CONTENTS

PHILIP DACEY 5 The New Love Poem
JEAN EASTON ANAPORTE 6 Pitfalls of the Lady Poet
ROSEMARY CAPPELLO 7 Leaving
LOUIS McKEE 8 What is Missing
TINA BARR 9 Night Before Moving
PETER BUSHYEAGER 10 New Jersey Turnpike Night
12 Things I Can’t Remember
BRIAN GALLAGHER 14 airplane haiku
LEONARD KRESS 15 The Frankford El
NAOMI SHIHAB NYE 17 The Brick
18 February
19 Arabic Coffee
DEBORAH L. ALLEN 20 to mama lizzie
SUJATA P. BHATT 21 The Woodcut
22 The Peacock
23 The Writer
RUSSELL SUSUMU ENDO 24 To Issei, The First Generation
ELIZABETH McKIM 25 Sometimes the name is just a small
shedding, a shadow,
26 secrets can be
ALICE FRIMAN 27 Orpheus and Eurydice in Spain, 1981
JERRY McGUIRE 30 Shut Up
HAROLD WATSON 32 the cajflck effick
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THE NEW LOVE POEM

The new love poem
is known for its honesty.
The new love poem says
I don't love you.

The new love poem
remembers the old love poem
in which a woman's body
was compared to the entire world.
The new love poem tries not to feel
superior to the old love poem.

The new love poem can live
on a steady diet
of bitter fruit. The new love poem
thinks sweets
are for children.

When the new love poem sleeps
it dreams
of getting old,
of shrivelling to a chrysalis,
of something with wings
and color so loud it talks
emerging
to thrill someone who doesn't know any better
and who doesn't want to.
PITFALLS OF THE LADY POET

I knocked the handle of the big knife
so it spun on the cutting board.
“Is that a threat?” he asked.
The real threat stays in my head
where lips pulled back I grip it
in my teeth blade away from tongue
and at night steal into his bedroom
looking for the fragile places—the belly,
the hollow in the chest—only
to be stopped by a back’s long shield,
the blade of silence in a shoulder.
And so I return to my own room where
I cut away soft spots
like bruises on a peach.
Soon, I'll be lean as any man.
LEAVING

I want to rock my house,
house that I'm leaving.

It is human to me—
a child—a child of the war
like so many 20th Century children.
Child of the war, the second world war,
but its walls are plaster
not board like the houses they build now.
Real plaster, with a foundation of gray stone.

When I saw the lawyer for the first time
last July, when I came home I tried
figuring on the calculator
how many times Joe and I made love.

We had made love all over this house.
On the living room floor,
dining room chair, kitchen chair,
though it wasn't easy to get him to
make love anywhere else but bed.

Once I wanted to make love in Hoffman Park
by Darby Creek
but he wouldn't.

It had to be in this house.

This house, with the walls we painted
tangerine and midnight blue
this house I'm leaving
this house I'm leaving remembering the time
we painted the midnight blue and the physical
activity turned me on and we stopped painting
to make love and the old couch was so comfortable
the new one is not should have never given the
old one to the Salvation Army changes so many changes
over the years so much has changed except the stone
foundation the plaster walls that are like our ancestors
they are our base and our strength and I'm leaving it
for another base another strength and it will be
okay but I have to cry first I have to cry first cry
over all these deaths including the death of what
could never be born between us.
WHAT IS MISSING

How many mornings
we wake up
and things are not there,
books we'd been reading,
glasses we drank from,
even pictures
missing from the walls?

At night you closed your eyes
to the cold, our bodies
touching their entire length.
In sleep it happens,

that we might roll apart,
but our arms reached
across that.

Light comes earlier
to the country. You are up
before I wake—what
is gone this time, Love?
NIGHT BEFORE MOVING

The eaves were like wings in the walls.
Upturned chairs and crates encircled me.
In my room a series of small panes
pressed out towards the back yard.
You could see through the curtains.
Fields: rocks where I'd picked out
flakes of mica with my fingernails.
Among those piled leaves, my snake
had slipped from my hands.
When I closed my eyes, my brother
still rested in a room beneath me,
laid in a white box.
The yew bushes were so overgrown
they covered all his windows.
In the dark, I listened to my breath.
NEW JERSEY TURNPIKE NIGHT

Tonight you are afraid to stop your car.
   It's the coldest night of the year.
You carry a schedule in your head
   and the suitable vitamins.
You glance quickly side to side.
Faces meet you from behind their glass
you swerve into another lane of traffic
   and tell yourself it was the wind.
You realize you are breathless.

You are very glad the car is moving
the air is meeting the windshield
and the heater is blowing over the radio.
In fifteen minutes you will be in a friend's
   living room not knowing what to say
and stamping your feet and smiling
and taking your gloves off.
The room will be warm.
You will begin to feel erotic.

Hot chocolate unravels your legs in bed.
Tea pumps your heart in the morning.
You are always sipping a liquid drug
   and finding yourself in an office
with your foot tapping or a bedroom
with your eyelids dropping
and you sense a great distance.
In the summer the drug is water.
Water and sluggishness by the fan.
Water at the ocean and the blinding
   headache under the sunglasses
the bodies moving in their suits
   almost naked.

You are thinking you will not stop your car
and will go south until there is spongy
moss on the trees and tremendous thirst.
A new fear seizes you.
It's a donut shop where you finally stop
for coffee and a vitamin.
It is the coldest weather of the year.
Everyone is heavily clothed
and looking furtive over their cups.
You wrap your hand around the hot cup
and sip looking through the window
at the highway.

You feel very much a part of your country.
You want to travel and once you get
to the warm room you are aiming for
perhaps the uneasiness will be worthwhile.
You think about the entire continent
braced under the force of weather.
It is the coldest night of the year.
You are shaking inside with excitement.
Your schedule will soon collapse against your will.
It is only a matter of time.
THINGS I CAN'T REMEMBER

I sleepwalk through my rooms and stare at my blue suit. I go to the chair and put on my running shorts. I am going to run down the hall to the water but I must shut the bedroom door; company might come. They will then have to knock before entering and I will have time to arrange my body so as to not appear raw or obscene.

The streetlight creates a tableau. Tableaux are flat expanses of evenly washed color, shadow, or concepts where anything might happen, generally to symbolic purpose. Symbolic purpose is of great import in epics—it is a shortcut. Perhaps this has to do with sentimentality and a loose slavering jaw; the pillow is wet with saliva, who knows? It is only certain that the tableau is outside the window and I am now awake standing in my bedroom with running shorts and I have meant to do some work.

I am confused and cannot remember the night, but I remember my name which has meaning in a language I never learned. I cannot duplicate the sound. Once I was caught by a sensation but I cannot remember the face. The features and expression have been memorized and take the place of dreams which I cannot remember. I walk but I do not speak.

I can remember an open car window and a song and a hand meeting the wind. The hand broke the wind while the song became part of it and stayed in my head. I have never sung underwater but I am certain it was the same without drowning. I remember the sense of the road, that American saga rolling on like the famous American muddy river where we can stand and shut our mouths or cross.

I don't remember the night or the face or the content of the speech. Words rush over me and I respond to their residue. You respond to your impression of my response to the residue and we are amiable and our hands at some point may slap against each other. In this way we are aware of our presences and the sounds we make.
I can't remember the words or the passion. Flying birds in a dark sky or a formal discussion at the glass table are allegories we may use. There is a pause in the conversation though the birds continue on their own dumb way and I hold these devices of comparison and look out the window at the tableau.

This was to be about dreams, time, and memory with its ploys but definitions have overtaken themselves and created a pleasant get-together and a burgeoning popular lyric. We are hoping for release. Connections have been bad and the season is a blue one.
AIRPLANE HAIKU

Flying with my son
makes me look out the window
all over again.
THE FRANKFORD EL

Though it saddens me and causes great shame
to walk beneath the Frankford El,
I do it often now, as I did ten years ago.

And I am still an easy mark
for pigeons roosting in the bolted crevices
of the structure, squat as the wives

of new Russian merchants, blocking doorways
to fruit stands or hoagie shops, although they,
of course, are not a cause of my shame.

I remember when I first entered the canopy
of the El structure, not caring
about the subway train, here above ground and always

moving on. I sat, that first day, on the concrete
stoop of the Fidelity Bank
and spread notebooks and sacred texts

around me. I was writing a saga
called Fishtown, a piece that lacked,
unlike the El, the spiritual underpinning

capable of supporting and transporting
the living. It was then the pea-green slime
dropped on my head. In my innocence

I suspected not the doves, but the sloppy,
scaffolded painters, coating the girders
that straddled Kensington Avenue. And I was outraged

that no one paid attention
when either nature or the working class
dumped on me. Although I have since
learned the difference between pigeon shit and paint, there is always something new from the same vatic source waiting to defeat us when we feel most sure.

Like Mrs. Sophia, the cardreader, rocking behind her picture window, or the parading school girls from Frankford High

or Little Flower—named for the more delicate Teresa, so meek and humble, whose ecstasy never came; not from heaven, not from me.
Naomi Shihab Nye

THE BRICK
For David & Barbara Clewell

Each morning in the gray margin
between sleep and rising, I find myself
on Pershing Avenue, St. Louis, examining bricks
in buildings, looking for the one I brushed
with my mitten in 1956. How will I know it
when I find it? A shade goes up in one window.
This is where the man in the undershirt lived.
Someone shakes a coffee can and turns a faucet:
the water gushes out, ice-cold.
Why do I want this brick? What does a brick,
red or otherwise, have to tell anyone
about how to live a life? It’s a crazy
as crying for the bear you didn’t get
when you were three, those little hands
hopefully touching the nose,
maybe they even named it. “Fuzzy.”
So what could I name a brick? Hard.
What Buildings Are Made Of.
And why would one brick that I brushed
while on a walk with my father and mother
become a shrine? Later we rode a bus.
My father carried a bag from a drugstore.
I stared hard at the faces of shops
to see what they looked like in the dark.
And things went on that way for decades,
doors opening, buzzers going off,
someone saying “We’re almost there.”

So. This has something to do with why
I stare at certain buildings in any city.
I don’t know where the mittens went,
they had a cord to keep them together.
I’m sure my parents could drive down
Pershing Avenue tomorrow without weeping.
But it’s different for me. It’s the Snagged Edge,
the Center of Memory, the Place Where I Get Off
And On.
FEBRUARY

Speak, air answers.
Words move out
into the auditorium of air.
What comes back: two oversize robins
foraging under mesquite,
a man flashes a devastating smile.

How is it, such commerce
with the world?
We are used to cash registers,
pocketbooks, a predictable sphere.
How is it words shift and swell
disappearing up the chute of wind
while one little one lingers
on the tip of the ear?

Listen hard, we hear.
Listen to what has no name.
Then speak to the main thing
that listens.
ARABIC COFFEE

It was never too strong for us:
make it blacker, Daddy,
thick in the bottom,
tell again how the years will gather
in small white cups,
how luck lives in a spot of grounds.

Leaning over the stove, he let it
boil to the top, and down again.
Two times. No sugar in his pot.
And the place where men and women
break off from one another
was not present in that room.
The hundred disappointments,
fire swallowing olive-wood beads
at the warehouse, and the dreams
tucked like pocket handkerchiefs
into each day, took their places
on the table, near the half-empty
dish of corn. And none was
more important than the others,
and all were guests. When
he carried the tray into the room,
high and balanced in his hands,
it was an offering to all of them,
stay, be seated, follow the talk
wherever it goes. The coffee was
the center of the flower.
Like clothes on a line saying
you will live long enough to wear me,
a motion of faith. There is this,
and there is more.
TO MAMA LIZZIE

no humming today sweet lizzie.
no familiar tunes of old, to pace
my step. no sweet song breeze to meet
the beat of my journey?
but when the morning comes, i will
pack my sack on my back, wrap my head
up tight and start to walking
dropping my seeds from this here old heart,
my sack. dropping them in the rich
black earth, patting softly as i step.

the seeds will grow bushy, as the hair
on my head, and as short as the winter's
days growing long through spring.

maybe then mama lizzie will hum
once more for me, sweet scent of my
mama birthing,
will bring me back again.
THE WOODCUT

For days
I touch the block of pine wood—
pressing its hard edge
against my forehead—
uncertain for days
while it rains
I walk through wet pine needles—
water-softened pine cones
flatten under my feet—
I follow the crooked
wrenched roots—
past torn clumps of moss,
blue-grey feathers, white wisps of cat fur—
and everywhere the sticky leaves,
yellow leaves
like the sliced skin of frogs
cover fallen logs, cover a squirrel’s skull—
For days I touch
the block of pine wood—
pressing its hard edge
between my breasts—
then, remembering your hardness
I cut the first quick stroke
sharp in the wood—
THE PEACOCK

His loud sharp call
seems to come from nowhere—
then, a flash of turquoise
in the pipal tree—
the slender neck arched away from you
as he descends,
and as he darts away, a glimpse
of the very end of his tail...

I was told
that you have to sit in the verandah
and read a book—
preferably one of your favorites—
with great concentration.
The moment you begin to live
inside the book
a blue shadow will fall over you—
the wind will change direction,
the steady hum of bees
in the bushes nearby
will stop—
the cat will awaken and stretch—
something has broken your attention—
and if you look up in time
you might see the peacock
turning away as he gathers in his tail
to shut those dark glowing eyes,
violet fringed with golden amber—
it is the tail that has to blink
for eyes that are always open—
THE WRITER

The best story
is the one you can’t write—
   you won’t write—
 it’s something that can only live
   in your heart—
not on paper—

Paper is dry, flat—
where is the soil
for the roots—and how do I lift out
entire trees—a whole forest
from the earth of the spirit
and transplant it on paper
without disturbing the birds?

And what about the mountain
on which this forest grows—
the waterfalls
   making rivers—
rivers with throngs of trees
elbowing each other aside
to have a look
at the fish—

beneath the fish
   there are clouds—
here the sky ripples,
the river thunders—
how would things move on paper?

Now watch the way
   the tigers walking
shreds the paper.
TO ISSEI, THE FIRST GENERATION

I watch the ending of a generation.
Issei meant “first” in Japanese:
They came by boat to America
In hope of finding a new life to live.
The farmlands in Japan could not contain them.

Life here was hard, bitter,
Like the roots that they had to pull:
They clutched this soil, the only one they had,
Even when the Government sent them off to camps,
Where dust and sand blew through barrack cracks...

They left their mark:
The ink is drying,
Curls drawn in one breath
In swirling times of frenzy.
Is it true that what we do is fade?...

By the muddy river we climbed up the mountain,
And as we climbed higher, we could see farther,
We climbed the terrace, step by step,
The path was hard but the view worth it,
The grey mountains ah the grey mountains...

Kobayashi-san, do you remember?
Yamashita-san, do you remember?
Kawabata-san, do you remember?

This is for you, Issei, first generation,
Written this first day of September, in Philadelphia,
By my own hand.
SOMETIMES THE NAME IS JUST A SMALL SHADING, A SHADOW,

A whisper, not even a true sound, just a little dot
sometimes, or a strange cry, like when you wake in
a foreign city and you hear two cats in sex or anger,
or sometimes I begin as a stone and before I know it
I am eaten into by light or sadness, and I find myself
turning into a bonfire around which people are dancing,
and then I am in a railroad station, and here is where
people say hello or goodbye, and now I am only a tele-
phone booth, and someone is trying to get through, an
international phonecall perhaps, and outside tanks are
moving through the streets, and planes are tearing away
at the sound barrier, and sometimes I no longer under-
stand or know my own mother-tongue, and the words shift
and prance and pirouette through me in exotic costumes
and guerilla uniforms, and I let them pass, just let them
pass, and I wonder about names and meanings, about feel-
ings and sounds, about coverings and the smell of secrets,
about boasts and swears and revelations, about boats pull-
ing out of ports and boats never coming home.
SECRETS

secrets can be
so small and yet
play, they play
with my head, and I
protect them, guard
against any harm coming
to them, wrap them in at night.
Telling, something I'm not
telling, some terrible
pleasure, the word, say it,
telling, some terrible
telling, something I'm not
to them, wrap them in at night
against any harm coming.
Protect them. Guard
with my head. And I
play, they play,
so small and yet
secrets can be
Alice Friman

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE IN SPAIN, 1981

“You dragged me to the light as boys drag out
A rabbit when they have dug its hole away.”

Yeats

They emerge in bright afternoon on a balcony in Madrid. He waits. Leans against the balustrade as if he were alone, blowing smoke out of a hotel window. While she, twenty stories up to loneliness, raises to her throat, a gesture naked as a bullock’s eye, reaches from the half-light of the doorway to call him back from the common crush of day: more death than darkness, this hail of sunlight.

Her paisley robe in the late Spanish afternoon spells its colors against the doorway like some dying thing above the traffic. He turns. Reaches for her. And beneath the silk there is an imperceptible buckling, the way a bull brought out from darkness sways before the crowd.

2.
Below, in the Puerto del Sol, an American sits in the sun writing postcards to a man in Philadelphia. Behind her on a building, black swastikas sparkle in the sunbeads of the fountain, spread their twisted legs and dance like sequined cripples in a show.

Messerschmitts screwed into the memory of these walls. She chews on the end of her pen struggling for the words: to say Love
in the midst of Goya's madness
that hangs in Madrid like an abcess in a black frame.
Soldiers pass her in pairs, cradle
machine guns to their chests like dolls.
She closes her eyes.

The woman on the balcony watches. Raises
her fingers to her lips as if to call
then turns away. The man has gone inside.
On Sunday she will go with him to the bull ring
wearing a big hat to shade her from the light.
It will make little difference.

3.
From the cool sanity of its stall, the labyrinth
walkways, dark as the tunnels of its brain,
the bull bursts into the bedlam of light
and sways before the crowd. Is it necessary
to speak of the wooing? The courting of the cape
before the invitation to shame?
The cutting of the neck muscle to bow the proud head.
The wreath of the bandeleras,
the veil of blood.
Until dizzy with veronicas and the peculiar smell
that rises from the hot sand, the scent
of its own line, the bull sees the matador
studded with sequins.
The two legs a colossus of bright stability:
a pillar of light to follow forty years across a desert
or into the red sea of its own heart
split down the middle of its blood.

He goes down at last, slow and heavy on the knees:
a final offering fallen mute.
The matador turns his back, waves to the crowd
like a man on a balcony. Behind him,
the bull dribbles out its red confession
from the dark love-knot in the chest.

4.
Overhead, airplanes shriek across the sky
leaving their bright trails. As if a finger moved,
wrote something, and left it on a wall.
SHUT UP

They're always saying stupid stupid. Stupid. Why
don't you shut up those hypocrites O I hate.

Take a shower in a dump hotel and right across
the wall they're banging stop that stupid singing
stupid.

I get up before dawn
and out the window down
the pipe to the alley
creep to the back among
the clutter bring my voice
way up like a girl's or cat's
they all scream hey
shut up! shut up!

Up at my father's farm
where the partridges sing
with their wings pigs
sing with twisted tails cows
with heavy eyes the last
elm with its Dutch blight
I only want to sing
they stop me stupid shut up.

At my mother's lying-in
I couldn't quite touch
her I sang like a baby
laughing I put my
tears on her singing
my father was on fire.
They always watch
I only wanted to
sing I am, and will be,
stupid as the daylight
I will shut up
if I can only sing.
The voices of the worst
of them are singing
shut up shut up they sing.
THE CAFLICK EFFICK

the delfonics
never came off
as being catholic

and i sought refuge
from them protestants
behind smokey robinson's complexion.

i wanted to be david ruffin.
i wanted to sing my girl.
i wanted to sing hello young lovers
but i was little eddie kendricks
all six feet ten inches of me.

to this day
kim weston still makes me wet the bed

and mary wells
she will always be my most nearest,
nastiest, sneakiest cousin i've never met.

we were shamed out there doing the 81.
it was even more pentecostal when no one was looking.

in 1965
mascara and diana ross
went hand in hand with blue bangs and smiling devils.

the sinfulness was
the black marvellettes
could only be the baptist women
on your father's side of the family.

the ones you vaguely remember cussing in public.