8/89

11 x 38

4650 wds

RONALD HUEBERT, ROBERT M. MARTIN,
AND TREVOR ROSS

Opening Gambits

THE WRITERS WHO CONTRIBUTED their fiction and poetry to this issue didn't consult one another, nor were they advised of a plan to divide their contributions into thematic (or any other) categories. The headings under which their works are printed, and the groups into which they are collected, are in a sense quite artificial. We created the groups and invented the headings only after we'd selected and studied the material. And the boundaries between sections are therefore provisional at best: it will be obvious to most readers that a particular poem could have been printed under more than one heading, or that some other heading might have been invented as a way of bringing together texts from two or three of our groups. Perhaps the best way of explaining our procedure is to suggest that the arrangement we have imposed on the material is itself an act of interpretation: or more precisely, that it follows from hundreds of smaller acts of interpretation called into being by the interaction between thirty-three texts and three readers. Each reader is of course at liberty to challenge and refute or improve upon the structure we have put in place, but we offer it nonetheless as a first move in the game.

Brute Creations gathers one story and four poems about mammals: pigs, horses, cats, deer. In attempting to render intelligible a point of view that remains inarticulate to us, these pieces engage the problem of anthropomorphism, of accommodating a

desire to imagine animal experience in recognizably human terms to our knowledge of how insuperably strange the natural world can be. As with many works in this issue, the items in this section are at some level about the limits of representation, about knowingly failing to give utterance to what is beyond our understanding.

These limits are addressed with admirable hesitation in Deirdre Dwyer's "The Calling" and Mike Catalano's "The Wreck." In each, a chance encounter with a deer prompts the speaker to seek connection with the animal as a way of coming to terms with the unexpectedness of the event. Dwyer's speaker braves a darkened wood to meet her lover, from whom she's "eager to hear the voices / of my own kind." Yet coming upon a young deer, her impulse is stilled. She tries to speak "*deer-talk*" in hopes that the "old differences" between the species can be laid aside and the two of them might listen to "the note of what we found," as if conscious choice and not instinct had brought them together. The attempt fails, as it must, though the wonder that the speaker feels at the poem's close may have as much to do with the inscrutable deer as with the thought that there might exist a "mother beyond" who can teach a voice for all species.

The speaker in "The Wreck," wakening to consciousness after the accident, finds himself "mere centimetres" from the buck he's violently killed. The speaker does not at first admit responsibility for the crash but rather likens the experience to a childhood episode when "bullies dunked me again and again / into an icy vat." The animal, he thinks, acknowledges their common suffering: circumstance has made them "blood brothers rather than enemy species." But the buck has died and in the accident's aftermath the speaker appears to own up to his own culpability. With blunt irony, he says we may be no better than "brute beasts," a metaphor that reaffirms the old differences even as it appears to erase them. And yet the speaker blames himself for not having earlier forgiven his childhood tormentors: is the kinship he feels now with them and not the beasts?

Dick Bird's "TGE" takes us deep into what is for many an unfamiliar setting, the world of pig farming. The narrator, facing the devastation of his herd by contagion, recollects a happier occasion when he successfully farrowed his sow Nola, she of the "sixteen bulging nipples oozing colostrum." The story is memorable

for its vigorous parading of such grotesque detail, but its wit is serious. It is, among other things, about the disparity between physical reality, which lends itself to ready description, and the things that defy description, from the pig's experience ("she's gone where I can't follow, into the dark ancestral swamp") to the narrator's own incomprehension at being the harbinger of the infestation. Bird's speaker also imagines a time when the old differences between species will vanish but, contrary to what the poets hope, he does not look forward to such a fate.

Because it includes no human figure, Jacqueline Karp's "Cherries" stands apart from the other items in this section. Yet the absence of any confrontation between human and animal consciousness may be the reason why the poem's tableau of grazing mares seems the least alien to our perception. The poem's sensory texture is rich only to a human perspective: it is we who delight in the visual pun of horses "eating their shade" and in the like sounds of "nuzzle/muzzles" and "withers/twitch." The poem is less about the horses' simple pleasures than our own.

The tales and poems collected as *Heart Failures* tell of disillusioned love, marital discord, sibling resentments, and sexual violence. Most feature characters who feel bitterness or incomprehension at the emotional isolation they find themselves in. This isolation may have immediate causes in acrimony or pathology, but the characters sense it too intensely to explain how they've let it happen or to recognize what it's done to them or others. Readers are left to infer a context and a moral bearing by which to judge the characters, while at the same time sharing in their curdled feelings.

"Two Rules" by Jon Boilard is the simplest of the stories, a terse monologue spoken by a man who's just murdered a woman who refused him sex. The speaker treats his pursuit of women as a sport, for which he trains himself and keeps himself smooth: "I just had my scrotum waxed," he proudly reports. He is of course a caricature of the self-absorbed male, who, like Browning's Duke, holds our interest by remaining soulless even as he confesses his crimes. But Boilard's monster has enough instinctive feeling to sense confusion overtaking him ("I can't believe I just said that") and so he becomes little more than a figure of pathos.

More complicated is the characterization of Warren Connor, the narrator of Ian Colford's sad and deliberate "The Comfort of Knowing." Like Boilard's speaker, Connor is admitting his sins as much as he is attempting to justify his actions, which, in his case, were intended to put an end to his sister's callous behaviour. "I knew it was my duty to bring her to account," he declares. Inevitably his vengeance brings only pain. Yet Connor is a person of conscience, a good father and devout Christian who's shocked by his own cruelty. There's little point in feeling morally superior to a man like Connor, who realizes too late that "in a short time many valuable things had passed out of my life."

The same can't be said of Arthur Royce, the historian of seventeenth-century English politics who is the central figure in Francis Blessington's spare tale of obsession, "The Clock." Royce becomes so engrossed in repairing an antique timepiece that he grows isolated from his wife, whom he begins to regard with suspicion. Or perhaps fixing the clock is merely Royce's way of suppressing the boredom that has already begun to destroy his marriage. Whatever the case, Royce cannot escape his self-enclosure: by the end he is telling himself to be "more watchful" but fails to notice his own awful pun.

An intriguing complement to Blessington's story, Catherine Greenwood's "Pearl Farmer's Wife" updates a long tradition of fishing wives' laments by transforming what in earlier examples had been grief over a husband's absence into enmity over his neglect. He too, it seems, is obsessed with perfecting small things. The poem, a sonnet astringed like its speaker's love, is filled with what seem like sexual puns ("I accuse him of being / in love with an oyster"). But in keeping steadfastly to the literal, and withholding the satisfying couplings of metaphor, the poem instead niftily makes us feel the speaker's frustrations.

S.P. Zitner's two sonnets are equally revisions of a venerable poetic tradition, the petulant elegies of Petrarchan lovers. But Zitner's speakers, unlike their predecessors, seem disquietingly resigned to love's failure, even as they view their own experience with pained cynicism. The results are gelid marvels of complex feeling. "Hearsay" reads like distilled asperity until one realizes that the words "Don't fret," which mark the sonnet's turn, could be said no less in tenderness than spite. And, with its speaker seemingly as angry with the loss of love as its endless recurrence, "A Second Chance"

is a stark and mordant sequel to the reproof that ends Shakespeare's sonnet on lust: "none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell."

The social construction of sexuality has become an easy cliché: so easy that using it often evades the difficult question of finding out how much of our sexual behaviour is biologically driven, how much is socially scripted, and how much is individually chosen. Creative writers tend to be more acutely aware of the ambiguities of sexual experience than theorists, or at least that is what you might infer from the works gathered here under *Erotic Inventions*. "Imposters in Love" by Melissa Hardy certainly gestures toward the social construction position. Near the end of the story Eugene, the gay protagonist, explains to his female friend Virginia that for both of them, sexuality is a masquerade. "We all have to tell lies. We all have to omit the details that put us out of the running, that disqualify us!" he observes. "The truth is that we are all imposters in love." The truth, yes, but by no means the whole truth. Eugene describes the sexual game as if it calls for ceaseless planning and resourceful improvisation. But if this were all there is, his would be just a funny story with a sad ending. The story's tragic undertow depends in large measure on forces he can't control or, in some cases, even predict. One of these tragic necessities is Eugene's sexual orientation; it becomes tragic insofar as it collaborates with an especially homophobic culture, the spread of an unforeseen disease, and a coincidence that ancient writers would have described as fate.

Two of the poems collected here are erotic inventions in the sense that they deploy (artfully, and with distinctive kinds of wit) what we refer to casually as sexual fantasies. In Kate Harding's "Hot for Teacher" the speaker has constructed a sexual relationship between her younger self and her former teacher by means of "a deliberately false memory." It would appear that nothing intimate ever happened between the two of them, or at least this is what the teacher's professional behaviour implies when the student visits him (years later, we assume) in his office. But in the speaker's self-edited version "there were tongues involved, to say the least," and she resents her former mentor for refusing to acknowledge the heat of their relationship. "Wanting More" by

Micheline Maylor is a fantasy of plenitude; what begins as a chance encounter becomes a virtuoso performance. The appeal here is to a widely shared need for rapturous sexual abandon. We are (for once) given exactly what we want. But the exuberance of the occasion is nicely bracketed by the speaker's reminder (in the first line) that she entered this world of ecstatic delight "while slumming," and by the young bartender's allegation (in the last line) that his partner's behaviour has been indecent.

It's more of a stretch to claim that "Trampoline Lessons" by Carolyn Black belongs with the other erotic inventions. (It could just as easily have been printed in the previous section, under *Heart Failures*.) But the story's whole texture and tone invite us to draw an implicit equation between two kinds of "*Flying Free*": the temporary defiance of gravity on the trampoline, and the (equally temporary) loss of inhibition in sexual orgasm. We learn at the outset that trampoline lessons are offered as a kind of therapy, for women only. Ms. Tessier seems to have gained very little from a four-year marriage, except the recurrent memory of her ex-husband's most devastating remark: "You held out on me." The trampoline therapy seems to offer her a second chance, but it doesn't work. The pathos of the story emerges from Ms. Tessier's unwillingness to make the required intimate disclosures during the therapeutic rituals that follow the trampoline sessions, and from her inability to achieve even the illusion of flight. This is a story of undeserved and understandable failure: of being unable to face the prospect of letting go.

Brian Day's "Krishna at the Mirror" depends for its effect on the ways in which religious and erotic imagery can be intertwined. To readers of canonical poetry, this is a pattern that will be familiar from the devotional writings of John Donne or Christina Rossetti. But here the images are Hindu rather than Christian, as Krishna works his way through a series of dancing partners: the "bright boy" who offers masculine "camaraderie," the woman who "pours her body like milk to his eyes," and finally himself—the god who can, like Narcissus, take delight "like a stranger in the grace of his limbs."

"Coyote Calls to Me" by Marcia Ross is part beast fable and part erotic narrative. Even readers quite familiar with the distinctive, lonesome yapping of the coyote at night may never have thought of it as a seductive invitation. But here the speaker, by

transforming herself into a red fox, is able to reinscribe the coyote's howl. Or rather, Coyote's howl: there's only one of him, and his disappearance from the speaker's life brings on "the winter of [her] grief." Although Coyote remains resolutely a thing of the wild, he goes through many transformations: sometimes he impersonates Milton's Satan, sometimes he wears a "stolen" grey suit and sells women's shoes, sometimes he is a sound, "a distant cry" that calls out to the narrator. At the end of the poem, the call is all that the narrator has left of Coyote, but even that is enough to last a lifetime.

Everyone knows that a very substantial proportion of fiction and poetry written in the last hundred years is about the Jewish experience. One reason for this is that Jewish writers were so self-consciously *Jewish*—and this is no surprise, given the forcefulness with which they were often reminded of that fact, and not just in Nazi Europe. It's reported, for instance, that George S. Kaufman, later to become one of the most successful and prolific of America's playwrights, was fired after less than a year at his first writing job as a columnist at the *Washington Times* when the newspaper's owner noticed him at his desk and bellowed, "What's that Jew doing in my city room?" Well, that happened around 1910; it's impossible now. But the curious fact is that Jewish writers, most of whom are nowadays completely integrated into the non-Jewish societies they live in, continue to write about Jews and with recognizably Jewish themes. This genre is represented here under *Jewish Legacies.*

One thing that's not surprising is that the Holocaust is still on people's minds, even sixty years later. Memorial museums and monuments are there to keep it in people's memories; but there's more to them than just that. Walking through the Holocaust Museum in Washington is an emotionally exhausting experience, but people keep going back there, regularly, several times a year—a ceremony that perhaps, somehow, is a way of dealing with what is still so disturbing. The Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation in Paris is a tiny, claustrophobic underground bunker whose walls are lined with 200,000 back-lit crystal chips, each representing one deportee to German concentration camps. Visiting this place is enormously moving. Joan McGuire's poem (and Desnos', which

she quotes) reflects the memorial's symbolism of light and darkness, shadow and sun.

The narrator of J.J. Steinfeld's "Would You Hide Me?" is a thoroughly assimilated Jew, a professor of literature in her fifties who thinks about Beckett a good deal, and about the Talmud never. The Jew as threatened outsider never occurs to her, till out for a drive to nowhere in particular, she picks up a hitchhiker, a young kid as alien to her world as she is to the world of her immigrant parents, as her parents were to the gentiles they lived among in Europe. The dense woods they drive through remind her of her father's hiding from the Nazis in Europe; even as an old man, safe in Canada, he keeps repeating: "Would you hide me?" But it turns out that she is unable to hide her hitchhiker from the authorities.

A related theme lies behind Anita Shir-Jacob's "Maartiens, Glory and Me." The narrator's Jewish family is safe and prosperous in mid-twentieth-century South Africa; much of the story is nostalgic anecdote of a comfortable snug life. Maartiens is a black longtime menial employee of the family, always in the background. At the end of the story, Maartiens' son tells the narrator that her feeling for his father, now dead, as a sort of minor member of the family, is entirely misplaced: he was in fact the exploited servant, the maltreated outsider victim. How can the Jews, so long themselves the victims of racist oppression, now be the oppressors? The question is not restricted to racist South Africa. Jews and blacks have an uncomfortable relationship throughout the West; and then there's Israel and the Palestinians.

On a quite different note, Elana Zaiman's short story achieves a sort of record by being set almost entirely in bathrooms. (Its title, "Porcelain," refers of course to the fixtures in that room.) The bathroom setting is (no kidding) a recognizably Jewish literary theme. Remember Jake Hersch taking his cousin Herky to see the men's lavatory at Harrods in *St. Urbain's Horseman?* Remember Portnoy? In that novel, as in our story, one is not safe from family interaction even in the bathroom. The refusal of the Jewish family to grant private space is a leftover, perhaps, of the experience of the early twentieth-century immigrants, crowded into their tiny New York tenements. But it also represents the pervasive, inescapable, intense intimacy of Jewish family ties.

Freud was (as usual) wrong in locating the most psychologically charged relationship in the family as the one between mother and son; and he didn't even get it right in his choice of second-place: father-daughter. The most influential relationship is between mother and daughter. This claim is advanced with great confidence and extremely limited scientific reliability on the basis, first, of the large number of our female friends who remain, even until middle-age, compulsively, perpetually, engrossingly involved with their mothers; and second, on the large number of poems and short stories received by this journal written by women, full of emotional affect, concerning mothers and their offspring. The items printed under *The Mother Imago* are the ones we've chosen from this large collection.

The first person you want to please is Mom; and her approval is the test and the source of your worth, maybe for your whole life. The speaker in Nancy Holmes' poem is a child full of panic that there won't be time to finish her poem for Mother's Day, that her "glorious days of favour" as family poet might be over. It's not only kids who feel the pressure of being an "artistic child." It's the terror everyone feels, to some extent, while staring at a blank piece of paper. Mother and clever child figure again in Crystal Hurdle's poem. Here Mom tells (as real mothers never do) the full sad story of her life. It's called "The Mother Speaks," but it's the guilty and sad voice of her daughter who's really talking, who's realized how much her mother had to put up with. This poem is part of a long sequence Hurdle is writing based on the life of Sylvia Plath and her often tormented relationships to those around her. Quite apart from its place in this larger project, "The Mother Speaks" can stand on its own as an experiment in poetic voicing.

The fears and large and small tragedies of maternal life are again the subject of the poems by Moira MacDougall, Gillian Harding-Russell, and Deirdre Dwyer. In "Glass-Light Thaw" the child's fragments of memory of her mother and grandmother are represented as slivers of broken glass, scattered fragments that will cut if you're not careful in handling them. They're memories of pain and grief and of gradual numbing of mother and later of child in response. (But grandmother's warm kiss can nevertheless thaw the freeze.) In "Voice Print 3" kid has wandered away from Mom in Wal-Mart—no doubt soon to be found; but in the meantime she is listening desperately "for your small voice to call me back." As

usual in poetry, the concrete incident can be taken to stand for something larger—the dreaded but unavoidable separation of mother and child. In Dwyer's "The Careful Path Back to Naïve" the children are kept ignorant of the fact that the car has run over a cat. This against the background of the inevitability of the destruction of children's trust in safety and stability.

Dwyer's poem is one of *three* in this issue in which a car kills an animal. What explains this literary trend? Sunspots? An edict from the MLA that this is to be the Year of the Roadkill? The speaker's car collides with a deer in "The Wreck" (discussed under *Brute Creations*). In Kerri Leigh Huffman's "Family Christmas" it is a cat, again, and again there are family consequences. But the family in this poem is already suffering strains. The gathering at Auntie's place is unsettling; the daughter finds out that she hadn't even been invited to Grandma's funeral. The family gets out as soon as possible. When they stop to shoo a limping cat out of the road, it is run down by a van; the daughter's horror at the dying cat in her arms, and her panicky search for its home, contrast with the unnoticed passing of Grandma. And then there's the mysterious "you," just sitting in the back seat of the car while all this is going on.

Millefiore is a type of Italian decorative glass; you've seen paperweights in that style, with what seem to be a thousand tiny embedded flowers. Like millefiori beads, a succession of items on a string, each full of little flowers, the series of items that made up her mother's life are remembered by the speaker of Cornelia C. Hornosty's little story. Again it's a story of regret for what was done and what wasn't, of wrong turns, missed opportunities, failures, of both mother and child.

Half a century ago, in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), M.H. Abrams posited a major shift in the beliefs of creative writers about the meaning and value of their task. During the Renaissance and for many years thereafter, Abrams argued, writers believed they were engaged in creating imitations of nature, or in reflecting (as in a mirror) the essential qualities of nature to their readers. With Romanticism these notions were replaced by the belief that writers had access to special powers of imagination by means of which they could illuminate (as with a lamp) the hidden mysteries of human existence. If

Abrams were writing today, he would perhaps want to complicate this model by adding a third component to his title: *The Mirror, the Lamp, and the Sign.* Somewhere during the twentieth century the mirror which had once reflected nature became a cause of distortion, and the lamp which had once offered illumination began to flicker and glare and go out at unexpected intervals. Postmodern writers are left with no confident assumptions about the relationship between their work and the world around them, and hence about the relationship between their work and its readers (if any). Even the language they use has changed its status: no longer the divinely sanctioned medium for naming the parts of the natural world and expressing the yearnings of the soul, it is now considered a system of arbitrary signs. Modern and postmodern thought alike have provoked a great deal of anxiety about language, about its ability to signify, and about the special ways in which poets have believed they were using it. So we close with a suite of six poems (under the heading *A Loss for Words*) which are responding, though in widely divergent ways, to this anxiety about the status of poetic utterance.

Elana Wolff's "Weeding" might look at first blush like a simple poem about some of the hardships of gardening. But the speaker can't describe even this experience without using scientific vocabulary—a language containing "meanings I discern though can't delimit" and hence put inside scare quotes. If gardening is a forum for discerning and delimiting meaning, you begin to suspect it has a lot to do with writing poetry. Indeed, "weeding" could be a sustained metaphor for the painful yet necessary task of revision: "slow, insipid work," as the speaker has it, but absolutely required by the discipline of poetry.

Carolyn Clink's "Query Letter" and Ouyang Yu's "Snapshots of an Awarding Ceremony: Slightly out of Sequence" offer whimsical commentary on the marketing of poetic utterance. The fictional poet who sends out the query letter to the *Migraine Review* has written a poem of 702 lines (a sestina consists of thirty-nine lines, and there are eighteen of them), but to meet the journal's guidelines she has to reduce all of this to seventeen syllables. If this poet is at a loss for words, it's because her editors are ruthlessly disregarding most of what she has to say. Hence the desperate strategem of offering eighty-seven photographs of herself with her submission. Ouyang Yu's narrator also feels marginalized, because the

recipients of the prizes are all "big names," people who have the traditional qualifications, "white-skinned and white-haired men and women." When one of these women tries to engage him in conversation, all he can say is "guess again." His monologue is an outpouring of words made in defiance of the belief that nobody is listening.

Marc Di Saverio's "When Still a Reader I Imagined a Tower" is a surrealistic fantasy about the power the speaker once attributed to poets: he imagines them flying, transcending time, and emitting poetry from "The unsealed beak, only theirs to have." The title would imply, on one level, that the speaker is no longer a reader. Does this mean that he has become a poet himself? If so, there is no guarantee that the powers he attributes to his predecessors will be available to him. In a parallel way, Eric Trethewey's "A Disaster of War" attributes heart-wrenching creativity to the painter Francisco Goya. The cruelty of Goya's vision is described with unflinching precision, but the last line would suggest that once again, words are unequal to the task: we cannot hear "that final scream that tells us what we are," and even if we could, it would be an utterance too primitive to catch in verbal signs.

"En Paz Descanse, Déia, Majorca," by Ann Taylor, takes us to the grave of the British modernist poet and writer Robert Graves. It is a tribute from a living poet to a dead one: a tribute in which some of Graves's many achievements are alluded to, and some of his idiosyncratic behaviours celebrated. But the verbal cleverness of the tribute is almost rebuked by the spareness of the tombstone, where the identity of the deceased is reduced to a single Spanish word: "Poeta." Perhaps the magic of this word still calls to us, even in an age when mirrors and lamps have been replaced by arbitrary signs. In this case the magic is secured by techniques that distance us from the word: by its having been carved in a slab of stone, and spoken in a language not our own.