

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### IMAGINED WORLDS: FIVE CONTEMPORARY POETS by Sarah Kennedy

*Shoah Train*, by William Heyen. Etruscan, 96 pp., \$15.95.

*Metropolis Burning*, by Karen Kovacik. Cleveland State, 72 pp., \$14.

*Zones of Paradise*, by Lynn Powell. University of Akron, 68 pp., \$14.95.

*Quipu*, by Arthur Sze. Copper Canyon, 88 pp., \$15.

*Chez Nous*, by Angie Estes. Oberlin College, 72 pp., \$14.95.

#### I

Many American poets find history an important subject, either in sustained meditation or as part of the pastiche that makes up contemporary life and art. The “history poem” has become a sub-genre, however, that is often dismissed as the sort of poem one might turn to when casting about for new material. In fact, writing and redefining history is one of the more vital modes of current poetry in the United States, and a variety of historicizing appears across the spectrum of current poetries. Personal history is no longer the domain of lesser writers, and public history is no longer the property of privilege. Most poets even refuse the separation of the two, insisting instead on their complex interaction.

William Heyen’s *Shoah Train* continues the poetic project Heyen has been developing through several books: a lyric, dramatic exploration of the Holocaust and its continuing influence on Western cultures. These poems of witness have their sources in both the first-person narrator who governs the book and the characters drawn from history who tell their stories. The collection opens on “Prayer,” a short despairing plea: “Lord of Shoah, / may we remain in Eden / where all that transpires later / forgets us, & always will again.” But of course, we must live in the post-lapsarian world, and even if we wish for events to forget *us*, it is incumbent upon us not to forget *them*.

The act of writing itself is a problem for many of these poems. First, as an act meant to preserve an individual's thoughts, it is fraught with dangerous potential for action. In "Zeitpost," the poet, wondering what has become of the drafts of *Mein Kampf*, asks, "When words are written / in righteous passion / on fine paper made with linen— // when words upwell from injury & hate, / will they nevertheless exist / even if the paper on which they were written / decomposes?" Writing as an act of preservation, however, can also be fragile, even doomed, work:

EVIDENCE

Before the Nazis entered Warsaw,  
Janina Bauman had to burn *The Brown Book*  
which documented persecution of German Jews  
in concentration camps. The book was bound  
in hard dark cardboard. Always,

she'd remember how it hurt her fingers  
to tear this evidence, which took a long time to burn,  
but, page by photograph by page, did.  
Then she cleaned out the stove, & spread  
these ashes in her family's autumn garden.

The difficulties inherent in writing are compounded when the poet turns to his own family's history. How does one witness—honestly and completely—when one is implicated in the horror of the Holocaust? "Ghosts" seeks an answer in the speaker's memory of his mother's hidden "papers": "I saw an order signed by Himmler, / memos from the Ministry of Propaganda, / records of her Aryan ancestry / back to the eighteenth century..." Memory itself becomes a part of the ever increasing complications in history reconstruction. "After her death," he says, "the evidence vanished, / burned by her widower," presumably because he wants to obliterate the family's connection to Third Reich politics. Without the verification of documents, truths can be remade and retold, as in "Schnapps," which dramatizes the alcoholic self-fashioning of German soldiers after a mass murder in Dresden:

It's time now, isn't it, for us to drink?

...

Tell me a story, a story of long before

when tresses swam in Germany's golden rivers  
 & heroes paused at the shore on their steeds  
 in legends before the slaughter of innocents.  
 We will forget. We will click glasses.

Clearly, however, these soldiers will not—cannot—forget. Even the mythic stories are palimpsests, stained with the indelible truth of the “slaughter of innocents” that they attempt to erase.

*Shoah Train* is able finally, and surprisingly, to end its complex and harrowing journey at something approaching hope. The book is a testament to intense suffering in the face of horrific cruelty; the poems relentlessly layer voice upon voice, some poems even printed two to a page as though to waste any white space at all would be a sign of forgetfulness. And yet, the terror of these stories is not the *whole* story. In “New Morning,” the speaker is touring a German bakery, and when the supervisor mentions that the ovens are run on gas, he is glad, “for once,” to be the “only one” who makes a connection to the Nazis. “Suddenly,” he states, “our skylight is a prayer from God, / our air surely sweet with the odor of bread.” The book closes on “Catbird,” that talkative bird whose language is without the limitations and difficulties of human words. The speaker looks up from “[a]nother thick book of testimonies” to see the bird, “singing like crazy.” This song encompasses the world without apology or self-reflection, and it is perhaps the greatest gift of possibility that nature can offer this poet,

. . . its song  
 losing track of its beginning,  
 never the melodies of final meanings,  
 but going on as though nothing  
 within its own singing  
 could ever not remember  
 everything.

## II

In her second book, *Metropolis Burning*, Karen Kovacic blends political and private histories. The three sections of this collection move between Poland and the United States, between the past and the present, so seamlessly that the instability of time and place becomes part of the book's project. Kovacic views much of twentieth-century Eastern

Europe through her family history; the first line of “If My Grandfather Had Not Emigrated from Silesia,” is the conclusion of the title’s conditional: “I would have been born between Auschwitz and Krakow.” This is not a collection of “family poems” per se, however. The weight of war keeps this work embedded in national histories.

The first section is titled “Warsaw,” and that city is emblematic of Kovacik’s larger concerns. The first poem, in an echo of the section, is titled “To Warsaw,” and its list of metaphors positions both speaker and place:

I feel like an umbrella in for repair.  
I’d rather be a telescope, to see past  
the scrim of things American,  
to smell past pickles, smoke, and grief  
and understand the idiom of uprisings.

You are the map that exists and the ones that have disappeared.  
You are the cigarette that makes the slow bus come.

...

You are the church and the candles in the church,  
the bank and the money, the book and the words.

I avoid talk.

By “talk,” the speaker seems to mean idle chatter, the tourist gab that marks many contemporary poems about travel and exploration of family background. Language, on the other hand—its slippery, tenuous, and yet necessary meaning-making potential—is one of the central subjects. In “Litany,” for example, the tercets end with different versions of the same place name: “Varsovie... Warszawa... Warschau...” Just before the penultimate stanza, the speaker lands on “Warsaw,” the familiar version for Americans. Yet even this word fails to comfort, as the name recalls “this city of cherries in summer / smoked prunes in winter / city halved by the Vistula’s gray knife // whether burning or rising / its syllables are stiff against my teeth / its name a coal on my tongue.”

Still, there are stories to be told, from the “Chernobyl Diary,” which mentions, seemingly in passing, “We stop brewing coffee or tea and wet our / toothbrushes with tonic water,” to the “Versions of Irena,” who, at fifteen years old, “scrubbed the parlor of a short Nazi

sergeant.” Pain, suffering, and alienation haunt much of the book, but the poems are not simply catalogues of horror. Terror is certainly here; even in safe Cleveland, the speaker is aware, as she watches a woman hang curtains, that the windows she decorates overlook “a city that has never been bombed.” The title, “During the Sorties over Baghdad,” deepens the resonance of the ending—written in 1991, the poem has a double meaning when published in 2005. “Requiem for the Buddhas of Bamiyan” laments the Taliban’s destruction of the figures “who survived Genghis Khan’s cannon, // who saw the British retreat, then Soviets and Americans.”

Kovacik’s vision, however, reaches beyond dismay at the destructiveness of humanity to the beauty that is also an element of our shared history. The “Song to Saint Ambrose” celebrates small creations—here a small statuette carved by an uncle—as acts of resistance to despair:

Born in Milan in 340  
 patron of beekeepers and candlemakers,  
 you stand before me in wood  
 ...  
 Bishop, saint: I sit in my kitchen,  
 my uncle’s honey blooming in my tea.  
 I am lonely here, the winter is dark,  
 I know all that I love will pass away.  
 Help me to bear my fate,  
 you who came in praise of the miniature—  
 cells of wax, cells of notes  
 humming before the choristers....

It is therefore unsurprising that *Metropolis Burning*, for all its attentiveness to the suffering that recent history has visited on the world, ends with a list of beatitudes in “Songs for a Belgrade Baker”:

Blessed are the Slovenes, for they are the cake-makers  
 Blessed are the Croats, for they excel at fish  
 Blessed the Macedonians, for their black wine gave birth to  
 philosophy  
 Blessed, too, the Bosnians for the subtlety of their tongues—who  
 else would season veal with lemon and hibiscus?

Blessed the Herzegovinians, for their silver wine strengthens  
 friendships  
 Blessed the Serbs, for their bean soup makes foreign clerics sweat  
 Blessed the Albanians for their love of cinnamon  
 And blessed are the olive trees and vineyards, goats and sheep,  
 for they serve both parable and table  
 Blessed are the mint and dill, for they are the peacemakers  
 And blessed the yeast and sponge, the sour-gray loaves, for they have  
 inherited the earth[.]

This poem makes a satisfyingly rich and inclusive conclusion to a complicated and troubling book; the list demands that we, too, include everyone in our hopes for a sustained peace.

### III

Lynn Powell's *The Zones of Paradise* looks at personal history through the lens of the sacred. Biblical stories, and Renaissance paintings based on them, are central to the palimpsest this book creates. Assonance and consonance provide a musical luxuriance in the language; though divided into three sections of roughly equal length, the book looks fairly conventional. These lyric free-verse poems are mostly made up of neat stanzas, left-justified and typographically unsurprising.

The first poem in the collection, however, immediately disrupts any notion that this will be a wholly conventional book. "Original Errata" begins inside the mind of God: "He thought He had made himself perfectly clear: / *Let there be lust.*" This is a God who prefers "lovely ambiguities" to certainties and in the face of human misunderstanding has retreated from the world: "No wonder He receded / farther than the stars, farther / than the white room of Emily Dickinson." The only hope for this creation is the *felix culpa*, or fortunate fall, so the creator intervenes one more time:

... He greeted the first tenants  
 of the flesh, then paused beside the pear.

He wanted to confide a brazen sweetness—  
 the short, slippery slope  
 He had made for them  
 into love.

This “brazen sweetness” of love, of desire, of living in a sexual body, provides the tone for many of Powell’s more personal poems. They are suffused with—I hesitate in these cynical times to use the word—a tenderness for the world that refuses to become sentimental. People singing to love songs alone in their cars might seem ridiculous to an onlooker, but the poet warns us not to indulge our sarcasm:

Well, go on, cast the first laugh, but,  
 after the crushed orchid of the slow dance  
 and the duet at the shaky ceremony,  
 have you ever slipped into a love song  
 anything but alone?

(“You Don’t Know What Love Is”)

Powell reads quotidian matters through divine language and discovers the sacred in the everyday, but hers is not just another version of natural theology. The kinds of paradise this speaker can imagine are built on the observant imagination. Her son wants a heaven of “milkshakes and fries”; her daughter is warming up for the sexual encounter that “waits beyond the first threshold of touch.” This speaker, for her part, simply looks outside and sees “an unpredicted bliss of blue.” Is this a trustworthy vision of God? She believes so, but only for a mind given to “making meanings out of molehills,” to wondering “how far to trust the cobalt happiness / that waits beyond these panicked clouds” (“Here & Yonder”).

Family plays an important part in this book’s exploration of what biblical meanings can inhere in contemporary life. It’s easy enough to feel God in the garden, that “swig of Eden” (“April & Ecclesiastes”), easy enough even to flirt with the “handsome zealot” who rings the doorbell (“And the First Shall Be Last”), but making meaning of lovers, spouses, and children is a trickier task, especially under the weight of the mountain of sentiment that defines Western domesticity. Sexuality is a beautiful language, and it can undo the dangerous pre-scripture of Genesis:

It doesn’t take long to master  
 The technology of underthings:  
 The backward buckle and stubborn snap,  
 The Braille of hook and eye, small lessons

we learn in the dark, encouraged  
by moonlight, mentored by lust.

But the mind, overdressed  
for the tender weather, hangs back...

...

And it's a long fumble down through  
years of undoing

...

until some sweet day the mind  
is naked as the first draft of Eve.

(“Naked Ambition”)

Sexual love also, of course, drives human beings into time and the fallen world, and the tension between these states propels many of Powell's poems. The speaker's son becomes a “pint-sized Moses” when he drapes a shirt over his head during a hike (“Outside the Garden”), and during her daughter's illness a mother sees a “bold and brazen . . . Pharisee” in a common forsythia bush (“Rescue”). A husband's brain surgery leads a woman to a nearby art museum, where she studies an image of Eve and Mary, both our mothers in different ways; she ends with a prayer for the mortal body to the “Mother / of the warmth beneath the quilt and the gamy scent, / the rowdy baby and the stretchmark, / the stealthy tumor and the neurosurgeon's knife....”

If this book has a weakness, it's the sentimentality that sometimes occurs in the poems about family. That tendency is overcome, however, by the toughness with which Powell renders her ekphrastic poems. One of the best examples—and one of the best poems—in the collection is “Larder with Christ at Emmaus,” which focuses on a painting by Joachim Beuckelaer. Here, the risen Christ appears in a “scrap of background” with his eyes “shocked into pools of black.” It is religious iconography, to be sure, but this is a deity forced uneasily back into the material world: “he's lurching through the archway, his half- / life of a heart panicked / by the recent chastities of cross and grave.” As in so much of *The Zones of Paradise*, this experience of divine and aesthetic history happens in and through the ordinary present; “a smudge of spirit / is still stalling at the threshold.”

## IV

The title of Arthur Sze's *Quipu* refers to a method of accounting or measurement—now long outdated—that has been used by many cultures: knots are tied into rope at various intervals. Quipu is also the controlling metaphor of both the construction of individual poems and the book's overall composition. The poems are separated into sections of differing lengths, and the poems themselves vary in length and appearance on the page. They have in common a structure of accrual, as sentence by sentence the poems braid threads of the personal, the historical, and the natural worlds. Sze's distinctive ability to morph syntax and diction is perhaps the brightest thread of all, and it makes of this collection a dazzling weave.

Although many of these poems are rich with description, most are held together by an overt observing consciousness. Many are governed by a first-person narrator who says, "I notice," "I sense," "I spot," "I learn," "I recollect," "I observe," even "I garner." These poems are as much about the construction of this narrator as they are about what is objectively experienced. In fact, whether what we call objective experience is really possible to achieve is one of the questions this collection raises. The senses absorb data and the mind attempts to order that information, but the resulting conclusions may be illusory. What to make, for instance of this catalogue?

Say teeth;  
 say gnawed his teeth in his sleep;  
 say each spring he scraped peeling blue paint off the windowsill;  
 say the ocean flickers;  
 say a squiggly chalk line screeching down a blackboard opens a  
     black rift;  
 say on a float house yellow cedar smoke rises in the woodstove;  
 say burn;  
 say crumpled white papers ripple then burst into yellow twists of  
     flame.

(“Earthshine: 3”)

An argument might be made for connections between two lines; the link between “teeth” and “gnawed” is clear enough, as is the metonymic line from “woodstove” to “burn” to “yellow twists of flame.” These knots of potential narrative, however, are passed over quickly. Attempts

to sustain a narrative or make a sequence are frustrated as the poem veers into another register. What holds such a poem together? The imperative anaphora, which both demands reader participation and focuses attention again and again on the act of speaking as meaningful gesture.

Sze is not the kind of poet, however, who frustrates conventional syntax for the sake of a gimmick tricked out as experimentalism. People and things are everywhere, and bits of stories are embedded in the strands of longer poems:

When she heard the barking dog,  
She shined a flashlight and spotted a porcupine on the roof;

As you would spotlight a deer;

A snake slides under the redwood boardwalk by the kitchen;

He kisses her shoulders,  
Rubs the soles of her feet;

The mind aligns such slivers.

("Earthshine: 5")

The task of making meaning of such fragments is part of the mind's—and this book's—work, and watching the mechanism of a mind at this work is a beautiful, complicated process. There is no fixed sequence or ending point, but there are endless possibilities for juxtaposition.

Some readers may find the lists that make up many of the poems frustrating rather than generative, may want the poet to guide them more directly toward some sort of closure, but to do that would be to write a different kind of book. Sze prefers to let out threads of meaning so slender that they can drift. "Solstice Quipu" begins with a weather map, "Hong Kong 87, New York 84," then moves across an imaginary earthscape:

ashes accumulate at the tip of an incense stick;

mosquitoes are hatching near the Arctic Circle;

300,000 acres in Arizona scorched or aflame;

The aroma of *genmai* tea from a teapot with no lid.

It is not that the poem goes everywhere. It doesn't; the list scans its elements as though from an extremely powerful satellite. The particulars of such a list are less significant than the very fact of their particularity. As the poem goes on to say, "though things are not yet in their places, / the truth sears his fingertips: // the output of gold mines, / the number of sandals knotted on string; // orange globe of sun refracted through haze; // a two-year-old gasps at hummingbirds lying on a porch."

"Didyma: 7," near the end of *Quipu*, shows how repetition and list accrue meaning without forcing a single interpretation:

"Do-as-you're-told scum sucker, you're the reason there are hydrogen  
bombs,"

yelled at the postal worker  
behind the counter—

it leopards the body—

cringes at strangled  
anteaters and raccoons hanging in the market—

it leopards the body—

wakes to pulverized starfish in his shoes—

it leopards the body...

Sze's poems leopard the mind as well, or to use the metaphor that drives the book, they knot the mind, even as those knots reveal themselves, one by one, as points on a larger scale of measurement.

## V

Angie Estes's *Chez Nous* is also constructed in tangles and knots, but in this collection the knots are linguistic as well as syntactic. History—of civilizations and of persons—is not at the center of this book, but it plays an essential part in the complexly allusive world these poems create, as they twist and turn their way through association, slant rhyme,

assonance, and consonance. These are playful poems, earnestly playful, and they take their game of language very seriously. From the first poem, “True Confessions,” in which the speaker says that the “true / home of glamour, by which / I mean of course the grammar / of glamour, is Scotland / because *glamour* is a Scottish variant / of *grammar* with its rustle of moods / and desires,” the book charts its own aesthetic territory.

Estes’ poems seem reckless in their willingness to speed through any pun that gets in their way, but in fact they pick up and fuel themselves with whatever material they come upon. Allusions to literature, to history, to high culture and pop culture tumble one over another:

Because a little knowledge  
is a dangerous thing, a little  
Everest, a bit of  
evidence, a little death, *le petit*  
*mort* is a dangerous thing,  
which is why Antony called Cleopatra  
*Egypt* and not his *Rome*  
*away from Rome...*

(“Amuse-Bouche”)

Etymology and pun can generate their own reality, though what it might mean and whether meaning itself is important are other, perhaps unanswerable, questions:

Taken literally, the shore would be  
*littoral* and the ocean its Latin  
lover, *litura*, erasure or  
correction, clearing the beach  
like a windshield with its big  
glassy hands. Waving, yes,  
but to whom? It’s morning already  
and all the worlds’ a mess or else  
at Mass.

(“A History of Reality”)

This is funny poetry, but it’s also smart—stylish, intelligent, and sharp-witted. The poems refuse to linger on their potential weightiness; philosophical moments—“What if / you paused for a minuet // instead

of a minute?”—speed immediately into metaphor—“The dark / might sky, the blue might // star, the always / could open, the close // might earth” (“Kind of Blue”). The title poem waterfalls into its opening line, driven quickly down the page by sound:

CHEZ NOUS

we say *vive*  
*la différence* between morals  
 and morals: the accent,  
 spelling, shape of the mouth  
 whenever it eats or  
 speaks. According to Sargent,  
 a portrait is a painting  
 with something wrong with  
 the mouth, but *chez nous*  
 the paintings have  
 no mouths and do not need  
 to sing because what we call  
 darkness darkens  
 in octaves.

Sometimes linguistic association pushes a poem along, with the same vertical speed:

In lieu of song, *liaison*:  
 let the usually silent, final  
 consonant of a word be pronounced  
 when followed by a word  
 beginning with a vowel, and pour out  
 the sentiment left at the bottom  
 of the glass when I've finished  
 the *Beaune-Grève de*  
*l'Enfant Jésus*, claimed by the nuns  
 who once owned the vineyard to produce  
 wine as smooth as the Baby Jesus  
 in velvet pants. I meant  
*sediment...*

(“Palinode”)

A few selections in this book do push linguistic dexterity so far that the effort seems more of a gimmick than an exploration. “Pattou’s French-English Manual,” for example, mimics short lessons in introductory French with numbered entries. Many of the numbers are missing, others are out of sequence, and the little lessons are divided by a section called “Pronunciation Helps.” This poem seems more concerned with showing that the writer knows a foreign language than with showing anything about translation. Such moments, however, are few, and overall *Chez Nous* is delightful. In fact, the book reads deceptively fast; the poems are so clear on their surface that the slips and puns and embedded quotations slide by effortlessly. Almost every poem’s ending, however, invites a return to the beginning. “*Vis-à-Vis*” is emblematic of the Möbius-strip quality of *Chez Nous*, beginning “What is always / looking back at itself: the *s* / of the *tete-à-tete* // sofa, a kind of sleigh / for two, never slight but sleight / of hand.” It is not solipsistic either, however, because, at the same time, the writer’s stance by the poem’s end is outward:

... *We’ll always*  
*have Paris*, whether in Paris

or in pairs, but now, from where  
 I stand, *face to face*, here  
 is looking at you.

It may be, as Hayden White said in *Tropics of Discourse*, that “each new representation of the past represents a further testing and refinement of our capacities to figure the world in language,” that history is a writing project enmeshed in its own historicity. How to turn a double lens on events of the past, to look at them and look at the self looking, is a problem with which historians and literary critics continue to struggle. These five books suggest, however, that poets manage to grapple with history—personal, political, and cultural—by making use of the ambiguities and disjunctions inherent in lyric. Troping, that serious game of multiplying meaning, may be our best tool yet for resisting forgetfulness.

## THE HIGH WIRE THAT CARRIES US SAFELY ACROSS

by Ellen Wehle

*Field Stone*, by Catherine Kasper. Winnow, 57 pp., \$14.

*Laws of My Nature*, by Margot Schilpp. Carnegie Mellon, 79 pp., \$14.95.

*The Mending Worm*, by Joan Houlihan. New Issues, 79 pp., \$14.

Ideally, reading a poem should be like walking a high wire. If the open air gaping beneath us is the chaos of non-meaning, then the wire—slender, tightly strung—that carries us safely across is coherence. What makes the performance thrilling is if it *is* only a wire and not, say, a nice sturdy plank bridging the abyss. By suggesting meaning (wire) rather than spelling out meaning (plank), the poet demands from us a high level of engagement: we must read with great care, intuitively, attuned to our own balance.

In the end, though, coherence is the goal. As a reader, my goal is making the heart-stopping trek through space, not plunging to my death.

As a reader, I want to come away knowing more about what it is to be human.

Unfortunately, I didn't have this circus metaphor handy the last time I debated aesthetics. I attract these conversations: at parties or, once, on the subway, I'll find someone telling me how human experience in poetry is passé, that the new writing makes meaning obsolete. In pushing the boundaries of language, so the logic goes, poetry liberates us from meaning; meaning is beside the point. That this leads to reams of poems no one wants to actually read is hardly seen as a problem. Instead, I keep hearing about the shortage of intelligent readers. In the face of so much earnest belief, where confusion and complexity are spoken of interchangeably, as if they were one, it's sometimes hard to remember that my own idea—coherence—is not in fact simplemindedness.

It was with great anticipation, then, that I sat down with three books that all promised a high level of engagement while still having something to say about human life.

## I

At first glance, Catherine Kasper's *Field Stone* is most noticeable for its form. While sections I and III are conventional groupings of poems, the book's main body, Section II, is a series of fragments. Titled "Blueprints of the City," these fragments read as one long thought, any boundary between them intentionally blurred. Much like rain falling, they drift down the pages, sometimes two or three to the same page, unpunctuated, stopping and starting. The titles (italicized rather than capitalized) add to this effect by allowing each piece to run or bleed into the next. "Blueprints" opens as follows:

*footpath: entrance before a building*

from soil from the sky we begin where we are  
 lattice cornerstone  
 we remember what we have been told  
 those feet do not imprint  
 sweat or effervescence  
 blood does not illuminate it soaks in  
 the taste of brick mortar edging the cracks  
 soldered plumbing  
 where do you expect to be taken—  
 where do you want to go?

The final question resonates, in that "Blueprints" is the record of a stay in a foreign city. "Where do you want to go?" becomes "Who do you want to be?" now that the old self has been left back home, the new self stripped bare and exposed. Anyone who's traveled and spent more than a week in a foreign city will recognize the speaker's sense of dislocation. Given Kasper's subject matter, her disjunctive form becomes especially apt, mimicking the disjunction of living alone in a strange place.

In this first fragment, I found myself coming back again and again to "feet do not imprint," the idea that we are only passing through, without power to leave any trace or part of ourselves on our surroundings. Yet in these poems it's the body, the sweat and blood, which seems to have greatest reality—that startling "taste" of brick mortar, as if the speaker had reached out to the building with her tongue. In "Blueprints" the repeated, loving references to hunger and to food ("chocolate, bread, cinnamon, odor of seared meat, a drink that tastes like coconut") are

what first clued me in to the speaker's isolation. Several times I've spent a month in cities where I knew no one, and I remember well how important meals became, entire days organized around them. Kasper captures exactly the heightening of appetite that is in large part loneliness.

Not just appetite, but all of the senses are on alert. The city is experienced as a series of sensory impressions, like lightning strokes or the rapid clicks of a camera. Moving past or through the city's scenes is the speaker, ghost-like witness, unable to take part. A public reading at the library becomes yet another night of solitude, the freefall of impressions she uses to describe it noticeably lacking any human interaction:

only in the evenings there is music everywhere damp smell of  
 blossoms wet mud then  
 smoke laughter an unspoken restriction on time crushed glass screech  
 of a dog  
 the slide your chair makes on the floor getting out  
 door slamming behind you

In this case “only” seems to mean “but,” and thus the passage reads like the continuation of some previous conversation, held with oneself. “Sure, the place is lonely and I'm miserable, but in the evenings...” For an endnote, there is that sharp finality of the “door slamming behind you.”

Further into the section a page of single-line fragments float on their own, surrounded by white space. Again, a risky move as form goes, because not many individual lines can hold up under that kind of scrutiny. To succeed you need a line so freighted that its meaning can't be unpacked all at once, earning the extra white space. I'll quote just one.

Silence: lives in unknown cities once they are known it must leave

Like a Zen koan, this is deceptively quiet. Also like a koan, it kept me going for days. For me, the line's success was all the more striking in that the line *is* so quiet; I was required to bring a lot of myself to the reading of it, and I did. Many of the best moments in *Field Stone* similarly distill volumes of experience down to just a handful of words.

Elsewhere, the same sensibility is at work in a different syntax. The more conventional (or at least discrete) poems of sections I and III use complete sentences and, occasionally, a skeletal narrative: “There was a moment in a museum thought precious and out of date; I will admit it had a / distinctly Victorian flavor. A hall of dinosaur bones running in fixed positions.” The voice—distanced, yet closely observant—is recognizably the voice from II and, again, is most powerful when unreeling thought sequences. In “Thirty-three Articles on Solar Navigation (& Seven Sentences in Shadow),” Kasper gives us a list of statements and images whose connections are tenuous, barely there... and fascinating. To read “There are several firelit worlds and our insistence on one tells us more about our selves / than the universe” followed several stanzas later by “She appeared to disappear into a blinding glare. Someone spoke about taking a / photograph” is similar to overhearing a foreign language. At first, all you’re aware of is a haunting familiarity in the unfamiliar. Then, with repetition, you begin to apprehend its sense.

Not all of the book satisfies. Certain verbal tics, as when Kasper refers to herself as both “she” and “I” in the same poem, are distracting. Section II, which I consider the strongest, is not always convincing. Several of the fragments read like somebody’s travel journal and, indeed, they may be. But it is poetry’s job to select and arrange *from* the notes, to construct a larger experience. In passages like “begin again in the morning nothing penciled in so nothing remembered / cracked shells strange eagerness open an iron latch step into a street,” there is a limited effect to be had from scrupulously noting a day’s activities. And even then, dependent on the note-taker, readers might expect to catch a glimpse of the working mind behind the notes, rather than just a catalog.

“The Gatherers,” based on a painting by George Lacombe, shows the inability of single, disconnected words to evoke more than themselves. A sample:

open	
field	forest
plain	
room	(wom b loom)
they	

red orange red  
 maroon            blue red  
 blood cinnamon  
 red

green            splayed  
 leaves “prominently  
 veined”  
 cartography

bout to            lead  
 enter/inter      sect  
 plane

Here, the whole is no more than its parts, a grocery list of nouns and adjectives—and not even arresting ones. If the purpose of an ekphrastic poem is to riff off of the original work of art, creating surprising echoes in another medium, “The Gatherers” does not. If the purpose is to pay homage to the original, it does not. Particularly grating is that language-y “(wom b loom),” as if separating the “b” somehow leads to deeper thought on the implications of “womb.” Is it a pun: womb be the loom? Womb bloom? Whenever I read wordplay of this sort I start looking for the payoff, and through repeated readings the line continued to ring hollow, a forced attempt at profundity.

On the whole, *Field Stone* is most interesting for what it tries to do. Ambitious books set challenges and then rise to meet them: “Blueprints” alone, with its fragments floating in and out of each other, makes this collection worth reading. Where Kasper succeeds she succeeds so well that a few missteps are forgivable.

## II

In contrast to the first book’s minimalism, *Laws of My Nature*, by Margot Schilpp, packs an entire universe between its covers. Schilpp’s technique is to gather up a torrent of images and let them fly, and while the poems are conventionally punctuated and speak in whole sentences, the overall effect is of being caught in a nor’easter. Whether writing in couplets or four- or five-line stanzas, Schilpp stacks clause upon clause so rapidly that the eye flies down the page.

I first discovered Schilpp's work in an issue of *The National Poetry Review*. Reading "Now and Then" at my local bookstore, I was mesmerized by the seeming irrationality of the images the poet yoked together:

I was holding the shards  
of a lie that scratched the lining

of the heart  
until the apple cored itself  
into even smaller pieces.

Until then, lilies and roses  
were not a wedge.  
Until then what grew in the sun

did nothing but shade  
the delicate bodies of snails.

Taken separately, the images were vivid, surreal, haunting; in conjunction they created their own world of logic, a highly personal logic whose rules hovered just beyond reach. There it was: that zing in my veins that, with every poem I pick up, I look for. Enough reason to walk over to the help desk and order *Laws of My Nature*, which I did.

Much of the book does indeed deliver that zing. Early on Schilpp writes, "This is my brief sedition. This is my / resistance to the order of things," and it's a thought that could serve as the book's epigraph. Creating chaos, or a semblance of chaos, through floods of images, Schilpp gives herself license to link anything to anything and everything else. And because so much is happening in these poems, they're not a quick read. Whether this is a plus depends on whether your test of a good poem is instantaneous comprehension. Since I expect to have to read more than once, I was satisfied.

"Taking Leave of My Senses" is a good example of Schilpp's technique. It opens:

I want that, I think, when I see the slender body  
of the model, the deer's white tail,

the hood ornament that glints  
in the strong sun, day after day,

all the traffic of memory knotted  
up in a big jam...

The title is a hook, pulling us in. As a common expression meaning experiencing a lapse in judgment, it promises a certain amount of craziness and thus prepares us for the speaker's high emotion. At the same time, it's ironic. To "leave one's senses" and become numb, literally "insensible" to the world, is exactly what the speaker doesn't do. Instead, she is hyper-aware. The world pours into her as if a tap had been turned on—which is the point. "I want that" she says, and then lists three disparate objects of desire: a model's beauty, a deer's white tail, a car's hood ornament. The poet moves us rapidly forward by creating very subtle relationships between clauses. Flashing white, the deer's tail is echoed visually a line later as the hood ornament flashes in the sun; the car vocabulary of "hood ornament" sets us up, in turn, for a "traffic jam" of memory.

A few stanzas further the speaker's universal desire shifts to a particular point in time:

Some things  
just are: the seagull, the pocketbook,

the wrought iron gate around  
the fierce heart. I want that, I think,

when I see you running up the path,  
your world proportioned through earphones.

I hear a wealth of loneliness in "Some things / just are." Many of those things that "just are" we dearly want, she seems to say, while it "just is" that we may not have them. Especially effective is the speaker's use of "that" for the man she sees running. "I want that" she says, deadpan, consciously objectifying him, before switching in the next line to the more intimate "you." How many of us, passing a stranger on the street, haven't glanced over with the same mix of lust and detachment?

Of course, the technique of combining disparate images isn't successful all the time. Several otherwise strong poems have moments of "thud" when a flight of fancy doesn't quite fly, such as "I wanted a little glamour / and the morning's toast not the place / to find it, not unless the toast is encrusted / with diamonds and cut into the shape / of a crown, a Lamborghini." Here, the "image" really isn't one, in that it's difficult to visualize toast being covered in diamonds. The passage is also misleading: Is this someone's mistress speaking? Why else diamonds, a Lamborghini and (next line) "the heart / of the woman who loves you"? Whimsy will take us only so far.

Another poem, "Never-Never," consists of a list: "never molting or shedding skin, even if it's time / Never Jello, never rice. Never iron, never grief." As the list continues each item remains separate and arbitrary, without relatedness. Because "Never-Never" never creates an interior logic, items (Never Jello, never rice) could be swapped at random (never eggplant, never jam) and the poem would read precisely the same. It's one of the book's few failures.

Throughout *Laws of My Nature*, subject matter is elusive. Narrative exists only in scraps (a breakfast table, a graveyard) and we are, for the most part, unanchored in time or space. Issues of identity, desire, and memory circle, Schilpp's best lines often posing as philosophical questions: "doesn't the earth / ... want to show us / how we can be the future of ourselves, a dark road / lit by the candles of yes?" This requires a certain reader, one content *not* to know the speaker—not to have the illusory sense literature often gives that, invited guests, we drop in on a speaker's life. Instead, we share her inner life. True, it isn't always enough. These are poems primarily about emotional states, and there is a certain amount of information withheld that, at times, feels coy. Poems such as "Ouija" and "Sunday Lyric" take on such a high emotional pitch it's doubly frustrating not to know just what is at stake. Most of the time, though, we *are* allowed to enter, and to watch a consciousness aware of itself.

Can you understand momentum  
when you stand perfectly still?  
A snake drops from the tree and makes

a small noise—the sound of thinking  
itself away—and across the leaves,  
a slithering.

Taken as a body, the book feels “whole,” with individual poems gaining energy and force from each other. Similarly, Schilpp’s images gain force from being stacked together: “Dragonflies braid[ing] themselves in and out” leads to “the funhouse mirror—/ incredible distortion, bare recognition”; “a swan / swimming in honey” leads to “another hand / that bludgeons or caresses / or smooths the wrinkles from a piece of paper / onto the secret darknesses.” Each time, seeing how Schilpp gets there—to any one point from any other point in her poem—is half the satisfaction. Nor’ easter or not, her work remains true to its own logic. Reading it gives the sensation of eavesdropping, in the best sense, on a very private mind.

### III

Joan Houlihan’s first book followed an unusual format, comprised of one half poetry and one half critical essays. When it came out, I remember admiring her chutzpah in being willing to stand her own poems alongside what amounted to a manifesto. In one essay much marked by my highlighter, she states, “Like a religious order, but without the religion, poets are fueled by deep connections to the ineffable, an inner silence... an almost physiological need for reverie.” I had recently been at an artists’ colony where a teacher asked, “Why write poetry?” and watched, bemused, as not a single student answered, “To express the inexpressible, the holy.” Thus the jolt of pleasure I felt at seeing the word “ineffable” staked out for poetry.

Now, in her second book, *The Mending Worm*, Houlihan shows us the truth of her claim.

First and foremost, these are poems of passion. Clean and spare, they are rich in image, hungrily appropriating the things of this world in order to express the other world. Implicit in many is a kind of harrowing force of love: love of a lover, love of God; the two intermix. And yet despite this the poems are remarkably subtle. Longing, lust, adoration, yes, but all in tightly controlled lines. Emotion is oblique; force of feeling reveals itself in tiny, unexpected turns of phrase rather than grand gestures. Darkly underpinning the speaker’s passion is an opposing force of decay, neglect, disintegration—a built-in balancing mechanism that allows more emotion into the poems than they could otherwise hold. “Between you and me there is nothing,” Houlihan says,

breaking her line, “but body,” thus earning the lyric intensity of the closing: “I am a blown surface.”

Second person “you” refers sometimes to the lover, sometimes to the self. Rarely do the poems dealing with love qualify as “love poems”; they’re too jarring for that, but they speak from an unmistakable depth of emotion. In “Wife,” we read, “She is bound to him, / Pressed against a hard place, then / Inside it, doorless.” Claustrophobia battles with a sense of the holy, the “doorless” temple of the beloved or God. The vocabulary of danger is everywhere (*gash, ligature, bleeding, bite, flamed, chained, blade*), and we understand instinctively that not just the body, but the heart, is fragile.

Writers are told “make it fresh, make it new.” In *The Mending Worm* it’s all new. Houlihan wields language like a weapon, carving out lines that are stingingly precise. Even the most familiar reference—for example, a crescent moon—remakes itself in her hands:

The modicum of life that strung the little necks  
of crocuses, that lulled the feeble seed  
into its disease called grass, that heaped the pious  
branches with their only whiteness,  
that broke silver from the jawbone of the moon...

These are lines that stopped me cold, each word dropping almost painfully into my inner ear. The stanza’s suspended syntax, in which one long sentence unspools without delivering a predicate until the next stanza, increases the impact. And the violence (“broke silver,” “jawbone”) is both startling and perfectly in keeping with the anti-pastoral tone. Page after page, Houlihan takes the natural world we think we know and upends it.

Often no more than fourteen or twenty lines, the poems set up their propositions and fulfill them quickly by a sophisticated use of syntax. Simple declarative sentences such as, “I am a wreckage / of light” alternate with complex constructions: “Will you rid me, make the wolf mild, / the hare, in its panic, soothe?” The declarative sentences become stepping stones, places for the reader to find footing before soaring off with more intricate constructions. In some cases, fragments are used to create a special tension and we read on more quickly, expecting to find the missing subject and verb in sentences that follow. Repetition of words or phrases (“no place / for my mouth except on yours, / no

place for my tongue / except to yours”) also provides a way into tightly packed sentences.

Part of this word craft is a careful attention to sound. In *The Mending Worm* so many passages beg to be read aloud, I found myself murmuring them under my breath.

Inside, the walls speckle.  
 Stark, kitchen-lit  
 flies pock the table  
 black as dropped seeds.

Though we go slowly  
 they startle—  
 bodies alive  
 with unshutable eyes.

Rhyme, which can so easily be abused, hammering on our ears, is lightly felt. We hear it but it falls naturally on the ear: the slant rhyme of “speckle/table/startle,” the straight rhyme of “Though/go/slow.” At no point do the sounds of the lines obstruct meaning. The harsh repeating *k*’s in the first stanza help to paint a mood of angst and irritation, while the three hard stresses of “black as dropped seeds” give added weight to the final image. Throughout the book, sound deftly augments meaning.

In the big picture, technical skill doesn’t mean much if there’s nothing to say. Certainly there are poets who are masters of craft yet whose work leaves me cold. Craft in service of meaning—now that I admire. And it’s clear that Houlihan is speaking from truth, from her own lived life.

The degree of mystery is high. Narrative is jagged and purposefully disordered. One of the few poems with a clear narrative, in the sense that a line of action can be traced, best illustrates what I mean by “mystery.” I’ll quote it in its entirety.

NOTHING SO STOIC AS A CHILD DONE EARLY

Nettled over and backed against a marsh  
 of kept pools, in a filigree of gnats,

you can see it from the train—

whitened by evening and one light inside—

house to which you will come back.  
You stood it for years.

In the crippled-fingered light, a few bees  
squeezed through the screen

as you wound around each hand an urgent  
maternal bandage. Accident?

You're stuttering. *Please*  
*open your throat for milk.*

Houlihan's titles rarely summarize but rather inform, glancing off of their poems at an angle. This one is faintly sinister, with overtones of "done in" and "done for" making us wonder just what the child's stoicism had to endure. (Like many of the titles, it can also be read last rather than first.) Tone is set by the opening depiction of the house, dark with stagnation and decay. Time shuttles backwards and forwards. The speaker is simultaneously an adult returning: "you can see it from the train," and the child in an infinite, ongoing past: "house to which you will come back." Then the killing line, "You stood it for years." How many poets could say this without bathos? But here the entire piece is so quiet the line drops like an axe.

In the final three stanzas, it's impossible to say whether we're witnessing past or present. Those bees squeezing their way in promise harm; likewise the maternal bandage restraining both hands. Finally the point-blank question—"Accident?"—as if the speaker, questioning the familial version of events, is edging towards a truer memory. And all accomplished within twelve lines.

Not every reader will be willing to put into these poems the work that they deserve. Of the three books reviewed, *The Mending Worm* demands the greatest engagement and delivers the least amount of help for decoding its meaning. Paradoxically, it is also the clearest book in terms of voice; the passion that drives these poems is consistent throughout.

One of my litmus tests for whether I keep a book of poetry or pass it on to friends is its degree of unanswerability. I give the same test to art

before hanging it on my wall. In this photograph, how much remains to be discovered after my first, second, or tenth viewing? In this poem, what layers of meaning elude my eye, how much deeper will repeated readings take me? In English class we are taught to want to get “to the bottom” of things, but with poetry I’m not sure that’s desirable. Reading this book again, I was reminded of the way the best poetry resembles a large body of water. No matter how many times you might dive in and swim, you will never touch bottom.