its material fate is irrelevant. The first conclusion, which is rationally inevitable, would in time lead anyone to stop writing; anyone who continues to write somehow believes a version of the second. But surely a God who was able to preserve all human works could also preserve all human intentions—indeed, He could deduce the work from its intention far more perfectly than the writer can produce it. Thus a writer with perfect trust would not have to do any work, but simply confide his intentions and aspirations to God. His effort, the pains he takes, are the precise measure of his lack of trust.

•

Writers are necessarily ambivalent about any kind of recognition—honors, prizes, simple praise—because they are ambivalent about their relationship to the present. The first audience that a writer wants to please is the past—the dead writers who led him to want to write in the first place. Forced to admit that this is impossible, he displaces his hope onto the future, the posterity whose judgment he will never know. That leaves the present as the only audible judge of his work; but the present is made up of precisely the people whom the writer cannot live among, which is why he subtracts himself from the actual world in order to deposit a version of himself in his writing. The approbation of the living is thus meaningful to a writer only insofar as he can convince himself that it is a proxy for the approbation of the past or the future—insofar as it becomes metaphorical.

•

How little of ourselves we give even to the writers we love best, compared to what they asked and expected of us. Genuine admiration and gratitude for a writer's work is very intermittent; usually, we think only about ourselves and how we can use what we're reading. But this must be considered a legitimate technique of self-defense, since if we opened ourselves to all the just demands for attention made by the dead, we would be totally overwhelmed, placed permanently in the wrong. For dead writers are like gods who are always hungry, no matter how many sacrifices they inhale.

•

The nineteenth-century Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick declared that he would rather see the music of Bach and Palestrina lost forever than Brahms's *German Requiem*. This is naturally scoffed at today — but isn't that because we have lost the experience of having the artists of our own time speak to us and for us so perfectly? To be equally appreciative of the art of every era, we must be equidistant from every era, including the present: this means being estranged from our own works, and so in a way from ourselves. It would be only fair, then, if the artworks of our time fail to reach posterity. If even the artist's contemporaries don't feel fiercely protective of him, why should the future?

•

Writing generates more writing — not in any metaphysical sense, but empirically. The writing a writer produces will inspire more writing in scholars, biographers, critics; over time, more and more of the writer's acquaintances and surroundings will eventually be illuminated by being written about. We know more about Franz Kafka's coworkers or Virginia Woolf's servants than about thousands of people who, during their lifetimes, would have sneered at clerks and servants; illustriousness does not light people up for posterity nearly as much as proximity to a writer. And this is not because of the inherent interest of the people surrounding a writer, or even of the writer herself, but simply because it is so much easier to write about someone who has already been written about. When you introduce a grain of salt into a beaker of supersaturated fluid, it crystallizes instantly in all directions, revealing structures that were hidden before. So with lives

in history: they are invisible because there are too many of them, and it's impossible to pick any one place to start recording them, until the presence of a writer sets the process arbitrarily in motion.

•

Just as a musical tone contains all its own overtones, resonating even on frequencies far removed from it in the scale, so every kind of mind contains every other, though in muted, attenuated form. Literature would be impossible otherwise.

•

At the Metropolitan Museum, there is a recreation of the Gubbio Studiolo, the workspace where Federico da Montefeltro, the fifteenth-century general and quasi-gangster, pursued his intellectual studies. Seeing the great beauty, seriousness, and lavishness of this room is painful, because it is a reminder that Montefeltro really did exist, that such honor really was paid to the intellect, that the “Renaissance type” is not just a fiction but once flourished. It drives home the immense contrast with the present, when it is certain that no such space would be created by a rich or powerful man for the same purpose.

This kind of pain is what we sublimate and forget when we read about Montefeltro in Pound's *Cantos* — or, similarly, about any great historical figure. To write about the great, to turn them into literature, is to make them subordinate to the reader: the reader can complacently regard himself as the heir to all the ages, because he preserves in imagination what no longer exists in fact. From there, it is a short step to convincing oneself that human perfection never really exists in fact, that all greatness is ultimately for the sake of the reader, who possesses it in imagination. What this implies is that the historical passion is rooted in resentment: reading is a way of gaining mastery over people and things that would be too painful to confront in reality, because they are so unmistakably superior to us.

•

One can actually get angry at the writers of the past for being so secretive about basic, intimate parts of human life. Jane Austen menstruated — why not Elizabeth Bennet? Think of all the writers



who fussed with chamber pots, and not a single character does. Omitting this side of life is a betrayal of us, their posterity, by falsifying the record of themselves that writers undertake to leave; they create the illusion that they were bodiless, angelic. We know the past from literature only the way astronomers know distant galaxies: not directly, but by correcting for what we know to be distortions.

•

Stefan Zweig writes in his memoirs that when he published a feuilleton on the front page of the *Neue Freie Presse*, as a teenager, he felt that he had conquered the world. Nothing is more enviable than a literary culture small and integrated enough to offer that kind of success — the Augustan poets in their clubs writing to and about one another, or the New York intellectuals battling in *Partisan Review*. Yet there is also something contemptible about a literary ambition that admits of being satisfied so readily, or at all. Real greatness is defined, for us, by its unappeasability — as with Kafka, who loved literature so much that he wanted to destroy all his writing.

•

Every writer needs a fireplace. On publication day, an author should burn a copy of his book, to acknowledge that what he accomplished is negligible compared to what he imagined and intended. Only this kind of burnt offering might be acceptable to the Muse he has let down.

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Literature claims to be a record of human existence through time; it is the only way we have to understand what people used to be like. But this is a basic mistake, if not a fraud, since in fact it only reflects the experience of writers — and writers are innately unrepresentative, precisely because they see life through and for writing. Literature tells us nothing really about what most people's lives are like or have ever been like. If it has a memorial purpose, it is more like that of an altar at which priests continue to light a fire, generation after generation, even though it gives no heat and very little light.

•

Pound's goal was to "write nothing that we might not say actually in life." But this is backwards, for nothing memorable is ever said, it is always written; only sometimes it is not written down, but written in the mind so quickly that it can be produced as speech. In speech, the mind is on the moment, the subject, the interlocutor; in writing, the mind is on these and also always on the self, and the appearance the self and its language are making. Speech is an action, writing an act (as in "putting on an act") whose audience is always primarily oneself. To become memorable or brilliant, language needs to be fertilized by egotism.

•

All forms of writing are only valid, maybe only comprehensible, as forms of self-expression. Even philosophy, even history, never says anything true about the world, only about the writer's experience of being in the world. Some sensibilities require the illusion of objectivity in order to get their version of the truth spoken: if the metaphysician realized he was only talking about himself, not about reality, he would be unable to say what he needs to say.

•

Literature presents itself to us today as a museum of perished affects. Belief in God, courtly love, honor, and so forth: we can recognize that people once felt these things, but we can't feel them ourselves. Perhaps this anesthesia will be what future ages see as characteristic of our literature.

•

*In Memoriam R.W.* Most suicides are a refusal of communication, or else a communication made in a language we protect ourselves against by declining to understand it. But for the suicide we know as a writer, her death becomes a continuation of the self-expression in her work, and may even be her most successful act of communication: we know exactly what she means by it.

•

Writerly vanity is like a vicious dog chained up outside the house. You try to starve and neglect the dog into silence, but sometimes he becomes so clamorous that he must be fed if you're going to be able to ignore him again.

•

Literature operates on the premise that humanity can be transcendent; but it now looks increasingly likely that humanity can only be transcended, that is, left behind. Like all culture, literature is a matter of directing the will inward, to create an inner life; this was a necessity for most of human history, when the conditions of outer life could not be changed. But the future will be defined by the ever more successful direction of the will outward, in the form of technology and power, which is now genuinely able to transform the conditions of life. In this sense, culture is an obsolete technology, a sunk cost that we keep adding to only because we lack the courage to write it off.

•

Our understanding of history is distorted by the universal tendency to identify only with the protagonists of the past — kings, heroes, nobles, the rich, or the exceptionally gifted or fated. When we read history or novels, we always imagine ourselves in the position of the protagonist, the position of agency; not remembering that we ourselves, had we lived then, would not have had the remotest chance of being protagonists, but would have lived in the outer darkness into which the light of narrative never penetrates.

•

The unadmitted reason why traditional readers are hostile to e-books is that we still hold the superstitious idea that a book is like a soul, and that every soul should have its own body. The condensation of millions of books on a single device, or their evaporation in a data cloud, seems to presage what is destined to happen to our souls, to the coming end of selfhood, even of embodiment. If this sounds fanciful, imagine what a lover of handwritten codices might have thought

in 1450 about the rise of print. Manuscripts, he would protest, were once rare, precious, hard to create, dedicated to holy or venerable subjects; print would make them cheap, derivative, profane, and easily disposable. And didn't exactly this happen to human beings in the age of print, which is the modern age?

•

One begins writing, in adolescence, as a detour away from life that is supposed to return one to the main road of life further on, at a better stage. Writing is seen as a shortcut, through isolation, to the communication and connection that are unavailable in reality. Only gradually does it become clear that the detour is really a fork in the road: as one continues to write, one moves farther away from life, from the communion with other people that writing was meant to provide. Eventually the main road can no longer be seen, but one keeps on writing: because of spite, because one is unfit for anything else and can't go back, and because of the unbanishable hope that maybe the next turn in the road will bring one back to life.

•

Bentham: "Pushpin is as good as poetry." In fact, pushpin is better, because it confesses its insignificance from the start. The pushpin player will never know the shame of realizing that he has built his life on the delusion that he is better than the poet.

•

Today, finding a good used bookstore is like finding Friday's footprint — evidence of a fellowship that is ordinarily invisible.

•

The crisis of literature, in contrast with the confidence of the sciences, is essentially a crisis of memory and transmission. The creation of works of art is only a valid way to spend a life if those works are preserved — if they are made exceptions to the general oblivion that nature designed for us. But the sciences do not require this kind of exceptional preservation. They make use of intellect in a way that

imitates nature, because the progress of science both incorporates and obliterates each contributor, in the same way that the progenitor is both incorporated and forgotten in his descendants. For the artist, the creation of a work of genius is an alternative to parenthood; for the scientist, it is an imitation of parenthood. This helps to explain the shame of the artist in the face of the scientist, which is that of the celibate in the face of the progenitor, the unnatural in the face of nature.

•

Writers used to write for posterity—that is, for people essentially like us in the future. Now the only future we can imagine, the only plausible alternative to extinction, will be made up of beings that will understand us wholly differently, and much better, than we can understand ourselves. The readers of the future will be anthropologists in the sense that we are ornithologists, studying creatures of a different and lesser species. Today, the writer's aspiration is not to communicate with such readers, the way past writers communicate with us, but to leave a body of evidence for the future to interpret.

•

The hallmark of a writer's late style—for instance, in Philip Roth's now annual production of short, indifferently written novels—is the abandonment of the attempt to triumph over death objectively by creating a work whose nature is essentially superior to death. No longer believing in this possibility, the aging artist is left to triumph over death subjectively, by writing perpetually in order to keep the thought of oblivion out of his mind. In retrospect, then, even his greatest works take on this air of subjectivity: art begins to look like a method of whistling past the graveyard.

•

Writing, not philosophy, is the true practice of death—it translates the self into print as a rehearsal for the time when the self disappears and print is all that remains. A writer has succeeded if, when we read his obituary, we are surprised to learn that he was still alive.

•

The line of nihilism and despair in modern literature, from Leopardi to Beckett, asks to be taken as a true diagnosis of humanity during this period. But it is no coincidence that this was also the time when the writer lost his connection with humanity, thanks to the increasing restriction and specialization of literature. Perhaps the sense we find in such writers that all human activity is cosmically pointless is simply the symptom of this isolation — as when an animal kept in a cage, far from its kind, pines away and languishes. To be immersed in the human world so deeply that one can't see outside it, so as to question the validity or purpose of the whole — that is the natural state of man. The miserable doubts that occur to the writer withdrawn from the world are not to be answered, but dealt with as symptoms, requiring the therapy of reimmersion.

•

No true universal statements can safely be made about human beings or human nature; it is only permissible to make such assertions hypothetically, or metaphorically. This realization is what gives birth to literature, a realm where anything can be expressed because it is essentially without consequence. But we can never stop imagining the secret mastery we would gain if this artistic power could be surreptitiously reintroduced to the actual world: the combination of imaginative freedom and actual power would be a kind of magic. This helps to explain the special mystique that attaches to artists of the real like Marx and Freud. By stating their metaphors about humankind as if they were scientific laws, they seem to gain magical powers, and promise them to their adherents. Such intellectual mages lose their authority only once we remember that power can only be gained over the physical, and over man insofar as he is physical; the truth about the spirit can only be demonstrated in works of the spirit.

•

An axiom of the novel is that people whose lives are devoted to the competition for status — the bourgeois, the philistines — are inferior to those who devote themselves to the realization of an aesthetic or ethical ideal. The very fact of being a novel reader is the badge of this distinction: to be a reader, in this sense, is really to be a writer of one's life, to try to shape one's life in the image of the values pro-

moted by what one reads. Yet the proud reader should remember that the pursuit of outward status and the pursuit of inward perfection can both be understood as ways of imposing direction, and therefore narrative, on a life. Both status and goodness are useful for this purpose because both are fundamentally unachievable: it will always be possible, and therefore necessary, to become “higher” or “better” than one is. These ways of imposing meaning on life are more similar to each other than either one is to the horrible vacancy of the vast majority of lives, which are composed simply of endless repetition. Compared to the peasant, the bourgeois is a kind of artist — and the artist is a kind of bourgeois.

•

People used to wish that life could be as it is in books — that it could have the beauty, drama, and shapeliness that writers gave it. Today, by contrast, we hope desperately that life is not really like our writers portray it; in other words, we hope that writers are not representative men and women, but unfit beings whose perceptions are filtered through their unhealth. It is necessary to hope this, because if life were as it appears in our literature it would be unlivable. Thus Flaubert’s pious sigh, “Ils sont dans le vrai” — because if the writer’s life were the true one, life would be unworthy of being continued. Biographies of writers who went mad or committed suicide are popular because they offer reassurance on this point.

•

The statesman always has contempt for the historian, and understandably so: how can you compare a professor to a president? But with the passage of only a few decades, it becomes clear that the great man acted and suffered only for the sake of the historians; the writer is superior to the man of action as the owner of a toy is superior to the one who made it.

•

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” On the contrary: it is what we cannot speak of in the sense Wittgenstein means, what we cannot point to and scientifically describe, that we

speaking about most and best, and always have. What can be wholly comprehended and demonstrated is “trivial” in the sense that mathematicians use the word: even if it is very hard to understand, once understood it does not provoke further discourse, does not point anywhere. But authentic speech and writing are always productive of more speech and writing — indeed, that is the point of discourse, not to describe reality but to avoid silence.



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dear Editor,

Cheers to William Logan for his comprehensive and enjoyable take on Philip Larkin's *Complete Poems*. Mr. Logan clearly knows his stuff, but I do want to point out one detail that tickled the nerd in me: If it's really new information to him that "Wild Oats" is autobiographical—that Larkin actually kept two photos of "Bosomy Rose" in his wallet—then Mr. Logan has either missed or forgotten one of my favorite descriptions of the poet, to be found in a book Logan himself reviewed in 2008 for the *New York Times: Words in the Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*. On April 30, 1973, Lowell wrote to Bishop about having Larkin as a weekend guest at Milgate Park in Kent:

He looked older than T.S. Eliot—six foot one, low-spoken, bald, deaf, deathbrooding, a sculpted statue of his poems. He made me feel almost as an undergraduate in health, and somehow old as the hills—he is four years younger. I asked him about a poem, "Wild Oats," where he speaks of a girl he met a few times in his twenties—a "bosomy English rose," and had kept two photos of her in his billfold—and there the two photos were, her breasts invisible under a heavy coat, small, the same and no more than passport pictures.

I mean this in the best humor: If Mr. Logan is guilty of skimming a little in an eight-hundred-page volume he was reviewing under a deadline, who could blame him? Certainly not me—or indeed Larkin himself, who once said he liked to skip to the middle of biographies, to about the point in a person's life when he or she starts to become interesting.

BRENDAN BERLS  
HACKETTSTOWN, NEW JERSEY

*William Logan responds:*

Mr. Logan never skims—he's afraid of missing the good bits. Apparently Mr. Logan's bear-trap mind was missing a few teeth that day.

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and phone number via e-mail to [editors@poetrymagazine.org](mailto:editors@poetrymagazine.org). Letters may be edited for length and clarity. We regret that we cannot reply to every letter.

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\* First appearance in *Poetry*.

## ANNOUNCEMENT OF PRIZES

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THE LEVINSON PRIZE, presented annually since 1914 through the generosity of the late Salmon O. Levinson and his family, for the sum of five hundred dollars, is awarded to Dean Young for his poems in the November 2011, February 2012, and June 2012 issues.

THE BESS HOKIN PRIZE, established in 1948 through the generosity of the late Mrs. David Hokin, for the sum of one thousand dollars, is awarded to Linda Kunhardt for her poems in the December 2011 issue.

THE FREDERICK BOCK PRIZE, founded in 1981 by friends in memory of the former associate editor of *Poetry*, for the sum of five hundred dollars, is awarded to Ange Mlinko for her poem in the October 2011 issue.

THE J. HOWARD AND BARBARA M.J. WOOD PRIZE, endowed since 1994, in the sum of five thousand dollars, is awarded to Eduardo Corral for his poems in the December 2011 and April 2012 issues.

THE JOHN FREDERICK NIMS MEMORIAL PRIZE for translation, established in 1999 by Bonnie Larkin Nims, trustees of the Poetry Foundation, and friends of the late poet, translator, and editor, in the amount of five hundred dollars, is awarded to Peter Cole for his Kabbalah translation portfolio in the March 2012 issue.

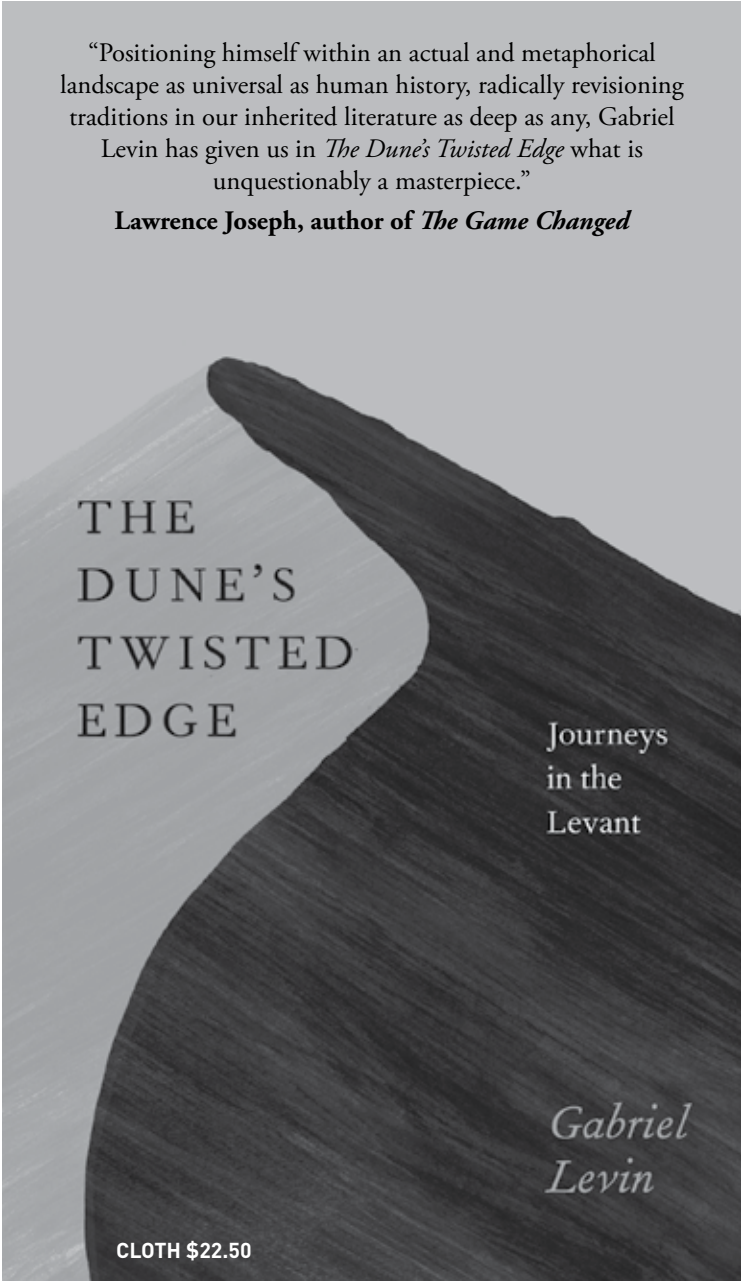
THE FRIENDS OF LITERATURE PRIZE, established in 2002 by the Friends of Literature, in the amount of five hundred dollars, is awarded to Devin Johnston for his poems in the May 2012 issue.

THE EDITORS PRIZE FOR FEATURE ARTICLE, established in 2005, in the amount of one thousand dollars, is awarded to Mary Ruefle for her essays in the June and July/August 2012 issues.

THE EDITORS PRIZE FOR REVIEWING, established in 2004, in the amount of one thousand dollars, is awarded to Adam Kirsch for his review in the January 2012 issue.

“Positioning himself within an actual and metaphorical landscape as universal as human history, radically revisioning traditions in our inherited literature as deep as any, Gabriel Levin has given us in *The Dune’s Twisted Edge* what is unquestionably a masterpiece.”

**Lawrence Joseph, author of *The Game Changed***



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and traverse me.

—Ren Xiangqing, from Issue No. 1

poems and bilingual Chinese-english

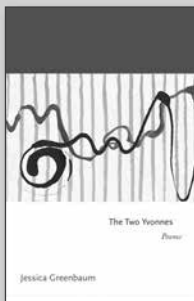
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Jessica Greenbaum

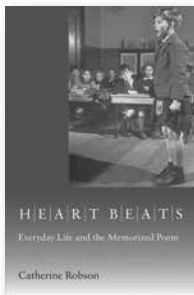
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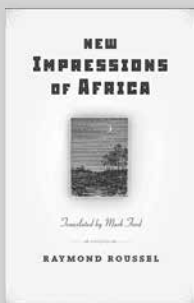
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## FOUNDATION EVENTS

### *Cedar Sigo*

Cedar Sigo is a San Francisco poet who was raised on the Suquamish reservation near Seattle and studied at Naropa with Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman. He reads from his work. Thursday, November 1, 6:30PM.

•

### *Joy Harjo*

Joy Harjo's poems evoke the landscape of the Southwest with language steeped in American native cultures and visionary lyricism. Her reading is part of the Chicago Humanities Festival. For tickets and information, visit [chicagohumanities.org](http://chicagohumanities.org). Sunday, November 4, 12:00PM.

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### *Sijo Poetry*

David McCann explores traditional Korean sijo and the growing body of sijo in English. Co-sponsored with the Sejong Cultural Society and the Harvard Club of Chicago. Thursday, November 15, 7:00PM.

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## BACK PAGE

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*November 1947*

In the November 1947 issue of *Poetry* appeared snapshots of contributors Arthur Gregor, W.R. Moses, John Malcolm Brinnin, and Lois Kent. All had responded to a request from the magazine for a photograph to be used “in connection with our college program,” an effort to increase readership among students, which also included the production of supplementary study guides by editor Hayden Carruth. According to the circulated request, a contributor’s photograph need not be “taken by a professional . . . as long as it is fairly natural and unposed looking,” something Moses clearly had in mind when he submitted a snapshot of himself staring down at his infant child. Of equal interest were the two photographs on the opposite page: the candid shots of T.S. Eliot reproduced here. Eliot’s work did not appear in the November issue. The photographs depict scenes from Eliot’s May 23, 1947 reading at the National Gallery in Washington D.C. The Library of Congress recorded the reading, which filled the auditorium where it was held to nearly twice its capacity. A description of the event by poet (and wife of the us Attorney General) Katherine Garrison Chapin appeared in the September 1947 issue of *Poetry*. Chapin listed Karl Shapiro, Ezra Pound’s wife and son, and her friend Saint-John Perse among those in the audience. Eliot had translated Perse’s *Anabase* in 1930. In addition to being a poet, Perse had served as a diplomat in pre-occupation France and was living in exile in Washington at the time of the National Gallery reading. Saint-John Perse was a pen name. His real name, Alexis Leger, appears in the caption.

*Paul Durica*



T. S. ELIOT IN WASHINGTON. AT TOP: WITH ALEXIS LEGER.