

Poetry South

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Poetry South

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Poetry South

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Angela Ball

History

History, the big baby,
Talks to itself half the night.

Doesn't care for bridge's bolts, tightening the cold,

Nor the campfires of bitter truck drivers
Running from impossible forgiveness.

Nor folk songs swelling
Into symphonies

While pigeon cries
Silence the eaves.

History is a photo stolen for luck,
A moth safe in the snowy city.

History's roads communicate
Broadly. Its cigarette boats are conceited
To reach land speeds of 100 mph.

Finally we turn our backs,
Throw embarrassments into manholes,
Claim a region of dangerous caves
Popular with vacationers.

Rescue a glossy waterfall, whose likeness
We want for our promotional calendar
Which pays for itself in good will.

Spears, bombs, and rocks
Continue their journeys.

Angela Ball

Joke

It went over my head,
Entering the magnetized brains

Of birds en route to probably ruined
Nesting grounds, then printed itself on a blimp,
The one universally ridiculed conveyance,

Which was fighting a younger blimp
For possession of a female,
As the crowd below

Caught its breath at each horrific, gaping hole
Torn in the old bull blimp, the joke destroyed
Before anyone could read it.

In other lives, the joke
Was as generous as the Mexican farmer
Who led the polite lepidopterist
To the Monarchs' mountain, as nasty

As Hedda Gabler or the junior high school
Keeper of the clique, whose only jokes
Are aspersions.

Joke, I don't get you. Come.

Angela Ball

Travel

Sometimes, a special skin
Allows us to speed onwards
Without touching

Clever bacteria, collapsible cranes, black stabs
To the blood. To arrive
At today: a tennis ball shocking the gutter

With yellow-green. Where afternoon begins
Down a road signed by a snake's blackness.

Tourists walk briskly through the Campo Santo
Where some enter Hell's maw,
Others ride out the plague in solemn monasteries.

I begin to see through my lost glasses.
The ones left face down
Under the bed.

Angela Ball

A Concerned Citizen

Writes,

“I was recently reading a book that used the word ‘towards’ many times. I have always said, ‘I went toward the lake.’ But, in this book the author wrote several sentences such as, ‘I went towards the lake.’”

Dear Concerned,

I have written several sentences towards the lake, though the sentences keep breaking down, breaking laws, braking for fire engines, which should be called “water engines.”

The lake has a rowboat containing a woman in an overcoat, a scarf tied under her chin, as was the unflattering style after WWII. She has been written about often—her neurasthenia, her early brushes with brushes, her desire for fish and lack of tackle. In fact, I have been waiting in line for quite a while. When at last she reopens for business I will move quickly towards her.

Meanwhile, a turtle begins talking. “She was a Duchess. Married a Duke. We turtles aren’t allowed to marry. A strain on the infrastructure, they told us.”

My map has a legend, and it is this:
If a country mobilizes, hope it does not face
Towards your donuts.

The best lake names are Moon (fictional)
And Forgetful (actual). It has been so wet and so dry
The lakes have linked arms
And are rushing towards us. Watch out,
Jumping beans, hidden away and chattering
Your dead language. Watch out
Tango, which Argentina has concealed
In the black valise of her borders.
When I met Lake Tahoe, it said,
“No one knows how deep I am.” I’m not about

To test its veracity, but I am about to go back
To the first lake and its woman, my real
Mom, to eat with her the bread
Of towards, the bacon of away.

Angela Ball

Polite Society

1936, a woman was shocked to find
Herself on the porch wearing a hat
And ready to jump into a car
So Mother wouldn't see her

As someone who would date an older sister's
Former beau.

Later, she married another man
Though she still loved her sister's ex,
"Peaches."

The honeymoon to the Black Hills
Was enlightening. In sixty years,
The woman did her best to conceal
All bruises, despite two breakdowns
That made her the state's guest
And relieved her of memory
For a few days, at least.

I hope that in another life
She'll appear feverishly dressed
At big-time dog fights,
Break them up by passing fake IOU's and stealing dogs
With her bare hands.

Angela Ball

Envy

for Dan Morris

Near the dampness of spring
She felt rage at the shimmering water
That would not pay attention

Jealous of the jay
Circling back to her nest

Mad at the moon, so carefully watched
And recorded

Resentful of the news
Of earthquakes and tsunamis
Of young men blown to bits

Of the silent monks in their cells
Of the doctors risking death for a cure

Of a bridge joining one island to the next
Of a waterfall full of going down

Of the people who lived before her
In history's regard

Of her body real as thoughts are not
So often called miraculous

With its pyx of heart and lungs
And its brain complex beyond imagining

Angela Ball

Bad Steakhouse of Raccoons

We eat on a screened porch
Above trees and a creek
Clinging to creekhood.

The beef has more chew than taste.
The lettuce has lulled in water.
The bread is a brave imitation.

Someone has strewn some
Outside. A raccoon appears, snatches a piece,
Dissolves into brush. This happens many times.
Either the same raccoon, or several.

A raccoon is good looking, with its gray coat and rings
Of darker gray, its tail strangely extensive, as if aspiring
To tip him backward.

We take our time. No one is coming
To startle us or snatch our food. Only our waitress,
Scarily polite and lovely
With her hank of yellow hair.

Angela Ball

The Smell of Outer Space

Since the locks were changed, keys are
Penitents. Close to death
They roll in ash.

Junk cars keep reliving
The elaborate crack-ups.
Ghost horns, ghost torsos.

The dog who saved the baby
Barks at him in her sleep.

Slovenian pumpkins concentrate too much,
Becoming legendary vampires.

Samuel Beckett wanted to be a pilot,
We are told. He also said, "It is so much easier
To be hurt than to hurt."

Space only an hour by car. Beckett is balsa wood,
A sky raft: soft, strong, and fast. We disappear
Into his ride.

Angela Ball

Bachelors

At times we miss
Love's careless apportionment
Of territory, having a special someone
To monitor the position of our socks
And our judgment.

Instead we freelance our affection,
Picking our way among goods and services,
Avoiding the middlebrow for all we're worth—
At least \$2,500 if Americans (estimate probably
Obsolete). The market questions our liquidity
But we float on top, nudging the landscape to one side
With our convertibles, peninsulas of wind.

Our fathers drove tractors or staffs
Of skirts. The beautifully incompetent,
The expertly ugly. We are free
Of dichotomies.

We button from the right, or know the reason why.

Dreams tell us what we need, but make it difficult.

The Mona Lisa is our girl, enshrined and bullet-proof,
Delivered from rapacity.

Angela Ball

Bassfield Blue

Paint has a history
Sometimes deep blue—

Saying itself up and down a street.
Stoop, doorframe, window sash.

Like a thought running one to the next.
A house-to-house handyman

Offering small jobs.
The partial suited him—a wife here,

A child there, various tries. Sounds came
Hand to mouth:

A grackles' evening of furious
Playground swings, a seethe of salt

In the bottom of a bag. Because the Greeks
Had no word for blue, they called it wine.

JQ Zheng

An Interview with Angela Ball

Angela Ball is Professor of English in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi and poetry editor for *Mississippi Review*. She is the author of five poetry collections, including *Night Clerk at the Hotel of Both Worlds*, which won the Donald Hall Prize in Poetry. She is the recipient of grants from the Mississippi Arts Commission and the NEA, and a former poet-in-residence at the University of Richmond. Her work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, the *New Republic*, *Poetry*, and *Best American Poetry 2001*, among other publications.

JQ Zheng: How long have you been living in Mississippi?

Angela Ball: Since 1979.

JZ: Why did you decide to be a poet?

AB: Because I became a reader. And immediately thought, “I want to do that some day—write these books.” I started with stories, but in college it seemed I was much more interested in words than in people and how their lives change. (An imbalance I’ve been working on ever since.) My first creative writing teacher, Victor Depta, steered me to poetry, which quickly became a lens through which to study nature—the adulterated post-farming landscape outside my back door, which had a doddering creek with interesting limestone walls and crowds of ferns on its banks. I took my dog and a pencil and paper and walked around there, making notes, trying to see and record. Ted Hughes, in an essay called “Capturing Animals,” talks of poetry as a kind of hunting activity. I think I was hunting for thingness—what Gerard Manly Hopkins calls “quiddity”—the notion was that if I could describe something accurately—a milky sheet of ice, a staved-in tree trunk—it would live again as words. Really, I was hunting metaphors: that device of language that connects one thing to another, illuminating both. Because, like many adolescents, I had a heightened sense of being alone, making connections between things was deeply important and satisfying. Now, all these years later, the search for connection is still the grounding force of my work.

JZ: Have you written poems about Mississippi?

AB: Since Mississippi has been around me for most of my life, every poem I write is Mississippian. I couldn't avoid that even if I wanted to. John Ashbery has said of New York that it's not a place he writes about—it's a large, in a sense, "empty" place that makes his poetry possible. Hattiesburg, with its community of writers, has made my poetry possible. It's a source of energy. As such, it is largely invisible in my work. But always present, the way a loved person is always in one's thoughts—non-specifically, wholly.

JZ: Poetry writing is like traveling through memories. The last part of *Kneeling Between Parked Cars* is about traveling. How do you construct your travel poems?

AB: I don't have a set program. Journeys have always been a natural form for story telling, and I think that affinity extends to poetry, which is often narrative as well as lyric. I've always envied Chaucer's brilliant idea of stories told inside a journey. I think my travel poems tell the story of being inside a journey—a series of interactions between a place and a person. What I don't ever want to do is digest a country—present it as a stock character. I think any place is an amalgam of the random and the planned, the elegant and the incongruous. The incongruous interests me most. Also, small details—how people carry themselves, the speed at which they walk. For example, in France people are often seen holding a baguette. Obviously, they aren't doing this to conform to a stereotype. They are doing this because everyone lives near a wonderful bakery and naturally falls into a pattern of picking up fresh loaves a couple of times a day.

JZ: "Learning to Sew" is my favorite poem. How did you happen to write it?

LEARNING TO SEW

Crossing my legs in front of you, I am
your tailor.

I will make you a suit.

What size?
The size of a tree
coming into its own.

A jacket with elbow room
for a small stream.

And what shall I use for a pattern?
The Mississippi River Basin.

You will wear this suit
only to the big occasions.

To the building
of anthills,

to the opening
of a door.

Don't look,
here it is now,

shouldering its way
into the room.

AB: That's a very early poem. I think I was excited about the possibilities inherent in language and in love. I was ready to try letting go of youthful self-consciousness, that painful effort to love and be loved, in favor of cheerful resourcefulness. I think the poem embodies surprise and delight in the discovery that imagination can be eminently practical.

JZ: How do you find the right word to correspond to a poem's voice, its emotional timbre?

AB: How do I find the right word? Luck. John Ciardi defined poetry as "luck with language." Usually it's a matter of a phrase more than of a word. Something I know the poem needs, something that has to come. If it does, it's immediately recognizable. Sometimes I wish I had a group of students to consult as I write—any class knows immediately whether or not something sounds right. Whether it speaks with the proper authority.

JZ: In "A Language" in *Possession*, you write:

Now, because they don't know
each other, there's an intricate
balance between them, as in tending a horse—

the glancing, diagonal approach
with the bridle; the cleaving
to the animal's left side, currying
and mounting.

Poetry writing is like tending a horse too. How do you craft your poems?

AB: I like your comparison of writing poetry to “tending a horse.” I immediately think of removing burrs from the horse’s mane and tail, which can’t fall or stream beautifully when tangled. A lot of the work of writing is like that. Or like mucking out the stall! I like thinking of a poem as a horse. A poem like Frank O’Hara’s “Talking to the Sun at Fire Island” goes running across an endless pasture, kicking up its hind hooves in exuberance—a glistening thing, impelled by the pleasure of movement.

JZ: I feel your award-winning book, *Night Clerk at the Hotel of Both Worlds*, is a conduit for many dream voices that talk about the psychological landscapes of mind. Could you tell, to cite a line from “Jazz,” how you “find the fanciest music” for this book?

AB: Whatever ‘fancy music’ is there found me. It was a difficult time. Poetry was an island I could escape to for many hours at a time. I was hurt and vulnerable, but wasn’t interested in complaint, but in seeing the world through the lens of this vulnerability, taking it as it came. After writing several poems in the new voice, which seemed to me to be celebratory as well as sad, I thought of the New York School and began re-visiting its poems. This was like the rediscovery of a family I had always had. Though I began, true to my Southern Ohio roots, as a pastoral poet, I have always loved poems that embody playfulness. Back in 1979, Kenneth Koch’s poetry had eased the difficulty of making myself at home in a new place, Hattiesburg. And Ashbery and O’Hara’s work had always been in the back of my mind, like strokes of color half seen. But now they moved to the foreground, along with James Schuyler’s precise evocations of urban landscape, his small poems bursting at the seams with feeling.

JZ: How do you assimilate all these voices into a perfect whole?

AB: There’s nothing perfect about my book. It does point toward other works of art that partake of perfection, perhaps, but more importantly, energy and persistent delight. Obviously, I’m a fan of William Blake. His double vision of humanity as innocent and ironic

blank slate ready to be written on. It amazes me that we can return to mental states that should now be ruled out by experience. That naïveté can be recaptured for a moment. I guess this returns us to Blake country.

JZ: My last question: Can you posit your poetic self as the night clerk in both the real and surreal worlds? And what's the clerk's major function?

AB: Of James Tate's work, John Ashbery says, "Surrealism is something very like the air we breathe, the unconscious mind erupting in one-on-one engagements with the life we all live, every day." I've always been interested in daily life's constant departures from the plot, its digressions and rabbit trails. Jean Rhys, deeply depressed and thinking of suicide, is attracted by a stationer's display of brightly colored pens and decides to become a writer. Or a rather self-absorbed man is hit by hunger pangs in his wife's hospital room and leaves to get a sandwich. Meanwhile, she dies. We're surrounded by accidental intersections of people and the forces that act on them in ways both trivial and momentous. Nonsense and meaning are constant dance partners. A hotel clerk is in a position to witness and record human incongruities. He or she also has lots of time for reading! Actually, I think of the book itself as the clerk, witnessing night and its guests, who may or may not give their correct names.

Kelli Russell Agodon

After Setting the Novel Down

Tonight, I am bookheavy, whitewashed
in pages of a woman who's part smoke,
part paper, and if I could remove her
silhouette from my mind I would
ask what she's praying for,
how many chapters she needs to
understand she was never meant to be a mother.

If she sat beside me, she could read it for herself
in the words across my lap—but
she dissolves into pages,
where each step leads to another
and we're walking up a hill together;
she will find a cliff to jump from and I
will close the book like a small stitched grave.

Kelli Russell Agodon

After Learning Another Writer Has Committed Suicide

*At times when I would rather be dead
the thought that I could never write another poem
has so far stopped me.*

—Frank O'Hara

Put away the gun. Unplug
the hairdryer and drain the bath.
There's a pencil waiting on your desk.

Turn off the engine and open
the garage. Set down the bottle of pills.
Lay down

the razor blade and untie
the noose, there are Swiss
chocolates near the bed.

For every thought of leaving,
there's a chance
of beginning
beneath the bills and ills.

Find the blank
sheet of paper
and a moment of quiet.

Write to the voices
escaping through the cracks
of books, singing,

*I'm still here
I'm still,
here.*

Kelli Russell Agodon

The Luck of Losing

—Seattle, 1997

Remember the year Al Gore came to
our neighborhood to see the giant sinkhole?

Sometimes I wish it were our house the earth
swallowed. Al put his hand on our neighbor's shoulder.

She cried as her front porch fell in, crumpled
one board at a time. All I thought of was her luck

of losing everything. This is not to say our life
should be dismantled. But a question:

is it easier to begin with nothing or to rebuild
with what's left? Our neighbor wears

an insurance-covered vest as she smokes
on her new wrap-around porch.

We mow the same bumpy lawn.
You suggest mole traps. I suggest natural disaster.

There won't be another vice-president
in our neighborhood or another news story

about houses traveling a road to hell.
But what they don't tell you is—

hell has new French doors and a security alarm.
Our neighbor dates the contractor who

redid her kitchen; her life dances across Pergo
floors. I wave to her from a broken hammock.

I am almost hidden by the leaves of alders,
roots filling the cracks the earth left exposed.

Richard Jones

This Blue World

When I was a boy, my father was forever
asking if I was
“checked-out with the controls.”
“Are you checked-out with the controls?”
Before I would undertake
the smallest task—
hammering a nail,
turning a screw,
polishing my shoes—
or when I embarked on the most modest mission—
going to school in the morning
or grabbing my glove to play baseball
in a field near our house
in the failing light
of an August evening—
he’d ask the same question:
“Are you checked-out with the controls?”
As a boy, I understood his meaning,
the urgency of my father’s instruction.
A decorated army air corp pilot,
my father flew over the “hump,”
and looked down on the Himalayas.
“It was,” he said,
“like spending an hour near God.”
The controls meant the electrical panel,
the oxygen pressure gauge and flow indicator,
the cowl flap handles,
and windshield de-icing control valve handle
in the cockpit of a C-47.
It was exhilarating,
and a little terrible,
the way a skilful captain,
heedless of weather
and black bursts of flak,
could lift heavy loads
into the air above the earth.

The cloudless day we buried my father—
a perfect day for flying—
I gave thanks at graveside
for the lesson the captain tried to teach the boy,
the miracle that was my father's life,
and his hope
that I safely fly through this blue world
knowing the terror of wings, the sweet gift of flight.

Richard Jones

O.E.D.

In the dictionary one finds the word
lucubrate, meaning “to study
by artificial light late at night
that one might express oneself
in writing,” on the heels of *luctiferous*—
“bringing sorrow,” and this immediately
preceded by *lucrous*, which, of course, is
“pertaining to lucre” and suggests “avaricious.”

To the right of *lucubrate* is *ludibrious*—
“subject of mockery”—
and the familiar *ludicrous*—
all that which is “laughably absurd.”

And in the far right column, variations
on two small words, *luff* and *lug*,
“to bring the head of a ship
nearer the wind,”
and “to pull and tug heavily and slowly,”
two tiny words that describe
what I am doing
here at my desk late at night,
turning the page to find the correct spelling
and exact meaning of
lugubrious.

Margo Stever

The Worst Mother

Playing music for you
before you were born,
waking up so early,
we searched the neighbor's
yard for sticks and pebbles.

Homework help, endless
stories, read and reread
to get you to sleep. We fed
your puppy—lizards, gerbils,
the mouse-eating toad from Nepal.

The night you gagged
and choked up shreds
as if your insides came out, as if
you could not stop unloading
yourself of yourself.

I comforted you, holding you,
singing to you.
But you have forgotten
and you accuse, as you remember
the deprivations—

that I cannot cook,
that I never hugged you.
Now you profess
to care about nothing.
Someday you will forget

all of this, too—the arbor,
the green vale, rushing out
toward the rushing creek,
the monitored hallway,
the anxious greeting.
See, instead, this picture
of you as a child
with bare-bottomed feet—
you wore angel's wings,
gossamer everywhere.

Margo Stever

Animal Crackers

Rhinos, zebras, hippos,
lions, tigers—I eat them all.
I eat them equally,
again and again, down
to the bone, beyond.

Elephants taste best.
Their trainers work them
in a circle with a whip.
They are always perfect,
the curvature of tails,

tusks, ears,
the lumbering symmetry.
Sometimes I eat them
in the closet where it's dark.
I can feel the broken legs

at the bottom of the box.
The broken ones taste best, tiny
bursts, serpentine epiphanies.
My mother used to buy them
after school. The boxes

never change, a circus
train, the red and yellow interplay.
When another bite would pop,

I stop and realize
once again,
I want to be perfect

like the elephant.
I want to be thin.

Margo Stever

The Nunnery

Path where
none was before,
nightingale, nightingale.

Mosquitoes dog us
past the nunnery; the picket
fence snakes up the hill.

Swallows
barely visible,
their wings glint

under a narrow
new moon.

Margo Stever

The Cracked Piano

Peter R. Taft II to Alphonso Taft,
Private Hospital for the Insane, Cincinnati, Ohio
April 2, 1878

Dear Father,

I am alone
this evening
as every evening,
alone,
that is so far
as having
any amusement
is concerned.

An artist
of imperfect mind
is endeavoring
to extract
harmonious discords
out of a cracked piano
just at my left.

Life here
is of the plainest, I might say,
of the hardest kind.
Last Sunday, Mr. and Mrs.
John Whetstone came
to this institution to see
her brother, but Mrs. W.
spent some time on this floor
in her brother's room
where I met her.

She stayed all night
of Sunday and until noon
Monday. Her visit
was a perfect godsend to me.
Oh, it did me so much
good to see a person
from the neighborhood

of what used to be home.

II.

Tell Tillie that I have enjoyed the fruit and preserves very much. I wish that she could send some more as soon as she can, for there is not much fruit here.

Tell Tillie that it hurts me to write her, but if she will come and see me, it will do me more good than anything that could happen. My foot is sore and needs some kind of application.

III.

I will now resume the description commenced in my last letter. Each patient has a separate room in which is a carpet, a bed, a table, a wash-stand, a box, and one chair, but no gas and no candles.

In the dining room there are two tables, one for the sane portion of this community, and the other for those who are supposed to be insane.

One table for the patients, the other for the attendants and other attaches. At the head of the patients' table sits Colonel Passot who is never guilty of two consecutive ideas on the same subject. He is moreover quite dirty.

On his right side sits your son.

On Colonel Passot's left
sits a Mr. Williams
who cannot articulate
so as to make himself understood,
but is always muttering.
He consists principally of hair.
Next to him sits his special attendant,
Mr. O'Brien, and on the right
side of your son sits a small German-
looking man whom they call
Duke, with a heavy mustache
and whiskers and eye glasses.
He is constantly saying things
which strike him as very witty,
and he laughs exceedingly.
He is a good deal of a fool.

On the table further down
sits Mr. McNeal, the tormentor
of the piano, and a Mr. Gillespie
who has been here for about a year.
He is going away in May.
The latter has privileges
and is allowed to go out
without attendant.
Further on is a thick-faced
individual who never speaks,
and whom I will denominate
as Mr. Blank.

At this table, the conversation
is neither amusing nor instructive.
It is liberally interspersed with grunts
on the part of Mr. Williams,
the man of hair, or hearty laughing
by the young man from Illinois.
But the bottom of the page is reached.

Love to you all
and a kiss to the baby.

Your affectionate son,
P.R. Taft

Margo Stever

Seer and Seen

from "The Horse Fair,"
by Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899)

In men's clothes,
she makes herself
invisible to examine
anatomy at
the slaughterhouse.
She obtains
a police permit
to wear trousers
while she works.

At the horse fair,
she draws horses
pulling, snorting,
heads crashing,
thrashing, hooves
dancing, tails wringing,
charging forward,
rearing, bucking, wheeling,
disappearing into darkness.

Hooves hammer, whips
crack, horses writhe
between seer and seen,
the fairground a battleground.
Frenzied pitch, cymbals
clash, arms flail, whips
raised against the horses' arched
and shining necks.
Eyes bulging, terrified,
the dappled gray, the bay pull
away, toward storm clouds.

Even then the agony, even
the light is waning.

John Hart

Insomnia

Those who are conscious in the middle of the night
are conscious of a thing they must perform.
When it is time, and more than time
to join the sleepers in their halls of foam,
when the blood turns black, and the dim heart on its stems
sways in an unknown hunger—

This is the moment. Blocking out the dark,
we turn from our desire, bow, and pray
toward that increase in speech
and rise in opposition that is day:
the war's renewal and the god's retreat
the grief of aliens, the misdirected word.

Bent to the task you feel
how one small weight can set in train
the coming round of a great starry sail.

Now dawn compels the window to show trees
and make an image of the standing world.
In a thousand sheets they wake to their duress.
the skin shakes and the blood is left alive.

John Hart

Death of the Desert Rat

for Nicholas Van Pelt

I have no evidence that you are here
but in this place I most remember you.

You who loved
the lathe of distance and the sky
like hot gears spinning that could crush your hand
in some immense unshielded machine—

what did you meet
in your pursuit
of truth and wideness?
What burglar shopped and exited your heart?
What troll bespoke, what rock turned you aside?

You could have been a hermit in these hills
pertaining to them like a novel indigene.

You could have taken notes for years,
showed us your way with engines, ferried storms,
and sat at intervals with not too many friends.

Those spaces, Nick? Why did they not commend you
unto the mercy of some wise unwavering god,
out walking with his goats and garrisons,
as slow to speak as you?

I do not know who counseled you
to render by some count of years more imminent
what is from the outset imminent, departure among stones.
Your book was hiding in its colophon
a small black biting thing.

But I wish you some fault-block heaven, leaning back,
rising without foothills from the dusty road,
with up among the peaks the limestone edging out,
and just a hint of timber in the draws.

Mark Pawlak

Red Line Inbound/Outbound

for Harvey Shapiro

Forbidding
Charles Street Jail's
ancient granite edifice,
now undergoing renovation,
glimpsed from inbound Red Line train:

large, white banner
draped from scaffolding
announces in bold, black letters,
"Future Site of the Liberty Hotel."

*

Young Black woman,
hair pulled back tight with a clasp,

body-hugging sweater, skin tight jeans,
high leather boots with stiletto heels,

walks briskly down the subway platform
past the *Metro* hawker.

"You look," his words trail after her,
"like an Egyptian queen."

She pays him no mind. "You ARE
an Egyptian queen."

*

Overheard

You know why it's called KFC don't you?
 You mean instead of Kentucky Fried Chicken?
Right. They can't use the word "chicken."
 Why not?
On account of how they breed them in their factories.

How's that?
All breasts and drumsticks; no heads or feet.
Headless chickens?

Yep.

I don't think so.

Yes, really!

Nah.

Yes!

Nah.

*

Gaunt, white-bearded 'mannequin'
dressed in ratty car coat, worn jeans, sneakers,
gray strands of hair showing under the brim of his Porkpie hat,
stands motionless, staring blankly ahead
as morning commuters scurry past
down the ramp, leading from bus drop to subway.
The white cardboard sign held up at his chest,
hand lettered in bold capitals, reads:
H E L P.

*

Man riding the inbound train,
shod in paint-splattered work boots
blurts out, "Look at this!"

to fellow passengers, standing and seated;
to no one in particular; "Look at this!"
pointing to his newspaper.

"It says right here,
'four American coots
spotted in Braintree yesterday.'"

Hands open, palms turned up,
he lifts his shoulders
in a gesture of puzzlement:

"American coots...
what's the big deal?
I see American coots

every single day.”

*

Movie poster ad:

Cropped photo of young woman’s face,
full lips parted, teeth bared,
whose rheumy-eyes stare
through cross-hatched wire fence or cage—
Hollywood’s image of dangerous sex;
her feral glare fixed on the
business-suited, young man—white shirt,
striped tie—standing before,
gripping the horizontal bar on this
crowded, lurching, rush hour train.
Captive, the movie’s title.

*

News Hawker:

Boston

Now!

Boston

Now!

When I say,

“Boston,”

you say,

“Now.”

Metro ain’t doin’ it,

Boston Now IS.

Givin’ away
one thousand dollars
every week!

Is that too much money?

You don’t want my paper?

OK, don’t take it!

Boston

Now!

Boston

Now!
When I say,
 “Boston,”
you say,
 “Now.”

Peggy Ann Tartt

Rehearsals

Death is so demanding these days
that long before it comes,

our spirits have already perfected slipping away—
sliding from our eyes down our cheeks in tears,

or leaping from the roof of our mouths
in words muttered during sleep.

Adrift in the world, they have begun
fitting their shapes into other bodies;

moreover, they enjoy tasting the air with new tongues.
Then either exhausted by these sojourns

or frightened by them, they come back
to those of us who are lucky, although they return

in silence without report or apology.
Only their chilled breath wakes us at dawn

and for one more day, we live.

Peggy Ann Tartt

Scottsboro Boys

I. Spring Ferment

By the time the sun rose naked and beautiful,
the moon and stars had vanished
like runaway slaves. Spring 1931.
White impatiens were blooming
and starlings whistled at length,
holding out their notes like hands.
Anyone living near the back roads would have heard
the sound of youngsters scampering to catch
the freight trains that rolled indifferently
over spikes of grass, pebbles and the broken glass
of dreams scattered along the tracks. Clinging to hope,
they heaved themselves into the dark cars
where strangers, awakened from sleep, stirred
like seedpods ready to burst at the slightest touch.

II. Knocking

When two brothers left home for Mississippi
they were not very different from other boys,
except that they had every intention
of returning in three months, maybe four.

But much of life depends on the wind
and whether it blows work one's way or not.

They picked an ordinary morning to leave—
yellowhammers were knocking
on tree-house doors; the river Alabama
was still cradling old secrets and drowned
dark-skinned bodies in its long arms.

The brothers had heard that log haulers were needed—
knock on wood, God was good, or so they thought
as they hopped that southern railroad freight car.

III. What They Knew

Before the boys could distinguish their mother's voice
from that of the ocean's, humming her lullaby
in contralto and filling their heads with dreams
even before they dreamed;

before they crossed the landscape like caribou
stepping over shedded antlers
as though they were graves,
leaving behind fresh footprints like petals
and calling softly to one another to follow;

before they could see beyond the twilight,
before they could see themselves in each other,
they knew something about blame and guilt.

They knew that life is mostly all about loss
and, only if one is lucky, recovery.

IV. Poor Relations

It was clear even to the oceans-away cities
of Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig, at least
before they sank into their own racial mire,
that Alabama had railroaded its nine Negro sons
as indifferently as a farmer driving his livestock
of hogs to market across the southern landscape—

hooves trampling the soil dappled with the bursts
of early-spring wildflowers, and perfecting
a steady trot without fleeing, as though
there is palpable comfort in not dying alone.

They must have felt some of that, the nine Negro sons,
poor relations who slogged submissively in shackled rhythm
from Paint Rock to Scottsboro
as mobs sneered and spat and dangled unused rope.

Theodore Haddin

Houses We've Built

We live in the houses we've built,
the one for ourselves, no matter
how the years have gone by
the windows with their dust
look in upon us and the clocks
unwind over and over
while the gardens succeed each other
and the prize amaryllis goes down again
with the peonies and daffodils.
Come rain and high water
winds about us know what we've done
with the roof and the cellar
and the paint we put on one year.
We live in the house we've built
for ourselves, even strangers see
what we've become by the carpets
that have worn ourselves into their threads
and the chimney that's lost its fire.
We live in the houses we've built
by ourselves, and we would have left
a long time ago if the doors hadn't
welcomed us so many times when we came back
and the table hadn't been so congenial when it was set,
and the son and daughter who kept love alive
returned so often to open those doors again.

Theodore Haddin

Amaryllis

It started out glorious blooming
plant, six or seven large red curling bells
the largest I've ever seen, going to it
in my kitchen window, so big, one
of the stems fell over with a light fresh
snap, and I had to stand it up to prop
it with a metal rod. There it flourished,
the whole plant, for weeks and days
in a sunny spot. When the flowers began
to droop and turn their purple-wine color
and go to Chinese-print dryness, the leaves,
compact in their center, began to rise.
Amazingly they've come onto three feet,
expanding into kitchen's light, all
just out of a single bulb I hardly water.
But every drop I give it now, goes to leaf
and whether this will end is another matter.

Theodore Haddin

We Worry About Oil

Inch by inch by inch the cars
go up the hill into the sun
like beads on a string
some going down
their drivers controlled
by wheels on wheels on wheels
upon the last everlasting drop
of oil under the sun that turns
metal upon metal upon metal
into the sun

Theodore Haddin

Lament

This afternoon I fell asleep
thinking it was night
and woke to birds
thinking it was morning
and nothing I could say
could take away the sense
a whole day and night
had passed and it was
some other day.
It might have been afternoon.
Partly changed was the way
the weather went
a gray and darkening time
as if time itself had gone
and there was more than a rent
in sky and cloud.
It seemed the world had at last
heard what it was to die in war
and was waiting for the answer
something new said across field and farm
and cities held in terrible alarm.
So I went out upon the dismal lawn
to see if someone was there
to tell the time or answer back,
but no one was there
and no one could know
how dark it was to see.

Anne McCrary Sullivan

Collision

Father, we were like those lanterns
I used to watch on the water at night,
silent lights of invisible fishermen
moving separately at great distances
each a mystery to the other but moving
through the same darkness, the same water,

and so that night when I ran to tell you
that if you went out again, Mama
who was already packing your suitcase
would put you on a bus to Raleigh, when
breathless I caught up with you
under the tall cedar and you asked
why and I sobbed "because you're going

to get drunk again" and when you wondered
if I wanted you to stay and I said yes,
flung my bony body to your bare
chest, that night when you held me
and did not go—we reeled
at our single gentle collision in the dark.

Anne McCrary Sullivan

Education of An Island Ecologist: St. Croix

—of and for George Seaman

He didn't know yet.
He hadn't yet learned more deeply
than any other man—the flora, fauna,
geology and weather of his island.
He was still studying, still observing,
taking notes. When notebooks were full,
he put them securely in a wooden box,
stored them away, kept observing, writing.

He didn't know yet
what island rot and termites do.
When he went to retrieve the box,
he lifted in his hands a crumbly mass.

A few phrases he could read:
*A somber calm . . . this corner
of the Caribbean . . . pall of clouds
. . . creeping . . . a rooster crowing..
heat . . . oppressive. The sea . . .*

He wept and kept observing,
writing the island he loved—
its storms and droughts, its flowers
and poisons, each sweet and bitter
necessity. The insects, too, he learned
to love, and in the end bequeathed
himself to them.

Anne McCrary Sullivan

Manchineel

A Carib arrow tipped with sap
ripped the skin of one

of Columbus' crew. His bones
dissolved on the island.

This sticky white sap
blisters and burns;

it oozes. On contact
with the eyes, it blinds.

In a rain storm do not
take shelter beneath this tree.

Do not touch its bark;
this, too, inflames.

To eat its yellow-green
apple-like fruit is death.

No part of this tree is innocent.
Every part of this tree is innocent.

The Caribs knew: this tree
is holy. This tree protects.

T. Mozelle Harris

listening

tina's learned that
listening under water
is like laying an ear

on the railroad
track, that water
and steel are first

to tell her what
is coming, that air
takes longer

as if sound
were a burden
it can't or won't

carry too far. tina
goes under water
to talk as well.

there she calls all
swimmers
in the Amazon,

Rhine, Ganges,
to listen
for her

coming, listen
and they can
expect her long

before she gets
close, tells them
she doesn't trust

air to carry
her to them,
instead they might

listen for
the shushing
of steel blades

on water,
the sound
of tina

ice-skating
across
the waves.

Rodger Martin

Reverie on Innsbruck Station

Beneath the semaphore of the autumnal coloring book,
against the railway's granite cut, ebbs and flows
its constant shadow—the highway, and rubber against pavement.
Silent rails stretch like an umbilical west to unclaimed
marshes in Gaul and east to Pashtun crags beyond
Kandahar. Still, a cricket cheeps in a hollow of stone.

The platform shrugs to the putter of bikers vanishing down
the notch. Leaves sigh for a cleansing breeze and its end-of-life
tickle while the crows raucously respond.
A thrush stutters somewhere in the brush and hidden wings
whir overhead, all this paramount against this seismographic
scratch of pen on pulp recording the spikes hammered
into the crosses of Alesia or the tracers crackling out a pass
for *Empire Builders* clattering across the page.

*Alesia: battlefield where Caesar finally defeated The Gauls

Rodger Martin

Thanksgiving

Branches hang like scorpions and shatter
the slanted sunlight into glowing fractals
across the highway. A landscape that follows
white lines meandering through November hills.

Parked automobiles crowd every third house
as families gather like migrating flocks.
They flounder across the continent, some instinct
bouncing them to land in these undulant fields.

Still, still—across an ocean devoid of understanding,
the crackle of small arms amid the thud of grenades
becomes the currency exchange. Its only language
the zealots' wail. Scorpions smothering all breath.

And far south in the gasping pale above *Lago Grande*
my daughter must ponder the fine fit stones of Cuzco,
a clear novel of what has been, the crumbles
of what is, and the possibilities that yet might be.

Lago Grande: Lake Titicaca

Jay Rubin

The Myth of Arcade Photos

—1954-1961

Small, square, black & white snaps
My mother & me above me & Dad
Two tales framed in burlap mat

Framed by burlap sand bags
Aboard a Coast Guard cruiser
My father shined his sailor shoes

Shoes that swept the beauty queen
Unlocked her pointy golden fleece
The stars above they danced beneath

A constellation wonderland
First, a box of letters sailed the sea
Yellowed, purple postage stamps

Then my father stamped on glass
Raised my mother's veiled lace
The stars aligned in outer space

As oracled in timeless lines
When my father Icarus fell
Mother Medea stole his seed

A needle pricked through plastic flesh
Look at her cloudy, colorless sky
Her tired eyes distracted, blurred

And my father's eyes, the size of stars
Paralyzed by ancient surprise

Jay Rubin

Wife of Noah

The sons of God saw that the daughters of men
were beautiful, and they married any they chose.

—Genesis 6:2

i

Beneath a searing, white-eyed sky
her husband bustles like a bee
froth in his beard, dust in his eyes
hammering, honing, back muscles bobbing
a sea of sweat spilling from his pores

At night, he comes between her sheets
exhausted, effete, skin still salted
the brine of devotion

ii

Her silent tears turn torrential
forty days of piss and shit
squealing pigs, rats and worms
a menagerie of screaming
beasts, vomit in their fur

iii

When seas retreat, doors fall open
animals emerge: her husband, her sons
kneel among the hungry herd
bless the ground, praise the lord
dance among the flopping fish

Alone, she sees a world of mud
an ocean of sludge, no dry wood
not a stick for soup

Nancy Canyon

Beneath a River of Crows

we lingered, the grassy knoll scented
with sun and sweet nothings, his nearness
replacing old fears with a downy bird
cupped in careful fingers: fluttering wings,
gaping beak, papery skin. *Yes*, he nods,
and folds an arm around you. *It's easy, see?*
Crows darken the sky, a reminder of long
nights spent without human touch. At last
daylight returns. Out comes butter and cheese
sandwiches like Grandmother once made,
a drink of wine and fruit.

Nancy Canyon

Drifting Off

He's off dreaming of beer joints, adult movie stores; pleasure parlors where his kind view x-rated videos in private rooms: low light, red walls, sultry music, chair with washable cover. You're standing in a public market naked above the waist; afraid someone will notice, you search for a cloth to cover your breasts. Above him, a glass ceiling where women squat, gyrate, finger themselves and each other. You are running from him now, a black-booted vixen whipping past plums and pears and other sweet forbidden fruit.

Jim Varn

The Lost Night

Last night, my daughter told me she heard crying sounds under the house. We went out together to find two kittens crawling back and forth through an opening in the wall next to the air conditioner.

Before she went to bed that night we talked of names to give them. The next morning, I asked her, "What about Heckle and Jeckle?" "No," she said, "I've already named them 'Lost and Night'." I told her that was very poetic, and she asked me what I meant, as if I were teasing her. "It means it has profound meaning," I said. Shutting the door, she answered "Okay," and ran toward the school entrance.

On my way to work, I think to myself how in need I am of images, and like the homeless searching for a few precious scraps of food, I take my daughter's carefully chosen words and place them in the changing colors of the sky, thinking, "The lost night wanders toward the breaking day from all directions."

Liu Huangtian

Horizon Variations

1

On one end sits the sun
on the other the moon

a seesaw
for waves to slide up and down—
a play of infinity.

2

A sharp knife
slices the sunset into
chips of last radiance and
pages of poetry
stained with blood

3

A line of wild geese flies farther and farther and
finally becomes the horizon

and my autumn thought that's been pulled away
tautens
into a quivering lute string

4

Autumn night, sparse stars
perch there
like sparrows on a power line

A homeless man makes a fire
on the beach

a star falls
wailing

the moon looks on, cold-eyed

5

On a pale blue morning
a large ship walks gracefully
on a tightrope

6

The fog rises on the sea
A Dutch windmill
creaks
on the beach
spinning the tourists' vision.

Seagulls fly out and
into the fog
What are they delivering?

When the foghorn stops
a thread spans
far across the distance—
creation
of the windmill

7

You and I
walk face to face
on a one-plank bridge
As we edge past
each other
my reflection sways—
Almost . . .

Then you reach
the shore of your dream and
I return to the homeland
of mine

translated from the Chinese by JQ Zheng

Baolin Cheng

A Day to Remember

That remote, rural town—

In a dim drugstore
I pointed to a pack
Inside the counter and
Mumbled to the salesgirl:
“I want to buy this item.”

My voice was so indistinct
I couldn't even hear my own words.

I was 24 that year,
Tortured by flesh and desire.
After all these red lights and stop signs,
I was in this tiny store
For a small pack.

I pointed to the pack,
But looked elsewhere.

The young girl moved closer,
Her cheeks like two peach petals.
She asked in low voice,
“What size?”
I couldn't answer.

My face must be redder than hers.

Notes on Contributors

Kelli Russell Agodon is the author of *Small Knots* and *Geography*. Her work has been published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Notre Dame Review*, *North American Review*, and *Image*. She is the co-editor of *Crab Creek Review*.

Nancy Canyon's prose is published in *Fourth Genre*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Obliquity*; her poem "Caution Says" is forthcoming in *Floating Bridge Review*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific Lutheran University and is fiction editor for *Crab Creek Review*. Canyon lives and teaches in Fairhaven, a pleasant village overlooking Bellingham Bay in Washington State.

Baolin Cheng holds an MFA in poetry from SFSU. He is an instructor of Chinese in Hawaii and an editor of *The Literati*, a San Francisco-based Chinese literary quarterly. He has published sixteen books, of which six are poetry collections.

Theodore Haddin, a professor emeritus from The University of Alabama in Birmingham, is the author of two poetry books, *The River and the Road* and *By a Doorway, In the Garden*. He has published articles and reviews on American literature.

T. Mozelle Harris teaches English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, edits *PMS poemmemoirstory*, and directs the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop for high school students. Her poetry and essays have been published in a variety of journals including *Red Mountain Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Story-South* and the anthologies, *Family Matters: Poems of Our Families* and *As Ordinary and Sacred as Blood: Alabama Women Speak*. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize for her poetry and for one of her essays.

John Hart is the author of *The Climbers* in the Pitt Poetry Series and of various non-fiction titles on environmental affairs. He lives near San Francisco, California, where he works with poets in the private Lawrence Hart Seminars and helps to edit *Blue Unicorn*, a poetry journal now in its fourth decade of publication.

Richard Jones is a poet. His books include *Apropos of Nothing* (Copper Canyon Press, 2006) and a forthcoming collection, *The Correct Spelling & Exact Meaning* (Copper Canyon, 2009). His poems are published in such popular anthologies as Billy Collins's *Poetry 180* and Garrison Keillor's *Good Poems*, and he has been heard on National Public Radio. His collected poems, *The Blessing* (Copper Canyon, 2000), won the Society of Midland Authors Award for poetry. For thirty years he has been editor of the literary journal *Poetry East*, which celebrates poetry, translation, and art from around the world. Currently he is Professor of English at DePaul University in Chicago, where he directs the creative writing program.

Liu Huangtian is a Chinese-American writer who has published four books of poetry and 18 books of non-fiction. He is an editor of *The Literati*, a literary quarterly in San Francisco.

Rodger Martin's third volume of poetry, *The Blue Moon Series* (Hobblebush Books, 2007), was selected by *Small Press Review* as one of its bi-monthly picks

of the year. He has been awarded an *Appalachia* award for poetry and a New Hampshire State Council on the Arts award for fiction. Additionally he has received fellowships from The National Endowment for the Humanities to study T.S. Eliot and Thomas Hardy at Oxford University and John Milton at Duquesne University. His work has been published in literary journals throughout the United States and China where he also wrote a series of essays on American poetry for *The Yangtze River Journal*. He has edited *The Worcester Review* since 1986.

Mark Pawlak is the author of five collections of original poetry, of which *Official Versions* is the most recent. He has another book of poems forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press (fall 2009). His work has appeared in such places as *The Best American Poetry*, *Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust*, *New American Writing*, and *Mother Jones*, among other places. His work has been translated into German, Polish, and Spanish. Pawlak is a co-editor/publisher of Brooklyn-based Hanging Loose Press. He supports his poetry habit by teaching mathematics at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where he is Director of Academic Support Programs.

Jay Rubin teaches writing at The College of Alameda in the San Francisco Bay Area and publishes *Alehouse*, an all-poetry literary journal, at www.alehousepress.com. He holds an MFA in Poetry from New England College and lives in San Francisco with his wife and son.

Margo Stever's *Frozen Spring* won the 2002 Mid-List Press First Series Award for Poetry. Her chapbook, *Reading the Night Sky*, won the 1996 Riverstone Press Chapbook Competition. Her poems have appeared in the *Seattle Review*, *West Branch*, *Connecticut Review*, *Rattapallax*, and elsewhere. She created and directed the traveling exhibition, "Looking East," of 1905 photographs by her great grandfather, Harry Fowler Woods, of the U.S. diplomatic mission to Asia (www.ohiohistory.org/tafttrip). She is the founding editor of the Slapering Hol Press and founder of The Hudson Valley Writers' Center.

Anne McCrary Sullivan's poems have appeared in many literary journals, including *The Southern Review* and *The Gettysburg Review*, and in a full-length collection titled *Ecology II: Throat Song from The Everglades*. She is Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at National-Louis University and is currently Poetry Editor for the *English Journal*.

Peggy Ann Tarrt authored *Among Bones* (Lotus Press 2002), won the ninth annual Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award, the Arts & Letters Prize in Poetry, and was a Pushcart Prize nominee. She has contributed poetry to an array of literary publications, including *Poem*, *Field*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Pedestal Magazine*, and *African American Review*. She holds an MFA degree from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Jim Varn serves as the Faculty Development Director and Assistant Professor of English at Mississippi Valley State University. He received his PhD from the University of South Carolina, where James Dickey directed his dissertation. He has published poems in *Clay and Pine*, *The Chariton Review*, *Paintbrush*, and *Ayn*. He is an associate editor for *Valley Voices*.