“Darkness Visible”: Five Books of American Poetry
by Sarah Kennedy

_In the Middle Distance_, by Linda Gregg. Graywolf, 80 pp., $14.
_Annus Mirabilis_, by Sally Ball. Barrow Street, 68 pp., $15.
_Postcards from the Interior_, by Wyn Cooper. BOA Editions, 88 pp., $14.95.

Many commentators have noted that American poetry has, in the last few years, taken on an unironically serious tone as writers focus on current political concerns around the world. This turn to gravity is unsurprising, and it seems to have ushered in a corollary tone in recent books of personal narrative, which sustain a tragic note through poems about love, family, and history. The five books below are all marked by their attention to the inevitability of suffering and loss, through disease, death, and decay. They do not entertain, but, in a satisfying way, they do connect the larger chaos of our public and political lives to the unavoidable sadness of individual existence.

I

Linda Gregg’s _In the Middle Distance_, in lyrics that wind from Greece to Texas, takes brokenness as both its subject and its form, as the narrator explores perceptions in the wake of lost love. The end of a relationship is dangerous territory for any poet, rife as this theme is with the potential for sentimentality or cliché. Gregg, however, avoids the expected with these crystalline short poems, which turn surprisingly from the quotidian to a sort of natural mysticism.

Many of the poems in this collection are literally made of fragments—sentence fragments—and they give a jagged, unsure quality to the book’s overarching tone. That halting sense is reinforced by paradox and oxymoron, as the speaker struggles in poem after poem to express the complexity of her observations and feelings. Stones under water are “[s]eeming to move, / but not moving” (“Waiting”); she claims that we “keel over because of the surprising / singing in us, & the quiet of the soul” (“Turn, Turn”). Rhetoric, however, does not solve the very
The body, significantly, is often subjected to violence and its consequent losses. It also becomes subject rather than object; as the speaker becomes animal herself, the natural non-human world is anthropomorphized and moralized: “Was the antelope already limping / or was the woman in love?” (“Guilty”).

This exchange is never stable for long. The very human ideas of beauty and its possible source in the divine continually intrude on the material world: “a chunk of marble becomes a god / if a mantle is put on it” (“Turn, Turn”). But what, in a broken world, in a broken person, can be made of received notions of God? The fragmentary character of these poems begins to reveal some answers. In “Trying To Ripen” the speaker begins, “I thought if I lived alone / in stillness, God would be closer,” and in “Waiting,” she recalls believing that “[w]hen [she] chewed a bay leaf and rubbed / sage on [her] hands and arms … / … / it was so [her] soul could be read by God.” But natural theology is another too-easy path for Gregg; instead, those glimpses of potential rest are shattered by her unwillingness to fuse the pieces of her experience into an artificial Meaning or Beauty.
... No Greek ruins.
No fragment with legs of walking horses
painted delicately on it. No part
of a lion on bits of glazed vase ...

... Here there is no need.

... When you find a bird’s wing
there is a flattened small bird attached.
A ranch at evening, the sun leaving,
antelope standing and the other birds
flying. All of it meaning the same thing.

(“As Is”)

Some of the poems seem to reconcile self-contradiction with
unmitigated pleasure. “Always Alone” succeeds best at this difficult
project, embracing neither belief nor despair wholeheartedly. The
speaker is living by herself in a small Greek town, and she might be
expected to indulge a desire to feel the presence of an ancient pantheon.
In fact, her emotional distance from both gods and people allows her to
see them more clearly:

... Mostly I looked away,
to another mountain where I felt
the goddess used to be. Where I walked
so often in her absence. Finding
ancient shards, negotiating for my soul
with the leftover facts of the Earth.
Reconciling with what love is. Always alone.

A few poems in the collection fail to achieve the beautiful, sometimes
terrifying stained-glass effect of “Always Alone”; a few, like “Beauty,” in
which the appearance of an “aged” Brigitte Bardot is juxtaposed with
a memory of the speaker’s father shooting his dog after it has learned
to kill sheep, seem strained. “Plenty” is a dialogue/list poem that never
really rises above the literal names of flowers. Even the poems that
fall short as complete poems, however, merit rereadings for individual
images. One of the great strengths of In the Middle Distance is its use of
arresting tropes:
Christ as the sun going down when the border
patrol cars are dragging tires on the dirt road

(“Marfa”)

... An ant carrying the wing
of a butterfly like a flag in the wind

(“Surviving Love”)

... Accurate
and unexpected beauty, rattling
and singing...

(“Elegance”)

And although this speaker insists, “I do not need the gods to return. I have
seen the fragments ... / ... / I don’t need Orpheus / to sing. / ... / I don’t need the old gods to be believed” (“I Do Not Need the Gods to Return”), that strident rejection is harmonized into a sadly minor
key by its echo of an earlier poem’s opposite conclusion: “What about
our very old god who is / now making his problematical children?”
(“Getting Value”).

What indeed? This fine book ends rather than opening *in medias
res*—“... Clean air, / and the great stars. / I’m trying to decide / if this
is what I want” (“Highway 90”). It is perhaps as succinct a statement of
adult life lived without self-pity as any in a recent book of poems.

II

Aleda Shirley’s third book, *Dark Familiar*, is also concerned with loss
of love, but this sustained sequence of poems, constructed of neatly
symmetrical stanzas, is primarily a meditation on death. In her controlled
five- to six-beat lines, Shirley documents and describes sudden loss and
the chaos that can envelop a survivor. Although these poems rarely
make an overt connection between the personal and political realms,
they do attend to the dangers, as well as the transient beauties, not only
of surviving personal loss but also of living in the consumerist world of
contemporary America.

Destruction, of individuals and ideals, is at the center of many
recent books published in this country, and though *Dark Familiar* opens
with the statement, “I could be almost anywhere,” it becomes clear very
quickly that the speaker is in the United States. More specifically, she is
in “the hotel of a casino / on an Indian reservation in the deep south”
(“The Star’s Etruscan Argument”). The gambler’s hope to get rich
quick becomes an emblem for anyone’s yearning for “luck & fortune,” but the speaker’s desire founders on her recognition of “consumption’s / / debris.” God, in this poem, is “not looking out for any of us,” and it is tempting to read the personal poems that follow through the lens of this bleak vision.

Shirley’s is a world in which reminders of mortality are frequent and unavoidable. Almost every poem contains some reference to death, and this tone of mourning is underscored by the palette of individual poem titles (after Mark Rothko paintings), in which color dominates: “Brown, Black on Maroon”; “Blue Poles”; “Three Blacks in Dark Blue”; “Four Darks in Red.” Even the poems that have titles in a brighter spectrum—“Purple, White, and Red,” “The Yellow Point,” and “White Center”—undercut and redefine traditional associations. “Purple, White, and Red,” for example begins this way:

In the wake of your death, twisting silver koi
& something that looks like the pale pebbled glass
from a smashed windshield. The figure of the Virgin
as she appeared in the window of an office building

in Florida, among the theme parks & golf courses
& souvenir shops.

The speaker is inconsolable all the way through this poem about grief, and the ending circles back to the opening lines: “What’s wrong. / / Those I loved asked & asked until finally / something else terrible happened & I could answer / with that. In the wake, silence, like a mirror / where the silver’s gone completely opaque.”

“The Yellow Point” follows, and at first the color seems to refer to sunlight seen through the doors of a clothing shop. The metaphoric ray of hope, however, does not make an appearance; this sun turns out to be “silver & unreal.” The yellow refers to some of the “sweaters, stacks of them,” and this buyer “want[s] them all.” Although “The Yellow Point” is placed three-quarters of the way through the book, it looks back to the empty consumerism of “The Star’s Etruscan Argument,” and the brightly optimistic yellow of the title is suddenly tarnished. The poem ends with the woman sitting on her bed, surrounded by purchases, slicing a “knife through tape” and holding “soft wads of tissue paper [she] make[s] smaller with [her] fists.” She’s completely alone; “If the
doorbell rings, it will be a delivery: / more to open,” not a friend or lover.

This solitary search for some way to fill an essentially empty life resonates throughout Dark Familiar. The relentless references to death may ultimately overwhelm some readers, but this book is tragic, and for it to end on a happy note would be a false turn. The point of these poems seems to be shaping tragedy into a recognizable form in which the writer and her readers can see into the larger dangers that surround us. As Shirley says in “Counter Love,” the penultimate poem, “After your death / / I discovered lies that changed everything / & now know that what one is left with after finding / truth is not truth.’’ What she finds is herself, adrift in an inescapable present where choices all seem to lead to the same dismal end. And in the final poem, “White Center,” she shows us that end: “A year is a basket, / making ferric the skin of the ice it molds / or through which steam drifts & water sluices, / silver until it darkens dusk.” It is the right conclusion for this book, but readers who are faint of heart about the condition of our country and our world should enter with caution.

III

The professional rivalry of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Isaac Newton threads through Sally Ball’s Annus Mirabilis, winner of the 2005 Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize. This is Ball’s first book, and while it does show signs of a writer young at her craft, the poems are also ambitious and finely wrought. Although broken into three parts, this collection reads almost as a multifaceted sequence, in which history and personal narrative are modes of exploring the materiality of the body, in which the most brilliant intellects can be imprisoned.

Sickness, especially illness of the mind, figures largely in Ball’s poems, though common childhood maladies are also present. “In Hannover: Clairvoyance” follows a woman through a research trip; she is trying to learn about Leibniz’s life, but she also has to attend to her sick son, who is “slumped / in the stroller” as she walks around town. Accidents occur, as well; in “Gravity and Levity,” someone named Heide (we never find out exactly who she is) “fell in a building under construction— / a temporary staircase collapsed.” The second half of the book introduces to the roll of damaged people a father waiting for, then receiving, a lung transplant. Still, the book is heavily weighted with depression and
other conditions of the mind that make human contact difficult, if not impossible. The brain, in these poems, is featured as the most delicate organ of all, subject to many forms of violence:

Messala Corvinus forgot his own name.
One, by a blow with a stone, forgot all his learning.
Another, by a fall from a horse,
forgot his mother’s name and kinfolk.
A young student of Montpellier, by a wound,
lost his memory, so that he was fain to be taught
the letters of the alphabet again.
The like befell a Franciscan friar after a fever.

(“Memory”)

Clearly, it can happen to anyone, to Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century, to a lover or spouse, to oneself at an unanticipated moment. The poems’ forms veer from narrative to jagged, elliptical lyric, as they try to make aesthetic sense of the senseless, of knowledge itself, which is “unremarkable / until it’s threatened” by mental breakdown (“Slope”). The speaker, though she believes that she is the stable one of a partnership, admits, in “Night Dances,” the possibility of a sudden fall into lunacy:

I thought I lived outside such music,
watching my beloved, yes, sure, gripped
or loosened, loosening and tightening his grip—

but there are darks into which
I find myself unloosed, pitched.

... the self its own thick frame and limit,
and the soul at play against those walls, a ghost.

In the next poem, “Dissolution,” Isaac Newton’s year of “vicious madness” seems to stand for all the other appearances of mental disease in the book. Newton’s self-isolation during this “Black Year” is outlined in the letters he writes to his friends Samuel Pepys (the famous diarist) and John Locke. The letters unexpectedly also become a record of Newton’s apparent recovery and return to “normal” life:
Writing to Pepys and to John Locke, full of his fear of “embroilment”:

Locke had endeavoured to embroil him with women, and Pepys, he feared, with favor-seeking,

accusatory, vituperative—

Then it went away. He apologized, told Locke he’d wished him dead but didn’t mean it.

The letters they exchanged were loving letters,

Locke: *I am more ready to forgive you than you can be to desire it*—

But even the desire to be well, to forgive, to be part of a healthy couple, is fraught with peril. The mind can imagine, in fact *must* imagine in order to know, but imagination can lead to betrayal. “Candle under Glass,” a multi-part lyric, catches this tension vividly; part three, “The Kind of Trouble,” states simply, “I would like to go to bed with someone / who is glad to be alive.” In part four, “Safety Clasp,” that thought unravels into sexual fantasy:

So far, I only imagine this with people who are married well, not going anywhere. Who maybe, because they’re honest, notice a little heat, a little mutual noticing, but—

no threat. Both sides alive to each other, sated, really, just by that.

But what I imagine: begins with an admittedly fatherly embrace,

from which hungrily, I—

No. Frequently what I imagine proceeds directly from hungrily, I—
In the fifth and final part, “The Candle under Glass Appears and Disappears,” the speaker returns to her life and her lover, in a plea that seems directed both to her partner and to herself: “I am telling you: / you would not always rather be dead. / Wrap that in whatever faith is left in you.”

The stories that weave through *Annus Mirabilis*, even those that involve famous historical people, are terrifyingly recognizable, and Ball’s poems are at their best when they are told through the snatches of detail and quotation that make up most of the book. Now and then, the poems do become frustratingly elliptical, as in “Function of X,” which, the notes say, incorporates elements of John Nash’s life and words. The poem is rather long at four pages, and its use of a mathematical register neither illuminates the story of the couple nor deepens the quality of their hopelessness at X’s inability to stop wanting to “walk under a bus.” The poems about Leibniz, too, while not cryptic, generally suffer from their proximity to the poems about Newton; Leibniz, in fact, seems to appear as often as he does simply because he was the rival of Newton and so makes a useful foil. (The long explanatory note at the back, unfortunately, contributes to this sense.)

For the most part, however, Sally Ball’s poems take on and wrestle into shape a topic both ordinary and mystifying—the workings of the human mind. The petition to the moon that ends “Heart Swims Away and Is Lost” is poignant without giving way to sentimentality:

> Oh, moon: I have just the one partner, whose love is a floor on which to walk out of my life. You know how he, too, looks at you. How dare you knock me down and then not take me?

The little question at the core of the short poem “Violent Motion” is the keystone of the entire book: “Could I be ill?” The answer, of course—whether we are prepared for it or not—is a mortifying yes for us all.
Like Sally Ball, Amy Beeder, in *Burn the Field*, is concerned with disease. This collection of allusive, ekphrastic poems shows more traditional forms—most of Beeder’s lines are in a rough iambic pentameter and she favors regular stanzas—but like *Annus Mirabilis*, the book examines the fragility of the mortal body.

Photos, paintings, and girls’ samplers are some of the objects through which Beeder views brutality and decay, as though the motionlessness of art helps her stop at a crucial moment. “Photograph in a Montana Bar” is the finest example of this kind of poem, beginning, “When you finally decipher the image,” then deferring description of that image for several lines to linger on the photographic process. When the poem reveals that the image is “a tangle of moose and hunter, bones nearly clean / though still darker than the snow they lie in,” the horrific content has already been filtered through the beauty of its medium. What the poem turns, and ends, on is that ambivalence, caught here as the lovely moment when the man stepped “from hemlock to a clearing … / … with this embrace a few seconds away.”

“Wrought” also meditates on the made thing, this time on a selection of samplers stitched by nineteenth-century girls. The needlework reflects the girls themselves: “Here is one by Frances Bassford, 1841 / whose alphabet sits tight as type / on the first line, before it comes undone: / / Stitch of Madness, Stitch of Palsy, Stitch of Failing Sight.” Their signatures, too, reveal how circumscribed are not only their labors but also their lives: “This work was done by Ruth Body she hated every stitch.” To the contemporary museum-goers whose faces “look back from museum glass,” the identities of the girls behind these sad artifacts are lost—“Their faces are no faces, long covered in darkness”—even as the poem itself recaptures them through their samplers and brings them back to life.

Not every ekphrastic poem attains this liveliness. The poems alluding to *The Wizard of Oz*, “Gossip” and “The Shoes,” need more context and so seem dropped into the book at random. “Photo of Pasteur” gives no real insight into its subject, and “On Two Paintings by Narcisse Virgil Diaz de La Peña” relies too unquestioningly on the equation of woman and nature, though its final lines, “There: belly a pool / feet of mushrooms, face of moss,” contains lovely, haunting images, amounting almost to apostrophe.
Some of the best poems in *Burn the Field* actually are full-dress apostrophes. “Cabezón” addresses a local character whose physical appearance, “chub & bug-eyed, jaw like a loaf / hands in your pockets, a smoke dangling slack / from the slit of your pumpkin mouth,” arrests the speaker when she is “driving much too fast.” There’s a hint of Yeatsian terror when the speaker wonders what this man is “slouching toward—knee-locked, / hippity, a hitch in [his] zombie walk.” The greater, fear, however, is that he will make contact, that he will “turn [his] gaze / upon [her] shadow in this tinted glass.” Although what meaning he might make of this narrator is left unspoken, the possibility that the gaze can be redirected at the original viewer creates an uneasy sense of powerlessness; she might just become that other if their positions are reversed.

These rhetorical strategies carry much of the book, though some variations occur. Persona poems are sprinkled throughout; in “Again the Donkey,” Shakespeare’s Bottom describes himself in familiar terms as “Velvet-lipped & long of tooth, wire whiskered” but then shows himself to be more sensitive to the precariousness of his working-class status than his portrayal as a low-comedy character often suggests: “in the dark I sing / so they will hear that I am not afraid.” Sometimes these persona poems, though written in the third person, are so close to their subjects that they could be described as personal lyrics. “Gunslinger” imagines the title character “young & neawly dead,” then lists some of the ways early death can happen: “killed for cattle, land / … bad liquor, accident, some lynched.” At the poem’s end, the speaker discloses the gunslinger’s relationship to her; he was a “distant cousin” she has seen in—ekphrasis again—a photograph. This fine short poem shows explicitly the implicit link between the object poems and the personal narratives and helps tie the poems together as a book.

Sickness and death are also recurrent themes in these poems, from the corpse of a “[g]irl on a heap of street sweepings high / as a pyre” in “Yellow Dress,” to the “Last Photo” of the speaker’s mother before her death from cancer, to the medicinal recipe of “Croup.” There is no great wisdom to be gained from daily pain or from realizing the very human capacity for inflicting it, but two possible responses emerge. One is exemplified in the loose sonnet “Cotton & Turnip,” in which Cotton Mather defends his part in the executions of the Salem witches: “Did you think all dead in the flood had equally sinned?” This is repulsive
reasoning by itself, but the poem is not done: “As the powers of air / Leave barren the world, the righteous will perish, / Some few, among the wicked. Though good wheat’s lost / When pestilence descends, you burn the field.”

The other, less cold, possibility is contained in “Cured,” which assigns to humans not the choice to kill but the ability to see through the inevitable dissolution of the body to life: “I say leukemia is a flower … / … / Sarcoma is a gem … / … / and lymphoma the rare weather / That created Venus.” The book, it should be noted, takes its title from “Cotton & Turnip,” but the counterthrust of Beeder’s musical rhythms and striking imagery suggest that her project is to make beautiful metaphor of our dangerous world.

V

Wyn Cooper’s *Postcards from the Interior* is perhaps the most comic of this group of books, but only comic in contrast to the unstinted tragedy that marks the others. These are epistolary poems, rendered as postcards to an unnamed recipient, and the letters, sometimes lineated and sometimes in paragraphs, become a vehicle through which Cooper plays with textual representation. A postcard, after all, is usually a brief, casual communication, often somewhat obligatory, that provides mostly exterior detail: weather, sites visited, the wish-you-were-here gesture of attachment. These postcards, however, are—as the title indicates—brief glimpses into how the fragments of experience make up perception.

Broken into two parts, “Postcards from Vermont” and “Postcards from the Interior,” the book always seems to be traveling, and the individual poems are often marked by a moment of dislocation or sudden transition. The first poem, “Postcard from this Place,” sets up the rest of the collection perfectly; at its center is the defining statement: “This message arrived today: Leave now or be sorry later. I / don’t know which to choose.”

Uncertainty governs not only individual poems but their juxtaposition within the book as well. Two prose poems, “Postcard from Whitingham” and “Postcard from Sodom,” sit uncomfortably on facing pages; “Whitingham” features “[f]amous polygamist Brigham Young [who] came into the world / here.” A “large stone marker” notes that he was a “MAN / OF MUCH COURAGE AND SUPERB EQUIPMENT” suggesting that his religious fervor is something to be admired. The second
paragraph-stanza describes a paddleboat ride past a “nude beach, next to a gay / nude beach.” None of the tourists or beachgoers mentions Brigham Young, to whom the narrator refers as an “emancipator of sorts” without articulating what sort of emancipation he effected. The poem ends on a note not exactly of admiration, but of appreciation. “Postcard from Sodom” refers not to a person but to a place that no longer exists. The stories of the town’s disappearance vary from the unspecified “behavior” of the inhabitants to their “overindulgence” to the “painfully boring” theory of “weather patterns and / overfarming.” Does the reason matter? Apparently not, because the poem, in contrast to the lovely conclusion of “Whitingham,” ends with a shrug: “maybe it’s nobody’s business.”

Ambiguity and irony are frequent variations on the uncertain tone of Postcards from the Interior. “Postcard from Harmony Parking Lot” highlights teenagers who at first appear laughably filled with angst:

The teens have gathered, because they are teens.
They wear brown shirts faded to beige, black boots, low-slung jeans. The way they stand
is called jaunty. Cigarettes burn through
their words, smoke blows through their hair,
and the way they stare at passersby blends
reptile with bird, spleen with wonder.

Before turning away with a sneer, however, the poem turns the hyper–cool pose into a reflection of the speaker (and the reader); “the way they stare” also blends “your past with their present to you.” We are all, in other words, posing, trying to combine the disparate elements of self into an acceptable persona, trying to live in—don’t laugh—“Harmony.”

Or maybe laughter is the only useful reaction. The only thing we really know, after all, is “[w]hat we don’t know”; all we can talk about authoritatively is “the weather.” And this realization comes, of course, in “Wethersfield,” where the speaker wonders if the people are “like us,” their talk dominated by whether “it will rain.” The emphasis of the second part on “the Interior,” then, is not a jarring shift in focus; indeed, though the poems shift to emotion, the second half mirrors the first very closely. “Postcard from Wethersfield” has its counterpart in “Postcard from Hell” (also a punning place name). Unsurprisingly, the
town plays up its name in souvenirs and jokes (the local weatherman loves to “report every November that Hell / froze over last night”). The poem’s end, however, makes clear—also recalling “Postcard from Harmony Parking Lot”—that the subject is loss: “I am cold without you, not burning in / hell like I thought I would be.”

This, like many of Cooper’s poems, is wryly funny, but that humor is deepened by the prevailing tone of indecision and dislocation:

Not even the northern star could tell us where we are.

(“Postcard from a Dream”)

In Hans Christian Andersen’s house

... 

no one can stay for long.

(“Postcard from Copenhagen”)

I have left something undone.

(“Postcard from Capri”)

I’m far from anything I know,
tired and cold . . . .

(“Postcard in a Bottle”)

The only words anyone hears
are spoken from a tower
in a tongue no one understands.

(“Postcard from Babel”)

So we laugh, but the laughter is muted by the realization in these poems that we are smiling in the face of solitude and indeterminate language. *Postcards from the Interior* is a complicated, deeply satisfying book, despite—perhaps because of—its underlying sobriety. As the “Postcard from Metal” says, heavy metal music, popular and lucrative for its stars, is “ugly” and its lyrics, like so much of what is said by characters in this collection—as well as the other collections featured here—display “a lack / of meaning so complete it hurts.”