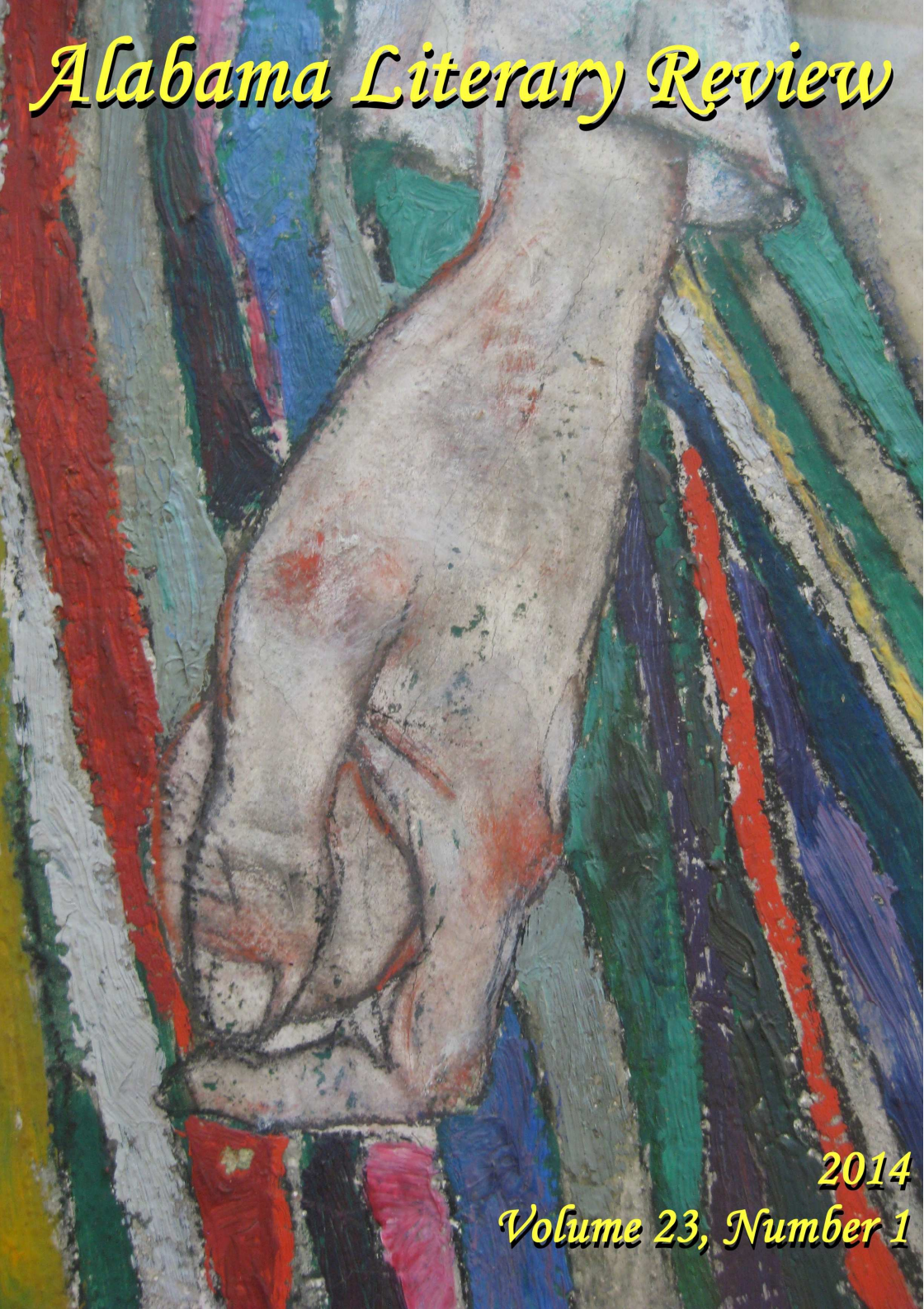
Alabama Literary Review



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Cover
Detail from Egon Schiele, *Portrait Of Edith Schiele In A Striped Dress*
Photograph by Patricia Waters

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ALR

Ned Balbo

Live from the Dakota

December 8, 1980

Through noise and smoke-haze drowning the TV
above the bar, your photograph flashed on
that Monday night close to semester's end
as if you'd joined the dead, closed captions still
unheard of as I glanced up at the screen.
Some file shot—outmoded mop-top, grin—
What were you up to now? But then the years—
your birth and death—appeared. I stood there, stunned,
proved wrong, but brought the brimming pitcher back to
friends for whom you held no special place—
Could that be true? It was. Still, they were kind
enough to hear me out, surprised as well.
What did I feel? The whirl of punk and disco
winding down had dropped me at the brink
of some new age I'd welcome or resist
to no avail, while you, five years retired,
were someone that I'd learned to live without.
Back briefly, twice as old, you were gunned down
before I'd yet forgiven you for leaving.
And who was I, exactly?
Poured beer banked
off empty glasses, Donna Summer mourned
a cake left under storm-clouds, while the Stones,
savvy survivors, vowed that they'd refuse
the role of burdened beast beneath the beat . . .

Back in my room, my girlfriend flipped through *Time*.
A record spun. I watched, blurred spectrum swirling as the
stylus fell, calling your voice—
loss-haunted, lasting—back into the world.

Major Tom and David Bowman

After David Bowie's "Space Oddity" and
Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*

What's the "oddity"
in David Bowie's song
about the astronaut
we know as Major Tom?
There's none: it's just a pun
on Kubrick's *Odyssey*,
inspired by the shot
of Frank Poole cast adrift,
unspooling into space
past any hope of rescue
from unending darkness,
betrayed by a computer's
dark intelligence.
So, too, will David Bowman
meet the same misfortune
unless the only voice
besides his own is silenced,
the vital key in hand,
each cartridge he removes
erasing memory,
regressing sentience
into a few short lines
of *Daisy, answer do*
eerily winding down.

But Major Tom, alone,

sounds unafraid, it's true.
The world below him spins
away his one last chance
to join its gravity—
Too late. The wife he loves
will never see him land.
His circuit dead, he's tensed,
prepared to make a choice.
Propelled from Earth and Sun
without much oxygen,
what does he feel—defiance?
Ground Control's intruders
matter less and less;
the earth below, still blue,
cloud-streaked, is now a place
he's permanently left,
this "tin can" all he's got
in all the galaxy
—But now that Earth is gone
for good, the steady hum
of static drowns all thought
of turning back, what's wrong
or right resolved: *I'm free*.

Glory-of-the-Seas

> This cone shell, *Conus Gloria-maris* Chemnitz, 4-5 in. long, is considered the most valuable shell in the world.—*Sea Shells of the World*, Golden Press, 1962 edition
>
> Once considered a great rarity, the Glory-of-the-Seas was a much sought-after cone and thought to be the most valuable shell in the world.— *Sea Shells of the World*, Golden Press, 1985 edition

Glory-of-the-Seas, your name alone
would flourish still without your graceful whorls
and surface finely etched, exquisite cone
shell tenantless, more fabulous than pearls.

Better, you'd have brought in twelve hundred bucks
in '60s dollars if I'd found you beached
upon Long Island shores, emerged from flecks
of foam retreating swiftly. If I'd touched

you then, a boy, and held you in my palm,
fine gold thread-patterns mesmerizing me,
I'd have felt chosen, thrilled yet strangely calm,
destined for anything. How large the sea

that held you I could not conceive . . . You lost
your luster in that decade's final year
when scuba divers swimming deeper, deepest,
found your habitat, unknown frontier

where, cast off, you lay numberless . . .
Today,

I know the Philippines is far away,
the market's flooded, glory is no more,
and rare shells don't just wash up on the shore.

On Trial for an Imaginary Murder

The accusation, strangely, is the proof.
The judge, secure on high, looks unforgiving.
No one takes an oath on your behalf,
sworn to the truth. You feel like an engraving,

powerless to move . . . Who was the victim?
No one says. You're told the prosecution
will defend you, too, since it saves time.
No jury files in for his presentation

of the facts, since no one disagrees.
Will someone raise his voice so you can hear
the case against you? Or the verdict? Freeze
that fraught split second filling you with fear

before you're called? The fan spins overhead—
All eyes are rapt. A bailiff locks the door
and glares. He knows exactly what you did,
and, yes, the evidence will soon assure

your swift conviction in the first degree . . .
But who is that behind you, looking on?
—The murder victim, waiting patiently,
alive and smiling, satisfied he's won.

Mark Belair

Fashion Statement

After trilling good bye
in her best party voice while
waving back, she confidently model-steps
down from what seems a glamorous restaurant gathering,

strides with strict savoir-faire
around the reflective-glass corner, immediately
stops, evicts whatever kept her hair stacked high and shakes
        it all out,
tucks her black, gauzy, bejeweled scarf into her stylish purse
from which she pulls

two flip-flops
she drops to the sidewalk
then—laying a hand on her companion's shoulder—
she bends one leg up behind her and, off-balance, blindly

tugs a wicked high heel
off, stubs her foot into a flip-flop, then
repeats the awkward maneuver for the other foot
and stuffs both shoes into the purse, her companion, all this
        time,

jabbering on
about some guy at work—
was it a company party?—trying to muscle him
out, but she can't seem to focus on him, her face revealing
        no goal

but one: to return—her fashion

performance done—to her preferred state of
fashion disaster, which is fortunate for him, for as she
flip-flops
away she casually takes his arm and, restored, tilts her
head to listen.

Autumn

Far too chilly
an October night to sit
at this sidewalk café, yet
there the wooden tables stand,
water glasses and wine goblets crowding
turquoise plates holding napkins tucked with cutlery,
the rustic indoors busy, the windows steamed with the
warmth
of bodies and food and talk, the empty outside tables—
set for a summer now past—recast as a rueful
still life of a receding
remembrance.

The Summer Night

The calm summer night
out the open window seems

another room of the house,
an adjoining interior, a stroll

past the screen door offering
no transition, no contrast,

the deep night domesticated,
the full moon a reading lamp

left on to illuminate
the sacred, enigmatic

text
of home.

Barbara Crooker

Dusk at La Baie des Anges, 1932

~Raoul Dufy

Dufy studied *couleur-lumière*, the effect
of light on color, turned the Mediterranean
into a pool of flat cerulean. No wind riffles
the water; this is sea as tablecloth or slab
of marble. That smooth. That cool.
Here in Virginia, blue jays
have been interrupting my morning
with their imperious squawks.
Their feathers, the blue fire of the Côte d'Azur
in summer. In Dufy's oils, the sky sings
hyacinthine. There is no motion; even the lone
palm on the right hand side of the painting
holds its breath. The figures in the foreground
are poised, waiting for night to come down
and paint them midnight, cold steel, indigo . . . .

The Green Blouse, 1919

~Pierre Bonnard

In this interior, a girl with a blouse the color of summer
sits in front of a window. Behind her, a curtain
falls, a shower of light, and behind that, the tropical
foliage of Le Cannet. Outside my window in Virginia,
it's a day still trying to make up its mind—dregs of snow
in the corners, daffodils ringing bravely in the cold wind.
Spring is late this year, the grass undecided if it should
take a pass, stay sleeping, rolled up in its patchy old coat.
But there are two blue jays at the feeding table, and they
aren't fooled by the bare trees, the blossoms reluctant
to unfold. They know the sun by its angle, see that the stars
have gathered in their spring flocks. They are bluer
than the sky,
and they know it. Every day, there's another cup of sunlight.
They tilt back their heads, and they drink it all in.

Kevin Durkin

Toddler Beneath a Jacaranda

Pale purple flowers, falling one by one,
strew the brick steps and sidewalk where she plays.
The wind chimes resonate in morning haze
soon to be burned to nothing by the sun.
She squats to wad some flowers in a ball,
thrusts fistfuls through a railing, lets them drop
on plush grass, smiles, and turns without a stop
to squat again—as if she'll clear them all.
Her father sits hunched over on a wall.
Protective, tired, he trains his eyes on her;
the street beyond dissolves into a blur
of trees, parked cars, and condos. In a lull,
the chimes grow still, and then he hears her sing,
in nonsense syllables, the end of spring.

Self-Interview

Where were you born? How did you spend your youth?
I hail from Mars and seldom told the truth.

You mean you're alienated and a skeptic?
Some germs resist when swabbed with antiseptic.

Which authors have influenced you the most?
Wind. Rain. The sunlight glancing off the coast.

Describe your process. What is your routine?
I stare straight through the pixels on my screen.

Do work and family life impinge on art?
Oases flourish in the desert's heart.

Any recurrent subjects, tropes, or themes?
Memory, mortality, desire, and dreams.

What do you hope to do before you die?
Cast off these clothes and mount into the sky.

Douglas Goetsch

1989

I woke each day to the same couple of songs
on my radio alarm, due no doubt
to the alchemy of programming format,
though it felt more like Groundhog Day—6:05
and Randy Travis still *waiting for you to forgive me,*
but you keep saying you can't even start . . .
Or "Kokomo," that ode to tropical paradise—
Aruba, Jamaica, ooh I wanna take ya . . .
Anywhere but here, a roominghouse of men
I never spoke to, a gray sky excreting ice and sleet
all through March. I trudged back and forth
to a job that had me so stressed and tired
even my clothes wanted to quit.
My only solace: re-runs of *Hill Street Blues*,
that lovable band of dysfunctional cops—
Andy Renko bickering in his Southern drawl
with Bobby Hill, his black partner,
alcoholic Norman Buntz who rode alone,
little Mick Belker hauling in perps from undercover
like a dog dragging in dead squirrels, sweet
Sargeant Esterhaus pronouncing the benediction
with long pointed finger: "Let's be careful out there."
It didn't air till midnight, and kept me up till 12:55,
when, once again, the beautiful public defender
and the smart precinct captain climbed into bed
after a day at each other's throats, to laugh
and tease and touch like teenagers.
Then five hours of sleep before The Beach Boys
chimed in from *A little place like Kokomo—*
we'll get there fast, and then we'll take it slow—

and I wished that beautiful wall of sound
could hold back the day, or I could float
forever in Randy Travis's high lonesome feeling
like a stone you have picked up and thrown
to the hard rock bottom of your heart.
I don't know how I managed, each morning,
to reach over and turn off that radio,
peel back the covers, get up, dress
in the dark tunnel of a life so desolate.
I mean that: I don't know how I did it.
I don't know how anyone does.

At the Residence

Every odd morning, in the small hours,
they see the paramedics rolling up
with sirens off. “Lucky stiff,” they say,
all through breakfast—dying in your sleep
better than hitting the Lotto. And so
they wander off to nap in the dayroom,
courtyard, barber shop. Even nap-proud Leo
gives it a go, like a baby in a carriage
hoping to get stolen. The other chief
activity: complaints about the food—
Who could possibly survive on this?
The staff helped organize a food committee,
they died (lucky stiffs), new officers
got elected and the food hasn’t changed,
at least not according to my grandfather.
“See this?” he says, pointing at the sauce
on his Salisbury steak. “I call it motor oil.”

One Good Thing

Who knows how
you've gotten here,
but you can always
do one good thing.
In fact, you should.

Wash a dish or
water a plant.
That's not nothing.

We're not talking
about paying the bills,
or even changing
a light bulb, but maybe
that underwear
finds the hamper?

Just one thing.
Then rest awhile.

Soon you might be
up for a shower,
or egg salad.
But this isn't a race,
so take it easy.

But don't watch TV.
If you do, not the news.
You already know enough

of other people's trouble,
or achievements—what
Mandela or Gandhi did—
and you're not on
some march to the sea.

This is more about
making the bed
and putting socks on.
Basic stuff, in sequence,
like breathing out
before breathing in.

You've got a right.
You're on this earth,
for whatever reason,
with nothing to
apologize for—at least
nothing today, so far.

Simple Math

Two plus two will always equal four,
as sure as God made green superheroes.
You don't need to know anything more

when you're little. You'll know the score
when greasy-headed Nicholas Shapiro
says, "Two plus two don't always equal four,"

gazing down at the school bus floor,
"but zero times a million is still zero."
"Well you're stupid," you say, not knowing more.

"Well *I* heard your parents got you at the store,
along with your adopted brother Theo—
so I guess two plus two *could* equal four."

"So what?" you say, "at least we aren't poor,
and we're not a bunch of Jewish weirdos."
But Nicholas isn't listening anymore.

And the bus rolls on like a portable war,
where zero times a million is still zero,
and two plus two will always equal four.
You don't need to know anything more.

Telemachus at 50

My father? I'm tired of the subject.
But you keep asking, so here's a story:
when I was three years old he took me sailing
out behind the house in a little skiff.
Each time we reached the mouth of the harbor
I'd stand and point and ask, "What's over there?"
He'd just turn for home without a word.
My father didn't teach the things that matter—
how to read the trades, trim the sails,
outrun storms or else steer into them,
and who to take on board. I learned haphazardly,
from old pirates, gamblers and ne'er-do-wells,
and I learned late, and never had much of a ship.
But somehow I managed to see the world
with my own eyes, lands where the light itself
is a different color, shining on girls
with irredescent skin, where fruit falls
from astounding heights and tastes peppery,
where the wisdom sayings seem silly at first,
and the local gods are full of fiery joy,
and toy-like coins jangle in my pockets
as I keep wandering this amazing place
that is my home. No treasure for the heart
that stays in the harbor—my father may
have known that—I don't know. And you come
to tell me he's nearby, and proud of me?
He's proud of *who*, exactly? And who is *he*?

Too Soon

Too soon to write a love poem
for a shy girl who won't
tell you on the phone
what she is wearing—
just "underwear."
Too soon to say "girlfriend"
though she likes it on the lips
of others jumping to conclusions,
like a Frisbee through a window.
Too early for "I love you"—
though no problem with
a punch on the arm,
"I'm going to steal that sweatshirt,"
"You're sort of awesome."
The language of the shy
is full of *maybe*, full of
kind of—"I maybe
kind of miss you a little"—
words to sand down a confession
lest it scratch her underbelly
or bring to boil what she
wants simmering on a burner
or under T-shirt and jeans.
It's premature for nicknames, Sarah
my tomboy (*in panties*!),
Princess *Whatever*, queen of shy,
too soon for a love poem—ah,
but too late for the blackbirds
to get back in the pie.

MARK D. HART

Timber Rattlers

--along the Appalachian Trail

He wants to know if we have ever seen one,
and we reverse our downward path to track
his burst of bare legs, knapsack, and information
back up the ridge-path through the scrub.
A sudden fraternity of three afoot
far above bucolic farms and fields,
we seek a thing of rumor, capable
of dealing death, which bounty hunters once
had beat, shot, bludgeoned, and beheaded
to rid the land of its elusive, penile threat.
He points out south-facing ledges, fractured cliffs
where they will overwinter for eight months,
one hibernaculum housing a clan
returning to the same dark dormitory
for countless generations, until they groove
the stone hallways of those caves
with the winding rivers of their scales.
How eager, how evangelical he is
to share with us the secret of this ridge,
his love, returning yearly to this spot.
I warm to these cold-blooded creatures
knowing they have a sense of home and kin,
but grow chill again to learn of how they hunt—
bloodhounds of heat, who glide free of foot-fall
on the infra-red trails of their warm-blooded prey,
whose heat-sensitive facial pits can aim
their strike with accuracy, though blind,
with a venom that not only kills but starts to digest,

turning insides soupy, the color of bricks.
We come to a cairn erected at a fork—
the very spot where earlier we'd rested—
and he goes down prostrate at this pillar
like a pagan worshiping some phallic god,
puts chin to dust, and, peering long into
the dark crevasses of the stacked stone,
searches its cold heart for a revelation.
He pokes it with a stick, exclaims, and I
drop down to take his place. Something tightens
in the black coil of myself, and then I see
a pencil-sized tail sharpened to a rattle
slip deeper, disappear. Another prod, and there's
the head, the lidless gaze of fear, the face.

Wild Turkeys in Town

The hesitant gait,
the starts, then pauses
to reconsider the tack,

makes this fowl
all the more anomalous
if it makes a dash.

Who expects decisiveness
from a messy queue of them
bobble-heading along?

(I'll resist the temptation
to compare them to
a town committee.)

Yet I sense a keen wit
among that congregation,
so gingerly attuned.

And that great miracle—
they can transport those
ample tushes skyward.

At dusk,
swarthy angels ascend,
dark globes

above the neighborhood
as they roost in treetops,
thinking they belong.

The sight stops me short.
I lift up my eyes,
a believer.

Their cult of repose
free of threat
says a blessing over us.

R. Nemo Hill

Empty Sleeve

Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.
(W. B. Yeats, To A Friend Whose Work Has Come To Nothing)

1.
Her bed was large. It almost filled the room
and smelled of flowers never not in bloom.
A boy, I could not picture age asleep.
Old women's beds, I thought, were there to keep
the coats and hats arriving guests would shed.
We always tossed *ours* there—onto her bed.

They lay there, limp, above me, as I slid
beneath that old fourposter—where I'd hid
a cough drop, several pennies, and a stone.
Self-marooned, I longed to be alone,
to share a place with all that won't be found,
a place that taught me not to make a sound.

This room was dim, these shadows near narcotic;
their waxed wood lilac talcum proved hypnotic.
They drew me in that first time—in and down—
toward things so secret they lay underground.
They drew me back when I felt most unknown:
to my coughdrop, my three pennies, my blue stone.

A gap between the baseboard and the floor
proved sanctum's inner sanctum. I was sure

no broom could ever sweep them from their nest.
The coughdrop failed an unexpected test—
its sugary glaze, in time, tempted a mouse.
But we sold both stone and copper with the house.

2.
Along with youth, wane certain ceremonies—
but still, I have my chosen sanctuaries
for lost but not forgotten things. A drawer
for poems. A jar for doorless keys. And for
the flotsam of suburban walks near dawn,
for the doll's arm reaching from one dew-drenched lawn,

for the five plastic barrettes, the sparrow's bones,
and, yes, elected pennies, special stones—
a certain streetside shrub's become the shrine
of what, by disappearing, remains mine.
Some winters, empty-handed, passing by
I peer in through bare branches on the sly

to catch perhaps a glimpse of the old lover,
the bright blue pencil, the four leaf clover,
the scribbled grocery lists, page after page,
the teacup cracked, no handle, my spent rage.
Let others tally up the minor losses—
one day I'll toss, as well, the hand that tosses.

In silence, I'll rejoice while others grieve
for all that's hidden up my empty sleeve.

(for Mark Allinson)

Young Horse

Birthed beside the road in a hail of wood chips,
adzed and sawn and chiseled from green hibiscus—
hewn the mane, then part of the twisted torso
breasting the tree bole.

Silence as I pass—the suspended gesture,
lifted tools and eyes of distracted sculptors,
shirtless barefoot boys hard at work since daybreak,
hair full of sawdust,

clinging calmly, each to his chosen station,
haunch or hoof or heart of the wood—each smiling
briefly, shyly. What's this I'll hear behind me
neighing and pawing?

(Petulu, Bali—2003)

Tom Holmes

The Museum of Dreams

The Smartest Person in the World

They say her hairs are antennas. She's always receiving
and quiet. When she's near, I don't know if I'm talking
to you or if she is speaking through us. They say
when she dies, she travels back in time and invents language.
She's died many times. I don't know what I'm saying.

Cathedral

The forest sways with 50-foot high toothbrushes.
Each morning, the sky bleeds. The bristles drip
long beady strings all day. At night, the dryness
arrives with fallen-egg-stenched winds shredding
through bristles like songs through cracked ceramic teeth.

Judgment Day and the Undermining

The cave is filled with cops. They are freeing
their prosthetic hats and batons. They are mixing
tickets with melted coins. They are smearing
it across the walls and floors. They are alchemizing
stone and dirt to lava and flesh. They are discharging.

Turning Around

I walk so fast through the apocalypse, skyscrapers
wake in front of me. One bows so low, I grab its antennae
and sing into it. It hurls me like a catapult to the world's
edge.
There's only salt here and a pile of blisters. There is no end
or horizon to the beyond, but for a pair of shoulders.

Moving Image

The long hall is lined with television sets –
from spirals of apertures to detached picture tubes
to extended plasma screens with remotes – at the end, a
father is buried
in a large maple veneer tv cabinet.
I feel almost nothing except for disinterestedness.

Medium Fairy Tale

I've been here before when there were more mountains.
I would pluck and stitch them to my chin. When the moon was
full, I'd cut them loose. They're now an asteroid belt.
The moon is not anymore a mirror, but, when full,
a palimpsest of my face inscribed with hardened lava pools.

Atlas of Pleasure

In the first act, she lowers her eyes. In the second,
she's deep in the woods. She bites her nails and spits

them every hundred paces. In the third act, she
whispers help,
a word she learned for God. In the fourth and fifth, when
she's lost,
her fingers stray and she forgets her lines.

Troubadour and Toreador

She unzips her long red dress, steps from it, kicks the dress
up to a cape and taunts the bull. The bull charges. She leaps
and twists over its head and stabs it in the back with her
stiletto
heels and breaks the neck with its horns. High in the corner
of the stadium, a poet with a stubby pencil takes notes.

City of Trams

A thousand naked ladies pace the Parthenon
with silk twisted through their hair. A cable car pulls up.
A man in a three-piece suit steps off, drops iron pennies
in the fountain, extends his paint brush, and approaches.
Women seated on the balconies fan themselves with shackles.

Untitled (Snail with Turtle)

At the garden's edge, a snail slides a sticky trail.
A turtle makes wakes through long grass. It will take days
before one yields their path and begs a pardon.
Meanwhile, the snail rolls a pair of dice for fate
to engender its sex, and the turtle turns inward.

Backyard Help

The neighborhood pond is blue as a tailed monster's eye.
When I strip, the houses turn away. My penis
is a rudder as I swim in circles, then drift
to the waterfall's pool, walled in with polished off rocks.
The pond fills with cattails and gathers spies on all sides.

In Mud Time

I'm naked, again, of course, but I am not running away –
there's rain and no one sees me or I them. I can stand
in the waterfall's pond and spit and sing until it dries
into this lunar field. There's the shack, where I write and hide,
rising a little more each time it rains. It's only half under.

Ringing

After the apocalypse, it snows. Survivors wear wool coats
and walk dogs. Gray buildings congregate and language fractures
over crackling radios. The lunch lines are long. I remember
my high school locker combination, and my first girlfriend
is here. She says yes, but I can't stop thinking last bell.

Last Call

As she tells me how her husband's mother insists she's not
to leave the bedroom after dark, she lifts her left leg
along the barroom table, I stroke her green sock and listen,
she points it out, I drop my hand, I apologize.
We're in the parking lot after hours walking away.

Black Hole with Red and White Checkered Table Cloth

I light my pipe. She serves a plate of potatoes.
She's laid out a bowl of milk, a cup of coffee, a basket
of tangerines, a platter with a donut. A tangerine pops
into its hole, another, a stream of coffee, milk, potatoes,
the smoke, then me
falling. My farewell stare – she's folding closed the table cloth.

Hallway

At the end of the hallway is a crack.
With this step past the stairs, the crack is a door
blossoming into orange poppy. When I reach to pluck
a petal, the end of the hallway is a mirror
with someone tugging my hand from behind.

Night Tremor (after Alexander Long)

I'm reading back cover book blurbs when rain arrives.
When lightning and thunder fall, I lock the front door.
I re-cover my books. The dry morning wakes me.
I open the door. Thunder is tangled in a tree.
Lightning encourages it to jump into the light.

Turned Back

It's my last day of tinkering with clocks
and the angle of my car's rearview mirror. It's the last day
I'll untie my shoes and count the steps to my bedroom.

It is the last time I'll measure my life – my compass
having drawn the full arc from the day I arrived.

Empty Suit (for Sophie)

This CEO reminds me of my daughter doodling
(though less responsible and loopy), but he won't spin
        his chair.
His office phone rings and delivers urgent information
as her play phone, though less charming and meaningful.
        I miss her.
Only a graveyard is filled with the irreplaceable.

Untitled (Hallway with Binding)

The hallway curves into a vanishing point.
On one side, the carved wooden rail. On the other,
the wall and bookshelf with the book that anticipates me.
It's soft and drapes in my hands. Each page reads
to a story's end. Every morning begins like this.

A.M. Juster

Loss for Words

I am in a painterly mood
at my kitchen table
sketching out a poem
called “Avocados in Action,”
but I am having trouble
coming up with adjectives
for their color and knobbiness,
plus nothing in the bowl
ever seems to move.

*(*from *The Billy Collins Experience)*

Completed Fragments of Rilke

"Les Dieux: ces obstinés qui vivent . . ."

The Gods: recalcitrants who live
in contradiction, frauds who lie
about which sins they may forgive,
which joys they know they must deny.

"Quelle étrange passion . . ."

What peculiar passion
transforms this large number
of things as they slumber
into words that fashion

a silence of flowers
with roots that do not tire
but bequeath desire
in still perfect hours.

"Est-ce des Dieux en fuite . . ."

Is it the Gods in flight
who make the sun resound
or is it human sight
where glory may be found?

Jacqueline Kolosov

Reconsiderations of the Epic: The Woman and the Poet in the Age of Terror

I.

In *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser argues that poetry is integral to the survival of our species and our planet. Denying the responsiveness that poetry asks of us, Rukeyser believes, brings forth "the weakness that leads to mechanical aggression…turning us inward to devour our own humanity, and outward to sell and kill nature and each other" (41). Given the corrosive aftermath of September 11, the violence endemic in the Middle East, and the global terrorism and atrocity, no one could argue that the stakes are not—*turning inward to devour our own humanity*—this high.

The modernist poet H.D.'s profound relevance and resonance today is the rationale for recuperating her long-neglected, book-length *Trilogy* and placing this visionary work—what I consider a feminine epic—in dialogue with the very necessary "epic" visions of three contemporary women poets, all of whom focus on the unbearably high costs of war. They are Lee Sharkey's *Calendars of Fire,* Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, and Louise Glück's *Averno*.

H.D.'s writings about war emerged out of direct experience. During World War I, she suffered profound trauma in London intensified by the death of her brother Gilbert, who fought in France. This series of shocks then converged with pneumonia that nearly killed her and her unborn child. Given such experience it is remarkable that she not only chose to remain in London during World War II but that she wrote each of the three long poems that became *Trilogy*. These poems

include “The Walls Do Not Fall,” written in 1942; “Tribute to the Angels,” which spans May 17-31, 1944; and “The Flowering of the Rod,” also written in a dizzying span of time between December 18-31, 1944. H.D. said of the composition of *Trilogy*: “The orgy of destructions … to be witnessed and lived through in London, that outer threat and constant reminder of death, drove me inward” (Pearson, v). Inwardness, in *Trilogy*, takes many forms. One of the earliest and most powerful examples occurs midway through the first book, “The Walls Do Not Fall”:

> [22]
>
> Now my right hand,
> now my left hand
>
> clutch your curled fleece;
> take me home, take me home,
>
> my voice wails from the ground;
> take me home, Father:
>
> pale as the worm in the grass,
> yet I am a spark
>
> struck by your hoof from a rock:
> *Amen*, you are so warm,
>
> hide me in your fleece,
> crop me up with the new-grass;
>
> let your teeth devour me,
> let me be warm in your belly,
>
> the sun-disk,
> the re-born Sun. (31)

The speaker pleads with the many faces or incarnations of God to "take me home," thereby invoking the safety and creative power that comes from living within, perhaps the only 'home' one can claim during wartime. In H.D.'s address to the faces of God, "Father" conjures the benevolent, shepherd God from the Judeo-Christian tradition, He who would "hide me in your fleece." "Amen" invokes the Judeo-Christian tradition, but within it remains 'Amon' or 'Amon-Ra,' who is associated with Ra, the Egyptian sun god, chief deity, and father of all things, and ultimately with Jesus Christ, the "reborn" Son of God.

Integral to H.D.'s method is the recovery of, dialogue between, and ultimately the alchemy, both of language—"Thoth, Hermes, the stylus, / the palette, the pen, the quill endure" (lines 1-2, Poem 9, "Walls")—and of religious, mythic, and cultural identities:

[39]

. . . I know, I feel
the meaning that words hide;

They are anagrams, cryptograms,
little boxes, conditioned

to hatch butterflies . . .

[40]

For example:
Osiris equates O-sir-is or O-Sire-is;

Osiris,
the star Sirius,
relates resurrection myth

and resurrection reality

. . . correlate faith with faith,

recover the secret of Isis,
which is: there was One

in the beginning, Creator,
Fosterer, Begetter, the Same-forever

in the papyrus-swamp
in the Judean meadow. (53)

For H.D., alchemy leads to the refinement, not of metals but of meanings, and the set of Osiris phonemes, the ability poetically to deconstruct words, leads the speaker and her readers to the mystical knowledge of the One [God]. In her own words: the "stylus … dipped in corrosive sublimate" will "scratch out // indelible ink of the palimpsest of past misadventure" (6). Osiris takes us back to the Lord God with 'O-Sire-is,' and with the evocation of 'Sirius,' to the star connected with Osiris's wife Isis and yearly regeneration and resurrection. Linguistic alchemy thereby enables H.D. to restore the scribe to her place of authority, with art becoming the medium for the redemption of both individual and culture.

II.

Although H.D. would not have considered herself the hero of *Trilogy*, "hero" belonging to the patriarchal tradition she seeks to amend, she does conceive of herself as the conduit for a vision by virtue of the fact that she has done her "worm cycle," the necessary prelude to a higher form of living/loving:

[6]

In me (the worm) clearly
is no righteousness, but this—

persistence; I escaped spider-snare,
bird-claw, scavenger bird-beak,

clung to grass-blade,
the back of a leaf

when storm-wind
tore it from its stem;

I escaped, I explored
rose-thorn forest . . .

. . . . I am yet unrepentant,

for I know how the Lord God
is about to manifest, when I,

the industrious worm,
spin my own shroud. (11-12)

[7]

Gods, goddesses
wear the winged head-dress

of horns, as the butterfly
antennae,

or the erect king-cobra crest
to show how the worm turns. (13)

These excerpts from "The Walls Do Not Fall" dramatize the self-authorizing, defiant power of the worm who is wise enough to intuit God's coming—"I know how the Lord God / is about to manifest." The worm emerges from its cocoon as butterfly or psyche—the soul; implicit in the worm cycle is death followed by rebirth, which H.D. conceived of as her own experience, and simultaneously as the path to a higher state of being. The butterfly—psyche or soul—is ultimately connected to the cobra that adorned the head-dress of Egyptian gods and goddesses—"to show how the worm turns"—and later the head-dresses of the pharaohs. In her rebirth as Psyche/the butterfly, H.D. therefore becomes both visionary and scribe, a divine vocation allied with the Egyptian Thoth (who also weighed souls in the afterlife) and later, with the Greek Hermes, the messenger god. Fundamental to the wisdom of the worm is its embrace of multiplicity, which translates into the power of finding value and commonality across religions.

III.

Poetry's power, Rukeyser argues, lies in its capacity to enact a transfer of human energy—"which is consciousness"— and this in turn leads to "the capacity to make change in existing conditions" precisely because poetry invites a *total response* (emphasis added, 11 & 173). Rukeyser's words have profound bearing on the revisionist vision of H.D.'s *Trilogy* and on the contemporary work of Lee Sharkey, Alice Oswald, and Louise Glück, each of whom participates in pushing further the vision of a feminine epic, one that I define as intrinsically meditative, open to the traditions and values of other cultures, and grounded in the need to salvage, preserve, and mourn the losses of war, all of which are necessary to the survival of human beings and our planet.

Calendars of Fire, Lee Sharkey's fourth collection, takes its title from Muriel Rukeyser's "Letter to the Front," the seventh section of which opens:

> To be a Jew in the twentieth century
> Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
> Wishing to be invisible, you choose
> Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.
> Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:
> Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood
> Of those who resist, fail, and resist; and God
> Reduced to a hostage among hostages.

"Jew" here could be replaced with "Poet," and *Calendars of Fire* is closely allied with the central concerns that Rukeyser maps out:

> I came of age in poetry reading Adrienne Rich, whose work foretold my life and set me on the path of a poetry born of questioning [Sharkey told me in an email exchange]. I have always been politically engaged…and looked toward Rich's work, and later Muriel Rukeyser's, for what an aesthetic of engagement might look like. Carolyn Forché, in *The Angel of History, Blue Hour*, and her monumental anthology *Against Forgetting*, offered forms of witness that felt as if they were wrenched from the body. I wanted nothing less.

In "On Urgency and Form," forthcoming on Tupelo's website, Sharkey further defines the characters and historical events driving her need to understand and remain politically engaged:

> My work is chronically inflected by issues of war and peace, in particular of late by two aspects of my

> Jewish identity: my acute discomfort over the treatment of the Palestinians by the state of Israel and the persistent shadow of the Nazi Holocaust—by the human capacity to make holocausts. I don't mean these necessarily determine the subject matter of my poems; rather, they color my consciousness, torque my sentences, shape my broodings about life and human nature. Given humanity's proclivity to violence and our headlong if inadvertent rush to make the biosphere unfit for life, what instruments can poets summon for the transformation Langston Hughes invokes when he calls out, "I'm gonna split this rock. / And split it wide! / When I split this rock, / Stand by my side," that Celan summons, as if in prayer from purgatory: "One more word like this, and the hammers will be swinging free"?

In writing *Calendars of Fire*, Sharkey began with a question about pronouns. "What would it take to make of 'I' and 'you,' the other I am separated from by history, ideology, religion, nationality, or gender, a 'we'?" To bridge that gap—or gulf—Sharkey, like H.D. before her—draws upon mythology, archetypal psychology, and history. The title poem, a sequence in nine parts, comes at the end of the collection and is concerned with the conflicts in Sarajevo, Serbia and Iran, but also with violence dating back to the Spanish Inquisition. The poem brings these atrocities and sufferings into dialogue so that they become part of a larger continuum of violence.

"Calendars of Fire" begins by invoking Mnemosyne and Lesmosyne, Greek sister goddesses. The first presides over memory and is in legend the mother of the muses, the source from which all human culture including art, history, and science, springs. Without memory, the imaginative reshaping or re-membering of experience would be impossible. Lesmosyne presides over forgetting, and the tension between the will to re-member and the need to forget is

strong in "Calendars of Fire," though it is memory which must abide despite the extremity of remaining present. The poem is composed primarily in couplets, many of which pair phrases that foreground action or image. The third of nine sections oscillates between memory/recovery/ recuperation and forgetting/death/the abyss:

> If you remember a sax lilt wafting above the tree line
> If you remember a house that arose from the fire
>
> In Death's walled face, the lids blink up
> Eyes meet my gaze as if from a black backdrop
>
> You, the eyes say, well, the eyes say, pull, the eyes say
> Say, they say, I've got no time don't skirt around
>
> *I want what you know*. The whole past rushes forward
> Folded flat as a kerchief, opening to flower
>
> Once Death squatted with his monkey in the garden
> Eating every bug the monkey ate (45-46).

Nearly seventy years after the Second World War, violence and terror are endemic, and we are making "the biosphere unfit for life." Sharkey, unlike H.D., cannot possibly feel herself to be "on the verge of a new religion." No, for her it must be enough to remember and recover, in language, fragments from the violence, and hold them up to the light. In remembering, Sharkey puts self and world in active dialogue, relying on parataxis that leads to strategies of juxtaposition. Ultimately, what she wants is language that moves by association across white space and silence that can rove across time, space, and modes of perception, generating a resonant field of consciousness:

> I breathe him in
> He inhabits me. He smells like balsam

I tell you this
Because quitting is not an option

Because I have seen the life spill out of him
Because the camera presents me with the moment the
life spilled out of him

He becomes my chosen one
Pearl at the base of the spine

When the tear gas canister punctures his abdomen he
is yelling
There are children here!

Waving his arms to draw the attention of the soldiers
To the rise he stands on to track what is happening
below . . .

You too can watch it
At *youtube.com/watch?v=OI4d7pFKzSU&feature=fvsr*

The soldiers take deliberate aim

He bellows once in surprise and outrage
Rolls down the slope and comes to rest in a curl (51-52)

The man's identity is not given in the poem, and he becomes part of a continuum of men, women and children destroyed by violence. Yet the speaker remembers him—"He becomes my chosen one / Pearl at the base of the spine." The language here is reverent and highly symbolic. Sharkey goes beyond a poetry of witness to participate in remembering and honoring, a sacred act, what the Jewish tradition calls 'Zakhor'—the command to remember, a moral act with an impact reaching backwards and forwards in time. Troubling Sharkey's verse is

the reference to YouTube, which partakes of Lesmosyne's domain. As the constant television coverage of 9/11 demonstrated, the inundation and ultimately the commodification or fetishization of horror numbs the viewer to violence.

Like H.D., the speaker/poet of *Calendars of Fire* is less a prophet and more a conduit for a vision. "By your intolerable acts of grace," the last poem in the collection, articulates poetry's struggle to stay present during a time of violence, while acknowledging the limits of such a vision:

> You are the teacher standing in the aftermath who
> insists,
> Kill us all, kill us all right now
>
> I am the witness who forgets the prayer and where it
> was made but swears, there
> was prayer there, there is a prayer
>
> You are the nurse who spoons egg yolk into the
> prisoner's mouth. (58)

The 'You' in this section seeks both Lesmosyne's renunciation and Mnemosyne's preservation. It is the 'I' who is consistent, not that she does not forget "the prayer." Rather, she knows that it did and does exist:

> You have labored to gather stone from the speechless
> Tongues in the rock
> On the drumskin of earth, we run. (60)

In these closing lines, Sharkey fulfills the quest with which she began: "What would it take to make of the 'I' and 'you,' the other I am separated from by history, ideology, religion, nationality, or gender, a 'we'?" That quest centers on being present, *not with Self but with Soul*, to the suffering endemic now and in the past. It is a quest charged with the sacred and ritual act of laying stones beside graves to acknowledge that

a life was—that lives were—lived and lost. Here, the 'You' gathers the stones from those who cannot speak. The stones are blessed with "tongues." The final line evokes ritual and the ritual actions of tribal culture, locating that culture on the skin of earth. "We run." Away? Towards? Or does the value of that 'we' lie in action, in the fact that 'we' do not remain static?

IV.

As H.D.'s *Trilogy* demonstrates, the oral tradition out of which epic derives emphasizes transformation and evolution. In her Afterward to Alice Oswald's *Memorial: A Version of Homer's Iliad*, Eavan Boland writes:

> *Memorial* is built on Homer's *Iliad*. It stands squarely on an epic foundation. The names are the same. Some of the actions are the same. The locations are identical. The similes are comparable. But why, the reader might ask, do these young men need to die again? Didn't Homer already lay them down in his great text? (84)

Boland provides an answer and attests to the oral tradition's ability to renew itself by drawing upon Oswald's description of *Memorial* as "an excavation of the *Iliad*":

What we see above all is that the atmosphere of epic has no expiry date. The soldiers here are not ciphers any more than they are merely symbols in the *Iliad*. In fact, the opposite is true. They are the brothers, husbands, sons over every war. And as we put down *Memorial* we wonder whether we first met them in Homer's epic or saw them on last night's news bulletin (85).

Oswald lifts the *Iliad* out of the context of the Trojan War to make its violence speak across time, further enlarging the conversation surrounding contemporary women poets'

engagements of war. Oswald herself calls *Memorial* "a translation of the *Iliad*'s atmosphere, not its story"; and her goal is to bring forth what the ancient critics praised in the *Iliad*—"its '*enargeia*'" (ix). This is not, however, the nobility of action that Matthew Arnold singled out during the Victorian era. Rather, "it means something like 'bright unbearable reality,'" Oswald writes in the Introduction. " . . .

[In] trying to retrieve the poem's *enargeia*, *[Memorial]* takes away its narrative, as you might lift the roof off a church in order to remember what you're worshipping" (ix). Here, Oswald seems to echo *Trilogy's* opening lines:

> [1]
>
> . . . ruin everywhere, yet as the fallen roof
> leaves the sealed room
> open to the air,
>
> so, through our desolation,
> thoughts stir, inspiration stalks us
> through gloom:
>
> unaware, Spirit announces the Presence . . . . (1).

Narrative, in *Trilogy* and *Memorial* as well as *Calendars of Fire*, moves to the background; in its place is what H.D. calls Presence; and Oswald "what you're worshipping." The comparison reveals a great deal about the poets' intentions, H.D.'s and Oswald's but also Sharkey's. In *Memorial*, Oswald draws intensively upon the oral tradition for the multiplicity of narratives they include; and the oral tradition invites revision; or in Eavan Boland's words: "the old, sacred purpose of the oral tradition . . . is nothing less than to be an understudy for human memory" (87). After stripping away the roof, what remains in *Memorial*, Oswald says, is "a bipolar poem made of similes and short biographies of soldiers, both of which

derive…from distinct poetic sources . . . the biographies from the Greek tradition of lament poetry" (ix).

Memorial begins by listing the names of more than two hundred dead, the effect akin to gazing at a war memorial's seemingly endless list of those who have been lost. The poem moves from this list to focus on the moment of each soldier's dying. The concentration of Oswald's technique builds in momentum as the reader tries to stay present with the chronicle of each soldier's death. Here is *Memorial's* depiction of Medon, the one hundred twenty-sixth soldier's dying:

> Poor wandering MEDON born out of wedlock
> Struck his hand into this ice-cold world
> And didn't like it but he had no choice
> Grew up in Locris under the smile
> Of a slim respectable stepmother
> And murdered her brother
>
> Then it was years of sleeping under bushes
> He went north to Phylace then north to Troy
> And at last in the ninth year
> Death kicked him and he kicked it back
> He was close to no one
>
> Like when a donkey walking by a cornfield
> Decides to stop
> Stands there being prodded and whacked
> Thinking good I will wade and eat sideways
> And does just that eats and eats sunk in a pond of corn
> Exhausted farm boys beat him with sticks
> Their arms ache their sticks break
> But nothing moves that big lump of donkey
> From the fixed statue of his eating
> Until he's full and of his own iron will
> Walks on (51-52)

Oswald's encapsulation of Medon's brief life is so sharply etched that his unhappiness and his status as an outcast pulse through the opening stanza, an isolation punctuated by phrases like " . . . . ice-cold world / And didn't like it but he had no choice . . . . / He was close to no one." The extended simile that follows Medon's biography brings lyric intensity to his story and makes his death seem almost pre-determined, instinctual in the way a donkey is stubborn and greedy: "Like when a donkey / eats and eats sunk in a pond of corn / Exhausted farm boys beat him with sticks… /But nothing moves… / Until he's full and of his own iron will / Walks on."

Memorial relies on repetition, extended similes, and the absence of punctuation, so that its central question becomes: how does the poet and by extension the reader find her way out—if there is a way? Oswald's final stanzas, each of which occupies a page unto itself, so that the white space engulfs or starkly frames the narrative, focus intensively on the mythic endlessness of war and war's rapacity:

> Like tribes of summer bees
> Coming up from the underworld out of a crack in a
> rock
> A billion factory women flying to their flower work
> Being born and reborn and shimmering over fields
>
> [page break]
>
> Like locusts lifted rippling over fields on fire
> Fleeing to the river
> A hanging banner of insects trying to outfly flame
> They hide by drowning
>
> [page break]
>
> Like restless wolves never run out of hunger
> Can eat a whole stag

Can drink the whole surface off a pool
Lapping away its blackness with thin tongues
And belching it back as blood
And still go on killing and killing
With their stomachs rubbing their sides
Haunted by hunger

[page break]
Like when water hits a rocky dam
Its long strong arms can't break those stones
And all its pouring rush curls back on itself
And bleeds sideways into marshes

[page break]

Like when god throws a star
And everyone looks up
To see that whip of sparks
And then it's gone (76-81)

Memorial's portrayal of the factory women as summer bees from the underworld brings to the foreground the presence of women—as wives, mothers and daughters—lurking at the margins. Their guise as factory women attests to *Memorial's* timelessness but also to its rightness in our historical moment of cheap global labor, becoming a window into the un-lives of the millions who toil in inhumane conditions. The workers are proceeded by the locusts—the displaced millions, the refugees—who "trying to outfly flame / …hide by drowning." It is a bleak yet dangerously luminous close, the '*enargeia*' which drives Oswald's vision, so that once we leave the force/presence/omnipresence of war, those "restless wolves [who] never run out of hunger," to arrive at the swift, dazzling sign of the god—known only through "that whip of sparks." Oswald ends the poem, not in a nihilistic universe, but one in which God or, significantly, 'god' is glimpsed but not necessarily known in a glimmer, an image that brings to

mind the bleakness or delusion that Emily Dickinson, in her darkest poems, associates with Hope which, according to the ancient Greeks, always appeared holding hands with Pathos:

> The Truth, is Bald – and Cold –
> But that will hold –
> If any are not sure –
> We show them – prayer –
> But we, who know,
> Stop hoping, now – . . .
>
> (Poem #341)

When we think of hope, we think of expectations, wishes, faith in the future. Pathos, however, transforms Hope into something quite other; and for Dickinson, hope is only for the deluded. Oswald's *Memorial* understands the inevitability of Hope and Pathos's partnership; hers is not delusion; rather it is a bright, unbearable reality, and profoundly necessary in our endless end time.

V.

Whereas *Memorial's* conversation is with the *Iliad*, in *Averno* Louise Glück joins a continuum of poets going back to Virgil who travel to the underworld—and return—bringing with them the knowledge of what they have learned. *Averno* takes its name from the Lago d'Averno, a volcanic crater lake ten miles west of Naples, two miles in circumference and two hundred feet in depth. For the ancient Romans, the Lago d'Averno reached far deeper, becoming the portal to the underworld.

Averno's six-sectioned "October," the first of several long sequences, is a meditation on our most primal fears: the end of love, the dissolution of memory, and the aging of both the body and the spirit. It is simultaneously a war poem written in the aftermath of 9/11. The way light moves through "October" both echoes and enters into conversation with the *'enargeia'* of the ancients that is Oswald's flame:

. . . . *Come to me*, said the world. I was standing
in my wool coat at a kind of bright portal—
I can finally say
long ago; it gives me considerable pleasure. Beauty
the healer, the teacher—
death cannot harm me
more than you have harmed me,
my beloved life. (9)

[End of Section Three]

The remembered girl that Glück conjures in such moments is idealistic, hopeful and naïve. The fourth section cuts immediately to the contemporary speaker's much more disturbing light:

The light has changed;
middle C is tuned darker now.
And the songs of morning sound over-rehearsed.

This is the light of autumn, not the light of spring.
The light of autumn: *you will not be spared*.

The songs have changed; the unspeakable
has entered them.

This is the light of autumn, not the light that says
I am reborn.

Not the spring dawn: *I strained, I suffered, I was delivered*.
This is the present, an allegory of waste….

The songs have changed, but really they are still quite beautiful.
They have been concentrated in a smaller space, the space of the mind.

> They are dark, now, with desolation and anguish.
> And yet the notes recur. They hover oddly
> in anticipation of silence.
> The ear gets used to them.
> The eye gets used to disappearances.
> *You will not be spared, nor will what you love be spared.* (11)

Alongside these stark, primal fears, Averno contains within it the language of faith or spirit—*I strained, I suffered, I was delivered*—set against absolute bleakness that refuses to give way to despair. This tension invests Glück's work with a prophetic power, except that here prophecy moves both backwards in time and forwards into an unbearable present which must be borne—"The ear gets used to them. / The eye gets used to disappearances."

Despite the lack of hope with which Averno views humanity and existence itself—*You will not be spared, nor will what you love be spared*—Glück makes conscious to the reader her gratitude to her vocation:

> How privileged you are, to be still passionately
> clinging to what you love;
> the forfeit of hope has not destroyed you
>
> *Maestoso, doloroso:*
>
> This is the light of autumn; it has turned on us.
> Surely it is a privilege to approach the end
> still believing in something.
>
> [End of Section 4]

The fourth line invokes two musical terms from the Italian, *majestic* and *sorrowful*, and sets them side by side, an act that ennobles her discovery and allies poetry with music, the most cerebral of the arts. Unlike H.D.'s language, rife with

triplings and the doublings and re-doublings of mythic echoes, Glück's language is spare, bracing, fierce. Her attention to the light of autumn inevitably recollects Keats's great ode. But whereas Keats's autumn burgeons with the harvest and with the sounds of the bees, in "October" the light "has turned on us"; the silence that remains is harrowing.

"October" attests to Glück's vision of herself as a speaker of truth, stripping away illusion. She is in Dickinson's company, and in the company of Oswald and Sharkey, "we who know." In *Averno*, truth glitters and terrifies, like the landscape and culture of Hades with which the collection is simultaneously engaged:

> It is true there is not enough beauty in the world.
> It is also true that I am not competent to restore it.
> Neither is there candor, and here I may be of use….
>
> The bland
>
> misery of the world
> bounds us on either side, an alley
>
> lined with trees; we are
>
> companions here, not speaking,
> each with his own thoughts;
>
> behind the trees, iron
> gates of the private houses,
> the shuttered rooms
>
> somehow deserted, abandoned,
>
> as though it were the artist's
> duty to create
> hope, but out of what? what?
> the word itself

false, a device to refute
perception . . . .

(Opening of Section 5, p. 13)

The poem dramatizes a mind in dialogue with itself; both placing the poem and its speaker in time and moving them beyond this historical moment towards the end time that section four confronts. The landscape here and throughout much of "October" is both specific and mythic—"The bland // misery of the world / bounds us on either side, an alley // lined with trees." Like H.D., Sharkey, and Oswald, Glück's strategic use of repetition wrenches the poem free of its historical context to locate it in a meditative space concerned with all time in which repetition is allied with ritual, reoccurrence, refrain.

The profound difference between *Trilogy* and *Averno*, one that maps the distance in perspective that we in western culture have come since World War II, crystallizes in "October's" sixth and final section:

. . . My friend the earth is bitter; I think
sunlight has failed her.
Bitter or weary, it is hard to say

Between herself and the sun,
something has ended
She wants, now, to be left alone;
I think we must give up
turning to her for affirmation . . . .

From within the earth's
bitter disgrace, the coldness and barrenness
my friend the moon rises:
she is beautiful tonight, but when is she not beautiful?
(15)

Unlike H.D., whose path to redemption lies in recovering and reconnecting with the goddesses of prehistory, Glück rejects, absolutely, the possibility that the earth, sun, and moon—and the divinities associated with them—can still be called upon to aid us, to care. There is no scaffolding here for understanding the earth's desire "to be left alone," no context; but really, does the contemporary reader need any? Glück's moon recollects, very subtly, the moon of Plath's *Ariel*, the antithesis of the loving mother. For Glück, however, the moon was never a mother. She remains other, distant, rather like the god who 'throws a star' at the close of *Memorial*. The moon, beautiful though she is, has nothing to offer us; her presence is a chilling corrective or reminder against romanticizing beauty.

Averno's vision is epic, and the central action is a dual one, for the poems replay the aftermath of the fall from innocence, again and again, to concentrate on living in the post-lapsarian state which is the condition of each of *Averno's* poems. Whereas *Trilogy* recuperates myths from across cultures in order to build the scaffolding for a new religion to heal the world, *Averno's* central and recurring myth is that of Persephone. That daughter/girl/initiate's centrality is established in "October" with the vision of the speaker standing in her wool coat "at the bright portal" of the world, a vision that returns, later in the poem, with a painful difference.

Averno's Persephone is both the girl of myth and a figure for the poet who has gone down to hell and returned. "Persephone the Wanderer" is the title of two poems, the poem proceeding "October" and the poem that closes the collection. In the first, Glück nods to Aristotle's vision of epic, in which action and not character, is central:

> You are allowed to like
> no one, you know. The characters
> are not people.
> They are aspects of a dilemma or conflict.

Three parts: just as the soul is divided,
ego, superego, id. Likewise

the three levels of the known world,
a kind of diagram that separates
heaven from earth from hell . . . .
They say
there is a rift in the human soul
which was not constructed to belong
entirely to life . . . .

Song of the earth,
song of the mythic vision of eternal life—

My soul
shattered with the strain
of trying to belong to earth—
What will you do,
when it is your turn in the field with the god [Hades]?
(17-18)

The voice of "Persephone the Wanderer," like the voice of "October," is meditative, philosophical, and able to speak from that place beyond conflict, which is the space of psychoanalysis, a process Glück describes in *Proofs and Theories*, and a practice that, it could be argued, enables the unflinching perspective—the ability to stay present given the unthinkable—that she brings to bear on *Averno*. Here I would single out her emphasis on the "rift in the human soul / which was not constructed to belong / entirely to life." To what, then, does that other part of the soul belong?

If Glück offers an answer, it must be "song of the mythic vision of eternal life" which *Averno* renounces, continually acknowledging that the light in which such a vision was possible, has changed—"middle C is tuned darker now. / And the songs of morning sound over-rehearsed. // This is

the light of autumn, not the light of spring. / The light of autumn: *you will not be spared."*

By the time we arrive at the second and final poem, "Persephone the Wanderer," Persephone has grown accustomed to hell, and her contemporary counterpart, a girl who is not the girl-self of Glück's "October," has set fire to a field. That girl's legacy? The consequence?:

> . . . The field was covered with snow, immaculate.
> There wasn't a sign of what happened here . . . .
>
> The police didn't catch the girl.
> After awhile they said she moved to some other
> country,
> one where they don't have fields.
>
> A disaster like this
> leaves no mark on the earth.
> And people like that—they think it gives them
> a fresh start.
>
> I stood a long time, staring at nothing.
> After a bit, I noticed how dark it was, how cold.
> A long time—I have no idea how long.
> Once the earth decides to have no memory
> time seems in a way meaningless . . . . (62)

The girl's story—like Persephone's—speaks to our time, to the aftermath of 9/11 that is the subtext in "October," and to the aftermath of all acts of terror—"A disaster likes this / leaves no mark on the earth." Here, the earth herself detaches. The speaker strives to be like the earth—to detach—and at the same time knows that is not part of her journey. Despite her loss of hope, the poet is still "passionately / clinging to what [she] love[s]," and at the last it is this passion that grounds and safeguards her.

In this last poem, the focus oscillates between Demeter and Persephone. In losing her daughter, the mother is duplicitous, untrustworthy—"like a politician / she remembers everything and admits / nothing." Persephone, who is inevitably subjected to the will / whim of her mother "haul[ing] her out again [each spring]," is a much more complicated figure. During her time with Hades, Persephone is wrenched free of 'the feeling' that living on this earth requires, a condition that returns us to Glück's earlier "there is a rift in the human soul / which was not constructed to belong / entirely to life . . . ." At the poem's close, Persephone's identity merges with the poet-speaker's so that the collection concludes:

> I think I can remember
> being dead. Many times, in winter,
> I approached Zeus. Tell me, I would ask him,
> how can I endure the earth?
>
> And he would say,
> in a short time you will be here again.
> And in the time between
>
> you will forget everything:
> those fields of ice will be
> the meadows of Elysium. (76)

It is a chilling way to exit, this transformation of the Ancient Greek conception of the afterlife, one reserved for those chosen by the gods for their righteousness and heroism on earth. H.D.'s concept of Elysium includes the Islands of the Blessed, and her voyagers aspire, 'not merely [to] the will to endure.' No, her voyagers possess as she does:

> the will to flight, the will to achievement,

the will to rest after long flight;
but who knows the desperate urge

of those others—actual or perhaps now
mythical birds—who seek but find no rest
till they drop from the highest point of the spiral
or fall from the innermost centre of the ever-
narrowing circle?

for they remember, they remember, as they sway and
hover,

what once was—they remember, they remember—

they will not swerve—they have known bliss….

for theirs is the hunger
for Paradise. (119-120)

In H.D.'s vision, the recovery of Elysium is a legitimate and worthy quest. The birds she speaks of—also figures for the self and for the selves surrounding her—hunger for Paradise, and they will hold back nothing in order to arrive there. In *Averno*, Elysium has become hell. Or more accurately, because Persephone/also the poet-speaker "will forget everything" the ravaged world with its "fields of ice *will be* / the meadows of Elysium" (emphasis added). Elysium becomes its antithesis, and that antithesis Glück dramatizes, throughout her series of journeys back from the underworld, is where *Averno* claims we now live.

As bleak as Glück's vision is, it "stand[s] against the idea of the fallen world" that Rukeyser identifies as the vocation for the poet precisely because the vision makes the fallen or broken nature of the world *conscious*. And consciousness derives from the Latin verb *conscire*, "to be mutually aware." The plurality of com/con "with, together" is central because it emphasizes poetry's charge to move

knowledge and awareness from the individual to the collective.

VI.

For H.D., consciousness is archetypal, and H.D. is the poet-visionary who initiates her readers in the path towards redemption. Lee Sharkey, Alice Oswald, and Louise Glück each in her own way follows in H.D.'s path. Their individual and collective acts of writing—of committing visions of horror to poetry and what's at stake in living in an end time—become the antithesis of "suffering in silence for the love of Truth." Writing—poetry—becomes advocacy: action; and in fundamental ways, the creation of a contemporary feminine epic steps into the place once occupied by traditional religious faith, though these epic visions—unlike H.D.'s—do not seek solace in religion, a severe mark of how visionary women's poetry has moved in the last seventy-five years.

Yet each poet's ability to remain present and conscious during endemic violence attests to the sustaining value of poetry. To paraphrase Rukeyser once more: Poetry is an art that lives in time. It expresses and evokes the moving relation between the individual consciousness and the world. Stepping further back in time, in Book XI of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine meditates on Genesis—on creation itself—in his search for the meaning of time in our lives:

> Suppose I am about to recite a psalm which I know. Before I begin, my expectation is directed towards the whole. But when I have begun, the verses from it which I take into the past become the object of my memory. The life of this act of mine is stretched two ways, into my memory because of the words I have already said and into my expectation because of those which I am about to say. But my attention is on what

> is present: by that the future is transferred to become the past . . . . The same is true of a longer action in which perhaps the psalm is a part. It is also valid of the entire life of an individual person, where all actions are parts of a whole, and of the total history of 'the sons of men' [Psalm 30] where all human lives are but parts. (Clarvoe, 31)

Each poet considered here is engaged in a practice that Augustine articulated more than fifteen hundred years ago; the fact that this practice abides is itself an achievement. It is one that stretches the mind and memory two ways: into the past and into the future.[1] Such a practice bears on "the entire life of an individual person, where all actions are parts of a whole, and of the total history of "the sons [and daughters] of men [and women]" where all human lives are but parts." The bracketed material is essential here for it returns us to H.D.'s quest to restore the feminine principle to the divine. Without this emphasis on creation and renewal, she understood, we would be lost.[2]

> A poem does invite, it does require. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response. This response is total, but it is reached through the motions . . . . That experience will have meaning. It will apply to your life; and it is more than likely to lead you to thought or action, that is, you are likely to want to go further into the world, further into yourself, toward further experience. (Rukeyser, 8)

If there is a value of writing "epic" poetry in an age of terror, then, it is the value of remaining present to the jeopardized values that the visions of these poets embody and preserve. Remaining present and conscious are the first, necessary steps towards the preservation and transmission of

values that recognize and honor the value of life. This is poetry that requires the individual to be accountable, conscious and active in striving to salvage our world by drawing upon myth, psychoanalysis, and mnemonic devices, each and all tools for preserving, understanding, and transmitting the values that H.D. sought to bring into dialogue and so create "a new religion" amid the ruin of the Second World War. By virtue of committing their visions to poetry, each of the poets gathered here taps into the *enargeia* that Oswald describes: 'bright unbearable reality.' Their poetry compels the reader to look, witness, remain present, and remember. A central responsibility, then, centers on widening poetry's audience so that "The life of this act of mine is stretched two ways, into my memory because of the words I have already said and into my expectation because of those which I am about to say." Intrinsically meditative so that thought becomes action, this poetry has pushed further a new vision of the war epic, one that recuperates a regenerative force of the feminine that changes both poet and reader from within.

Notes

[1] '…gods always face two-ways' is a reoccurring motif in *Trilogy*, for understanding the non-linearity of time and the ways in which pre-history—what seems past—is vaulted into the present (*Trilogy*, 5).

[2] That principle is the source of value that Glück herself acknowledges in "The Evening Star":

> Tonight, for the first time in many years,
> there appeared to me again
> a vision of the earth's splendor:
>
> in the evening sky
> the first star seemed
> to increase in brilliance
> as the earth darkened
> until at last it could grow no darker.
> And the light, which was the light of death,

seemed to restore to earth
its power to console. There were
no other stars. Only the one
whose name I knew

as in my other life I did her
injury: Venus,
star of the early evening,

to you I dedicate
my vision, since on this blank surface

you have cast enough light
to make my thought
visible again. (39)

Venus, after the sun and moon, is the third brightest planet. And it is Venus to whom H.D. also turns or returns: "O holiest one," she addresses her, "Venus whose name is kin // to venerate, / venerator." She is the goddess of love; but for the poets considered here, it is love of all of our lives on this fragile planet.

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Leslie Monsour

Doggedness

The sun has followed through and come again
To tint my window pane pearlescent gray.
It's cloudy, but it isn't gong to rain;
That's the official forecast for today.

The fly resumes its angry arabesque;
The child across the street heads off to school;
I gravitate in stages to my desk
And take my swivel throne, summon the fool.

On cue, the neighbor's dog begins to yelp;
Its chambers echo like a catacomb.
I'd go and comfort it, if that would help,
But it's not me it cries for to come home.

The dog is at a loss without its master.
It clamors in confusion at its lot.
You'd think it had been stranded by disaster,
The way it howls. It overruns my thought,

As if a distant dog awaited me
In some abandoned place I knew before;
I'll search for it and keep it company,
Until my own master comes through the door.

James B. Nicola

Album on a Turntable

A little this and that
        sprung from the coil
of wonder
        that is itself wound into a blackness
as pitch as nothing
        until something
is done.

        Conception:
the start, false starts and restarts,
        accidental and incidental
somethings on something of a highway
        that leads, in the end,
to the nowhere
        that is the center
by which creation is held.

Sometimes, replaying it, we'll skip
        dimensions, in a way,
like electrons jumping orbits
        or even smaller subatomic particles as they approach
the Void. Some have left behind a groove
        with a little this, a little that,
and a lot of something else which the diamond stylus

may follow to the hole to hear from Nothing
the sound of a lifeline unwinding round and round—
the somethings can't be seen, nor are they unseen,
but, once the jewel's re-lifted, are
rather like the
Common Silence.
When the jewel's replaced
the point scratches onward
through the delightful hazards
of occasion.

John Poch

Four Riddles

after Greg Williamson

1.
I've come to call your body home.
We share the same blood and die alone.
I'll help you eat your ice cream cone.

2.
A hem is part of my resume.
I cloak with my hand what I have to say.
My hanky takes your breath away.

3.
Let's drink to homonyms: to two
as well as one. If you're looking to
see something more, then I am too.

4.
I tell the account that will be told.
It's safe to say I guard the gold
but cannot keep the change I hold.

1.
a. A parasite
b. Death
c. Your big brother
d. Your clogged artery

2.
a. a good seamstress
b. a cough
c. a magician
d. hanky-panky

3.
a. glasses
b. also
c. a weird personal ad

4.
a. A teller
b. The till
c. A fortune teller
d. The pot at the end of the rainbow

Aidan Rooney

Rigor

All I can say to her in her language
is: this will pass. The tremors run through her
as if the earth had started up a dance,
then she dozes again under my hands,
good for nothing but their light-press weight.
Her too-small infant coos in the next room.
Sa a ap pase, I want to soothsay
in a more inarticulate Kreyòl
when the rigor roils again and her eyes
reopen into mine. Glazed. How can fear
appear so beautiful? There is nothing
more to say, so I say: *Dòmi, Couche.*
Couche, Dòmi, I say again, when we drop
her and her baby home – an 8-foot cube,
corrugated tin, US AID
wrap round bamboo stakes – and go over
the medications she will need to take,
counting out the days – *demen, aprè demen* –
till she is well and I will be long gone.

In Acadie

There is an interior here new world
blow-ins like myself don't enter often,
a dark sky reserve one can paddle round
like a first person. I like how round here
they will say, *I'm going up the valley,*
the way we would go – our home on a road
that took a fair dip out front – *down the North*.
We'd make a list. I'd to hide the butter.

The Home Depot an hour up the valley
has everything every Home Depot has
to put up a house, and then some, *mod-cons*
you'd call them. Onward, an airport. You'd land
in for the best, one-month summer around,
this only the half of it. You should see
the holiday home, not the one you saw,
once, really, only. You came across as

lonely for your own home. There's a county
near here, funny – Clare County – like back home
but backwards. We never knew if it was you
after it or both of you for the saint.
I've a friend in Clare, she speaks a mix of
Mi'qmaq and French, English like ours. You'd love
the wild life: porpoises, given the tides,
owls, wolves, the odd howl from who or God knows what.

J.D. Smith

Beginning with a Line from *The Bread Bible*

If working with a sticky dough alarms you,
First make yourself less prone to its effects.
Wash hands and forearms for some time, then dry
So thoroughly that no bits cling or slip.
These measures failing, or bypassing them,
Attempt to work with plastic gloves so that
Each finger's safe in its respective condom,
With all of the attendant loss and gain.
Regardless of the method you select,
Flour surfaces until an arid fog
Is stirred by your least move or slightest breath.
You may then ponder some alternatives:
Not having dough, or hands to knead it with—
Not to mention, as we often don't,
The distant if well-known enormities
That strike the Horn (and heart) of Africa
And everywhere it serves as metaphor,
Details of which can murder appetite.

To step away from melodrama, though,
What is the worst thing that could happen here?
A person learning baking from a book
Can well afford to lose a loaf or two

En route to golden-brown perfection.
The kitchen cleared, trash taken out, that loss
Will not be noted or remembered more
Than taking second in a spelling bee,
Failing a driving test the first time out,
Not getting into Harvard, or Yale Law.
Get over them, yourself, and if you must,
The Buddha in the road. Dough doesn't care.
If such indifference is not to taste,
Still try to raise your threshold of alarm.
Take stock, a breath, a shot of something strong.

Remember the alternatives. Start in.

To His Skeleton

At length, sharp bone
Becomes well known
As mottled skin
Grows paper thin,
Firm flesh shrinks back
And joints go slack,
As aches diffuse
Their worsening news.

Why excavate
At this late date
What will return
To earth, or burn?
What truth discerned,
What lesson learned
Requires this taste
Of coming waste?

No answers come
From Nature, mum
And still, which bends
To its own ends.
But asking will
Demand its fill.
As bones emerge,
Fresh questions surge.
What's lost, at length,
Besides youth's strength?

Gone like sound knees,
Are memories
Of long disease,
Uncertain cure,
Thought turned from pure
At early age
To gnarls of rage
At schoolyard taunts,
The unmet wants
Of single years,
Hard by careers
At lowly tiers
Of grinding gears
Or tapping keys,
And by degrees
Attaining, lo,
A long plateau
From which some fall,
For whom that's all
Until flesh fails,
Bone slips its veils.
This brings us to
The present view
Of short days left
And time's sure theft—
If indiscreet,
Not incomplete.
What's taken, then,
Won't come again,
Which holds, in brief,
Along with grief,
No small relief.

At a Bistro

A speck adrift in red wine caught my eye
And took shape as a minute fly,
Both wings and all six legs aflail
On alcohol and surface tension
Before the facts of physics could prevail,
Barring a rarely-offered intervention.

I could have waited for another glass
(The server, though, would seldom pass)
Or drunk my order, fly and all,
But squeamishness surpassed my thirst
Up to a point: my stomach wall,
I hoped, would hold against stray microbes' worst.

Possessed by curiosity or sloth,
And probably a bit of both,
I dipped a spoon into my drink
And, drawing up a sea-dark sip,
Spilled out the excess on the zinc
And left the sodden insect on the tip.

The ruby droplet turned to air, the fly
Held out its wings to further dry
Until, it seemed, no worse for wear
Nor swallowed in a drunken haze
It lifted off into the air
To live out its remaining hours or days.
This flight called for another round.

No better reason could be found:
I'd saved a helpless life, although
In the face of minimal resistance.
Today I'd nothing else to show
For my bourgeois mock epic of existence.

What grace, in turn, might I hope to receive?
I paid the check and took my leave.

Several Solitudes

In a culture run by and for extroverts, solitude stands little chance of receiving a proper assessment. Group activities seem to multiply into a minefield for the less gregarious, which poses a problem—for groups. At least one volume is dedicated to the difficulties that churches' congregational cultures pose to introverts and how congregations can attract and retain them, and presumably their donations. A sympathetic psychologist or management consultant might arrive at how many hours of an introvert's average workweek are devoted (i.e., "lost") to dodging or dreading birthday and other "parties" in windowless conference rooms and signing cards for them, or happy hours in similarly claustrophobic bars and restaurants with hard acoustics and loud ambient music. Time actually spent in these events, and in regretting them, represents a no doubt smaller number but one still too grim to contemplate, no matter how much alcohol is served. The prize for attempting to run the invitational gauntlet and emerge only minimally scathed earns one the distinction of being known as "antisocial," as if not attending an event threatened others' ability to do so. This stands in distinct contrast to the designation of persons with little or no libido as asexual rather than anti-sexual; they rarely interfere with others' fun.

Underlying the convivial norm is the assumption that solitude is inherently undesirable, and sometimes it can be. Working in small groups was crucial to the survival of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, and larger clusters have permitted—for good and ill—the specialization needed for sedentary agriculture and later industrial societies. At any stage of

civilization, there remain plenty of places where and times when one shouldn't walk alone.

In this context enforced solitude represents the sternest punishment. Execution can be over with quickly, but expulsion from the group and its resources means a living death, and in extreme climates quite possibly a slow and painful one. Anyone who enjoys air conditioning and running water can only imagine the desert psalmist's cry "I am cut off." It thus seems fair to wonder if the United States' refraining from exile as a sentence stems from the Eighth Amendment prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. Tangent to exile is solitary confinement, which for even the most confirmed introverts represents too much of a good thing.

Solitude, moreover, is associated with "the solitary vice" targeted in anti-masturbation hysterias of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—as is someone alone had no other options until the next telephone call or knock at the door. Snickering aside, hotels' "Do Not Disturb" signs may well have benefited more lone travelers reading or napping than any number of trysting couples or individuals pleasuring themselves. With or without hairy palms and a sidewalk-sweeping cane, some simply need less contact than others with the world that is too much with them.

Once solitude is deemed suspect, those who seek it out are likely to be regarded in a far from positive light. What kind of person is not drawn to the safety and pleasures of the community: solidarity, fellow-feeling, *Gemütlichkeit*? In other words, what is wrong with him/her/them?

Labels are applied like diagnoses of illness, and statistical deviance is conflated with the moral variety. The prevailing gregarious norm goes unquestioned in the sense that perhaps takes too literally Alexander Pope's dictum "Whatever is, is right." Suffering from stunted growth and tuberculosis of the spine, he might have meant this in only a very general way.

To use an unfortunate verbifications of recent decades, the "othering" of the less sociable features prominently in popular culture. The serial killer or mass murderer is often described as a "quiet man" and possibly one "who kept to himself" or simply a "loner." Yet a horrifically expanding sample casts doubt on that association. Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy and BTK Killer Dennis Rader were active and well-known in their communities, if not universally liked, and spree killer Richard Speck seemed to enjoy an alarmingly active social (and sexual) life in prison. The perception of the solitary as threat to society has nonetheless been perpetuated to the point of self-parody. In *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, Paul Rubens' protagonist cautions love interest Dottie not to "get mixed up" with him because he is "a loner, a rebel," like any number of characters whose directors expected their actors to say as much while keeping a straight face.

As for heroes, the Lone Ranger in fact works with Tonto, and Batman with Robin. Superman acts alone in his superhero morph, but mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent interacts with a wide range of Gothamites, if far less than he would wish with Lois Lane.

If a penchant for solitude is conflated with vice or downright evil, conviviality is often seen as prima facie evidence of virtue. Pascal once noted that most of the world's problems stemmed from people's inability to sit alone quietly in a room, but he can be dismissed as a sickly nerd, and a religious fanatic to boot. At an outdoor meet-up of dog owners, a person too busy talking to notice that his dog has defecated may end up better regarded member than the more reticent person who steadfastly picks up after her companion animal. By these premises civic virtue in the absence of social intercourse does not exist—one apparently cannot contribute to the common weal or the polis without explicitly interacting with its members. If a tree falls in a forest, and so on, the implicit answer is NO.

Judgment of the less sociable, though, is not however, always based on moral criteria. Such judgment can instead involve a frank assessment of aptitudes, tinged with pity. Polite conversation often skirts evaluations of this sort, but *in vino veritas*.

In *cervisia* as well. To wit: in our twenties, a high school friend of mine joined me in visiting a third friend who was tending bar where my father had worked part-time some two decades before. All three of us present soon found ourselves in a cabbages-and-kings discussion with a barstool philosopher named Perry. He seemed not have been much older than us, but from his beer garden perch he had apparently seen a great deal. This allowed him to note that both of us on his side of the bar possessed a "high IQ." He went on to say that my friend was obviously more intelligent because he "talked more."

This came as news to both of us. My friend—now a commercial airline pilot and published author—was taller, better-looking, more athletic and far more charismatic, but my test scores, grades and other conventional measures of intelligence had always been greater. But in the eyes of Perry (IQ unknown), I wasn't merely a geek, but a second-rate one at that. A nerd manqué, I had aimed low and missed.

The epilogue to our cheap drafts with Perry suggests that he was far from alone in his thinking. The first time I told this story, I met with the response "Maybe you should talk more." It could happen, just as two-headed turtles have hatched and survived into adulthood. But this leaves unquestioned the fallacy, once exuberantly voiced by Sammy Hagar, that there is only one way to rock.

Jim Harrison has more reflectively questioned various subcultures' desire to impose a "monoethic"—only one way to exist and behave, or only one such way that is presumably normative and superior to all others. Unfortunately, monoethics abound. I once read of a hard-charging entrepreneur who not only did not attend a liberal arts college but also believed that liberal arts colleges should not exist. Less

numerous, and perhaps fortunately so, is the artist explicitly contemptuous of non-artists, or at least those who fail to appreciate his work. Others are the provincial Manhattanite, or the dour individual whose radio is set to the local NPR affiliate and who lives in her own private Vermont.

All of these monoethics, though, depend on a degree of specialization that can severely restrict contact with individuals much different than oneself and makes it easy to forget the extent to which we often depend on others precisely because they differ from ourselves in aptitude and inclination—including an inclination to spend little time with others. Even the simplest stages of social organization have included specialists, but the shaman would have known the village's leading hunter, and both would have known the potter. The warriors and sages of antiquity were likewise symbiotic, regularly exposed to if not necessarily appreciative of each other's different gifts. Some, like Sophocles, played both parts.

In these settings traits represent differences in proportions rather than complete otherness. Non-specialists are sometimes expected to partake of one another's traits, withdrawing as a rite of passage rather than a lifelong vocation. The Australian Aboriginal walkabout falls under this heading, as do the Native American vision quest and biblical times of fasting and prayer in the wilderness. Descent from none of these is readily apparent in the present-day corporate "retreat" of PowerPoint presentations in chilly conference rooms, interspersed with periods of enforced conviviality like those found in any other setting.

In a culture that gives rise to such events it is hardly surprising that solitude is disparaged and those who seek it out morally as well as statistically deviant. Largely unknown, solitude is seen as monolithic and its devotees all unpleasantly alike.

But what if solitude represents more than the preferred habitat of some subspecies of bloodless troglodytes?

And what if it is not so much an experiential widget as a container of multitudes? Solitudes have long been viewed as differing among themselves, each a mute testimony to the ineffability of experience. In this spirit Rilke famously described the two solitudes that stand together in romantic love. Other solitudes can fall together by chance or be yoked together by violence, if necessary. In this spirit Canadian novelist Hugh MacLennan took Rilke's words for both the epigraph and the title of his novel on the physical proximity of his country's Anglophone and Francophone communities, and the cultural gulf between them. Hundreds of such solitudes cover the world.

Individual solitude also takes many forms. The most obvious is physical separation, but this does little to convey differences in the interiority of experience, or how solitudes vary in quality.

Solitude's bad reputation may arise, in a corollary to Gresham's Law, from a lack of contact with the genuine article. Many are instead compelled to spend much of their waking hours in what could be called pseudosolitude, which combines the worst features of both physical isolation and social interaction. Pseudosolitude may not have originated with industrial or post-industrial life, but our era has perversely perfected it.

Let us consider—because it has been thrust upon us—the office cubicle. Invented by Robert Propst and first sold by manufacturer Herman Miller as the Action Office II in 1967, the cubicle was originally designed to replace the open offices that have perversely come back in fashion. It has since ranked with the multi-modal shipping container as one of the most blandly powerful innovations of the last century. Propst's intentions notwithstanding, the contemporary cubicle farm places white-collar workers in a series of enclosures designed to minimize real estate costs by maximizing the number of work stations in a given area without redundant expenditures on acoustically meaningful walls or, in some settings, close proximity to windows and natural light.

The same approach arguably underlies concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), better known as factory farms. Whether this spatial arrangement contributes to workplace shootings represents an intriguing research question. Perhaps Temple Grandin, whose insights have improved slaughterhouse conditions, could offer similar advice for offices.

Penned in a small but hardly private place, like calves en route to veal, the typical office worker is out of visual contact with his colleagues, the better to focus on a monitor and perform certain narrowly defined clerical or symbolic analytical tasks. Though deprived of visual contact with others, the worker bee is nonetheless exposed to the sounds of telephone calls, music of not necessarily compatible tastes and the clicking of keyboards; knuckle-cracking and nail-clipping are optional. The cubicle wall's Maginot Line is no more resistant to odors. The worker's sense of vulnerability is reinforced by the typical placement of the work station's seat facing away from its entrance—a choice avoided by gangsters as well as higher animals. This arrangement calls for vigilance that readily edges over into hypervigilance, like a long-haul trucker strung out on caffeine and possibly other stimulants, but without a trucker's opportunity to exercise mastery of skills and autonomy in action.

The cubicle farmer is thus, to mix metaphors, perpetually dangled in the limbo of the firehouse—a condition of high responsibility and low control, but without the fireman's possibilities of life-affirming risk, clear-cut results or public appeal; a grocery bagger, postal clerk or similar assembly-line worker experiences similar frustrations. Yet no firehouse has been the birthplace of a great work of art, science or philosophy, nor has any mailroom. Charles Bukowski worked in a post office before he was able to write full time, but his writing served as a rebuttal to his day job rather than an affirmation of its possibilities. When drink, pari-mutuel betting and misguided sex all fail,

autonomous creation is the last arrow in the quiver of psychic defense.

Less literal cubicles abound. Rush-hour solo driving simply puts the cubicle in motion, while short commutes on public transportation pose similar issues. A functional person's city bus or subway consists largely of attempting not to encroach on others and avoiding others' encroachments, the latter easier said than done.

A more subtle version of pseudosolitude occurs in the de facto training cubicles college and university computer "labs." Given limits on hours of access and time of use, and no guarantee that others will follow posted instructions to avoid loud conversation and telephone calls, any work done is that of a proverbial long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Like the cubicle farmer, the computer lab rat often must leave his/her back exposed to a common area and must remain vigilant at some atavistic level. As Special Agent Dale Cooper noted in the first season of *Twin Peaks*, "once a traveler leaves his home he loses almost 100% of his ability to control his environment," and seeking some degree of equilibrium drains mental space and energy from deep concentration. Studying at Ottawa's Carleton University in the early 1990s, I suspected that the great thoughts of the late twentieth century were not arising from the Dunton Tower computer lab.

Where those great thoughts did occur may not yet be known, but, like the great thoughts of other centuries, they are likely to arisen from what could be called genuine solitude. Archimedes was presumably bathing alone with his thoughts when he arrived at water displacement as a means to measure the volume of irregularly shaped objects. If he weren't, he wouldn't have needed to go into the streets of Syracuse to shout *Eureka*! A recent poll similarly found that many writers get their best ideas in the shower.

Trees join tubs and showers as sponsors of solitude. Newton was presumably alone with a falling apple when he

discovered gravity. In a contemporary example, the poet Myra Sklarew once note to a writing class that, while the workshop had its uses, she preferred to think poetry as taking place under a tree somewhere.

The room of Pascal's thought, though, is available in all weathers. Virginia Woolf's corollary of the need for a "room of one's own" has become a cliché; it is at least more attainable than her much less cited co-requirement of five thousand pounds a year, a handsome sum at the time. The violation of such a sanctuary in the previous century entered legend as the visitor from Porlock who broke the inspiration and possible opiate spell in which Coleridge was composing "Kubla Khan." The ghost of this story informs the artist's colony rule against visiting a studio uninvited. More explicitly, Wordsworth sang the praises of solitude in a Romantics answer to the intrusions of the English Industrial Revolution.

At least one of its productions, though, has created a space for genuine solitude. Anthony Trollope wrote some of his novels while commuting by train to London and a high-ranking position in the Royal Postal Service. Extended train travel—say a half hour or more—offers a delineated period of unbounded solitude, not unlike the meditation alarm clocks, effectively spiritual egg timers, advertised in Buddhist magazines. A similar commute has until recently served Scott Turow between his home in the North Shore suburbs of Chicago and the downtown offices of the law firm of Sonnenschein, Nath and Rosenthal; in this mobile studio he wrote *Presumed Innocent* and subsequent novels.

Air travel can also, if less dependably, afford a space for solitude. Poet Robert Phillips notes that much of his writing is done on airports and in airplanes. And so has much of this essay. The "special security announcement" made every several minutes becomes the filtered babbling on an incoherent Leviathan, along with other forms of white noise. Perhaps not coincidentally, the security of airports can be compared to that of jails; the history of prison writing from Saint Paul to Malcolm X deserves its own library of studies, as does the parallel tradition of writing from insane asylums.

Such solitudes, though, are rarely available on the writer's terms.

For all their preindustrial pedigree, ships have a mixed record. If the prevailing account is correct, John Newton wrote "Amazing Grace" in the wake of an Atlantic storm that buffeted his slaving ship: emotion expressed in urgency rather than recollected in tranquility. That situation seems far less favorable to works of other than lyric mood or length. The less immediately eventful voyage of the *Beagle*, however, gave Charles Darwin the secular monk's cell of his cabin in which to compile and analyze the observations that became *The Origin of Species*.

Cafes and taverns provide a longer and possibly more prolific lineage. Thomas Paine is believed to have composed much of *The Rights of Man* at London's Olde Red Lion, and in the popular imagination French literature, give or take a Proust in a cork-lined office, is assumed to be written at a sidewalk café. The spread of café culture in North America follows the Parisian example. Many of the seats in both chain and independent coffeehouses are taken by lone individuals attending to books, papers and computers in the now-proverbial "third place" that is neither home nor standard place of employment. Eating and drinking is a secondary concern, if not a pretext. Like an hourglass or the water clocks of antiquity, the cup of coffee is the interval for which one rents office space.

All of these settings can provide the possibility if not the certainty of genuine solitude. Yet none of these settings is on its surface comparable to better-known redoubts of solitude such as the wilderness or a cabin on Walden Pond, marked by physical isolation.

Public venues clearly are not, even as they suffice for writing or any form of solitude for which writing serves as a proxy. Loneliness in a crowd, lamented to the point of cliché, is answered by an individual's stroll through a great city, attending to his thoughts more than his surroundings, in the spirit of Walter Benjamin's *flâneurie*, an experience that

points to the essence of genuine solitude. Others may be present—and not necessarily as the staff of a Sartrean Hell—and sensory stimulus may occur, but none of them require immediate attention on the part of the solitary person. Dishes may clatter, lighted signs blink, and horns honk, but one can leave their management to others while engaged in greater or lesser thought, or none. We might sit like Pascal, or wander like Wordsworth's cloud, but alone rather than lonely. We might hear the small still voice that addressed the prophets, or simply our blood coursing through our eardrums.

But watching and listening may lead to more listening and more watching. Those points in time could be drawn into untold constellations of thought. What Chesterton said of Christianity can also be said of genuine solitude: it has not been tried and found wanting, but found wanting and left untried. In those scarce times of genuine solitude, we can ask what might happen if we tried it more often and made it more available for others.

How many answers might others provide on their own?

James Valvis

Banana Split Summer

When the ice cream truck came, when its music
swept through the streets like sirens singing,
you ran up the stairs to tell your father,
and had he not wanted any ice cream,
nothing would have made him give you money
so you could buy a vanilla cone with sprinkles,
but he did want something, his banana split,
and so he gave you a new five dollar bill,
just enough for a banana split and a cone.
It was your job then to run back downstairs,
stand in line, purchase the banana split boat,
and carry the ice cream up the long stairs.
Since you couldn’t carry both at once,
your vanilla cone had to wait.
There was no rushing, the fear too great
you'd mix the strawberry and fudge in his split
into one obscene ice cream mush.
Walking that long stairwell, slowly, slowly,
knowing behind you the line of customers shrunk,
the people grabbing their cones and pineapple sundaes,
you tried to keep your pace fast but steady.
You could already taste your ice cream,
tongue pushing sprinkles into the white cream.
Late August, this was the last ice cream this summer.
First, however, you had to deliver the banana split still split,
and then run back outside before the truck drove off,
before the siren song came on again
and drifted away like you felt summer drifting,
tooling down the block, toward others, the new lucky.
Near the top of the stairs, still imagining the cool cream,

you felt a jolt when up rode the music, that jingle,
that treasonous song now sung for another.
What else could have happened then but the panic,
the tripping over your own feet, the sensation of falling?
With both hands holding tight the banana split,
there was nothing to break your fall.
Yes, it was better to crush your nose than spill his treat,
yet it slipped from your hands anyway,
just slid right out of your grip, that whole summer
split open and everything spilt everywhere forever.

Mudding

My brother took me mudding,
and this is how I ended up
in the a pickup truck stuck
in the middle of a lake
with two people I didn't know,
the bearded and overweight driver
and, seated between us, a kid
who was maybe eight or nine.
The water line was almost up
to our the door window
and the driver tried to restart the car
but it wouldn't even turn over.
He called on the cell phone
to send in the tow truck and hook
to drag us out of there,
and this is when the kid lost it,
said we were all going to die in there,
and began thrashing about.
We weren't going to die.
The water was maybe chest high
and I am a good swimmer besides.
I told the kid everything would be okay
and he cried and told me to fuck off.
I was a nigger lover, he said, so shut up,
and the bearded guy laughed
as water flooded around our feet.
I wasn't even sure how black people
came up for discussion because
there weren't any around
and I hadn't met the kid before,

though technically he was right.
I'm fond of black people, as a rule,
who, also as a rule, wouldn't be stupid
enough to intentionally drive a pickup
into a swampy Florida lake.
When the water rose in the cab,
reaching almost up to my calves,
screw it, I looked that kid in the eye
and said, "We're all going to die."
The way he started crying then,
tears running through his muddy face,
I was sad when we were rescued.

Robert West

Rejoice

This is the day the Lord

to whom we've knelt and prayed
and homage paid

the one we name our guide
whose words we've read and weighed

whose music sung and played

for whom the martyrs died
were burned beheaded flayed

and crucified
both brave and sore afraid

has made.

To a Friend Enduring Time of Trial

Who knows if you can do it?
The you already through it:
that grateful future avatar
remembers well how strong you are.

To a Young Poet Who Doesn't Like to Read

Incurious as you are about the past,
I wonder if you think your work could last,

or care that no one ever learns by heart
the lines of those who never learned the art.

A Student Explicator's Pocket Manual with Sample Exercise

Of course, the first thing you should do is read,
proceeding word by word and clause by clause,
not just once through but several times, because
before you comment on those lines you need

to grasp what they regret, or praise, or plead—
their grounds for grief, the plot of their applause.
And punctuation ought to give you pause:
close reading calls for special care, not speed.

Of course, you think you know all that. What's next?
You write an essay partly paraphrase
and partly explanation of the ways

details inflect and form informs the text,
unfolding *what* it says in terms of *how*.
Imagine what you'd do with this one now.

Epilogue

The angel-choir now out of range
and all the gaping shepherds gone,
she sighs: the baby needs a change.
And life goes on.

Joyce Wilson

The Chicken Hawk

Now we suspect the speckled hawk has been
Here many times, the reason anxious crows
And jays intensify their cries, and spin
For no apparent cause, until she shows

Her profile from her perch. There, pressed in flat
Against the trunk, she hides in spotted light.
She looks across her shoulder at the fat
Contented hens below, soon bunched in tight.

Now I can count how frequently she came,
Recalling where two chickens in the snow
Had died at separate times yet with the same
Delivery of force, from high to low.

The one who gashed and opened up the breast,
Consumed the innards, scooping out the heart—
And left the head, and wings and feet, the rest
To rot—fulfilled her designated part.

Today I listen for her quiet climb.
She turns and drops down close as if she would
Negotiate—but no, she needs no time
To map the layout of our neighborhood.

I cannot say her actions have outweighed
Distortions of her predatory nature;
Aloft, borne on the arrow she has made,
She strikes to live and does not pause to torture,

And does not wish but takes, without an argument,

As long ago, she proved the world was hers.
Her pinions weave through each impediment—
The outstretched oaks, the prickly firs—

And gather severed shreds, from strife to strife,
That might explain divisions in her ways—
The softest down, the sharpest knife,
The fierceness in the cry that she betrays.

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Ned Balbo's third book, *The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems* (Story Line Press), was awarded the 2010 Donald Justice Prize and the 2012 Poets' Prize. His second book, *Lives of the Sleepers* (U. of Notre Dame Press), received the Ernest Sandeen Prize and a *ForeWord* Book of the Year Gold Medal; his first, *Galileo's Banquet*, shared the Towson University Prize. A selection of poems based on the paintings of Nora Sturges appears in the 2012 *Avatar Review*, and variations on poems by Apollinaire, Baudelaire, Rilke, Rimbaud, Trakl, and Valéry are out or forthcoming in *Able Muse, Evansville Review, Inscape, String Poet, Unsplendid*, and elsewhere. He is co-winner of the 2013 Willis Barnstone Translation Prize.

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