

Poetry Midwest

**a damn fine literary journal
perpetually late on arrival**

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END OF 2008
(SPRING/SUMMER 2008 & FALL 2008 COMBINED ISSUE)

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EDITOR

MATTHEW W. SCHMEER

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MASTHEAD

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No issues were published between 1997 and 2001.

Fish heads, Fish heads.
Roly-poly fish heads,
Fish heads, fish heads,
Eat them up, yum!

—Barnes & Barnes, “Fish Heads,”
from *Voobaba*, Rhino Records, 1980

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ENCLOSED PLEASE FIND

An umbrella hanging in the hallway.

A noisy vending machine with a quick temper.

Circles drawn in a mirror with red lipstick.

Tar melting on a hot tin roof.

One innocent knife.

Some shy bullets.

The moat of a former castle.

Ordinary white underwear.

A persistent fire alarm.

Toy trains emitting real puffs of smoke.

War right after it declares a truce.

A copper skillet with its own cleaning instructions.

Brightly colored canisters of embalming fluid.

8 x 10 pictures of a single apple ripening.

A meadow thick in a woman of flowers.

SEPTEMBER

after Tu Fu

Lured by money dreams, you fly to meetings
on far-off coasts where hurricanes chew
shifting sand. I slice and freeze peaches,
stir tomato sauce. Sparrows mob the feeder;

sunflower hulls rain on the empty hammock.
Dry-winged insects blunder through the house,
while I click a thousand rounds of Solitaire.
The dog grumbles on the mat by the front door.

AUTUMN OHIO

“All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home”

James Wright, “Autumn Begins in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio”

It is still only this time of year
when high school boys hurtle
suicidally against one another
under towering stadium lights
and the full moon rests
on the horizon
like a fallen orange,

wind pulls leaves from trees,
mud thick in the cleats,
kids in grass stained jeans,
old men clean rifles
to hunt deer that hide
deeper in the vibrant foliage;
this is only autumn.

NORTHWEST CORNER OF ST. ANTIMONY AND SALINATION ST.

It's an enlarged fabrication—you can't miss it. We're all heliocentric *here*, goes without saying. I hope you'll consider joining our next humming circle. Free lentils, natch. Three—count 'em, *three*—faucets: cold water, clarified butter, and boiling Rh-positive blood. You wouldn't believe what it takes to clean the sink, but my skin is softer than ever, with a pink, metallic luster. My brother lost his mind—somewhere in the mountains (yes, *those* mountains). We think. Of course we've tried 4-color advertising. The reward-poster photo is of a dangerous-looking animal, its red, drooling maw gaping wide, and it answers—if it were to answer to anything, it would be to this—to Ruggles. Ignore the staples; they're not *my* idea of punctuation. The lucky finder to receive (gasp!) his own weight in dispensations, and to have the back of his neck shaved and scented with lavender. Drop by if you hear anything, you hear? We hope that no one could be so cruel as to keep the lost mind for their own enjoyment.

FRANK O'HARA, AFTER USING VISINE

You can stop seeing red too! Here's how:

when the hiccups subside
wrap your anxiety in toilet
paper. Put all doubt in a
zip-lock bag and freeze it.

Next, rub a little ill comfort
on the turnstile then arouse
disgust until it reveals its
most tender spots.

Or if you really want to risk
being blown about by the
windmill, sit for hours and
watch light reflect off the
baby bottle.

But for god sakes, try not
to be in the transport van
when the prisoner remembers
he left his reading glasses
on the night stand at home.

ONION

We unmask the root,
pierce the skin,
and dig beneath the coat.

We see brown fall from green,
and green unclasp
the stinging white.

We scrape the threads,
peel the layers,
and tear into the center.

We tunnel toward a seed
which we do not know
we are holding,

and which we do not know
we are unsheathing.

EL PLANETA DE LOS OREOS

so delightful this black oceaned and white continent world
the round black framed white bellied people enjoy eating
black crusted pizza covered with creamy white topping
as they sit at their white tableclothed black tables and
wear black and white dresses and suits and ties simply to
exit their white windowed black houses and walk on
white stone walkways around black bladed grass to go in
to their black cars sporting white rims which roll down
black (white lines down the middle) highway arrive at
circular black concrete plaza and lounge on raised white platform
dark and light mouths open in delight at the joy of living
on a delicious planet with black sky and white clouds except
for the fact their teeth are white with black spots all over
which they try to clean by taking milk river baths while
standing on black stones as the white sun shines in the night
but mostly their poetry is ours . . . which we can experience by
turning our video screens to the black and white setting

THOUGHT WHILE PISSING INTO AN EMPTY BOTTLE OF BOONE'S

turn and turn

the world is a pratfall

and a giant leech

attached

at the heart

GLOAMING

didn't pull the line
from my victim

sapped-I
in my muddy
skiff

mill-suede

all the
sorry language

gone
out the pommel
grow

kale
bit-fisted
she-drone;

Mab mother
her forest pile-
peels stout

rubble-
gone slip-twisted
pull penny
wet

bull-I
to seal

at the laundry
gather
my ever pretty baby

up
in weaves

RESPONSIBILITY

In my dream
a friend who has promised
to adopt a baby
abandoned on her lawn
reneges.

No one says so,
but the task, I understand,
will fall to me.

The baby is naked,
like a wasp or ant trisected:
head, abdomen and thorax
chain-link joined.

It has no legs or arms,
the barest hint of trembling wings,
yet it will fall to me

to teach it how to walk,
to ride a bicycle,
and dance.
It has curly Shirley Temple hair,

springy, blonde,
radiant in sunlight,
and pink rose ears.
But it has no face.

No one speaks,
but the sculpted lawns
and numbers on the houses say,
it will fall to me

to teach it how to kiss,
to witness evil
and distinguish ambergris
from sperm.

The labor weighs upon my heart
like a cast iron kettle.
I turn to run,

but a fence of insect children,
risen urgently erect,
surrounds me.

Like greeters at an airport,
they are waving placards,
thousands red-lettered with my name.

I fall on beggar's knees
and hold the baby's body to my own,
as though it stands.

I press my lips
to where a mouth might be.
I feel it open.
We begin to dance.

AMERICA, AMERICA

The story goes that the day
my grandmother got off the boat,

just a girl from the village,
the dead were parading past

with crumbling, infested faces,
and ever after, she saw,

or, rather, sensed,
the future in her peripheral vision,

God dangling from a broken pulley
and the stars turning black.

MY FATHER WAS A WEAVER

*

My father was a weaver
–by the dozen, threading spools
the way all silk flows into the sea

–this horse must be thirsty
tugging straw loose: each strand
gushes along the ground

–he shaved with a soap
that floated and the foam taking hold
some iron-gray streak: his mustache
almost clanking

–the horse doesn't hear
and this paper bag
bronzed the way all bells
count out-loud and looking up
mean nothing now.

Even on the night shift
he worked each stream till the cloth
slowly rolls into pasture
into oak fence rails: the loom
somehow jams in the distance
needing parts, adjustments, rest

–he would lift the small bag
to his huge head–the light
was never close enough–he ate
this half-light
and the wrinkles around his mouth
as if he was calling for more water

–even now, even this page
wants to be folded again: the bag
filled with a sandwich
smelling from grass
trying again to root along his throat

–this old horse
half blind, half deaf, half dead
–a miracle to a child
leaning against the rotting fence
filled with apples, with rivers
that carry off forever and the skies.

BEFORE SPEAKING

I. Quickness of Apples

Eastern wind grovels high speed
 through medieval stars,
the girl playing clarinet as her mother whittles an apple
 down to the fruit of the song
 on behalf of ten billion delicate chambers
 & heart stem holdings, the rain-weight
of trees that know how to near their apples to hunger

near smokestacks dusting acres of Monday, fast numbers
 mirroring their chords even in Jonagold trees,
yet clusters of October calm in the sky seeing itself
 in solidness that apples use to teach roundness.
For rains will rain for weeks here
 as easily as trucks packed with ruins
will turn slowly into evening cars.

II. Out of the Body

In the split second of eternity, what do we know
that isn't before speaking?
Finches appear as sun wheels in bursts of cellular hope

& utensils chime on shining operative trays
near someone positioned on a diagonal
steadied by part of the city ready to work,

centered in a galaxy swirling far beyond night
& what can be called ourselves
swelling with breath as multiple suns explode
in post-workweek light impossibly overhead

over the human harbors & people together
in clusters after a day, beneath vast star fields
& electric guitars making fractals from fractals,
each curve taking over 200 years, which isn't so long,
considering all the birds that ever were.

TWENTY-TWO LINES

Twenty-two stones dry out my mouth and the swallows want them all to build some crazy-ass altar at the side of the road. Who is it sits for a moment to rest on a walk? Who wonders at the stones?

Twenty-two stones heat up my mouth for the cranes, who can't wait to take them away to their nests. When will they feed me? When will my stones make soup for the strange, hungry widow?

Twenty-two stones drowning in my mouth and I still mumble.
The finches
take them one by one to drop to the beat of a jazz drummer.
What is it
that compels this dance? What wonders at stones?

Twenty-two stones in my mouth, earth. Blow them away.
Let the herons take them. How could I take this weight of letters? How to do this making of dwelling places in every limb?

Twenty-two stones in my mouth, bedrock. Burn them up, leave the molten cores for the hawks to pour into molds. Why not? Why not let the stones flow with the bass strum of the night?

Twenty-two, count them, stones in my mouth. Drop them in the water.
Let the cormorants dive for them, black and shining in their wet suits. Where else but the deepest well? Where could I build an altar in this world?

Twenty-two stones given up to the birds. My mouth is empty of stones.
Letters and words flow from my mouth and heart.
Only birds fly out of my mouth.

Twenty-two birds.

NIGHT AT SEBAGO LAKE, MAINE

The calls of owls
Punctuated
By the slow lap
Of waves; barely
Heard is the
Decay of a log
Beside the porch
Where I stand
Watching the forest
Breathe.

THE HARD WAY

He is going to find out the hard way—
the way we go feet-first into cold
bodies of water. He will not find her
until morning. Pancake batter on his fingers,
jet-skis in the main channel.

Or rather, he will not find her at all.
There is that terrible pause when the brain
thinks it sees something familiar
that isn't at all. A body unfound for hours
in the shudder of leaves, a face
no shade of blue like water.

DOWN HERE

Calm, listless, empty yet full. It wasn't like this when my kid sister fell over the boat last summer. She sank to the bottom posthaste and died even quicker. Sometimes, I can imagine that she was not even aware of anything happening at all. However, on the day she fell over, her eyes full of panic; I felt helpless and knew that she knew that she was going to die.

There's a helicopter circling above but it can't see me. The dense night sky makes it almost impossible to seek me out of hiding. I can hear the scream of its engine as it circles. Like some majestic beast about to wreak havoc on an unsuspecting populace. Or, if I even believed in a god, it could be God hovering above and crying for another soul lost to the cruelty of life. The scream pulsates in and out of frequency as I listlessly ebb and flow about the waterline. With each minute, the frequency is less and less clear.

I can still see the helicopter but the sound is almost gone now. They are still near but I am not. Water is filling my lungs and I can see, perhaps for the first time, clearly where I belong. How does that phrase go, "sleeps with the fishes"? Yea. That's what I want. I want to sleep with the fishes. A new biosphere awaits me. Unlike anything I have experienced before. Teeming with life that runs on pure instinct. It is not like the world I am leaving where people are confused and hurt, happy and sad, bitter yet in denial. Down here there is only kill or be killed. It is black and white. I understand this concept completely.

They are still looking for me. They will never find me. Black absorbs crimson, even among the colorful life down here.

WOLF LAKE

The surface shines smoothly back the images of all the trees of the shore, marking a double row of green reflections strung between the blue sky & the blue lake. An old man blesses everything, including the finding of flat skipping stones at the edge. They fly over the water, then under the water, then over & under again & again. Each hop leaves two concentric rings to mark the path—breadcrumbs to show the way returning—or calling cards that say: I was here & here & here & here.

SMALL POND

Half pond & puddle—made from small rivulets & rainwater creeks—the neighborhood boys wade in among the trees sprouting from the water. Their feet find slick mossy stones & loose sucking mud eating away at old twigs. Tadpoles & insect larva swim between their legs & tickle their skin. The boys pile up rocks & bark—building small island castles & cities in their sea. A frog is king of one, a salamander princess in another. Yellow toy ships journey between each enclave to carry messages of marriage & death. When the boys leave, ducks land in the water, quacking after a long flight & the boys come out of the house throwing stones.

INSIDE IVY

Ivy spins up the sides of walls & turns on the edges of stone ledges & the knees of gargoyles. Inside, drops of water make another faithful climb, passed up through each pale cell. The inside skin is warm with the coursing & so white it glows under the moon. Like hands holding, the ivy twists its vines together. The drops grow tighter as they bend through these linking corners—until they break open at the leaves & moisten the green transparent veins. He wants to dive into her feet & let the fair insides pull them both up to her twining hair.

LATE ARRIVALS

While small lake waves
roll toward shore,
seaweed floats
obliquely below,

lassos my ankles as I tip
forward—toes grasping
sand to anchor there—
however, briefly.

Overhead, gulls
shriek with complaint
when startled
from the hoist, looping

round, and round
to settle back
in feathered
tranquility—

nothing ever
makes them sing.

(OVER)HEARD

High in treetops, hidden
in the sway of leaves, crows

squabble, back and forth—
acerbic decibels pierce the air

until there's an uncomfortable
silence.

Domestic discord, you say.
What else could it be?

ETERNITY

Everyone desired a cure for August's brooding.
By late afternoon, after quick rain, wind
arrived with certain relief.

There I stood in a field of burdock and goldenrod,
watching a flycatcher's hesitation—
She hovered, up and down, she hovered—

The blistered barn door creaked open a crack
and blue wasps, with dabs of mud in their mouths,
repaired the tombs found under eaves.

I smelled bitterness of basil gone to seed—
watched the ether of dark clouds crown
in tender offering—wondered if this could be it.

WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT

you will take a long walk
in the woods and come upon

one spruce whose beauty
will strikes you

cold & you will stare,
long and hard, at its lines

shifting in air—its shade
of ocean undulating

beneath a sunless sky—
flawless without pretense,

that after this will be another,
and another.

No, in this hush, you will
understand: there is only one.

THE WAY THE LAND LIES

Fresh snow lies
fallen on the ground
last night without a sound.
It hurts our eyes.

We arise without a word.
Like the lovely snow
outside our window,
we will not disturb—

having made our bed—
the way we choose to lie
by omission, silently,
and will watch, instead,

the way the land lies,
starlings making tracks.
cryptic pictographs
as if only for our eyes,

printed in fresh snow
fallen on the ground
last night without a sound
outside our window.

THE FIRST THING WE BURIED

The first thing we buried
We never saw. It found its way
Into a hole beneath the cement
Slab of our front stoop.

My wife by this time had carried
Three children—the everyday
Wear and tear left no dent
Upon her. An animal control group

Advised us only of this:
That household bleach will help rot
Out the flesh, the smell,

And that if the thing persists,
Take soil to the spot
As Ceres began with seed, with cell.

OCCULTATION

Her fingers find it. Here in the dirt
beneath the tomato plants. The smooth edge
of something tactile and familiar.
The slab of bone buried with the roots.
All morning she has been thinking
about wanting a child. Has imagined
it burrowing and hiding like a spotted turtle
in the pond loam. To conceive a child
is to remember gathering wood lilies
and spiderworts with her grandmother.
Is to recall peering beneath her father's porch
to see the hognose snake lurking as an occultation
in the dust. Now her fingers are prying at the edges
of the skull as though to wend it without damage
from the dirt, as though longing itself
is forever perishable: the wind thrashing
as epilepsy through the sweetgum leaves,
the July clouds closing in as brooding flesh.
What she imagines is that the child will come to her
as memory, as the dark chasm to draw
you back into yourself. Of course
she imagines her son or daughter suckling.
Clinging like roots that grip the earth and will not
let it go. Even the skull is trapped and unyielding.
She has rubbed her fingers raw. She digs
down far. Pulls. There is a moment in any life
when everything lets go. She has it now.
A bleached white possum skull, the fifty teeth
exposed. Someone's kit once, riding small
as a wasp in mama's pouch. Ridden once
in the woods behind the house. She drags herself up.
Holds the skull as augury in two hands.
Doesn't know now what to do with it.

THE LAWYER WHO DIED IN THE COURTHOUSE BATHROOM

As a young man, he read Camus
and resolved that even if God did exist
it wouldn't make any difference.

He went to Spain and almost didn't come back.

Once, he snowshoed eight miles. There wasn't
a sound in the woods that day, not even birdsong.
Just the snowshoes breaking through the icy
crust to the powder—and his misty breath in
and out. He walked across a frozen pond
where he hunted for turtles when he was a kid.
He paused on the ice to listen to the faint
cracklings as he shifted his weight from side to side.

The hundreds of clients
the blinking at happiness
the files waiting in his briefcase
the combination set to open.

A BRIEF SUMMARY

One day you're with beautiful women.
I mean one day. I mean women.
And the next you're not.
I mean not.

THE NOTE

I.

call my husband

the note in its entirety

you drank a glass of water
a handful of sleeping pills
walked towards the swing set
past the dog park

did you notice how light found a way
through the damp grey clouds
to illumine the dirt

ever wonder how tranquil you looked
unconscious as if you were in bed
about to wake
with the morning sun on your face

II.

won't be around anymore

I'm sorry

I loved you so much

the last thing you wrote me
left it on the kitchen table

it is the inescapable past tense
you warned about weeks ago
now horror snakes its way into me

like it already happened
as if you have always been gone
as if I have always been afraid

ARUBA

When I think of you, I think of Aruba,
not with much joy, because I've never
been to Aruba, but I see you anyway,
bronze and happy, your thighs
stained with sand, your shaded eyes invisible,

and I want you to be happy, I'm glad
you're happy, there in Aruba,
where we have never been, I want
your happiness the way I want my nights
not to be flooded with sorrow.

So let's say goodbye to Aruba
and leave you there, playing
on the white unbelievable beaches,
while the effervescent unstoppable tide
drowns this dismal poem with its noise.

CONTRIBUTORS

Chris Bays is a member of the English Faculty at Clark State Community College in Springfield, Ohio. Prior to teaching, he was a business owner and world traveler, having lived in Germany and Turkey and visited much of Europe and parts of China. His haiku was awarded Honorable Mention in the 2008 Key West Heritage House Robert Frost Poetry Contest. His recent work has been published in *Acorn*, *The Heron's Nest*, and *Modern Haiku*.

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Howie Good, a journalism professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz, is the author of five poetry chapbooks: *Death of the Frog Prince* (2004), *Heartland* (2007), and *Apocalypse Mambo* (2008), from FootHills Publishing; *Strangers & Angels* (2007) from Scintillating Publications; and the e-chapbook, *Police & Questions* (2008), from Right Hand Pointing. His poems have appeared in numerous print and online journals as well as in several anthologies. He has been nominated for the Best of the Web anthology and twice for a Pushcart Prize.

James Grabill lives in Portland, Oregon and has been participating in literary periodicals since the early 1970s.

Justin Hyde lives in Iowa where he works with criminals. His first book of poetry, *Down Where the Hummingbird Goes to Die*, is available from The Guild of Outsider Writers.

M.J. Iuppa lives on a small farm near the shores of Lake Ontario. Her second full length collection, *Within Reach*, from Cherry Grove Collections, and her chapbook, *As the Crow Flies*, from Foothills Publishing, are forthcoming. She is Writer-in-Residence and Director of the Arts Minor Program at St. John Fisher College, Rochester, New York.

Don Kingfisher Campbell's poetry has recently been published by *Hot Metal Press*, *Vox Journal*, *Poetic Diversity*, *Behold The Pirate Pig*, *Prism Review*, *The League Of Laboring Poets*, *Turbula*, *Hudson View Poetry Digest*, *Off Your Chest*, *Poets Express*, *Stone Table Review*, and *Six Little Things*.

Philip Miller's poetry has appeared in magazines and journals, such as *Chelsea*, *Barefoot Muse*, *Harp Strings*, *New Letters*, *The Georgia Review*, and *Poetry*. His chapbook, *Fathers' Day*, won Ledge Press' annual award. His books include *Cats in the House* (Woodley Press), *Hard Freeze* (BookMark Press), and *Branches Snapping* (Helicon Nine Editions). His sixth book, *The Casablanca Fan*, is forthcoming from Unholy Day Press. He has co-edited (with Gloria Vando) an anthology of ghost poems called, *A Chance of a Ghost*.

Megan O'Patry is a poet and playwright living in San Francisco. Her new play, *The Land of Infants*, will be produced this year.

Maurice Oliver's poetry has appeared in numerous national and international publications and literary websites including *Potomac Journal*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Taj Mahal Review* (India), *Dandelion Magazine* (Canada), *Stride Magazine* UK), and online at *Thieves Jargon*, *Interpoetry* (UK), *Kritya* (India), *Blue-PrintReview* (Germany), and is forthcoming in *The Arabesques Review* (Algeria). His fourth chapbook, *One Remedy Is Travel*, was published in August 2007 at *Origami Condom*. The editor of the ezine *Concelebratory Shoeborn Review*, he lives in Portland, Oregon, where he works as a private tutor.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry Midwest* and elsewhere. *Rafts* (Parsifal Editions) is his most recent collection, with another, *Family of Man*, forthcoming soon from Pavement Saw Press. For more information, including his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" and a complete bibliography, please visit his website at: <<http://www.geocities.com/simonthepoet>>.

Doug Ramspeck's poetry collection, *Black Tupelo Country*, was selected for 2007 John Ciardi Prize for Poetry and will be published in the fall of 2008 by BkMk Press (University of Missouri-Kansas City). His poems have appeared in *West Branch*, *Rattle*, *Confrontation Magazine*, *Connecticut Review*, *Nimrod*, *Hunger Mountain*, and numerous other journals. He directs the Writing Center and teaches English at The Ohio State University at Lima.

Sam Rasnake's poetry has appeared in journals such as *MiPOesias*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Literal Latté*, *Portland Review*, *Snow Monkey*, *Siren*, *The Dead Mule*, and *Boxcar Poetry Review*. His work has won a *Literal Latté* poetry prize and has been nominated for Pushcart and Best of the Internet prizes. He is the author of one chapbook, *Religions of the Blood* (Pudding House), and one collection, *Necessary Motions* (Sow's Ear Press). He edits *Blue Fifth Review*, an online poetry journal.

Stan Sanvel Rubin lives on the Olympic Peninsula. His 2006 collection, *Hidden Sequel*, Barrow Street Book Prize winner, was a Small Press Distribution best-seller. His work is forthcoming in *Willow Springs*, *Poetry East*, *The Marlboro Review*, *The Laurel Review*, and *Birmingham Poetry Review*. He directs the Rainier Writing Workshop low residency MFA program at Pacific Lutheran University and writes annual essay reviews of poetry for *Water-Stone Review*.

Michael Schmeltzer is a writer living in Seattle, Washington. He earned an MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. He helps out with *A River & Sound Review*, was a finalist for the *Crab Creek Review* Poetry Contest and has been published or has work forthcoming in *Water-Stone Review*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, and *pacificREVIEW*, among others.

Jeffrey Warzecha is the recipient of the Leslie Leeds poetry prize awarded by *The Connecticut Review* and has recent work in, among others, *The Rio Grande Review*, *The Edison Literary Review*, *Conclave*, *The Oak Bend Review*, *The Cherry Blossom Review*, *Thieves Jargon*, and *The Eight Octaves Review*.

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