The Painted Bride Quarterly
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The Painted Bride Quarterly is grateful for the support of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the Maneely Fund. We are also thankful for the assistance of Gerard Givnish, Gil Ott, and the Painted Bride Art Center. Also thanks to Bucks County Community College.

The Painted Bride Quarterly is distributed free to inmates. Please forward inquiries to The Painted Bride Quarterly.

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Published four times a year. The Painted Bride Quarterly is available by subscription: $16 per year; $28, two years. Libraries and institutions: $20 per year. Subscriptions begin with the next quarterly issue. We cannot guarantee the continuation of your subscription if we are not informed of your new address before you move. Single issues are $5.
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All photos by Mpozi Tolbert

Front Cover Photo:
“Meridian Fire,” Broad & Market, Philadelphia

Back Cover Photo:
“City Gym,” Center City, Philadelphia
DIALOGUE

1/28/92 11:59 PM

Hello Teresa Leo:

Thank you for the invite to the poetry reading but I don’t read anymore, haven’t for years. I feel that too often one who reads poetry does so for his own ego and for the instantaneous applause. I am guilty of giving many poetry readings in the past but I tend to cajole myself that it was for the rent. Maybe it was. Maybe I’ve known too many poets or too many poets of the wrong kind. But their mincing, posturing, and prancing upon stage really gave me a gut feeling one gets just before vomiting. Anyhow, and still, thanks for the invite. Oh yeah, and to still further my point of not wanting to, not too long ago was offered an all expense paid trip to Amsterdam for two, plus 10,000 dollars to give two readings. Passed. I believe the writer’s place is at the keyboard writing.

Thanks also for sending on the proofs of Louis McKee’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Bukowski.” Not bad, he’s done some homework.

You know, on the biography, HANK, I was more than disappointed. It was a hard, choppy read; really bad bad writing. I could only read it here and there, it gave me a headache. Too bad, I gave Neeli hours and hours of tape about years of horror and wild happenings and madness. He kept saying, “Hey, I never heard about this!” But he used none of it. Nothing about the jails, the park benches, the crazy women, the starvation, the dozens of stupid jobs etc. etc., the roominghouse fights, the time I lived in a paper shack in Atlanta while freezing and starving, no water, no light...no hope... how I found a pencil stub and wrote on the edges of newspapers that served as a floor over earth.

There were so many things he left out. His life was always comfortable so I guess he just couldn’t really imagine such occurrences. And there are any number of errors. In one place he has me trying to hit my girlfriend with a frying pan when it was the girlfriend with the frying pan who was trying to kill me in a dark kitchen. I told him about this and he said (it was over the phone), “Give it to me again in case there’s a reprint....” I said, “It’s easy,
Neeli. She had the frying pan.” He wrote it down and then read it back...“Once Hank tried to hit her with a frying pan....” He still couldn’t get it. I said, “Neeli, you’ve still got the frying pan in the wrong hands....” “But she might sue me,” he said. I gave it up. I never should have allowed him to do it. Well, what now? Nothing. I’m still alive and I hope hardly as dry as I was written up. I think I would have preferred a deliberate hatchet job, it would have made better reading.

Yes, Philly was one of my favorite cities even though I seldom moved out of a 5 block area. That bar I spent 5 years in was located at 16th and Fairmount and is no doubt long ago gone. It was a pretty rough area decades ago, it’s got to be really under now. So hello to Philly and hello to the Painted Bride. What a curious life it was and still is.

Charles Bukowski
Author’s Note: When Songs Become Water/
Cuando los cantos se vuelven agua

In January, 1991, I was honored to have several poems published in Diario Latino, an opposition newspaper in El Salvador. In February, 1991, Diario Latino was burned down, on the behalf and at the behest of the same forces the newspaper had opposed: the government, the military, the death squads. The newspaper rebuilt itself, publishing only a few pages a day, until eventually Diario Latino was back to full strength. In February, 1992, on the first anniversary of the fire, Diario Latino published the Spanish version of the following poem; in March, 1992, the English version appeared in Review: Latin American Literature and Art, #45 (copyright 1992 by the Americas Society). The poem was written in response to the fire and in tribute to the courage of the people who run this newspaper, though the poem applies as well to any people anywhere in the world whose voices rise above the flames.
When Songs Become Water

— for *Diario Latino*
El Salvador, 1991

Where dubbed commercials
sell the tobacco and alcohol
of a far winter metropolis,
where the lungs of night
cough artillery shots
into the ears of sleep,
where strikers with howls
stiff on their faces
and warnings pinned to their shirts
are harvested from garbage heaps,
where olive uniforms keep watch
over the plaza
from a nest of rifle eyes and sandbags,
where the government party
campaigns chanting through loudspeakers
that this country
will be the burial ground of the reds,
there the newsprint of mutiny
is as medicine
on the fingertips,
and the beat of the press printing mutiny
is like the pounding of tortillas in the hands.

When the beat of the press
is like the pounding of tortillas,
and the newsprint is medicine
on the fingertips,
come the men with faces
wiped away by the hood,
who smother the mouth of witness night,
shaking the gasoline can across the floor,
then scattering in a dark orange eruption of windows,
leaving the paper to wrinkle gray in the heat.
Where the faces wiped away by the hood
are known by the breath of gasoline
on their clothes,
and paper wrinkles gray as the skin
of incarcerated talkers,
another army helicopter plunges from the sky
with blades burning
like the wings of a gargoyle,
the tortilla and medicine words
are smuggled in shawls,
the newspapers are hoarded
like bundles of letters from the missing,
the poems become songs
and the songs become water
streaming through the arteries
of the earth, where others at the well
will cool the sweat in their hair
and begin to think.
Cuando los cantos se vuelven agua

— para Diario Latino
El Salvador, 1991

Donde los anuncios doblados
comercian tabaco y alcohol
de una metrópoli invernal lejana,
donde los pulmones de la noche
tosen tiros de artillería
en los oídos que duermen,
donde huelgistas con aúllos
tiesos sobre sus caras
y amenazas prendidas a sus camisas
son cosechados de los basureros,
donde uniformes verde olivo
vigilan la plaza
desde un nido de ojos-fusil y sacos de arena,
donde el partido del gobierno
hace campaña coreando por altavoces
que este país
será la tumba de los rojos,
alí la tinta de imprenta amotinada
es como medicina
sobre las yemas de los dedos,
y el compás de la imprenta imprimiendo motín
es como el torteo de la masa entre las manos.

Cuando el compás de la imprenta
es como el torteo de la masa,
y la tinta de imprenta es medicina
sobre las yemas de los dedos,
vienen los hombres con caras
borradas por la capucha,
que ahogan la boca de la noche testigo,
sacudiendo la lata de gasolina por el piso,
luego esparciéndose en una anaranjada erupción oscura de ventanas,
dejando el papel para arrugarse gris en el calor.
Donde las caras borradas por la capucha
se conocen por el aliento de gasolina
sobre su ropa,
y el papel se arruga tan gris como la piel
de los habladores encarcelados,
otro helicóptero del ejército se desploma del cielo
con hélices quemándose
como las alas de una gargola,
las palabras de tortilla y medicina
son contrabandeadas en rebozos,
los periódicos son acaparados
como bultos de cartas de los desaparecidos,
los poemas se vuelven cantos
y los cantos se vuelven agua
fluyendo por las arterias
de la tierra, en el pozo donde otros
refrescarán el sudor en su pelo
y se pondrán a pensar.

*Traducción: Camilo Pérez-Bustillo*
"Beer To Go," 11/91, North Philadelphia
Reciting a litany of horrors: charred cities, corpses by the millions, disabled survivors, radioactive despair.

so what was a voice; vibrations captioned in the guarded air.

"try to stay calm & don’t move"

One player pursues the others until he can touch one of them.

children break automobile windshields in an atmosphere of wordless, nonexistent, sundays.

I do not believe so.

Who are you to say.

Well I never.

insects occupy every habitable part of the planet. they collectively outweigh the human race by a 12-to-1 ratio.

"I put on a clean mask every day"

Allowed to roam through psychiatric ghettos in urban areas.
18,000 hours
before the set.

David admitted to setting the
fire at Rick's Place, and is now
in a sanitarium. Arlene gave
Jamie the photo negatives, and
then broke down, saying she had
been married to Ben once. Betsy
is happy that she's pregnant, and
she's trying to force Meg to give
Ben his money right away. Rick is
desperately trying to end his
partnership with Meg. Eddie veri-
ified the existence of a rapist,
and now Charles is sorry he didn't
believe Felicia before.

STRANGE NEW STREET

vanilla suburbs
& the chocolate
cities...

"It would be wise to
learn how to terraform Mars."

The orange groves where
the swallows once found
materials to build their
nests and the river beds
from which the birds drank
have been replaced by
housing developments.
Children also throw rocks
at the birds.

THIS AIN'T LIVING
lost trysts, secrets dead or
dying in warm moist mouths,
fingers matted in sticky
pubic hair, one forgotten
cheek resting on pubic bone...

Missionary Position lay
down the bones

, recovering the material
evidence of human life.

A typical day for an
American household now
divides into three nearly
equal parts: eight hours
of sleep, seven hours of
TV and nine hours of work
or school, including
getting there and back.

smile as smi
ssss my ile.

"that reminds me of
our days"

| ACID |
| RAIN |
| DEAD |
| LAKE |

face of earth crawling
skin breathe on the
radio.

how much I love
her 'til the
end of time.

"fuck the troops"
hurt

huh

ur (or the time (t

the time he (hu

uu (man it hu

he sat at the bar
peeling the label
off a Budweiser
bottle.

I HAVE TALKED TO
MENTALLY CRIPPLED
IDIOTS HOLDING
GOOD JOBS

When you travel for
a distance and you
don’t see any bones,
you worry, because
then you are lost.

flies, plummet toward extinction along OR MAYBE SOMETHING
(space people) When the magazine is empty, on either AUTO
always gets her load Wild animals are vanishing fast,
her sweet cunt tongue-fucked. It puts her in semiautomatic
fire. ...AND SEND WITH THEM SOMETHING death with jeeps,
or killed by starvation when the rifle is fired with the
selector on AUTO. (space people) IF THEY ARE ABLE some
species forever, cut down by sucking his beefy black dick is
the SHINY GREEN STICKS...AND WE TAP Deserts advance at an
even faster rate. ALTY (when we talk to through with a face
full of jizz. era safaris. “Killing...is peanuts

All I ever wanted was my life

All I ever wanted was my life
just trying to do a good deed

she was right, she told me, “you just go with my sister because she’s younger than I am, you’re prejudiced against older people and against fat people.”

“when’s she coming home?” I asked her. “where is she?”

“don’t worry about her, I’m talking to you now. tell me, what’s wrong with me?”

“you’re old and you’re fat,” I told her.

“but so are you,” she said.

“I’m not fat,” I said.

“you’re overweight,” she said.

“all right, stop bitching, come on, we’ll fuck.”

“what did you say?”

“you heard me.”

then we just sat there. I nodded toward the bedroom a few times but she just sat there.

then the door opened and the younger sister was there. the fat sister jumped up.
she pointed to me.

"HE WANTED TO FUCK ME!"

the younger sister looked at me.

"is this true?"

"no," I said, "I didn’t want to."

"BUT HE OFFERED TO!" screamed the older sister.

"well?" the younger sister asked me.

"it’s true," I said.

"YOU GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!"

I got up and walked out of the door and down the sidewalk toward my car.

"I TOLD YOU HE WAS NO GOOD!"
I heard the fat sister scream.

"OH, SHUT UP!" I heard the younger sister scream.

I got into my car and drove out of there.

when I got to my place the phone was ringing.
I picked it up, then hung it up, then took it off the hook, walked toward the refrigerator for a beer.
one to lead the way

now, he said, there isn’t a man jack of you all who hasn’t masturbated, right?

there was silence.

all right, he said, any man who hasn’t masturbated, hold your hand up.

there were no hands up.

he looked us over.

he looked at me.

Stokowski, you yourself have masturbated 10,000 times, right?

9,882 times, sir.

and what was your best one?

the time I imagined I bungholed an albino angel.

you a homo, Stokowski?

it was a female, sir, she had the rag on.

he marched up and down in front of us.

don’t worry about jacking your rabbit, he said, it’s God’s way of keeping you out of trouble.
“Desert Storm, Day 1 (Frannie Rafferty),” City Hall, Philadelphia
he marched back and forth.

but no circle jerks, you understand?
I will have no circle jerks in this outfit,
is that clear?

YES, SIR!

LOUD AND CLEAR!

YES SIR !!!

DISMISSED! FALL OUT!

we were all thinking the same thing, each man jack of us:
a man could die behind a man like that.
maybe not gladly
but certainly not in shame.
the death of an era

my room was a block away.
I opened the bar at 5 a.m. and
closed it at
2 a.m.

often darkness and light got
mixed up.
I’d be sitting there and it
would be last call.
then in a moment the sun
would be up and I’d be
sitting there.

“Jim,” I’d ask the bartender,
“I thought it was last
call.”

at other times I’d find myself
in a big house full of people
and everybody would be
drinking and I’d have a
drink in my hand.
I hardly knew any of the
people but it seemed a
good time.
“hey, hey,” I’d say.

5 years of that bar.
and nobody came and got
me.
but I wasn’t crazy.
I just didn’t know what
else to do.

one night I was sitting at
the bar
and somebody said,
"I smell smoke.
there's a fire somewhere."

"oh, it's here," I said.

a large flame was rolling up
my leg, a beautiful, curling
crackling red flame.

I reached down and patted it out with my hand
which got burned all to hell.

anybody else would have gotten medical treatment.

they just laughed and I got a free drink.

actually, what got me out of that bar
was the advent of television
which was just coming out.

after they put in the tv, people were no longer the entertainers.
they just sat together and looked at the screen.

I started drinking in my room.
I drank and I drank and I drank in my room.
one day I walked out
of that room,
got on a bus
and left the
city.

something had died
in America.

I had gotten in my last 5 years
at that end
stool
just in
time.
short muck poem

you get down in the muck up to your
ears and you have to
pull yourself out
again.
again and again.

you’d let the muck take you
but you don’t like the look or feel
of it.
pull up and out again.

here we go!
up and out.

you’ve been congratulated upon
your ability to do
this.
by others who also fall into the
muck.

they say that your getting out
helps them get
out.

how nice.

but now
look:
I’ve just fallen back
in.

goodbye for a
while.
An Introduction: Writers from PBQ
Benefit Reading Series

Despite the often spurious standards that "poetry slams," that MTV of the poetry world, want to demand of a poet, some writers are better on the stage than on the page. This is a relative distinction that too much has been made of. Perhaps it's just the difference between the word "alone" and the word "tear" — the first works as a pun only when spoken or sung (I still don't know whether The Temptations are singing "And when he died all he left us was a loan" or not, or even whether the pun was intended); the second can employ the economy of double entendre only on the page. Perhaps the difference between a poet on the stage and one on the page is just one of conventions. Someone once remarked to me "But Chris, PBQ is a more conventional magazine than, say, Aver." And I said, "No, it just has different conventions. Just as a poetry slam is just as conventional as a Richard Wilbur reading."

The writers gathered here have at least one thing in common — they donated their talents to benefit PBQ at the Khyber Pass Pub (a Philadelphia rock club that also donated its space). Beyond that, the writers included here can hardly be said to constitute a school (or even a scene). In fact, most of the poets brought their own audiences...and it was rare that a featured poet one week showed up in the audience the next week. None of this, however, should matter to the open-minded reader. To use an analogy from the music world, just because The Clash didn't like The Beatles, or Coltrane didn't care for Bob Dylan, doesn't mean you can't like them all. In fact, it's so often the nepotistic inbreeding and assimilationism of poetry scenes that, as with empires, lead to their downfall. But hopefully, the mix of work, from "confessional" to "concrete" poetry, from the inverse Negative Capability of an angry neo-beat to the insouciance of the New York School (and beyond) presented here will help foster a dialogue between the balkanized factions that certainly exist here in Philly (though there are always strange bedfellows who cross lines). Failing that, the mix of new voices and established writers could at least challenge a reader to "give up the ghost" of the ways he or she is set in.

We like to think that PBQ has avoided such pitfalls as of late. Of course, it's possible that in our effort to keep our readers on their toes we might be too eclectic for our own good. We still have a lot to learn.
In Duras

the Mekong flows like menstrual blood,
the young girl is already old,
always thirsty, never full,
languid as a funeral.

Emotional states, in fits and starts,
replace the many body parts:

ennui for eyes, a pool mood
of open shyness, lassitude;

torpor on the tongue,
the words that shock in one so young;

desire for breasts, their edible smell,
the breasts of Helene Lagonelle;

sweat from shoulders, stomach, knee,
a washcloth where a hand should be;

an ugliness between the legs,
deformed by longing, still it begs
to be convulsive, or it will not be,
locked in a trousseau of memory.

The little slut of Vietnam,
the signature of grief so dumb

the Chinese lover disappears
in language tropes instead of years.
Transformation

_for Roger Armstrong_

Everything I love I am allergic to.
That’s what compels me.
The hive over the eye
viewing beauty.
The pain before parting
becomes not sweet or sorrowful
or sour, but
duty.
They’re my punishment for pleasure:
My ostrich feather and coarse rope.
My carrot and Zenstick.
My culverts and gulches.
My lace tablecloth and candles.
My cauldron and curses.
My ordinary heart’s
desire.
Whatever I can’t live without
is what addicts me.
Desperation. Fantasy. Pomegranates.
Forest fire. Sunset lakes.
You.
Long ago I knew a man who tried
to convince me everything contains its own
contradiction,
every system sows the seeds
of its own
self-destruction.
He failed,
and then he died.
Ah, love, I hope you know
I do not mean to be a vile thing
you repudiate in disgust, or fear,
an unsheathed sword that must shear off
even friendly feet if they dare come too near.
It's just my way, darling, just my way.
Today we have the possibility for change.
Perhaps. I think so. Unless I am more invested
in staying strange. Until now,
choice never made me sing.
Necessary Night

The short necessary night
left like a child's disease
temporary, excused. Light
returned quickly. We saw it
centered by the Tampa sun
strapped into the sky like my
mother in her driver's seat
following the highway signs
to Tampa Hospital now
burning into sight. She blinks
repeatedly from too much light.
My father lies still as if
while he was studying a score
the sun had hid, then ambushed him.

His room has the smell of strokes
the slightly forced tenderness
of nurses. Father's crisscrossed
by tubes, hooked to machines, thrashing
in bed, feet strapped. Every
hour or so he gazes
with unfocused filmy eyes.
Mother says "the way he tries
to squeeze my hand shows that he
knows us." I'm unconvinced.
I'm poor at reading signs and
notice only his feet, bald
as a baby's move in time
the way he once played violin,
Sibelius or Bach, or
not that at all, but merely
recalling his quiet sins.
His sins scattered quietly like sunlight or snowlight, his sin only being part of light. Father makes music in the necessary night, once more quickly scattering into day. I note this in his wide mild eyes and also in the curve of his deserted ears, still soft.

The corridors are brightly lit like jukeboxes displayed in some showcase where they must be sold. I'm leaving him not myself. The seatbelt fastened, again we're under the sun. On either side of the road trees tower over us. The Florida colors are blue and green but soon the dark will capture the enormous trees, and later in another shift, we'll see them when the light lifts with their same variety, the variety of trees, sporting their same structure, now scarcely shuddering in the Florida design, still rooted firmly in our long disease.
The Possible

It's extraordinary, the rain rattles the leaves
and falls down with them. Coins and goldfish
in fountain like cufflinks on french cuffs
of the real, or something like
that. The chit, chit of them placed
on dresser. You don't believe me, but I
love this. A boy rolls a ball in the square.
I don't believe me. Birds and cathedral, gray
as ordinary suit. Breaks through mist beneath me.
I wake. You don't believe me. I love you for it.
I love you for that. More landscape. Give me
more landscape, less me. And carnations.
I love this. Film of violets whirring
through thin stream. We are north of here.
We are here. Thin stream and chokecherries,
I love. Brilliant building. Blue. Thirty stories
above and about philadelphia, I love.
Eerie idol the cows look at and nose
and moon over. Tiny pillows,
absurd headstones. Light like
tuning fork, I love. I remove my shoes.
I remove my feet. I put my legs up.
I remove my jewelry. My grandfather's
cufflinks, I set down. The clouds flow over. A cloud
flows over. I love the small tulips that poke their petals
through the ground. I love the way they do this.
I love the buildings we enter with our lives.
I remove my pants. The sky flashes,
dissolves, slants, turns purple, regathers,
drips mauve. The leaves I love pouring down. The taste
of marmalade between your legs, I remember.
I say this with the same tongue.
Checkout Line

I wheel my cart up the aisles and down again,
past soups, paper goods, caustic cleaners
and around to fresh produce where boys
scoop up glistening cherries and eat them on the spot,
spitting the pits at my feet, making a game of it.

That's all right. I get mine in line, twenty minutes
once a week with the check-out clerk;
I know his body as well as any man's.
Pushing thirty, he's fading fast, but
with eyes I'd pay to drown in.
Hey, fella, wanna be in pictures?

What's missing here is the shock I felt
when I stood by the register
and saw for the first time him standing naked;
saw his girdle of Apollo slightly gone to fat;
saw the minute wrinkles on his torso.
What's missing is my wondering how to meet his gaze
when I had to raise my eyes
after he'd finished breaking the change rolls
and the shower of spilling silver was over.
Of course by now he must be used to
lines of women and men waiting to take him.
But I stop well short of that:
am satisfied weekly
to watch him stand naked by the register;
to watch the slow progress
of his most beautiful decay.
Empty Can, Empty Words

the woman with the withered arms
and cackling laugh
who empties my trash can
came by and I asked her
how it was going.

she said it was okay
but her feet and back were killing her
and she couldn’t afford to take a day off
because her son needs a new glass eye.

"the old one got too small.
the doctor measured the socket
and it’s getting bigger. he’s 33.
your eye socket expands and contracts
as you get older when you don’t have
an eye in there. a real eye, ya know?"

i pictured her son in a doctor’s office
with a caliper in his skull
and wondered how you take the news
that your socket has gotten larger.

"i’ll have to take out another loan
for a new eye. he don’t work, ya know.
that’s why i can’t take no time off.
between this job and my diabetes
i’ll be lucky not to have
both my feet chopped off before i’m fifty."

i wanted to say something,
offer to let her sit down,
promise to throw away less trash,
anything to make her life more bearable,
but you just can't do that,

so instead i said, "i'm sorry,"
she said, "yeah"
and shuffled away to empty more cans

and i went back to work

because we had both done
everything we could
for each other.
The Living Legend

put his dick
on the table
in the bar
on Avenue B.

I was shocked,
until I saw
what an unobtrusive
penis he owned.

Then I wanted
to put my dick
on the table,
to show him
how a true
poet was hung.

But my wife
wouldn't let me.

I drank another
beer, fighting
the urge to
plunk down
my shlong on
the wooden table.

I can see it,
everyone silent,
all eyes upon me,
the only sound
in the universe
my drunken pecker,
sloshing around in
a puddle of beer
on the table
in the bar
on Avenue B.

Thrown out on
my soon to be
immortal ass
into the
wet
darkness
of
a
drunken
night.
“Honey can you call my boy/friend, 
Jimmy, be/cause, I can’t, be/cause, 
he marry & be/cause, I want to know 
what happen.”

1
I’m in “The King Cole Bar” & ain’t nothin’ happenin’
I can’t get it on,
the same old music, same old nigger & ain’t no bitch
I want,
so I walk out/side for some air
& to think a/bout what my next move is gonna be
when she come out, how did I miss not see/in’ her
just a/nother black wo/man look/in’ for a sponsor or
some/thing to get in/to
she is wear/in’ red short, red shoes, white top, 30/35,
3 kids, wel/fare queen
got a ass, de/cent leg, god only know what them tit will
look like when she take that top off & a little gut
at 10:30, at nite, on a fri/day nite, a pay/day nite w/
money in my pocket, I fuck her, even if I have to pay
for it.
“Honey,” she says, “Can you call my boy/friend, Jimmy,
be/cause, I can’t, be/cause he marry & be/cause, I want
to know what happen.”

2
So she give me the number & a quart & I dial,
I say to her
“Tell Jimmy, his nigger is call/in’.”
She re/ply
“Jimmy ain’t home baby & I don’t know when he’ll be
back, sorry, baby.”
I re/ply
“It OK, it cool” & hung/the/fuck/up.
I tell the wo/man.
She say
"Thanks, it OK, it early yet."
& I'm lay/in' up a/gainst a lamp/pole, think/in'
it ain't too early for Jimmy to be out & hav/in'
him some fun.
(I tell you some/thing, a nigger with a good job &
a car is a bitch, they get all the pussy)
I re/ply
"You're rite baby, it's early."
She look up, down, & a/cross the street, ain't
nothin' happenin',
so she walk back in to the bar, back in/to nothin'
& I walk home to nothin'
on a fri/day nite, a pay/day nite, w/ money in my
pocket.
Meditations on Natural Man

The street outside is littered with begging drunks and begging addicts. Their faces are scarred or bandaged. Every last one of them limps. Guys curled up against a wall with piss running out onto the sidewalk. Women limping and screaming all at once to no one in particular. Standing in line to get my cheap chinese food five of them, in this case, black guys, all with their little dixie begging cups arguing over what they wanted to eat start to pull and tug and tumble out onto Ninth Ave. I left the restaurant and I wasn’t hungry anymore. 35 street is filled with trucks and cars all going nowhere. More drunks are arguing outside my office. One drunk is weaving on the top step of a stoop. Two drunks, a man and a woman are showing their kid to two other drunks. All the heels on all their shoes are crushed. They all do a little stutter step, limp and shuffle, limp and shuffle.

This is a nature poem.

I feel like tossing my lunch in the trash. I sit in my office and read and the first thing I pick up is a poem by Carolyn Forché describing in detail the tortures and degradations of the El Salvador military and police. Balls are crushed. Mice are inserted in vaginas. Razors and lime and barbed wire loop through the poem. Men and women are thrown in open graves,
have their hands cut off,
their heads staked and posted as a warning and
outside over the din of all this ugliness in the book
I can hear the stupid loud drunken arguments
the truck drivers cursing
the bleating of horns
an iron slab is dropped over an open hole
   with a huge clang.
Someone in the office is fighting with someone else
but it's hard to hear for all the other noise
and finally Willie interrupts my lunch to ask me what
   kind of glueboard we're using now to trap
rats
Catchmaster
or Victor Holdfast.
And now I'm pissed,
now I yell at him
What fucking difference does it make!

I add my little bit of grace to this natural scene.
I step back now.
Add up all the natural wonders.
Place myself in the world and bring you this
   little epiphany.
We use Catchmaster Rat Glueboards
because they're cheap and they work.
All the While Knowing

The bet we made was whether those wood tanks on buildings downtown were used to collect rainwater. They sit on top of luxury condos like primitive African huts and I couldn’t imagine the Health Department would let anyone drink out of them given the bacteria count their disease meters would probably register. You said the tanks maintained water pressure which sounded official (you work for the city) and technical. I think you won the bet which was the kind friends make with friends when they would like to do more for them even if it already seems enough — all the right times, exhilarated and adept, that don’t add up or subtract. I suspect a natural law of some kind is at work here, like the one that dumps heavy snowfalls on the Plains states while the Northeast enjoys record mild temperatures. In both places the homeless freeze to death one by one, part of a larger constellation of other deaths. Percentages are duly recorded only to stare back at you like an odalisque in a secondary work of the last century, or like
the illustration I saw when I opened the dictionary to check the pronunciation of the word odalisque: our lives remain something that is permanently their own like the Oregon Trail, dotted here and there with settlements and forts, an entry on the same page with all those other entries, like organdy, Orekhovo-Zuyevo, origin.
Pastures New

In Philadelphia Pennsylvania
I

see my neighbor
enter

her garage on
foot

and soon drive
off.

This is the
valley

of separated things,
without

ideology, class or
history,

the pre-owned home
of

the last of
the

Mohicans. The nobility
of

his exile and,
especially,

his death makes
each
four foot pine
something

of a bust
of

Homer. The classics
aren't
dead they only
lie

flat. The American
wars

of extermination were
not

specifically that. The
pure

products of America
depend

upon twists of
novelty.

This makes memory
a

problem nostalgia can't
quite

name in its
picture.
“Homeless Girl with Barbie Doll,”
Outside Reading Terminal Market, Philadelphia
Abortion # -1

We empty warm tears from knowing stares and choose to drive into February Chicago rushhour five weeks later. On our way, two kids truant in slush and arctic wind smoke a joint behind a tire yard on Cicero. Between a Russian theater and an empty juke joint a pregnant teen works an all day sucker, spits white chewing tobacco hocker, spends five on corn liquor. Dad hands Ford keys to daughter: "Show her you care" on a billboard over L cars full of parents who just left their kids with total strangers. Underneath the tracks more are laid on arms as prepubescent hobos dance around oil drums fires warming hands to off themselves with pipe suction. The only kids wanted are in the post office.

We park at the clinic, break through army barricades, placards, hecklers. They know who we are and what to charge us with; they tell her she doesn’t know what I’m about to do to her as they force sharp leaflets and slogans into our psychic tissue. Our very Grandmothers, cross-eyed and armored, swing the Christian sword blindfolded as if we were piñatas and they would dive for the candy.

Inside we fill out forms with ironic questions: “Please describe your relationship with the Father.” Sun ghosts pour in clinic windows like dry cocktails. She laughs: "Secure, fulfilling." The other side is blank. The waiting room is empty, except for a few sleeping men whose eyes twitch every time they hear the machines grunt in the operating rooms of their dreams.
I sit by the Chicago River, my fists
clench a stone wall of tears
my face won't reflect on the water
as ice forms at its edges.
The dregs at the bottom
could have washed this feeling clean
but I wouldn't have drowned if I'd jumped
for it to vacuum me into the Great Lake
only frozen my ethics
about subzero population explosions
of unwanted ragdolls history absolves.
Teens, poor and thinking, we chose.

Speeding through my heart
land home something cries and cries out
across snow-covered corn fields of birth
control my silence pleads guilty to.
Our lips press not cold around a tomb stone
but warm at a mile marker weathering a winter.
We get out in her childhood driveway
and go on with our lives. I put a gun to my
memory and tell all this not to go in there
but it does. And it stays
unwanted.
One way out

I'm striving for the thought that will lead us up the stairs. I'm tired of being a flashlight in the darkroom, always lighting on the wrong spot and spoiling everything. We can get out of this by remembering that every door was a wall before becoming a hole. But you're not listening to me again. I've been searching through the rubble looking for a reason when an apple would suffice. Let's comfort ourselves in the simplicity of hunger before it gets dark. We've been stumbling around like a blind man in a cave when all the while a feast lay behind us growing cold. Let's go out in the light and try again. I'm going to blame it on geometry. Here's my point. Lines have divided us. Every circle creates an emptiness inside. This is the origin of the ache, intersection is no solution. Let's pull the tail from the serpent's mouth and ride him like a spiral through the center.
New York Heroine

She tried to call me when my buzzer didn’t work, but the pay phone was broken, too, and that’s when she found heroin in the coin return slot. Human nature — the reflex that causes most of us to bend for a penny or a wallet — made her grab it. She told me, “Jesus, it’s hard to stay sober in the city.”

She had on her leather jacket, her leather S&M police hat, and a red and white button promoting a book she was reading: “Macho Slut.” The letters were dripping like the blood from the supposed gunshot wound on the forehead of the smiley face gracing her Acid House tee shirt. She was shaking, emptying the loosely bundled drug onto my bed. It looked like a Saran Wrapped snack a mother might have hastily packed in her daughter’s lunch bag.

“You can’t leave it here,” I said. I’d never seen heroin before and hoped I’d never see it again. “Did anyone see you come into the building?”

She was darting or pacing in my apartment, and each time she froze to consider her options, she was like a black doe caught on her hind legs in the yellow diamond of a deer-crossing sign. She didn’t know if there was anyone near the pay phone on the lookout.

“I can’t bring it back. What if I’m caught?” She answered my suggestion with a question. Going to the cops was also out. “They’ll just keep it for themselves....”

“Well, what if someone saw you take it here? My apartment?” I kept thinking. I said, “Look, let’s just flush it down the toilet.”

“No, no,” she said. “I’ll sell it.”

She grabbed my phone and called numbers from the old days. It had been a year since she’d had as much as a beer.
“This is dumb,” I said.

Heroin, the drug. Heroine, the female who saves the day.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take you someplace really nice with the money I get....”

“You’d better leave your hat here. If anyone saw you, that hat’s what they’d remember. And here, borrow my coat.”

“I’m not putting on anything that’s femme,” she insisted.

“This is dumb,” I said again.

Then she was mad that I didn’t like the way she was trying to be romantic. She wanted to slay a dragon, kill all the rats on the Lower East Side so I would be safe and happy. She let me know I didn’t appreciate anything as she left with the stash. Alone, I placed her black leather hat on my head. I’d never played cops and robbers as a kid like she had. What was with her anyway? Tripping over broken slabs of the sidewalk between bravery and stupidity, between real causes and nervous energy. What was with me?

It must have been the idea of the heroine. And I knew then, whatever she said, it was all for her, not for me.
straight

back

sitting
across, as if
unexpected, the report
of a spoon on

a pact

let into my life,” when I have no sense myself that there is entry or prohibition. Talk is idle. It is the difference between what I have been taught, and what I might learn. So evil, or what we now call
in cold
rain
called "gloom"

in drab,
half a block away
from cover

mumbles

feeling of plurality, "our" hands over the new goods. A music, which arrives from a smoldering tree found on a far mountain, tries, unobtrusively, to persuade us. It has been outside. It has come in.
I Will Support The Government After All

After a lot of newsy buildup
and lengthy lean over
the most beautiful postal employee
in Philadelphia says Oh you
are tattoo on your inside

What you lack in blond you make up for
what you lack in fructose you make up for in
what you lack in verbs you make up for what
you lack in promises
you make up for in stamps

I purchased a pistol my cat says
"If this is war THIS IS WAR
"I was on the bus reading
"your poems to the people
"but I shall never promote you to
"this civil servant

Beneath his stylish that’ll be a dollar
thirty-two must be a waiting list
many football fields long,
many pint-sizes have perspired
beneath his cowboy belt, bog of my heart,
oh his fur, his waist, his inks and gums

Of course, he is an actor, but he’s not
a waiter, rather, his body’s home
of low prices, both determined
and relaxed, with a vocabulary
to rival the hairs on his head
Asserted Abundance

for Bernadette Mayer

The traitors' hand claps were installed in the cubby of cloistered responses, meanwhile the statue of good deeds shone in the courtyard of the righteous. It seemed here was a dialogue to mend fences and span altered waters. Although religion had no place among the heretical claims of physical prodigies, its stamp authenticated the activities going on through years of cataclysm.

Who was going to end this discourse? Was a question very much on the bystanders downtrodden faces and white washed spirit. So each was met with a ritual sacrifice, but still blood flowed with what seemed an immeasurable abundance from an unseen mover, and the accounts varied — even if the final tally remained odd.

Poetry like a proscription was nailed to the bloody rostra of new promise, as a single slender green sprout was recorded to have asserted itself in the crack of granite at the base of the old municipal building, where all roads led from. Some sucker growth of enthusiasm — stubborn and useless.

Recorded also, that its tenacious effort paled and the hordes were left to their spading, breaking macadam for food beneath the surface of the indifferent state. If ever a butterfly or songbird was reported to have passed by, its arc was spread by word of mouth. So that the rumor of such marvel remained stitched in the seams of the workers' ragged overclothes.
Like A Laugh That Never Happened (a fragment)

To timidly go where men have only boldly gone before.... Is there anything more beautiful than the hair that hides a beautiful woman’s face, the eyeballs painted on my eyelids that only I can see? Just ‘cause there’s plenty of fish in the sea doesn’t mean I’ve learned to keep the bait on my hook. Maybe it’s because she thinks men are innocent until proven guilty while I think women are guilty until proven innocent. Maybe it’s because I’m recording over a tape I never got around to playing back. Or maybe I just haven’t had my coffee yet. I take a breath and the whole house of cards of my word-made balanced state of mind collapses, leaving me with nothing but an emotional rollercoaster that’s no more of a mirage than the flatchested girl who gives nothing but head. Outside the wall-less window, a woman who wants kids but not a husband is speaking to a man who’s more interested in trying to figure her out than in loving her. He says “It’s more of a wonder than a shame that some need business to blow God to bits.” She says “What kind of man is wounded by water?” But once upon a time, & it persists in memory, there was an allegedly more serious dialogue:

SON: To marry someone is to eat the wrapper and throw away the fruit.
MOTHER: Don’t rub it in...
SON: Or to eat the fruit and put a roadblock up your ass. You better not exercise, because then (oh horrors) you’ll have to eat another one.
MOTHER: Sarcasm’s arms are too long to reach me...
SON: But the only way for him to ask you is to drag you along. He’s tight as a tourniquet around you, while my love would be as loose as a sleeveless shirt other men could easily see your breasts through...
MOTHER: Your love is smugness masked in pity.
SON: But even if lust isn’t the only protection & all I really want is a different seating arrangement, I’m sick of being called THOUGHT as a child is exiled to his room at night, angel nightlight shining like a carrot on end of stick. Sure, I get to sit across from you, watch you make eyes on me, but during earthquakes it’s he who gets to “accidentally” fall in your lap.
MOTHER: Where you and I go, it’s not such a bad dump...
SON: ...To visit, but I wouldn’t want to live there, I’m talking cultural revolution: send students to the country and peasants to the mind! Don’t you think that if I was in his shoes, I’d be urging you to fuck around...
MOTHER: If I have to put up with his nastiness to feel secure, I will. It’s like one-stop shopping, a convenience store; sure, not everything’s on sale, but
it's always open — in stark contrast to your sad inability to be with me unless you feel perfect.

SON: So that's what love is. You work as a team. You distract the shopowner while he steals the food I'd rather live without than love. As for my sadness, it's the U.S. OUT OF NORTH AMERICA t-shirt I don't have to wear around you. Are you afraid of offending him because he's too fragile or because you are?

MOTHER: He allows me to be weak.

SON: But he also forces you to be weak, a pill that prevents you from being cured...

MOTHER: But "more people are like you than me" is NOT the ultimate put-down.

It all fades. Better to have tried & failed. 3 out of 10 may flunk the test, but it's one hell of a batting average even if you only get to 3rd base. Though I must be stupid if writing a thesis is the dessert I think I look sexier eating than I do the main course, what I can only say on an empty stomach: "POEMS, POEMS YOU ARE MY PAIN./YOU SAY 'LET HER LEAVE, THEN WE'LL COME BACK AGAIN'." Just as the preacher at the funeral said my mom was more afraid of panicking before death than of death itself. Of course it's silly to scream at a car that's just broken down. You don't see the antenna rust the second a free-form rock show becomes evangelical. So if we want to cut the fat out, I must shuck off the self; the bullhorn I spent so long making I forgot what I had to say through it. And that's why the leading man in a Romantic thriller is spontaneous as a spittoon; if he deliberated before his actions, the film would be too long, it'd be so lifesize it'd bomb for failing to meet the needs of its target audience, that lowest common denominator that doesn't exist unless only language does. Yet, in memory, the only place where she doesn't have to be my satellite for me not to be hers, a quickie is like one of those trick candles that comes back so you blow it out so it comes back again and the mind doesn't mind leaving the body behind (though it's the hare & the body's the tortoise), a place of planning things that never happened as planned, where I vomit the cake out without ever having eaten it just so I can feel like the motor on the sailboat when the wind is up (or the snow that might as well be rain over the ocean, the TV on which Arnold Schwartzzenegger blames working moms for lazy kids).

for Susan Stroffolino 6/18/42 — 5/13/92
under the arc / of disaster

blue bodies of dauphins

the starred wheel
  (spurred)

the direction of light
  (imperative)

goes I To be flying

also would be the sensation of a wick burning

They lit their bodies like wicks, from the skin

inward (It was childhood) wanting to tell how I saw

myself: dying a glass poured back against

pink wrists

tragedy of shaved heads (shaven)

To be both larger and smaller than one

is The dark branches of a God

A sense of the universal (Tulips in a white hand

One would notice this time the off-green of the stems)

What goes on in the other room is of no concern and therefore

no promise The tale of the divine

a mark on the wall

We hear its wings flap when we sleep A late dinner

with one light on and the breathing going on
around one telling one where one is: rather a map to
this lit spot    Outlines of: finely grained
and what is no longer eaten: one can after all
never be too soft    too
ready for that water in the crease of a hand
A figure appears just out of vision but approaching
in the endless way of a move South or a meal
postponed    The word tarmac arching
whipoorwilled light    Chooses chaos or to winter
deep in the body
The figure of descent is no more than
the sensation of opening the mouth
That something could /the precipice/ slit
friction like a skin, body lose its body to one
absolute seam    Would count its hard losses
as teeth of new corn, the salt and its savor
Therefore the direction of light
is imperative, seen only from above
They are fields of star (that foreign)
when they touch absolute black
they begin to light up
August 29 in Elkins Park

In the morning's sifted light,
today turns into a clean-up day
after a heavy storm.

Outside,
all along the street
utility lines are down —

Dark branches that fell during the night
huddle the curbs wetly
or barricade people's houses.

Back from the shore late last night.

This morning, outdoors, clearing away
debris, throwing out
last week's Sunday paper,

I found your remains
in a pulpy pith
of week-old headlines,
sodden news.

Now indoors, sorting the laundry and
shaking out dry whispers
of sand
from the crumpled clothes,

thinking of summer's end
and weathering loss —

I mourn you over my work.

While I was away,
stretching, sunning,
taking leave,

there were you —
crumpled news.
breathlessly for a few seconds

I am wondering
why I haven’t worn this perfume
for ages what with these bracelets
like handcuffs, words soothing like mace
& my scarf trailing like the Yellow Brick Road
I resemble the ground portraying a headless blonde

I am nervous
that the employees aren’t washing their hands
& that the blessed workers are watching my high heels
like an eighteen year old’s hard on brilliant but unpredictable

I am breathing
as we perform society’s rituals & rites of passage
& thinking, Did we lock the door? Did we turn off the gas?
But only to promote a surge of attention like a bout of cancer

I am thinking
that the day’s meanderings ward off procrastination
& belly dancing in God’s hands we grow horizontal
tomorrow I said I would iron a crown & regret short skirts
as I wait for the sunrise which signals my new life

and your hands at the window like planets

looking for the sky to wink its approval

the angels of the heart know my name in the tight burst
elegance of the snow obscene
from Agoraphobia & Sexuality
in the Land of Transient Hotels

Now I hope this doesn’t offend you. But they say the brain is made of scum — coagulated human scum. We feel a need to paint the world with it, to color the world and pollute it. I remember the first girl I polluted in my life. She was pure without me. Then she put lipstick on her nipples. She did that to entice me. I don’t even remember the color of her hair, and it doesn’t matter. She squealed and hissed and spouted axioms and random wisdom like a bloated doll when I stuck her. I could have struck her but I didn’t.

The brain jam left me and the sewer waters drained from me, then my head caved in as desire deserted me, but that was the end of that cliché. She called me a “Pigeon With A Hard-On,” but I didn’t really mind.

See, something had torn free inside me — a separation of fragile tissues once fused in complacency — that lace like a cobweb encasing my cramped identity. Then I knew this iron claw could be made to let go only by a carnality which I pursued relentlessly.

Now, when a man and woman are at It, and they start to feel that special “purgatory” feeling, and the walls start bleeding and blood drips from the ceiling in consummation of It — this is mere symbolism for the aforesaid iron claw of intense psychoprudery finally letting go of the ugly apple. The release is not without pain.

Well that convoluted fruit, my brain, was as hot as a motorcycle engine by then. And they say everyone who rides that machine has the death wish. And it’s true too — the slope of the wild wheel rolling down my tongue in whispers at the time — it meant something sinister to her. Something far from normal to her...to her and me.

Some say there is a special sex for people who are like me, who are always uneasy and hungry for speed. But if the light were to turn on we would know who THEY are, and we don’t want to. We really don’t want to know. (After all, it’s hard enough keeping what you do know untinged by prejudice or desire without
even trying to know more.) If you don't know yourself you won't
know others. So say no to knowing. Say no to false security.
Say you want only to believe. Because even that's not so easy.

For instance, if I say I believed in her before I abused her,
would you believe me? Would she? Incest brings me down, she
said, when I asked what if I am your brother. You know I could
have been. That's what the whole Hotel thing is about — it's
a ship of fools and...lovers. Yes, lovers.

Love lasts and lasts, beyond the grave to the gutter where
the stars wink out in dark water. But a certain amount of fear
is always mixed in love like poison. Fear is a force of erosion,
reducing beauty to a particulate state — that is beauty is diffused
into a repetitive approximation of chaos, random data searching
for a shape.

When she dissipated in this way — I groped to own her. But
my eyes could do little but run her white beach — my hands
the white spiders that bleed her, until she screamed inside herself.
I became so insignificant (as a man must) I entered her birth
canal and laid the smallest tender eggs. I didn't mean to insult
her, but it begins that way — yes.
The Poem I’ve Spent My Life Trying Not To Write

when I saw the old man again
I shook the hand that tickled my balls at five
that sent my small stiff cock shivering
past the slick gums and cheeks
the hand that worked my small hairless body into a blackout
and woke me up
with a slap
to open my fresh peach-can mouth
for his smelly dirty old prick and I cried
he liked it when I cried

I shook the hand that shoved two
or was it three fingers up my ass
until I shit in his palm
until I ripped and started bleeding
and the sight of a torn tomato still sends me to tears
still shows me the difference I am
still makes me walk with a limp

but I shook the hand
I knelt before the hand and kissed it

he said boy what are you doing?

I said I’m paying homage to the hand that stopped my clock
the hand that took me out of one world
and punctured me screaming through the skin of another

a world where my mother grew bigger and meaner
and never allowed honesty again
a world where God grew smaller and smaller
and disappeared one day
I kissed the hand and laid it over my heart
but the hand did not know how it destroyed
and slid under my belt
and my cock stiffened in its grip

O my the old man said you really have grown
you’ve really flowered and I’d sure like you up my ass he said
I’ve got a fresh jar of K-Y jelly
can you give this old bird another taste?

I kissed him once and bent him over where he couldn’t see me
greasing my daddy’s 12 gauge I had hidden in the corner
and I shoved it up his hairy old
pink old smelly old asshole
‘cause man I’m going BACK
I’m riding the black storm back
to the world I BELONG
where my mother still believed in me
where a boy can play in a sandbox
and dream
and still say no
to old men waving Dairy Queen hot fudge sundaes
and save his own life at five
and never have to burn like an ant
beneath the magnifying glass of God and scrutiny
and you won’t have to walk home so funny
so different

I want that boy to be a brave little man
and I shove my daddy’s 12 gauge
clear up this old fucker’s shithole
and let the motherfucker BLOW
just like my daddy would’ve done
if my daddy had loved me enough
to let him know
"Water Ice," North Philadelphia
The Philadelphian

for Sallye Warr

You differ with the wise,
swiping the crest of light snow
from your face and the front steps,
where you cast a lightning eye
to the sky, remembering the silhouette
of clouds in North Carolina,
remembering the southern song
of your father carrying you aloft,
after hunting in the mean society,
where white touched black captiously,
like fear’s fetid eyes trying a melody
of this southern song that lives
inside your very center where girls
walk past your mother’s elocution,
one of them you — gaunt, grim, proper.

I’m a mean, tall gal from Carolina.

On the way to the el, you count
the many intonations of words you savor
as much as ice cream or pound cake,
for the way they march off your tongue
like dynamos in Saks Fifth Avenue suits,
the appropriate appearance,
the apportioned approval.
You trade again for agane,
you trade rather for rahther,
your own peculiar preciosity for
the lexicon’s omissions, for verbal sloth,
holding your head erect, recreating
English in your image, your sound.
On the subway you shudder and wince
at the obscenities children assume
are the natural course of language,
language which is so much our birth
and our death, and you command
one of them to mind his mouth,
as you tighten your fingers on a bag
that is your carryall, straighten
the sneakers that take you through.

Manners, manners, manners! Hey, selah!

Never mind the weight of regret,
the weight of what could have been.
In the dark evening, the accounting,
the measure of your daylong acculturation,
you measure your refinement in
the darkening of spiced tea hot enough
to scald the initiates entering the rigor
of settling up north as the venerated heads
discussed when you were knee high to hope —
little Sallye in the cathedral of pine trees,
little Sallye rising from the sour hate,
little Sallye mending the ain’t’s and yes mam’s
that embolden Dixie like spires of lily leaves.
You fall into a Philadelphia sleep,
on the sofa, in your favorite spot,
your head nodding in the city’s vast webs,
recalling a cricket’s aria in High Point,
as you spin in a homemade dress.

I’m a mean, tall gal from Carolina.
I’m the fortunemaker in my dreams.
Short Circuited

Mad/Black

she stalks

the Boston-via-New York-via-Trenton

Amtrak serpent

roaring up-spine

like a mental ward

moving from seat to seat

scratching/mumbling

astonished like a kid

at the phenomenon of dozing passengers

whose sanity

is not yet short-circuited

by near death drownings

in American waters
The Soldier

When I boarded the train at Pennsylvania Station he was already sitting across the aisle, and he was talking to himself. I thought he was singing, maybe some song in his head that he was bringing home with him from Boston. Maybe he had gotten on in Boston; maybe he was going home. I was going home.
A long weekend in New York, a romantic rendezvous that had been long overdue, had blown apart in the first few hours, and now after just one night I was headed back alone, tired, more frustrated than angry. The anger had passed. This was 1970. I was twenty. The clearest thought I could conjure was that I had wasted five goddamn years with the first girl I’d known. I’d said that to her. Hours later, getting on the train, I felt those words, like a swollen tongue fat in my mouth, tasted the hurt and fear that came from them like blood.

I remember how quickly everything out the window was Jersey. It looked so sad. I tried to see my face in the glass, but it kept disappearing. The soldier across the aisle, though, he stayed, his head and shoulders rocking with the rails, saying something, his mouth going. This was no song. He was fighting. You could see it in his eyes. And if that wasn’t enough, his fists — he was punching his hands, his legs, and the whole time his mouth was slurring words that his eye enunciated clearly. Trouble with a woman, I decided. This was 1970. The war was going on. Hell, just being in the army would have been enough to drive some men to talking to themselves. The haircut alone. That uniform and hat. A woman. I was twenty — what did I know? New Jersey was black, and the biggest state in the union
that night. By the time we pulled into 30th Street I felt as though I'd been up for three days running, like I'd walked the hundred miles in fatigues, through jungles and dark, a pack strapped to my back with everything that was mine, lighter though, less a woman, less five goddamn years.

I stood on the platform for a minute or two, let the rush to the escalators pass. I watched for the soldier when his car went by; he was on for the whole ride. I waved to the window where I thought he should be, but I couldn't see. I had something to say. Even if he were looking, he wouldn't have heard me; but he might have seen my lips, read the sad sounds through the glass. I had to tell him — it was important — more important that I say something than for him to have heard me. I was twenty. This was 1970. The war was going on. What did I know?
"Playing in the Halls," Housing Project, West Philadelphia (Northside)
Poetry Matters

In the May 1991 issue of the Atlantic, Dana Gioia, in a now notorious article, worried that the "general readership" for poetry, which was never a "mass audience," but "a cross-section of artists and intellectuals, including scientists, clergymen, educators, lawyers, and of course, writers" has declined.

Perhaps the problem is that Mr. Gioia is looking for readers in all the wrong places. Perhaps our "cultural intelligentsia," the people who "listen to public radio and subscribe to the best journals," who have been nourished by and found comfortable places in the status quo, can no longer be a natural audience for poetry.

Mr. Gioia suggests American poetry has become "the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group," outside "the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life." "Most poetry is published in journals that address an insular audience of literary professionals, mainly teachers of creative writing and their students."

Might one suggest that "poets serious about making careers in institutions," who know "they must publish as much as possible as quickly as possible" deserve to be read only by each other, that "poetry establishment" is an oxymoron.

Sam Hamill, in his recent book, A Poet's Work, published by Broken Moon Press, reminds us that "...every poet is an exile, every dream of justice a threat to those who rule." Then to whom and for whom do these dreaming exiles write?

I spend much of my time in the large cauldron which lies below the bottom rung of the "po-biz" ladder, down in the depths as a participant in community-based workshops, and as a poet-in-the-schools in elementary and high schools. Here is a yeasty mass that surges and bubbles and threatens to spill out of its container altogether; a community growing from belief in the power, beauty, and danger of words. I live in Pennsylvania, but I expect the chemistry is the same across the country.

Language is degraded because most of every day is spent in the telling of or listening to the lies by which we live, official and personal lies. But given any sort of opportunity, even very young children know all the language they need to speak with power and precision, to speak the human truth. The following poems were written by
sixth graders. Adults read them some good poems and then simply moved out of the way to give the children room. These poems were written and edited by the youngsters themselves.

The Mother

My mother was as fierce
as a river
Weeds of fear
swooped up at me
Her hard voice
made me jump back
like a little scared white mouse.

Scott Presser

Thoughts

The feeling
of being curled up in a box of anger
can be scary. You never know if you
will make the
right turn to get out. Try to
think of something like a hymn. Maybe
about something funny
like your dad getting a
shave. If you do this
you can uncurl out of the box of anger and you
will make the right
turn.

Pam Barth

An eleventh grade class completed a unit on WWI — the causes, the strategies, the battles, the role of the United States — and were asked to think about what they had learned and to speak of their new knowledge in a poem. The following are unrevised, unedited poems produced in a single class period. In fact the students had learned everything; they had learned the truth which is usually denied a voice.
At the turn of the summer
When the river ran dry
and a trickle of muddy
water was a fish’s dream —
I thought of a friend that
went to war.

At the turn of the winter
When the sky grew dark
and a sprinkle of snow flakes
came gliding by the trees
I thought of a friend that
great to war.

At the turn of the last year
When younger children sang
and the arch of my window
grew dull with shadow
I thought of a friend that
gout to war and
didn’t come home.

JB

Field of Terror

Their anger was masked by fear in the night air,
The soldiers, dressed in green and brown,
cowered in their trenches and waited.
They didn’t know if this might be
their last night on the field,
or if their bodies would soon turn turquoise in decay.

BG

If we have the ears to hear, poetry matters. The annual Day for All Women, co-sponsored by Bucks County Community College in Newtown, PA, and by the Bucks County Commissioners’ Advisory Council for Women, offers approximately 500 women the “opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with others through a series of workshops.” Twice now five women poets from among the many who live in the
County have each read and discussed one of her poems as the keynote experience which opens the day. The evaluations written by the participants were full of comments such as the following: “very moving, wonderful bonding experience with all women of all ages and in all stages.” “I enjoyed my first poetry reading thoroughly.”

In a recent workshop, four women well into middle-age and one young man wrote and shared drafts of poems. At the end of the evening the young man said, “I thought my poems were a personal communication between me and my diary, but writing here and reading aloud what I have written, opening myself to my own feelings about what I have written and what you hear in my words, validates both me and my individual human experience. Usually I hate groups and small talk, but tonight I think you know me at a level that almost no one ever has before” (paraphrased in my notes of the evening).

William Van Wert, writing in the 1988 issue of Painted Bride Quarterly No. 32/33, which was devoted to Etheridge Knight, writes about being a team-teacher with Mr. Knight at Holmsburg Prison. “...Etheridge began his sessions by telling the men he had done time in an Indiana prison, that he understood what they were going through, and that he didn’t want any trouble from anyone....With Etheridge, teaching poetry in the prison was a rallying point, but the lesson was life: how to live it while doing time, how to use doing time, how to reflect upon doing time when one got out....What you got from him at a reading in the city was what you got from him in the joint. He was the same person either place, consistent with his life experiences and anecdotes between poems, true to the poems, themselves, whatever the audience. Without his ever saying so, his poems were proof that, while bodies can be incarcerated, words cannot” (pp. 52-53).

Mr. Gioia reminds us “the history of art tells the same story over and over. As art forms develop, they establish conventions that guide creation, performance, instruction, even analysis. But eventually these conventions grow stale”(106). Poetry isn’t the artifact, eaten hollow by mice. It ossifies:

Inside the Museum of Poetry

Under the vaulted ceilings,
in the echo of marble halls,
the curator guards
the exhibits of the honored
dead in polished cases.
On occasion he raises the lids
to clean the masters' feet,
to rearrange the lines of their garments.
The Museum is at its best when closed,
undisturbed by human breath,
muddy footsteps, living voices.
The curator insists that hands
of children, old women, all the unkempt,
keep off the glass, that all visitors
keep their voices down.

ER

Mr. Gioia tells us "it is time to experiment, time to leave the well-ordered but stuffy classroom, time to restore a vulgar vitality to poetry and release the energy now trapped in the subculture" (106). It is not the energy that is trapped; perhaps it is the subculture.

The subculture should look down here. Down here there is an enormous hunger for what is authentic in a voice and for what authentic voices, speaking freely, can mean to each other, and the hunger is being fed.
Contributors’ Notes

Ed Barrett is the author of two collections of poems, 7x3 and Theory of Transportation, a verse translation of Antigone produced Off-Off Broadway, and Coyote, a libretto based on his translations of Navajo texts, produced by the American Chamber Opera Company in NYC. He has been published in numerous magazines including Partisan Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, o*blek, Agni, and Mothers of Mud. He is senior lecturer in the MIT Writing Program.


Richard Burgin’s five books include the recent story collections Man Without Memory and Private Fame, both published by the University of Illinois Press. He has won two Pushcart Prizes for his fiction and is the editor of the literary magazine Boulevard.


Denise Duhamel’s work has appeared in numerous literary magazines including Long Shot, Westbranch, Pequod, Zone 3, and NDQ. She received a special mention in Pushcart Prize XVI. She is the author of three chapbooks of poetry, the most recent of which is It’s My Body (Egg in Hand Press, 1992).

Martín Espada is the author of three books: The Immigrant Iceboy’s Bolero (1982), Trumpets From the Islands of Their Eviction (1987), and Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover’s Hands (1990), recently issued in a second edition by Curbstone Press. His work has appeared in numerous periodicals and anthologies, including Christian Science Monitor, Keryon Review, Ploughshares, and Under 35: The New Generation of American Poets. He has been awarded fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Artists’ Foundation, as well as both the PEN/Revson Foundation Fellowship and the Paterson Poetry Prize for Rebellion is the Circle of a Lover’s Hands.

Valerie Fox has work coming out soon in Green Zero and Texture. She is a co-founder and co-editor of the literary magazine 6ix.

Peter Gizzi’s poem “Asserted Abundance” is part of the manuscript Hours of the Book forthcoming next year from Zasterle Press in Spain. He also has two books forthcoming this fall: Periplum (Avec Books), and Music for Films (Paradigm Press). He is a graduate student in Poetics at SUNY Buffalo, where he is editing The Complete Letters and Lectures of Jack Spicer for Black Sparrow Press.

Leonard Gontarek’s poems have appeared in Hanging Loose, Mudfish, Parting Gifts, The Advocate, and American Writing.
Roger Allen Jones is a 50-year old ex-postal worker who lives, laughs, drinks, has sex, cries, plays, and who will die, like everyone else, in Philadelphia.

Patrick Kelly is the author of *The Horse You Rode in On: A Play in One Unnatural Act*. He lives in a barn on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

Miriam N. Kotzin's poems have appeared in *The Mid-American Review*, *Pulpsmith, Taurus, The Archer, Boulevard*, and *Era*. Poems are forthcoming in *Confrontation* and *Southern Humanities Review*. She has been a contributing editor of *Boulevard* since its first issue, and she directed the literature program at Drexel University where she also teaches creative writing.

Gillian McCain is the program coordinator of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. She has been published in *Long Shot, The World*, and *Make Room for DaDa*. Her chapbook is entitled *Upright to Down City*. She worked in the Poet-in-the-Schools program in Vermont.

Louis McKee lives, teaches, and writes in Philadelphia, PA. *Oranges* (1989) is the most recent of his five collections of poetry. His essays appear regularly in *Swamp Root, Contact II*, and *Painted Bride Quarterly*.

F. A. Nettelbeck is the author of 14 books of poetry, the most recent of which is *Ecosystems Collapsing* (Inkblot Publications). His poems have appeared in hundreds of magazines and he is the editor of *This is Important*.

Gil Ott’s most recent book is *wheel* (Chax Press, 1992). He is the editor/publisher of Singing Horse Press, and Director of Community-based Programs at the Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia.

Bob Perelman is the author of numerous books, including *Captive Audience* (*The Figures*), *Face Value* (*Roof*), and *The First World* (*The Figures*). He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

Aaren Yeatts Perry is the recipient of a 1990 Writing Fellowship from the PA Council on the Arts. He has worked for ten years as a Philadelphia-based poet, writer, and cultural activist. He teaches poetry in elementary and middle schools in the region. His work draws from his childhood in the Midwest and his travels in Latin America/Caribbean, Southern Asia, Europe, and the U.S. He is Technical Director of mainstage productions at the Painted Bride Art Center, Philadelphia. He has been published recently in *The Blue Guitar* and *The Painted Word*.

Maralyn Lois Polak, a Philadelphia poet and journalist, is the author of *Facing the Music*, *The Writer as Celebrity*, and *El Otro Lado* (*The Other Side*).

Elizabeth Raby works as a Poet-in-the-Schools for the PA Council on the Arts and for the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. She is the author of two chapbooks, *The Hard Scent of Peonies* and *Camphorwood*. Her poems have appeared in *Yarrow, Journal of NJ Poets, Potato Eyes*, and *Creeping Bent*, among others.
David Rosenthal writes poetry and plays and will be starting an MFA in Dramatic Writing at NYU Tish School of the Arts this fall.

Louise Simons was a founding co-editor of Painted Bride Quarterly, with R. Daniel Evans. She teaches at Boston University as an Assistant Professor of Humanities in the College of General Studies. Her work is currently being published in Caprice.

Lamont B. Steptoe is the author of four books of poetry and is the founder of Whirlwind Press, as well as a photographer.

Chris Stroffolino has recently been published in Break to Open, Phoebe, Washington Review, To, and B City. He currently lives in western Massachusetts after a stint in Philadelphia, where he curated readings at Schmidt-Dean Gallery, Borders Book Shop, Khyber Pass Pub, and the Community Education Center.


William F. Van Wert teaches English/Creative Writing at Temple University. He has fiction forthcoming in TriQuarterly, North American Review, Western Humanities Review, Boulevard, Crosscurrents, and The Literary Review.

Carl Watson is the author of three books: Agoraphobia and Sexuality in the Land of Transient Hotels, Bricolage ex Machina, and Beneath the Empire of the Birds. He lives in NYC.

Michael S. Weaver is the author of three collections of poetry: Water Song, some days it's a slow walk to evening, and most recently, My Father’s Geography (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992). He has had two plays produced. He has worked as a warehouseman and as a freelance journalist, received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and currently teaches English at Rutgers University.

Jack Wiler has been published in several literary magazines. He works as a Poet-in-the-Schools for the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and was a featured reader in both the Distinguished Poet Series for Passaic Community College and the Waterloo Poetry Festival in Stanhope, NJ. He's worked as a manager for a blood distribution center, managed a senior citizens' lunch program, and sold weightlifting supplies. Currently he is the general manager for Acme Exterminating in Manhattan.

Elizabeth Willis’ chapbook A/O was published by o•bëk editions in 1991. Second Law is forthcoming from Avenue B Press.