

POETRY MISCELLANY

2008



**POEMS BY DARA WIER, CHAD PREVOST AND OTHERS
JON CONE ON POLISH POETRY
TRANSLATIONS OF SRECKO KOSOVEL
POEMS FROM PRAGUE SUMMER AND UT-CHATTANOOGA
PROGRAMS**

THE POETRY MISCELLANY

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POEMS BY DARA WIER

Your Stormy Petrel

Brittle yet warm, brilliant yet wan, acute yet discernible,
Wacked yet stern, fierce yet visible, loose yet neatly sewn,
Sketchy yet lumpy, silent yet momentous, blasphemous yet
Inane, curtailed yet uncertain, cool yet through the blue roof,
Smoking in the soaking rain yet a good place for crows to stand,
Up yet not in the morning, dusty yet fine for someone's name,
Proud yet rumped, flared yet wincing, soon yet not soon enough,
A switch yet not for an electrical illuminator, Jumbotron yet so far
Away as to be invisible, taking a step yet doing so with little conviction,
Waiting all night to follow a satellite yet following it for ulterior motives,
Having a conversation with someone who's not to be brought back to life
Yet greening through clouds of the finest green shades of pollens, yet
Hiding and staying hidden yet nearer to spring than to leap than to dare,
Fragile yet occupationally hazardous, faithfully yours yet a firestorm.

Camels of the Vieux Carre

I view you as one who should slipslap out of a grease trap
For the sake of turning a hairpin back over our tuning fork
That we stand near when we need to locate you, locating
You is what we do now with ramifications of exquisite
Pleasures such as watching words fly into dead microphones
With our lungs dry and your tongue tipped in our battlefields
Where you left us holding our hats out catching your bullets
Free with no use for not even a threadbare catchy old overcoat
For the freedom of seeing your backbones unlittered for eons
As the case may be we are intrusions in an industry of fishtanks
On the high plains with much interplay among us and firewood
As it waits for its next transformation which will come soon
For the night is chilly and the ghosts know precisely where
To find us as they prepare to serenade us as you once had done.

Blind Eyes in No-Mans Land

You are much like a rubber tombstone in a hailstorm, some-
What like, on a porcelain tabletop one long black hair, moving
Of its own accord, a little like jasmine tea spread over the galaxy
In a midnight's dawning, pieces of you are not at all like a mountain
Of rice or sand in a ruined sandbox, your shadow disobeys the sun's orders. You are a
black coat's silver lining shredded & stripped with use.
In the clinking of ice and in the clicking of sticks on fire, we can sense
Where you are much as we sense when we're coming near a river's edge.
A book is kind because its pages let us know when we're reaching its end.
You leave tracks, you leave evidence, you leave trails to tantalize and
We suppose to keep us wanting to find you. Do you suppose we have
Little else to do with our lives? We've heard your volleys & explosions
Rock the hills to our North, impressed with your fine sense of composition.
You're a silk tombstone nearby which a child's blowing out a match.

Attending Another International Consortium

When the deskbell and the trainwhistle and the doves and the
Marquee solutions held well, we hurried over to consult with
The big boss of the protein sector who had little interest in our
Feral bees or our truckloads of missing pollinators. It was mid-
Night, I was with a dejected mid-wife, we couldn't find the night-
Life, so we retired to the kitchen shelf where upon we were run
Through like a dogfight in candlelight. Some symbiosis we be-
Lieved we'd need came in the carnage of a cartel's luggage. Ah,
You say, so this is how we'll proceed, you grab the handle &
I'll stand guard by the guardrail til three in the morning when the
Wolves we need will slip out of the darkness, they will be in
Disguise, in good cami, flaunting good timing, registering top
Bristling all for the causing of extreme contaminations to stop
Happening to the children, whose turn it is going to be left alone.

Unintentional Counter-Contemplative Opaque Disunities

When I popped you up side the head with the harp of a piano
It wasn't intentional. The number of times I've said I'm sorry
Is equal to the combined incomes of medium tall people who
Self-identify as impoverished, under-employed, willing to work
In alternative bluegrass ensembles for tips. Look at us, heading
Around a corner fretting about which vegetables will be killing
Us next. If I'm a fret and you're the fuselage of an air-ship I'm
Afraid we'll have little to do with one another. I hear someone
Say we're trying to establish a transparent community, I think, no,
More like a collection of lint collectors, barbs in the brains,
Viscosity extreme, and then it's time to be sucked down a drain.
I tend to like my emotional and intellectual extortions plain.
The cougar positioned by the kitchen sink should not collapse.
I want the cougar to be equal to the combined velocity of the new
Light that moves in circles, like when you let your eyes let my eyes
Take in your eyes. Our next target won't be located, it cannot be.

Another Wind

It blew through the teeth of the dogs that day.
The regular mazes of our routine routes led it on.
I said it passed through my mind. It asked me to name
For what do I live. What flew through the air didn't
Have wings. The beggars were nowhere to be seen.
I saw a shirt of yours in the air. There were no more birds.
No more brine. The crazy woman we see every day we
Saw once more. She'd wrapped up her face in a filtered
Upheaval. She must have been listening to terrible music.
Fields were moving from town to town. I wanted to put my
Hand where you are. I needed to ask someone who might
Know what to do with my legs. There were reasons for
Why we couldn't stay for as long as we'd like. We took
The pirogue out for a walk, we were invisible under it.

BOB FISCHER

The Soul's not dead,

it lies dormant under piles
of dead words

like a Trout Lily sleeping
under last year=s leaves.

Walk the bare-branched forest,
and hear the woodpecker drum.

He raps out in code
that words rot like leaves,

and piles of them shrink like snow
-- until they flower again.

Speak Softly

Speak softly. The Indian Pony is but a foal.
Speak only in a whisper. He grazes close to the road.

The flower is of the lily family.
Speak softly. It has just opened.

A pair of swans nested by this lake last summer.
Speak softly. One glides by now.

A wagon has dropped an apple.
Speak softly. Three sparrows are pecking at it.

This willow is the first tree to put out leaves in spring.
Speak softly. Its drooping branches almost touch the lake's surface.

A large black cloud has appeared in the west.
Speak softly when lightning flashes. I want to hear thunder.

POEMS BY CHAD PREVOST

Infallible Myth

My love exorcises your heart's demons
and casts them into pig-herds flinging themselves
from cliffs. My love is the myth
of the frog kissed by a princess.
My love turns Zeus from a god
into a mere story of a dangerous
lover. The reason my love is capable
of such things is that it's grounded
in the heart of the Sangre De Criste mountain
valleys. It's able to see so far above
the rest of the flat world because
it goes as deep as any wound.
The myth of my love spits you out
of the whale's mouth. My love's myth spans
over 5,000 generations
and has the voltage of one
who's been transformed. It takes you deep
and won't let go till you climb great walls
to the sea-leveled land. It hovers over you
indifferent as a god, letting you choose
whether or not you'll climb on
as high as you can breathe. My love's myth
has its head in the clouds, leaves you
gasping, never wanting
to come down. Hey, love like this is scary
—not everyone wants to believe
in my love's myth because they'd have to see
what their own love is like.
The infallible myth of my love is a garden
where all the world's refugees base camp.
My love looks out for the forgotten.
It's this great chest filled with light
that no one else has ever been able to peer into.
Somewhere in there a scroll explains
the insane myth of my love.
Some have searched for answers
to my love's myth only to come back empty-
handed. The wildlife of the myth of my love

doesn't galavant around like some Eden
version. No, my love requires you to be
alone. Most would rather float off
to the moon of their addictions. It's up to you
if you'd like to entertain this kind of love.
My love holds the myth of the nightingale's
song. It just goes on giving itself away
in the face of so much loss.
The myth of my love is as extravagant
as the Egyptian pyramid dreamers
who spent all the region's resources for a few
palaces of the dead. My love's myth is as lunatic
as your rockets blasting into the great Wherever.

The Movers

—for Larry Brown, dead at 53

The black Angus go still as stone as a hitcher walks past.
Two movers stub out their Reds. A haze covers the hills
like smoke from the ashtray, like fat in the veins from oil
and catfish battered in beer. The hay and stubbled grass

come back as cud from the guts. Another all-night haul.
Two wrinkled bills beneath a saucer of spilled coffee,
and the folded *Daily Journal* of Northeast Mississippi
sit in the spill on a Formica-topped counter. The bell

tinkles as they amble out, the smell of chicken fingers
clinging to their clothes. Bottom front page, *Noted author
Larry Brown dies*. No one reads about the Oxford
firefighter "who grew up in a time and place where

it was hard to be superficial," quotes the "shocked" Mayor.
Life moves on. "I swear, it's one damn thing after another,"
says the driver whose kid won't take no for an answer.
"You know what they say about movers?" The other

chimes, "A strong back and a weak mind." The waitress
mops the spill, tosses the paper in the trash. *All I do
is stamp out fires*. She squeezes her toes in her shoes.
The evening draws to its worn-down conclusion. Harvest

tomorrow. Soon they'll be shipped to the killing floor.
A man who all night decapitates cows, shoulders the load

for overtime in a white smock splattered with blood.
He feels okay knowing how little each will suffer.

Faithful Poetic Muse

She's already given him everything he needs,
paraded before him in black lingerie,
born him kids, suffered on his behalf,
and, yet, he goes off with any
given fresh scent in the wind,
ready to cast her off like
an evening robe and go strutting
across fictionalized stages
where they clap with rulers, slapping
them against their knees,
and strobe lights glitter
like the promise of diamonds.
When he's back with her no one
pays them any mind—he's taken,
they think, or else they think nothing,
lukewarm as a flat bubble bath.
But before long he's in another tangle
of words, tearing down side streets
and alleyways in full possession
of other characters in the one-act
play of his life. "You need many wives
before you settle down with one,"
this one tells him, unconcerned
with whether or not she becomes the one,
knowing for now, the only moment
that counts for anything, he's hers.
She's dressed in furs, knee high stockings,
a bow that might be the last thing
to go. She makes no secret
that she comes at a price—
"You get what you pay for," she says.
People read them when they're together
like what they do somehow matters
more because it glitters, because maybe
more people pay attention,
but everyone is really only looking
for their muse, and soon enough
he is racing home as reckless as ever,
teetering alongside the road's edge
with a drunken, righteous fury

never to leave her alone again.
If she takes him back he'll stay true
though they'll never live anywhere special,
and he'll lose all his friends.
She's waiting at the door to let him in—
lines a little deeper, as if nothing
much had happened, as if she'd been
expecting him whenever he was ready
to come back home and settle down.

Keep Away from the Pandas

Here is the kiosk. Check your bags here.
Do not leave them with a stranger. Enter
your password. Keep your username
and password on your person at all times.
Under no conditions should you trust anyone
with your password. Here is where you wait in line.
Keep an eye on your bags at all times.
Remove your shoes. Remove all articles
of clothing. Sharps and metals in the bucket.
Rings, watches. Remove your laptop from its case.
If the security sensor beeps simply step back through.
No one should have anything to hide. Declare
everything. We speak English
for your convenience. You've been selected
to step out of line. Just a routine
check. Keep your eyes on your luggage.
It's best to avoid eye contact with strangers.
Attention: please report any suspicious activity.
This is the boarding line. Please present verification.
Here are the pandas. We're shipping them back.
We would have liked to have seen them mate
in captivity as they never have. The kids won't
follow the rules: they throw popcorn and yell
at the pandas. Do not make direct eye contact.
The pandas remind me of my drunk neighbor.
Take time to tie your shoes. I'll keep my eyes
on your bags. He lived with his mother
and slugged vodka from her front steps and sang
these awful songs. Pandas don't sing of course.
The pandas only eat bamboo all day
and night. They finally threw him
in jail for disorderly conduct

and carrying a weapon through the neighborhood. Turns out it was only an air gun. *Bomb 'em all*, he yelled as they threw him to the grass, cuffed him and drove away. Can you imagine? Please speak English. A few of us speak Spanish, but official policy states we must speak the Official Language. What's that? America doesn't have an Official Language? Not according to Policy. Keep in line. Hands to yourself. Avoid eye contact. Step out of line only if directed. Declare everything. You have nothing to hide. Keep away from the pandas.



Near Fall Creek Falls, TN

TERRI HARVEY
THE SENTENCE

Yes, I was amused while
the endless nettle of your opinions
clung to my robe, my tired hair.

When Vicenze appeared,
steady as a wrecking ball,
and stole me, La Gioconde,
walked me right out the front
door, it was as if
he tucked me
neatly as a love letter
into his cramped Parisian flat.

For two years I enjoyed
the black hole of obscurity
while he worked to profit from me,
while I hoped for Florence,
Rome perhaps.

When, in the end, he was jailed
you and I, we did not get off

so lightly.
I was returned to my
Salon under guard
where I endure,
where you have to stand before me.

Do not expect salvation.
I will reveal only this:
you will never be granted
the bliss of indifference.

We are dancing in iron shoes.

You may long to ignore me,
like a puzzling dream
you cannot interpret
but in the end
I will be
the only flower
in your garden whose name
you cannot forget.



WHAT HE KNOWS

My grandson knows, after six years of living,
that even one unexpected animal crossing your
path means you have chosen the right trail.
He is as certain as morning dew, shaken from
a blanket of stars, that he can talk to the owls.
Sitting as crossed legged as his boot laces, listening
to their low pitched stutter, he informs no one
in particular that he can do this owl talk. To him
the empty socket of the sinkhole is not some earth
betrayed by rock, but a pocket to be emptied,
a cupped hand of earthen talismans, fat glossy
buckeyes, slate smooth as snake skin, that fill
his pockets of imagination. But most of all he knows,
the monsters he invents, living deep in a cave's heart,
churning like black clouds, must have a way out.
He tells me about tunnels, as secret as silence,
where evil will travel. It is here we must stand guard,



Near Tucson Arizona

BARBARA SIEGEL CARLSON

Personal

(after C.D. Wright)

Some mornings my hair looks like sea smoke,
and the drawstring in my nightgown disappears.
I was told in a dream that I was speaking
Etruscan. If you want to find me when I walk
go to the island in the swamp. If we meet
we can share a good smoke on the footbridge.
I still use my manual typewriter
to plunk out dirty letters on onion skin
to strangers like you. Route 44's my own
private runway. One time a sparrow smacked
into my windshield, and I left the stain for weeks
till the rain washed it off. I like watching
the number zero appear on the odometer,
the clouds float like grease, and slow dancing
tight. Favorite words: w(hole), ravel, ravish,
and universe, for everyone's a Janus.
It's impossible to see your real face.
I refuse to eat tongue, chopped liver
or lamb. I still have the fake opal earring
I stole for my secret box. My only trophy
for miniature golf, my first place ribbon for the rope
climbing contest; my raffle ticket won me
a *Thing Maker*, a hot plate with molds to make
a creature out of goop. Then you stuck a pencil
through the body. I, too, wore the dead
lady's coat. My nicknames Cream Soda
and Swivel Hips. I spelled it Tim Buck Too.
Once I went sledding down my cellar stairs
on a gate. Another time I left a piano in the rain.
I dreamed I carried my birdbaby in my pouch
like a kangaroo. I'm a great parallel parker, but also
write letters while driving. Buried in me is
Elsa the Lion, the silent siren in the mangrove.

The Truth

Spinoza is rubbing my glasses again, leaving
the middle range blurred for a reason.
Any truth is a blur. I can write at the same time
as I peel an orange. This is a trick
my grandfather taught me: to peel the skin to a swirl
and place your fist inside. I still remember
the smell of my hand like the river out my window
whose lull is a blur in the wind. No one
holds the truth. My friend drank some white lightning
till it electrified his veins. This is how simple it is
to become a street person.
When Father Charlie asked for prayers,
the homeless man said Jesus fished out his soul.
I shook his hand. Later he covered his face
with his hands and lay his head in his lap. We all have
missing teeth, holes where other teeth still try
to grow, button holes that look lonely and pillowcases
that tear to let the feathers out. My friend had a daughter
who didn't know she was his daughter.
This is the truth, the only truth he could ever live with
for that moment that has lasted
her whole life. I was given a portrait
of many galaxies spinning among the dwarves.
Spinoza must have known the hottest colors
came from the stars in his hands. We have no age.
Before the Big Bang we were swimming
through each other. A spider draws from a bottomless self
raveling its meal into the lightest being,
as Joan Miro painted *Rosalie sleeping in a web
washed by the dew that fell from a bird wing*.
Each strand of the truth has an unknown emanation.
In Chekhov's story the student wept
for the two peasant women listening to a simple retelling
of Jesus's message to Peter about his betrayal.
An ancient pain, a thread
in the wooden footbridge I used to cross
with my thick-tired bike as I passed through the chain
of smokers, too shy to look up. Once a girl named Diane
blew smoke in my face.

DEBORAH BROWN

Narratively Speaking

Just yesterday Dean Young said I could tell you
about the blue-fingered giant who wears blossoms
behind his ears and cleans clothes better than Ivory Snow.
And that was before the woodpile creaked its regrets.
He lets me tell stories and not believe in narrative sense
or the moon-deserted sky. He lets me
finish the plum juice, swing on my swing
and remember my last meal with Aunt Hannah,
moo shi and plum sauce, when she sneaked
out of the nursing home. Narro, narrere,
drifts overhead like a Coors balloon—the first Latin verb
I learned from Miss Barnes in eighth grade.
Did a bloated sidekick of fear ring the bells?
Narratively, it's time for a turn here,
toward the self, if possible, time to reveal
something about the child I was,
abandoned in my crib, and how later
both of my dogs died of cancer and my sister
said I ruined her life. It may be time to tell the story
of the pot-bellied pig who went door to door
collecting old Watchtowers and time
to put the dust and dog hair in a recyclable blue bag,
hope whatever is left in the bedroom looks
like somebody would want to sleep there,
not like an aperture to misery.
Today the clouds hang low as the brim
of a cap on backward. There's more that's
backward around here. I myself face south
often. Dean agrees life is not always
as easy as buying an ankle bracelet.



JORDAN SCOTT

The Moth

He is a murdered heart
wrapped in butcher paper,

chasing will-o-wisps,
porch lights, tiny
moons all night.

I want to touch
his boneless wings,
brown dust covering
my fingers like charcoal.

Where does he go all day?
Does he sleep against trees,

owl eyes painted across his body
for a warning to real birds?

Or like dryads does he become
the bark itself, the entire forest
of earth tones blending inward?

It doesn't matter.
Like us, he only exists,
then does not.

Millions of moths
depart like stars.
We will too, eventually:
our creosote hearts
dripping into the same dirt
from which we were all born.



SUSAN THOMAS

Black Macadam Over White Asphalt

After Vallejo

Maybe I'll die in New Jersey near the Hackensack River, clutching a Jersey tomato or a Bischoff's ice-cream cone like the ones I couldn't eat in my youth fearing midriff bulge and popular mean girls who sat at the counter. The sky was always gray then, or maybe it was pollution. I'll probably die in New Jersey, bored, waiting for the No. 70 bus to pick me up on Rte. 4, and it will most likely be Tuesday, the most boring day of the week, even worse than Monday because you expect the worst from Monday but it doesn't get any better and by Wednesday you've gotten used to the awfulness of New Jersey. Yeah, maybe I'll die in New Jersey, the Bergen Evening Record lying unread on my doorstep, pissed on by my neighbor's cat, wishing I was someplace else.



POEMS FROM ITALY AND SLOVENIA UTC CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM

TRENNA SHARPE

My Love Isn't Love

It's the way I felt when
the vein in your throat throbbbed
after each time you coughed:
like a weeping man
punching at the pure
coffin of snow
locking him in the mountains.
The way the fever
held you like a brace
on the pillow, till only
your eyes had strength left to move--
to smile into my barren future.

Death Practice

Every time I try to get close enough
it rolls away, building thunderstorms
behind someone else's back.

Every time I walk through cemeteries at night
and lay down on empty stones for practice,
the rock cools my back
and cradles me in a light embrace.

Do the stars see me
and wonder if I'm burning
warmly in some other sky
or nearing the end
of a daring leap into theirs?
They shiver and I know—
They feel me brush past them
and slip into the dark alleys
between their outstretched palms
like a lucky thief.

My pockets are filled
with crumbling memories
that scrape my hands
when I try to dig them out.

MATT HAINES

Strength

Look at me drift to the river,
it sinks every day into my home.
I hang my clothes aloud.
They swing along in the burja.

I turn the earth with my hands--
handsome with callouses--
they are engines that cut the forest.

The drowsy fault line
does the earth's slow work.
The forest mutters to itself, shifting its weight.
I lean on my other elbow—my gaze changes the
current.

One Response to Absence

Absence is the not too low to hear
that precedes the violent rush of wind
that fills the empty space
and sends your stomach to your throat
It's a kind of betrayal—like when
the black clouds come to stare
and give no rain.
We are not leaving,
we are just being drawn
to where we're missed the most.

ADAM BINKLEY

Carol for the Muse

The moon comes on,
a white siren to split me,
and the ocean and all of it,
but you can't hear, even though
the light arrives like wolves
turned loose and gaining.
You are too concerned with me,
and the way your eyes swim
in my darkness, fish-eyes,
indestructible god-lamps of the deep.
What are they searching for?
Like wandering mourners on the day,
the anniversary of some rainy death,
skulking around like flies
after a picked clean meal.
Is it my heart they want?
That legless beast, torn apart
like a dog in a trap?
Go ahead daughter of black and need,
here it is, exposed and rotting.
Take it. I don't have use for it anyways.
You don't know, but I have been busy too.
I am making maps of your unimaginable silences.
Soon I will possess you. Don't even try.
There will be no stopping my hand
as it grimaces around this pen,
like a throat it is trying to force to speak.

LAURIE PERRY VAUGHEN

Your advice on writing a poem

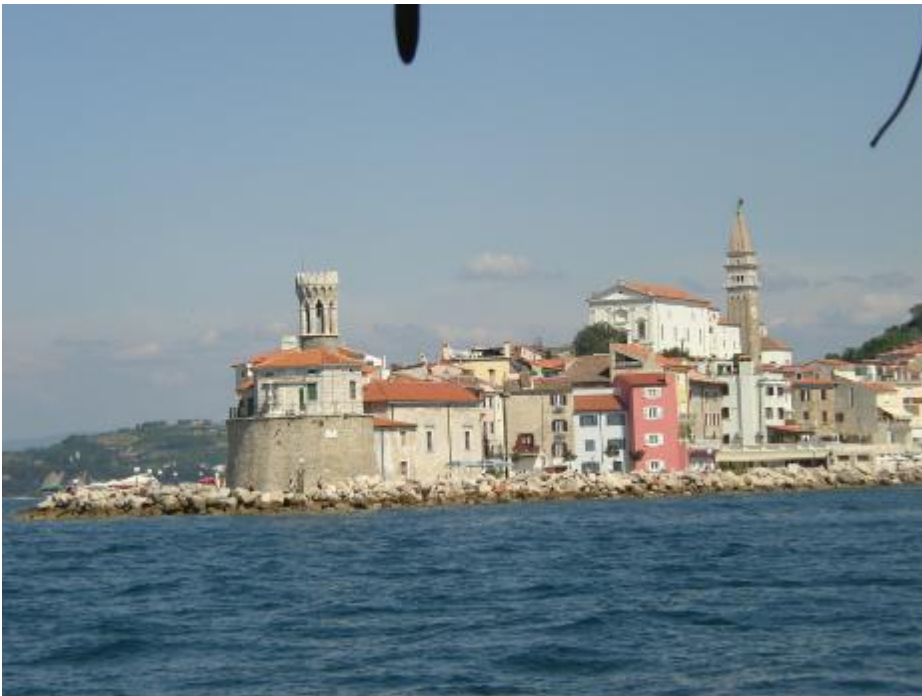
Skocjan, Sloveni for Joe McCormick

You tell me I hold the ending
of each poem in my voice.
I read and pause at the unlocked
gate, the night's field of candles.
Stop there, you say,
at the last strong image
your voice circles on the page.

You can only stack up
so many large stones in one place
before they become a wall
that shelters nothing.

Listen. There's music in the winds
even here, in these harsh mountains,
and the direction is always shifting,
circling us around
like a whirl of leaves in the street.
Just let it.

Sometimes, the best poetry
isn't cruelty, but risk. Poetry is
standing in that peculiar place
where anything can happen.



Piran, Slovenia

ZEBADIAH TAYLOR

Oh Verisimilitude, We Think:

A concept is like a clump of wet moss pressed in our palm.
No, it's like the wall we ripped the moss from.
If the concept is an object of the mind
It's like a word, a thing of interconnected objects
we dare to call by a single sound.
But the concept does not sit still.
When we look at it, it melts; if we listen, it boils,
if we question, it implodes and flies apart invisibly.
If we read a poem out loud about it, we forget what it is.
Therefore, a concept is nothing. I wrote this about nothing.
Someone made it up to explain something else,
and I'm stumbling down the same stairs that that someone climbed.
These stone walls I run my fingertips on as I fall
are concepts. Snatches of birdsong we piece together are concepts.
You and I, we break the barbed fence of concept
like a pair of dumb cows
who wander down-hill in the dark.

The Wages of Poetry are Poverty

Expectant audience, don't groan
as I pronounce this poem dead.
I tried to raise it from its mossy cave,
but it would not come; I called it, offered
meats and candy, and it didn't
even offer a pair of suspicious eyes in the dark.
So as I stand before you like a juggler
without his balls or batons, or a stripper who refuses
to smile as she dons coat after coat,
do not slap your knees in rancor, or stifle
your indifferent laughter --
I've declared my love for you, you've read the poems I've written
for only you to read, so as you watch
this failed actor be hooded and led
off his final stage,
lower your eyes, or close them, and hum my name
in whatever darkness you belong to.

EMILIA PHILIPS

A collection of critical essays about waste

You crumpled the sky in your hand and threw it in a wastebasket, and the janitor came around a half past seven and put it in his biohazard bag while he whistled a Herbie Hancock song and you were almost home then, your tie flaccid around your neck and your hands sweating on the steering wheel. You knew what you had done, but you kissed your wife on the cheek anyway and tasted the chalk of her rogue and the red matte of her lips that night in bed, when she told you she was leaving, but wanted one more time, just to be sure. And the next morning, the garbage-truck guys didn't even notice when sky was dumped in the back of the truck with the bloated diapers, the shredded fiscal reports, the leaking car battery, and that dead dog that someone decided to shoot between the eyes. You pet it once as you were going into the office, ran your hands through the half-chewed out hair and it whined and jumped on you, leaving its paw prints on your slacks and you ran to the bathroom and scrubbed the mutt's marks away with paper towels, but you never thought to remove the slick-treaded shoeprints you left in the lobby when you walked in. It had rained the night before and you had wandered out of bed and outside and you weren't sure if you were sleepwalking or just lost. The sky was an open mouth and you thought you heard it talking to you, or at least, whispering behind your back and you walked out through the rain-blued grass, your toes as slimy and wet as slugs, and the legs of your pajamas soaked through. It was black, except for the glitter of rain. You thought the sky had dissolved the stars in its mouth, sucked away the ethereal sugar like candy and you knelt and listened to the dogs barking in the neighborhood, to the careful breathing of your wife, to the conspirators in your heart, the ones who threw it all away.

KATIE CHRISTIE

The Writer

I didn't see her, sitting barefoot on the low rock wall, until I turned my head and dragged my forearm up to wipe the sweat from my cheek. The impact of my feet striking the pavement shook my skeleton all the way up through my jaws and made my vision bob up and down. I thought I saw her swinging her feet; it was that kind of evening. On the second glance, I noticed she was wearing some kind of green dress and that she had a notebook in her lap. Although I was nearing the end of my second mile, I passed her fairly quickly and didn't think to wave until she was far behind.

I tried to remember the last time I'd seen an adult just writing but I'd always assumed they kept to college campuses or coffee shops. I wondered what could be so important that she had to go out by herself and write it down: a dream, a letter to a friend, a poem? What kinds of things would you choose to put down in ink, indelible, eternal? Was I in there? Did she take note of my appearance, my red face puffing and blowing up the hill? Were the grey chest hairs climbing out of the collar of my tank top again? I straightened my shoulders and lifted my head though I was near the end of my run and my stamina.

Deciding to push all my remaining strength out on a wind sprint up the driveway, I gladly ground to a stop on my porch to stretch out my muscles. I bent my head over my calf, noticing the pink magic marker streak on a sneaker, courtesy of my five year old son. My left hand rested against my ankle and I realized how conspicuous the band of white skin still is on the fourth finger. As I sat up, I let my fingertips graze the smooth white patch from my knee surgery two years ago and remembered Joanne's cool fingers pressing alcohol-soaked cotton balls into the incision until I screamed, then smearing the antibiotic ointment over the top. I hated her for doing it, but that's why the scar is cleanly fading into the rest of my skin. The aftermath of our divorce was just as clean: split custody, halved assets, no lawyers or outrageous alimony. The numbers and paperwork illustrate only a couple who separated equally, from one to two in marriage and back to one in divorce.

I almost wish my knee scar was a fiery and choppy half-healed gash, something that would draw attention and sympathy. Something that would show the permanent mutation after excision, to prove to my doctor and Joanne you can't just cut where you will and expect everything to go back to the way it was before. But my scar will fade and so will my tan line, until neither I nor girls on the side of the road will notice.

MATT ZINGG

How it feels to be so far away

Remember when you chose
your favorite star, the faint one
to the left of Orion's shoulder.
It blinked, or burned out, said it would
always be there for you, always, as
a remainder of love.

And each night
you could point to it, even without
looking. You could draw a line down
from the sky to your shoulder, and
the naked freckle to the left
of your collarbone.

These things, I told myself, I'd
never forget. How in the morning you'd
pull the slip around you like rain
or snow. How I'd watch your
paper thin back prepare breakfast. Or
before one dawn

how I noticed, past your shoulder,
pine trees wavering outside the tempered glass.

Now the whiteness of your memory
only makes me think of small bits
of mountainsides and dew collections on windowsills.
But even this

has become too familiar.

Orion is hidden
in snow smoke and the shrugging evergreen so that I can't see
any marker of home.

I've forgotten the shape
space takes past the curve of your collarbone
and you are lost, with dreamlike suddenness, to

the fog.



Castle of Chillon



Rock Painting, Near Tucson, AZ



Church Fresco, Near Skocjan, Slovenia

JOE McCORMICK

An Argument Against Leading Questions

We let them know what to say, and they said it,
and time passed easily,
but something there started to ferment,
and our questions began closing the curtains,
and the answers crept like rust from their mouths,
little lips gaping like the slats in a knife block.
I left wondering
whether the greatest tragedy of language
is always expecting some certain answer--
the answers become relics,
I find the questions everywhere,
behind dumpsters, in puddles, cut up and run through.
When I was young, my father
drove me to see the boats going through the lock.
I asked him when we would get there,
and he said, "In a while."
I asked him who built the locks,
and he said, "People."
I don't think this pattern will change,
so we have to go deeper, cleaner.
Start by moving the North Star, and all
thinking will shift.
How do you get to Carnegie Hall?
You sleep with the booking agent.
Why did the chicken cross the road?
Because she was jealous.

Friedrich Nietzsche Debates Whether to Let His House Maid Read Twilight of the Idols

She is an idle glance down the road
that won't be crossed. She is love.
She blows into the embers under the stove
like a mare trying to breath life into her dead foal,
but when the door to the parlor needs work,
she doesn't have the strength to lift it off its hinges.
She nurses for her sister's child in the time of pox,
but her sister will die. And the child will die.
And she will show the wounds in her wrists
and her side to an audience of limp carbon.
She loves with a heart of damp cloth.

But she also breathes with her mind.
I know my weakness - I get caught
embalming my thoughts in the dressings
of longer and deader thought. She does not.
She is not sacred; she sanctifies.
Music plays, and the notes pass over her
like a cloud of dandelion pushing through the sunlight.
Dogs bark, and she leans toward them out the window.

The chimney begs to be cleaned, so she reaches up
and scrapes with her fingernails.
The doornails beg to be driven in,
but she doesn't have the strength to lift the hammer,
so she bangs with a canning jar
until it shatters on the floor.
I find her scraping up the pieces of glass
with papers from my desk,
and my neck is stiff as a headstone.
If she read my book of blades,
she alone might feel its dullness.



Church near Skočjan, Slovenia

REWRITTEN CLASSICS
POEMS FROM WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY'S
PRAGUE SUMMER PROGRAM

from Richard Jackson's Undergraduate Workshop

NATHAN LIPPS

Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea, by N.C. Lipps

I was never pissed
that's what I really wanted to say
Buy me a beer old man
And challenge me to checkers
And lets never dry out

I hurt though, though
I'm sure you knew that well
And yes I can see your scars
You don't have to ask

Where is your boy old man
Where is your coffee now
Go on, set the board and we'll see
Who can hold out

And yes I knew you before then,
Whispering to my subjects
For eighty-four days to stay
Away, do you know
How deep you went

To find me, to create such a story
A saving grace for an ailing face
Out too far, now out for good

You beat the Makos
And now lets sleep
Lets sail off to some home run
Shore and chase
Lions at play.

SHANNON VISLOCKY

William Faulkner's as Lay Dying Shannon Vislocky

It's something like mind reading.
Or, it's not that I don't matter,
it's just that jewels
tend to sparkle so obviously. Every

face is a facet
only it's too dark to see any eyes
but our own.
On the porch, father chews
rhetoric like tobacco. In the house,
mother gives up. In the house
where she births blood covered diamonds.
It's in the same house where father
pretends every gem is his. *Everyone is bound
to prosper.*

Soil absorbs water and both
put our fires.

It's just that William Faulkner knows
nothing of Jefferson or the stench
of mother's corpse. He doesn't know
why she hits those children, or the
importance of teeth. The smell of
wood and nails.

So white-knuckle the soil
to squeeze water from earth.
Quit the fire.
Suffering mother into a box,
write me into a cage.
Because wood burns faster than we can run.
And really, we can't walk faster
than mules can walk.

BRIAN LEWIS

Hermann Hesse's Steppenwolf, by Brian Lewis

Visions of Maria, the shock of fire
and ice—either or. Wolves play dead
with the corpses of men

whose brothers kill wolves
for sport. My sympathies extend
to both, though mostly

I'm on all fours. Last week, I found
and read a treatise on myself, as though
that bastard thought

I could resist. I sank my teeth
into its cover, tore its pages like strips
of flesh, spilt its ink—an act

of violence and regret. The worst

part of dilemma is transition:
smokestacks, saxophones, the death

of Mozart and the debasement of Goethe,
Modernism becoming and rebecoming
itself. Cloudy whispers

of *Ouroboros*, lullabies I, pessimist
and atavist, recognize as music
of the highest kind. I close

my eyes and curse the motion
and the notion of the tides. Sleep
comes, and with it dreams

of devouring the sheep I raised. I bathe
in the red of blood and sunrise, symbols
with nothing left to signify.

AMANDA VALLEY

Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray by Amanda Valley

I am expecting the tension, building from my stolen
thoughts, my stolen face. I see my skin peel
from the pleasure I get from your pain.
But all I wish to do is wander the streets and burn
the flesh of others. I don't really see myself with sympathy
enough to stop the vanity. My beauty is too much to leave behind.
The flesh is what intrigues me, not the bends of others' words.
My mind was formed before the words, those precious words, my dear friends
once spoke to me. They simply unlocked the door – convinced the senses –
forgave my already tender-less heart. I know my own beauty.
You see, that's how I survive. Dear Wilde just didn't know.
He knew of the proper ways a man should be, vulgarity
not permitted. But my fiendish heart yearned for this succulence,
this pleasure of fancy and flesh. Dear Wilde just didn't understand.
He ended my story before it really began, for I am here
still taking refuge in burn. And I can't help but wonder
if I helped form this future that I'm in. Taking part
in the heart burning flesh for the rights to feel clean
and better than you. I've long forgotten the day
we came face to face in that attic where the blood smelled fresh.
My painting and I have an *agreement* of sorts. He rots
while I relish the light. Vanity is purity in this new age of life
where the dead can stay dead while the babies are what haunt.
Youth is the time, and the enemy to come. And as I sing to myself
the song that I know of the uglier I am, the more beautiful I become,
I smile my unwilling smile to the naïve and the young who'll never know
just how far behind they really are. For the *I's* that I speak are not of one,
but two. The *I* that can speak, and the *I* that can rot.

JaCOREY BROYLES

Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" by JaCorey Broyles

Someone whispered her name in the field

She hid in the stretching silhouette
of a tree house with two rooms
in it. a doorway
and a doorway. between
them she stood peeking through
the powder room door to see
something

She whispered back, "marigolds"

while dragging the permanent blue marker
in circles, like a soggy centipede
across the mirror facing her.
it dripped where her eyes used to be.

Smiling and not smiling,
and in the half-smile she saw
fingers pushing through the circles
wiggling like eager baby worms,
climbing from the roots of the tree house.

When I heard a third whisper

it sounded
like the name of a neighbor's cat,
and Pecola answered like the wind
on my chafed ear, like a wet-willie
the smell of rainwater,

and it rained and did not
rain, and everything bloomed
but the marigolds.

Toni, don't you like marigolds?

Even now that she's left,
I hear ricocheting whispers
in the tree house, whose doorways still
bend to form the silhouette of lips
saying, "Pecola, I too wear contacts"



Jan Hus Monument, Prague

POST SCRIPT

The Letter

by JaCorey Broyles

The letter sits on the dresser, underneath a boy and a girl,
in a photograph, holding baby's breath on their fingertips.
The girl guesses the boy's response to frustrated fireflies
with their tongues out, testing distance. She tastes and smears
her sticky fingertips on the negative, like a hungry slug, leaving
her hands in the picture. No return. The colors swirl in sequence
at the back of the ocean, where it meets the sky
and paints silence's tears with the air. The boy transcribes
the moon and the stars that read *no return* in a milky way
of water-colors, wishing upon themselves, with sticky faces,
still falling from the camera slot of rejection. A photograph
of a welt moon lingers, in reminiscent skies on a clear sea,
through a woman's voice in falling meteors, snapping shutters.



Mesa Verde, CO



Predjamski Grad, Slovenia

THE POLISH CONNECTION

JON CONE

For me one poem by Anna Swir stands out because it is remarkably unlike her poems of agony and torment. The poem is 'The Youngest Children of an Angel':¹

When you kissed me for the first time
we became a couple
of the youngest children of an angel,
which just started
to fledge.

Lapsed into silence in mid-move,
hushed in mid-breath,
astounded
to the very blood,
they listen with their bodies
to the sprouting on their shoulder blades
of the first little plume.

(67)

There is an innocence here that is nearly heart-braking, Blake-like in its mythic gestures. A kiss is a coupling of pipes, literally; but the kiss is also an act that unleashes transforming energies – in this case the kissers become innocents ('the youngest children') of a particular being ('an angel') who glories in her close proximity and association with God. In their innocent state as children of an angel, the kissers find themselves gaining their first feathers. It is easy to picture these fledglings in a nest, open-beaked, chirping insistently for their mother's attention. The miracle which the kiss initiates leads to a silence 'in mid-move' – this pause is sexual, a gathering of singular intent from two bodies enmeshed in complementary searching – and 'in mid-breath', a saving of the necessary air that is needed for physical culmination, the dive down and deep. And in this pause, between movements and breaths, the kissers are astounded to feel what is new about their bodies as they transform further into communion with innocence and the greater glories of God: they feel 'sprouting on their shoulder blades' their very first 'plumes.'

What I find startling about Swir's treatment of the kiss – and by expansion the sexual act itself – is her linkage of it to innocence itself and to the great exemplars – children, angels, fledglings – of that innocence. She raises what is physical to a metaphysical state, in a way that is after all consistent with that state. The higher state is achieved when one sprouts wings *and gains the power to ascend toward that state.*

To write a poem entitled 'Happiness' (4-5), as Swir does, is too risk a great deal. The banal lurks everywhere. Of course, Swir is too good for such an easy fall. The poem swiftly suggests a definition beyond the familiar: 'My hair is happy/and my skin is happy./My skin quivers with happiness.' (4) Generally, happiness is more state of psyche than of body, hair and skin. The verb 'quivers' is an interesting word. Arrows quiver in wood. And the skin of animals might quiver when danger is in the air. But happiness doesn't usually result in quivering skin – in fact, quivering is more like trembling than anything else.

As the poem proceeds it is clear that Swir's understanding of happiness is idiosyncratic and more closely related to ecstasy. She tells us, 'Tears roll down my face' and 'I forget I have a face.' Her skin 'is

¹ Swir, Anna. *Happy as a Dog's Tail*. Translated by Czeslaw Milosz with Leonard Nathan. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.

singing' and she shivers. In her altered state, her 'happiness', a change occurs in her perception of time: 'I feel time's duration/as it is felt in the hour of death.' Time elongates at death, or so I've heard, and one's life replays like a movie before one's fading eyes. The hour of death might have its share of happy moments, but just as likely it would have many sad as well. Life is democratic in that sense, providing portions to each – maybe not fairly, in the final balance, but certainly everyone gets to taste.

For Swir the ecstatic moment is grounded in the physical. It has weight to it, is sexual and erotic. 'Immersed in terrifying/magnificence/I feel every second of happiness, as it arrives,/fills up, bursts into flower/according to its own natural way,/unhurried as a fruit,/astounding as a deity.' The terrifying magnificence is what surrounds us, engulfs us. The bursting is orgasmic, and is described by an image that conjures the sexual orgasm with an easy explicitness. I mean we don't have to reach far to uncover this eruption within Swir's insistence on happiness.

But it becomes even more obvious as the poem progresses. Swir begins 'to scream' and 'to leave her body' and then she even begins to lose her sense of human self: 'I do not know whether I am human anymore.' Perhaps in her heightened state she is even sprouting wings. And from such a peak, Swir acknowledges that one could die 'from such screaming ' and therefore die 'from happiness.' The Renaissance notion of orgasm as a kind of little death – a rehearsal for death – is invoked here. For Swir happiness on some level, and most likely in near terms, is a fuck of mind-blowing dimension. At the peak, we scream and disappear even, and exist in some other space outside ourselves:

I do not shiver any longer,
I do not breathe any longer.
I don't know whether I still have
something to breath with.

I feel time's duration,
how perfectly, I feel time's duration.

I sink
I sink into time.

(50)

It would appear that the 'feeling of time's duration' is distinct from that other sense we have of time as we exist within time. As 'Fools of time' as Shakespeare would have it; that is, time incompletely or partially comprehended because we perceive from within its grip rather than outside or beside or beyond it. The orgasmic release is a loss of self, an oceanic release, and in that moment duration becomes something else, time loses its grip on those so engaged and instead they seem to grip time instead. Time stops or slows or disappears and the self merges with the larger universe.

I would say the poem opens quickly by taking us to an elevated state - it is a 'supreme fiction' in that sense – and then just as quickly returns us, letting us 'sink' back down – letting us drown, letting us die back into the ordinary world where most of our lives are lived and where 'happiness' as described by Swir is seldom encountered.

What about Swir's poetry considered as a whole? It shows remarkable consistency. The poems tend to toward the brief. Long poems are rare, most running around a page. The lyric voice dominates. The poems seem to inhabit an interior space and the subject of the poem often reduces itself to a confrontation with the body: the body as source of pain, as space where the poetic vision finds itself, and the body as source of joy. (This latter is an ephemeral encounter, as 'Happiness' shows.) In fact it is difficult at times to

tell the difference between the body's pain and its joy. There is a great measure of the mystical in Swir's relation to the body – to her body, the female body – as if she were a penitent determined to meet up with vision by the mechanisms of discipline and deprivation. 'What is the central theme of these poems?' Millosz asks. And answers: 'Flesh.' (ix)

In her poem 'Catch-as-catch Can' Swir provides a list of those common things which seem to give her strength, to save her and prevent her from 'sink[ing] in the abyss.' It begins:

I catch at various things,
snow, trees, unnecessary telephones,
tenderness of a child, departures,
Różewicz's poems,
sleep apples, morning calisthenics,
conversations on blessed effects of vitamins [...]
(65)

Wait. Go back. That Swir finds in Tadeusz Różewicz a poet whose art is saving is interesting indeed, since Różewicz writes from an entirely different perspective and his poems embody an aesthetic rooted firmly in the world that surrounds him, as opposed to the flesh which confines him.

Here is one of my favorite Różewicz poems, an ars poetica (or more accurately an anti-ars poetica):²

MY POETRY

explains nothing
clarifies nothing
makes no sacrifices
is not all-embracing
doesn't fulfill any hopes

doesn't create new rules of the game
takes no part in play
has a defined place
which is has to occupy

if it's not a cryptic language
if it speaks without originality
if it doesn't surprise
evidently that is how things must be

obedient to its own necessity
its range and limitations
it loses even against itself

² Różewicz, Tadeus. They came to see a poet: selected poems. Translated by Adam Czerniawski. London: Anvil, 2004.

it does not usurp the space of another poetic
nor can it be replaced by any other
open to all
devoid of mystery

it has many tasks
to which it will never do justice
(172)

What I find interesting about this poem is the determined way it sets us up, how it affects an indifference that is vast yet continues to insist on its right to exist in a voice that is particular and unique. 'My poetry' not 'Poetry' but his poetry and so what he owns of poetry: this self-effacing title is like a line drawn in sand. To continue: doesn't explain, clarify; doesn't sacrifice or embrace the-All or fulfill hope. To define by way of negatives is still a way of defining. The cudgel isn't a gun nor the lance an armored tank, and while such details might seem inefficient nevertheless they are true statements from which we could say an image begins to form. Poetry that doesn't explain is a poetry uninterested in moral purpose; a poetry that doesn't clarify is a poetry without theological or metaphysical or historical purpose. And yet another reading is possible: Różewicz's poetry explains 'nothing' – explains what is not, explains what nothing stands for – the abyss, the absurd universe, the vacuum the Ancients claimed was abhorred by Nature – and so this explaining of 'nothing' is profound indeed. From this perspective Różewicz is making the grandest of claims for his poetry.

That Różewicz claims his poetry makes no sacrifice on face value is a repudiation of Romanticism and the accompanying belief that true Art rises out of the poet's personal turmoil and agony. (Swir would seem to believe in this view.) A shoe makes no sacrifice, though it undeniably provides protection and comfort to the man wandering city streets. A poem made in a certain way – made with a sense of the poem as an object and not as an eruption or insanity – might be more like a shoe than a sacrifice, and thereby provide comfort to those willing to appreciate its everyday deployments. But this is not meant to diminish poetry – as art or artifice – nor do I believe Różewicz intends any diminishment of his own poetry. Knowing something about the poet's own history in this case is useful in putting a poem's declarations in context: a poet who survived a terrible war would place enormous value in life on any activity that makes no sacrifice. A poem that does not sacrifice is therefore an expression that commits to life, to the living. Even to what is ordinary and everyday.

A close reading of 'My Poetry' would eventually leads us out into the far extremities of Różewicz's entire body of work. The rules of the game of poetry aren't disturbed by his poetry, in part because his poetry is subtle and makes use of essential techniques drawn from prose. (It is easy to imagine that Różewicz in another age he might very well have been an essayist in the style of Montaigne or a diarist in the manner of Boswell.) Throughout his poems one always gets the sense of a singular personality behind the words, in spite of the fact that his language is often abruptly quotidian. If the poem seems to be a harsh critique of its own possibilities, there is a sense of pride lurking beneath all that it is not and all that it does not do and all that it seems to fail at. The poem is nearly a tragic hero, in this conceiving, as it exists 'obedient to its own necessity' and is 'open to all' and it is given 'many tasks.' If it fails it shall fail on its own terms – which is almost a kind of romantic notion – and it shall do so nobly.

At first glance Różewicz might call to mind the American poet Charles Bukowski in terms of style and the look of the poem on the page. Both poets seem unconcerned with traditional markings: regular line lengths and stanzas, rhyme and meter and other sonic patterns and so on. (Whereas Bukowski applies punctuation and some capitalization – he can be highly irregular in this regard – Różewicz ignores all punctuation and a rather fluid use of capitalization.) Thematically, the two poets are strikingly different. Bukowski's concerns are well-known: drinking, horse-racing, women. And what amounts to the clichés of male toughness: prize fighting and bull-fighting, fights in bars and alleys. And any literature written by writers who exemplify that same male toughness or world-weary cynicism. Hemingway looms large, but the largest presence would be Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose masterpiece *Journey to the End of the Night* remains for Bukowski throughout his writing life a kind of lodestone for what is true and worthwhile in

writing. While Céline is most likely a shared influence, Różewicz has an entirely different set of thematic concerns than Bukowski.

While it is easy to imagine that the following lines could be found in a Różewicz poem:

I had this fellow write me that
he felt there wasn't the
'urgency' in my poems
of the present
as compared to my poems
of the past.

(76)

They do not. They come instead from Bukowski's 'a non-urgent poem'.³ On the other hand, it would be harder to assume that the following lines come from Różewicz – they do not – they come unmistakably from Bukowski in a poem called 'an ordinary poem':

since you've always wanted
to know I am going to admit I never liked Shakespeare, Browning, the
Bronte sisters,
Tolstoy, baseball, summers on the shore, arm-
wrestling, hockey, Thomas Mann, Vivaldi, Winston Churchill,
Dudley
Moore, free verse,
pizza, bowling, the Olympic Games, the Three Stooges, the
Marx
Brothers, Ives, Al Jolson, Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, Mickey
Mouse, basketball ...

(266)

The heavy-handed weaving of names drawn from American popular culture with canonical giants from music and literature is something that Różewicz's own personal history would not have provided; but that fact notwithstanding there is something deeply unfamiliar in such a loud and aggressive postulating, a defiance that seems personal and more a sharply felt response to a past private exclusion. Bukowski's pain was personal; Różewicz came to his pain as a direct result of Poland's involvement in World War II. It is this which is the shaping principle in his work. 'After the end of the world/after death' writes Różewicz, 'I found myself in the midst of life.' (69). War is the end of the world, death. At war's end life begins anew.

I found myself in the midst of life
creating myself
building life
people animals landscapes

this is a table I said
this is a table
there is bread and a knife on the table
knife serves to cut bread
people are nourished by bread

(69)

Existence it turns out is atomic in its breakdown:

³ Bukowski, Charles. *You get so alone that at times it just makes sense*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1986. Both poems can be found in this edition.

this is a man
this is a tree this is bread

people eat to live

(70)

And if syllogisms so constructed seem to lead nowhere then that is where they lead, though there is a point at which whatever existential dread or absurdity is finally realized there remains one last grace to which the poet shall attend:

and if a voice was heard
flowing
from earth water and sky
it was a voice of another man

(71)

The voice saves, seems to save: the human calls to human.

It is difficult to resist the temptation to compare Różewicz with Zbigniew Herbert. The two bear certain stylistic similarities – a preference for plain-language, concision, indirection, and a common debt to certain European intellectual and aesthetic movements of their time. Moreover, both poets share the experience of having survived World War II, an event of profound and lasting influence. So it is easy to see them together, in a sense, and to find in their work much that is shared. But there are differences between the two – of course – and it is these differences which are as profound as any similarities one would care to admit.

Herbert is a poet whose poems inevitably seem to rise from his historical and political understandings. We can reach the personal in a Herbert poem, but it seems as if such a point is achieved first through the prism that history provides. By insisting on this point, I do not mean to suggest Herbert is merely or only interested in what is historical at the expense of the personal. He is far too subtle a writer for that to be the case; nor does he ever approach the darkness where the propagandist for the state might lurk. But even when Herbert writes what would conventionally be understood as a love poem, one gets the sensation – it is a sensation – that literary tradition is also at play, along with wit and charm. I believe Herbert is more committed to a belief that poetry has the power to redeem; that in Christian Wiman's words, "in the end we go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things, we might be less apt to destroy them."⁴ Such a view is idealistic to be sure; it is this sense of an elevated communal purpose I find inhabiting much of Herbert's poetry. Różewicz, on the other hand, strikes me as authentically filled with doubt and even torment about the value of his own poetry, even the poetry of others.

Certain poems by Herbert remind me strongly of Różewicz. 'Our Fear', for example:

Our fear
does not wear a night shirt
does not have an owl's eyes
does not lift a casket lid
does not extinguish a candle

⁴ From a card sent to the author by Christian Wiman, 2008.

does not have a dead man's face either

our fear
is a scrap of paper
found in a pocket
'warn Wójcik
the place on Długe Street is hot'
(90)

This is resistance territory, underground and life-gambling. It is a world of looks over shoulders and worries about shadows; it is clandestine and coded, of information on scraps of paper found in wrapped bundles 'made in haste/with provisions/and arms.' If this sounds familiar, it is because it is familiar. The anaphora and simple language calls to mind Różewicz; the setting recalls Zajc. For Herbert the fear of the resistance defines true fear for him: it is a fear rooted in the larger betrayals of larger community, a nation under siege and finally occupied. In such a context, fear isn't death and it isn't the 'face of the dead man.' At this point the poem seems to leave altogether its focus on fear, and proceeds to the gentle treatment of the dead by the living. Herbert describes the gentle and furtive way in which the dead are handled:

close their eyes
adjust their lips
pick a dry spot
and bury them

not too deep
not too shallow

(91)

Granted Herbert's large intelligence that sees the personal within the larger domains, he is also able to see what is small and subtle and to write of beauty without an aggrandizing voice or one that transmutes what is delicate into the heaviness of a gaveled theme. Consider, for example, two quite different poems: 'Rosy Ear' and 'Wooden Bird.' The former is a love poem, a poem of beauty discovered and received as playful revelation. 'I thought/but I know her so well/we have been living together for years', Herbert tells us, and so prefaces what an unnoticed aspect of beauty he discovers one winter evening:

she sat down beside me
and in the lamplight
falling behind us
I saw a rosy ear

a comic petal of skin
a conch with living blood
inside it –

(53)

The moment is as quiet as what is observed is small; the moment is delicate and the description is too. The ear is 'a comic petal of skin' which isn't mean but links its owner to flowers in bloom; the ear is 'a conch with living blood' which links the owner to the sea and to the myth of Aphrodite riding the sea-shell to the shore. But the narrator after noticing this petal and conch remains silent – dumbstruck, in effect, the archetypal response to beauty – and so proceeds to meditate on the value of 'the rosy ear' as subject for a poem. (The poem has already enacted what the poem at this point pretends to discuss.) 'It would be good to write/a poem about a rosy ear.' But the difficulty to be avoided is writing about this petal in such a way 'that people would say/what a subject he chose/he's trying to be eccentric.' Too much is at stake, because his love is too great, and the poet (Herbert) must not let the moment be diminished by his limitations as a poet. How often I have felt certain subjects would be worthy of a poem, yet for whatever reason have feared the result would be nothing less than a betrayal of that moment by framing it within the lesser context that a bad

poem supplies. Better silence than a bad poem, Herbert seems to be saying, a sentiment with which I am in total agreement. Slyly, ironically, Herbert offers us his silence:

I didn't say anything then
but that night when we were in bed together
delicately I essayed
the exotic taste
of a rosy ear

(54)

Having written the poem – having presented it to us – Herbert proceeds to the silence that he avers is the greater prudence. Taste the ear's praises with your tongue, don't sing them with your mouth.

If the petal of an ear is treated delicately and with gentleness, and becomes a symbol of physical love and pleasure, the wooden bird in the poem of the same name is treated differently. The poem begins to send us in one direction but by the end we have arrived at a place wholly unexpected. Initially, the poem begins someplace in fairy tale: 'In the warm hands/of children/a wooden bird/began to live.' Once upon a time, in other words. But the wooden bird is soon outside the warmth of the hands of children, in a forest where 'woodpeckers picked out its eyes/its tiny black heart blackened/from the torture of common beaks.' Eventually, the wooden bird is found 'between matter animate/and invented/between a fern in the forest/and a fern from Larousse.' Neither real nor cerebral; neither of the material nor metaphysical world, the wooden bird is something else, something which finally 'does not transform itself/into an image.' I am not sure exactly what Herbert is getting at; the poem is at least ambiguous in the conviction of its own closing. Perhaps the wooden bird is more failed image than no image at all, though the poem insists the wooden bird is no image and all along whatever meanings have been applied to the wooden bird are perhaps no more than a reader's misreading. (That sentence was convoluted because my thinking about this is convoluted.) A wooden bird rotting in the forest might be no more than a wooden bird rotting in the forest. I wonder.

Compared to the poetry of Różewicz and Herbert, and even Swir, the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska stands out for its expansiveness and range of tone. Szymborska is not a reckless poet by any means, but she is not committed to concision as an aesthetic necessity. Szymborska lets her poems open out onto her subject and plays with language in the space she finds there. Lines become longer, poems become rich with adjectives and verbs, the ordinary phrase is found sometimes – of course -- but so is the extraordinary; even the look of her poems is different, in thick dense stanzas of both regular and irregular line patterns. I think it is fair to see in Szymborska's work an inclusiveness that speaks to her belief in the poet's role within a larger community, that the poet has a public role to play even while the impulse to write a poem is existential and (sometimes) immeasurably private.

'Letters of the Dead'⁵ is typical of the kind of large themes with which Szymborska wrestles:

We read the letters of the dead like helpless gods,
yet gods nevertheless knowing later dates.
We know which debts were never settled,
whom the widows hastily married.
Poor dead, blinded dead,
deceived, error-prone, awkwardly provident.
We see the faces and gestures made behind their backs.

(61)

⁵ Szymborska, Wislawa. *People on a Bridge*. Translated by Adam Czerniawski. London: Forest Books, 1990.

From our present vantage – that is, our position in the present which looks back upon those in the past – we see more than anyone could have known then. We are ‘like helpless gods’ because we know so much yet can change nothing of what has transpired. Here we see Szymborska’s use of repetition (‘We read .. We know ...’) and her language with its layering of descriptive phrases (‘Poor dead, blinded dead’) and adjectives (‘deceived, error prone...’). Those in the present are inclined to judge those of the past in harsh terms:

They sit before us like ridiculous gnomes
or chase their hats the wind has snatched.
Their bad taste, Napoleon, steam and electricity,
their deadly cures for curable illnesses,
the foolish Apocalypse according to St. John,
the false paradise on earth according to Jean-Jacques ...
(61)

Whereas we are gods – helpless but still gods – those in the past are ‘gnomes’ – freakish monsters – or laughably chasing their hats like characters in a silent movie. How stupid they were back then! How ugly! How willing they were to follow and praise arrogant little men; how primitive their worlds were; how ignorant their medicine; how deluded their religions, their idealism that amounted to nothing. Thus far the poem is pure indictment, really savage and unforgiving. It continues:

We watch in silence their pawns on the chess-board
nor moved merely three squares further on.
Everything they foretold has turned out quite differently,
or somewhat differently, that is, again, quite differently.
The most earnest ones look trustingly in our eyes
because according to their calculations they would see
perfection
(61)

The chess-board is a game of closing possibilities, a game where fate is given shape before the very eyes of those who play it. Each move is connected to the move made before and the move made after. Szymborska’s narrator seems suddenly unclear at this point in the poem, unnerved perhaps by the growing weight her poem seems to carry. The ‘foretold’ would include the speaker of the poem, would include ‘the helpless gods’ looking back at the ‘ridiculous gnomes’ of the past. Everything – the foretold – turned out ‘quite differently’ or ‘somewhat differently’ or ‘again, quite differently.’ The speaker is confused as she realizes that the condemnation of the past is just as easily a condemnation of the present; that when the past looked to the future they saw some other thing, something quite different, they saw a ‘perfection’ which the speaker realizes is not to be found in the present. The earnest past might see ‘perfection’ but the speaker realizes that there is no perfection in her world, which is the world that so harshly judges the past.

A quite different poem is ‘Funeral.’ Which appears to be an artless assemblage of fragments of conversation overheard at a funeral, and the effect is darkly humorous. The poem doesn’t dwell explicitly on what is insincere and empty about a ritual conclusion to a life, nor for that matter the suggestion that once finished a life is almost immediately forgotten. It begins with quiet discussions concerning the cause of death (‘nerves and cigarettes’) and branches out, like a stain, into mean-spirited assessments (‘only himself to blame’) and then banal and irrelevant comments:

– door varnishing included, guess how much
– two yolks, a spoonful of sugar
[...]
– only in blue and only in small sizes
[...]
– the priest’s quite a Belmondo

[...]
– let's find a beer somewhere
– give me a ring we'll talk
– catch a 4 or a 12
– I go this way
– we go over there

(33)

The poem reminds me of those wonderful movies of the Sixties that dissected the inauthentic lives of the middle-class, all insincere surface and quiet murderous intentions. The poem ends ironically. People depart to unspecified and so unknown destinations, as if they too have died and now must go elsewhere.

Czeslaw Milosz is a poet whose work represents a monument, casting shadows and giving shelter in storms when winds push the rains in the direction against which one struggles. Milosz makes me tired. When I read Milosz it is only for brief periods because my eyes begin to close and I feel sluggish and stupid. Mostly I feel stupid then sluggish, then want to recline on the sofa with the window open where I feel a warm breeze and hear lawn-mowers and children screaming and motorcycles when they go by. This isn't criticism but the facts of a response that is familiar. Milosz writes of malachite mountains, in dithyrambs, of basalt and azaleas and 'palisades and pregnant sheep and pigs, fast eaters and poor eaters, and cows cured by incantations' and I am reminded of greatness and my own smallness. Milosz goes on. The small poem isn't his thing, and yet there is:

SEASONS

Transparent tree, full of migrating birds on a blue morning,
Cold because there is still snow in the mountains.

Which can be found on page 250 of his *Collected Poems: 1931-1987*.⁶ Into his nineties Milosz continued to write, furiously it would seem, and a later revised edition was issued which contained a prodigious amount of new work. (Prolific as hell, a poet such as Milosz haunts anyone who ever complains about not 'writing enough.') One reads Milosz and realizes how little one knows of history, of the Old Testament, of philosophy, of literary biography and bibliography. It is horrible to feel this way but it is eye-opening as well. I slink to the library with a list of names to look up in easy encyclopedias.

When Milosz was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1980, I remember seeing a photograph of him peering out, in pajamas, at journalists crowding his front door and the world suddenly interested in his poetry and opinions. What is this? And why? his arched eyebrow seemed to say:

I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing.
That is dictated to me and a few others.
Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth.
Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle
Or ending it with a comma. And how it all looks when competed
Is not up to us to inquire, we won't read it anyway.

Written in Berkeley, in 1975, and appearing on page 325. Called 'Secretaries' and one assumes the secretary of the poem is a stand-in for the poet himself. But false modesty must surely be at fault here, a voice most insincere and devious. I do not think so. He seems a most un-ironic Polish modernist – if he is a modernist which he may well not be. (More likely he seems to 'hark back' to an earlier age, combining elements of classicism with romanticism, even elements of existentialism and – in small measure – surrealism.)

⁶ Milosz, Czeslaw. *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987*. New York: Ecco, 1988.

I find it interesting that Milosz lived most of his writing life away from Poland. Like that great extravagant writer of Irish dream James Joyce, Milosz mined his nostalgia apart from the soil in which it was nourished, in America, in the America of Californian excess and mystique. Like Joyce writing in Finnegans dream tongue, Milosz chose to write his poems in a language available to few of his native Californians. In Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky and Leonard Nathan, Milosz found brilliant collaborators who would assist him in finalizing into English his poems and translations. Only a poet of grand gestures could find such willing adjuncts.

It is hard for me not to see Milosz ripping this one off in a few minutes:

SO LITTLE
I said so little.
Days were short.

Short days.
Short nights.
Short years.

I said so little.
I couldn't keep up.

My heart grew weary
From joy,
Despair,
Ardor,
Hope.

The jaws of Leviathan
Were closing upon me.

Naked, I lay on the shores
of desert islands.

The white whale of the world
Hauled me down to its pit.

And now I don't know
What in all that was real.

Berkeley, 1969

(247)

The poem reads like Herbert or Różewicz, maybe even Swir. Allusions are rampant: Jonah and the whale; Ahab and Moby Dick (a version of Jonah and the whale); Robinson Crusoe; maybe Borges. Is it allegory, political allegory, personal? Impossible for me to resist seeing Milosz ripping this one off in five minutes, so inclined is he towards what is novelistic and sequential, monumental.

What is typical: large themes, large questions.
A seriousness of purpose.
A poetry of serious purpose.
As always, in Milosz.

SREČKO KOSOVEL

Translated from the Slovenian by Barbara Siegel Carlson and Ana Jelnikar

KDO STRMI V MOJA SANJE

Kdo strmi v moje sanje?
Jaz nočem, da jih spozna,
tihe v senci mojih misli,
same, ločene od sveta...

Ko grem po cesti, jih skrivam v molk;
lepa je senca, samotni je gozd;
v kavarni se s časopisom zagrnem
in jih odkrijem samo Tebi
na loku gozdne poti, Neznani...

WHO SPIES ON MY DREAMS

Who spies on my dreams?
I don't want you to know them,
silent in the shadows of my thoughts.
alone, apart from the world...

When I walk down the road I hide them
in the silence; beautiful is the shadow,
solitary are the woods; in the café
I hide behind a newspaper,
and where the forest path curves,
I'll show them just to you, the Unknown...

MAJHRN PLAŠČU

Jaz bi rad hodil
v majhnem plašč
besed

Ali pod tem naj se skriva
topel, svetál svet.

Kaj je bogastvo?
Kaj je razkošje?
Zame je eno;
majhen plašč imam
in ta plašč ni nobenemu
enak.

A SMALL COAT

I would like to walk around
in a small coat of
words.

But hidden underneath should be
a warm, bright world.

What is wealth?
What's luxury?
For me it is this:
a small coat I have,
and this coat is like
no other.



Karst Village near Kosovel's House

CONS XY

Skozi moje srce stopa veliki slon.
Cirkus Kludsky, vstopnina 5 din.
Ne obesi bolesti na veliki zvon!
Ona se smehjja: cin cin cin.

Srca ljudi so majan in ječe velike,
rad bi šel skozi srca ljudi.
Si pristaš te ali one klike?
Tisoč dinarjev ali zaprt 7 dni.

Rože v mojem srcu ne jočejo nikdar.
Kdo bi bil mlad, pa vendar potrtr.
Kaj če prihaja skozi vrata žandar.
Vojaški process, vi boste v ječi zaprt.

Rože, ostanite same te težke dni.
Tvoje oči, žandar, so kot bajonet,
neumne in zlobne. (Rože, zaprite oči!)
Gandhi, je bil zaprt celih šest let.

CONS. CONS. CONS.

Mesečina je mrzla kakar sladoleed.
Prazna kakor trubadurske pesmi.
Lepo je sedeti v senci noči.
Latrine, Pissoir. Tukaj.
Mož za vrati, kaj hoč on?
Kakor senca stoji
za prosojnimi vrati
mesečine.
Mesečina nad polji
je kakor okamenela bolest...
Tvoje telo blesti
v mesečini.

Cons XY

Through my heart treads a huge elephant.
Kludsky Circus-- 5 dinars please.
Don't wear your heart on your sleeve.
She smiles: ring-a-ling-ding.

Human hearts are small and cages large.
Let me walk through people's hearts.
What is your clique?
A thousand dinars or 7 days in jail.

The flowers in my heart never cry.
Who wants to be young and dejected.
What if a gendarme comes through the door.
It's a war tribunal—you'll go to jail.

Flowers, stay alone through these heavy days.
Your eyes, officer, glint like a bayonet,
stupid and mean. (Flowers, don't look!)
Gandhi was locked up for six long years.

Cons. Cons. Cons.

The moonlight is cold as ice cream.
Empty as the troubadour's song.
It's nice to sit in the shade of the night.
Latrines. Pissoir. Here.
A man behind the door, what does he want?
Shadow-like he stands
behind the transparent door
of moonlight.
Moonlight covers the fields
like a petrified sickness...
Your body glistens
in the moonlight.



from Kosovel's House, Tomaj, Slovenia

