

SHOULD WE BE SO LUCKY:
A REVIEW OF FIVE FIRST-BOOK WINNERS

The publication of a first book for a poet, I'm imagining, must be a fairly schizophrenic experience. There's probably five to ten years worth of "serious" writing going on before the poet *hears* his/her voice. There's probably a lifetime worth of subject and imagination being ingested and nearly-rendered with sincerity, clarity, technical facility and agility. There are probably four to five notebooks full of what were once "finished" poems since tossed to the waste bin marked "schmaltz." Consider Yeats. His early stuff is technically flawless *and* brilliant; but, to my mind, it pales when compared to his later cosmically Tower-obsessed poems. Or Stevens. Silly (Supreme) Wally early on: emperors, ice cream, uncles' monocles, comedians as letters.... Big (serious) fun. But Mr. Stevens's deathbed conversions: old philosophers dying in Rome, farewells *without* a guitar, poems taking the place of mountains, merely being...*that's* Poetry.

We're not all Yeats and Stevens. Or Bishop, or Wright (take your pick), or Berryman, or Rich, or Walcott, or.... Still, I can hear the young poet sigh as s/he looks to the "shmaltz" bin: "but *at the time* that was *me*; that was *real*...that was what I was *feeling*." Then the mail comes, and the young poet learns that poems will be popping up in "major" journals that may lead to tenured-type jobs (for now). And then, for some fewer, "*the call*" comes: you've won. Won? Who said this was a game? (Well, that's another discussion.) Yes, there's luck involved, but the kind of

luck golfer Jack Nicholas talks about: “the more I practice, the luckier I get....” The young poet experiences contentment and validation not quite felt before. The young poet rummages through the “schmaltz” bin for the next book. The young poet, for weeks and months after “*the call*,” hammers away at the keyboard feeling—perhaps even almost knowing—that his/her poems might actually be “good enough.”

But, really, how many first books are last books?

As I read through these five prize-winning first books, why was it I keep hearing the end of Berryman’s “Dream Song 1:”

Once in a sycamore I was glad
all at the top, and I sang.
Hard on the land wears the strong sea
and empty grows every bed.

Was it the youthful singing, the ecstasy implicit in it all? Was it the Wordsworthian echo I heard that simultaneously laments and praises, curses and blesses, the symbiotic and faulty relationship between the passage of time and the accretion of memory? And, of course, the chasm between: desire? Mind you, none of these poets reviewed here—Miranda Field, Ted Genoways, James Hoch, Major Jackson, and Kate Northrop—sound like Berryman because they have, as T. S. Eliot prescribes in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “...a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and temporal together....” Maybe that’s why I kept

hearing Berryman: because I kept reaching for something familiar. It never happened, and I was glad all at the end of them. What each poet reviewed here has accomplished is a complete absorption, internalization, and individuation of Berryman's lines and Eliot's manifesto (among the other thousands they've read). In fact, influence—that dialogic and coy mistress—becomes increasingly difficult to identify with these poets, and seriously challenges Bakhtin when he says, “Quests for my own words are quests for a word that is not my own.” Thank God. These five poets are well-read...and on their own. I pray these five first books aren't these poets' last books. I want to talk about their second, third, fourth, fifth...that is, should we be so lucky to have them.

* * *

Miranda Field's *Swallow* (winner of the 2002 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize, Mariner/Houghton Mifflin) is a dark, perhaps unsettling, and at times disturbing book...for the weak of heart and mind, for those who don't ride out desire to its insatiable conclusion. This is no weak book. Whenever Field is lured to a lurid (a word whose connotations span ghastly to ghostly to luminosity) subject—a boy masturbating on a subway platform (“Subway”) or a voyeur watching half-naked girls box on his bed (“The Parties”)—it's not strictly for effect, for shock's sake, to snap us awake (though that is, in part, what happens). Moreover, it is felt *and* calculated, and propels this book's larger project: an investigation, without

discrimination, of the realms and ramifications of desire. Or as Field puts it at the end of one of her prose poems, “Field Hare:” “The senses drink, the senses nearly drown in the strange stare. And all the ganglia surrender.”

Part of desire’s entrancement is slowness, suspension, arrestation. Field, certainly, senses this and gravitates toward it. These almost-static ecstatic occasions in Field’s poems are her strongest, and these poems arch and crane above the rest in the collection. (See “Crime Scenes,” “Museum of Natural History,” “Tumultuous Stillness,” and “Miraculous Image”.) “Thread of the Screw,” perhaps the strongest in this vein, proceeds instructionally in tone:

Under a naked sun
among bosomy clusters
the spider discovers sweetness

drives the fly, the bee,
fireworm, the black pest

Phyloxera vastarix

to visit the vine

& with a twine endless

& beginningless

rigs all the trellises

with traps. Rapture is *the act...*

“Naked,” “bosomy,” and “sweetness” in three lines. This is desire, none it forced eroticism because it’s executed as reportage of biological history; it’s not *news*. But the music of it is; Field’s technical prowess couples economic phrasing with lush internal rhymes equally and pleasingly intelligent and elegant. The result—the culmination, the *climax*—is a commingling of sense and sound, and as we read we begin to realize that classifications such as “sense” and/or “sound” belie classification. They are one, the same. And what “happens” in this poem? Not much. Just creation. Of nectar, grapes, sweetness, wine, ecstasy, rapture.... Here are the final three stanzas:

Turn swallows turn: vines,
 bubbling juice,
 bombinations of the fumbling
 bees, flies.

The spider in the ripe
 grapes slows, the grapes grow
 full. In town, time

intensifies: bottles to be blown,
 corks carved, vine-
 hooks sharpened, presses set.

For all the sonic pyrotechnics, the audible dazzle, the alliterative lushness, it's the emotive intelligence I'm drawn to. Field takes us from the innocent, natural pollinating process to the wine press to the table of those ready to relax: enjoy, have a drink...and, then, who knows...? There's certainly an alluring narrative under all this "distanced" reportage. There's a hyperactive slowness in the penultimate stanza; like the grapes, I'm at once stilled, moved, and ripe, ready to be crushed into sweetness. Such as it is with desire, such as it is with Field's poems. Things are created, born.

Birth has consequences, namely family. Whereas Field alludes to family—as mother, as sister, as wife—most of the other poets gathered here embrace it, despite their desire to shed their bloodline (as if any of us could). James Hoch's *A Parade of Hands* (winner of the 2001 Gerald Cable Book Award, Silverfish Review Press) openly addresses (and how I loathe the easy pop-psych nomenclature) dysfunctional components of modern American family life. Hoch's poetic masque has for its genesis a tumultuous childhood, specifically an alcoholic and abusive father. That's not his only subject, but one can see how such experiences haunt the speaker when he takes on "other" subjects, like ballet, Whitman, and St. Jerome. Hoch marries the painful experience with the lyric impulse and neo-traditional form. He does this, in part, through his voice. If we could describe Field's voice as lyrically cerebral or erotically intellectual, then we could perhaps describe Hoch's voice as passionately casual or formally nonchalant. Hoch's eye doesn't dart around as much as Field's, but his ear is more tuned in to the natural cadences of speech and how they are rendered

within prosody's parameters.

The proem to *A Parade of Hands*, "My Letter of Introduction to God," begins

I'm 33, Christ's age; you remember Christ.

I was lucky enough to be born in New Jersey,

so I believe I'm entitled to a few things:...

There's humor, sarcasm, wit, tongue-in-cheek self-effacement. The mood is immediately lightened; we laugh a little. But Hoch's intent in triggering these little laughs is quite serious: he's preparing us for the graver moments that run all through *Parade of Hands*. (Of course, we don't know that yet.) What follows these first three lines is a litany of outrageous and gorgeous imaginings of a man who has one foot planted in the real world while the rest of him leans toward the celestial possible. All of it's propelled by anaphora: "I'd like" this, and "I'd like" that...desires that, ironically, compel the speaker to long for streets "empty of want." The humor turns to tenderness, and the imagery is so, so far away from the speaker; he's nearly exiled from the beautiful scene he's created. The speaker's focus shifts from his "excessively beautiful wife" Isabelle riding a horse through the streets of Mexico while his "excessively beautiful children" run under the legs of the horse to a pack of dogs

who remind me of people

I have loved and failed to love well enough,

the way they roam back into my life, ones

that would tend not to stray beyond my voice,
and if so, would turn gentle, more caring,
like the horse the children feed pomegranates.

What we glimpse here is the speaker's state of mind. Beneath the romance and beauty (imagination's end) is loss (reality's price)...but, still, we don't know this is where Hoch's coming from just yet. And where did the humor go that opened the poem? It succumbed to the poem's larger impulse: longing for wholeness, for beauty. In that pain, there's pleasure, in pleasure pain. Or as Shelley says in his "Defence of Poetry:" "This is the source also of the melancholy which is inseparable from the sweetest melody. The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself."

Hoch writes short poems (the longest doesn't exceed 53 lines). His titles are simple: "Gutbucket," "Wall," "Furnace," "Shed," "Nature," "Hinge," "Ballet," "A Walk," "Squash," "Parenting," and so forth. The syntax and diction are simple as well. It's all so casual, relaxed. Here's "Wall" in its entirety:

A pastoral, boardwalk oil of the Jersey Shore
hung from a threadbare wire, a masonry nail
sunk in crumbling plaster: Gulls as strokes
of white, gray, and the surf the same kind
of clean, only bluer, someone in a plaid chair
waiting for a wave to break, close on itself.

Behind the painting, my mother's yelling
alimony, a drunk's promise in the mail,
 my brother, he's older, he'd save me if he could,
 warns: *The ocean is coming*, coming
 through the wall, and I believe him, have to.

It's difficult for me to say that I *love* this poem; who can love such a scene? But I greatly admire the subtle, and substantial, project of it: the unassuming opening, the pedestrian nature of the painting (this isn't Brueghel's *Icarus*, for example, or anything by Caravaggio), the peaceful scene in the painting itself (a day at the beach), the controlled rambling of the rhythm, the ebb and flow (like waves) of the lines' spatial arrangement. A beautiful, simple, and quiet little trance...in six lines, one sentence.

Then, the spell is broken, hell breaks loose, and the imagination is interrupted; reality intrudes and trounces the young speaker's modest desire. The compression is astonishing: of family history, of subsequent effect on the speaker. Sure, we need the other family poems to get the clearest picture, but this is an autonomous poem. "Mother's yelling/ *alimony*, a drunk's promise in the mail," the older brother doing what older brothers do: teasing...but in a disturbing context and in an unthinkably cruel way. Finally, it's not the drama I'm drawn to; it's the *lack* of drama, Hoch's successful attempt to understate the enormity of this defining moment of the speaker's childhood. And in the understatement, of course, Hoch manages to make

these “simple” eleven lines (two sentences) hover like the shadow of a sleeping shark, or as he says in the poem “Sleeping Shark:” “Perhaps its dream is effortless drifting,/ riding the easy labyrinths of current....” The “it” here is not only a referent for the passed-out, nearly-naked father; “it” is also alluding to Hoch’s poetic method: (seemingly) effortless, potentially ominous, terribly beautiful.

When Hoch “moves out” and away from the family, observation and speculation take over as the book’s prime mover, as opposed to memory. “Bathers,” with its obvious nod to Whitman, is a study of mannequins floating in a dumpster, “swimming as if swimming/ is not drowning.” “Gleaners,” with its title, offers a promise of something pastoral, Romantic; it begins “Summer evenings....” There’s nothing bucolic in the poem. Rather, this poem, too, is a study of a young couple who ride skateboards and rummage through dumpsters for food: “She’s holding/ a flat of blackberries;/ he’s carrying a pile of tubers--taking what they can, a blur/ washed in evening.” Hoch’s sympathy for the dispossessed gives birth to his imagination. The title poem, perhaps, is the most imaginative—and ambitious, and successful—poem in the collection. Hoch covers a large terrain in 51 lines: Bergamo, Italy, the painter Lorenzo Lotto, St. Jerome, a group of boys “playing” with a dead heron, the speaker’s imagination, the slippery nature of “fact” and “truth.” The first four tercets supply a narrative that recounts in detail the remnants of the Italian town after a mild flood:

a loose flower cart, a bloated goat stolen

from a field. A pack of boys huddled
over a heron half-sunk in mud. One
prodded with a stick, another nudged

the head to see if the stare would alter,
slit open its neck: snips of rhododendron
and laurel, a small orange carp plucked

from a shallow, placenta from snake eggs,
legs tangled in fishing line made fast
to a rock like the grip oil has on the eye.

The description's inward movement—a town, a river, the river's contents, a heron's contents—is unsettling and gorgeous. And supplies a tiny slice of history, which is, in part, the poem's project. More than history, however, the poem is about imagination, what's triggered in the mind when confronted with "minor" tragedies that serve as a catalyst for curiosity and cast a spell of wonder on the gazer. Then Hoch tells us what it all means to him:

And I thought of you, Lotto, painting Jerome:
the caress of muscle and skull, swirling white
over red and gray, the color of confluence

and stone and his beard when he crawled
from winter prayer, bruised, half-coiled,
half-out-stretched, a rose tunic crushed

petal-like in his crotch....

What we have here is an extended metaphor: the details of the city and heron remind the speaker of Lotto's rendering of St. Jerome, and Hoch executes it all with intimacy, distance, and (in his subtle way) style. Just as we received a little history of Bergamo, we receive a little history—or narrative, if you will—of Lotto's painting, which is, of course, an *imagined* story of St. Jerome's hibernation and flagellation. Really, what's at stake for Hoch in these retellings, these imaginings, is the temporality of history and the flux of imagination...and what holds them together: memory held in art. Or, as Hoch puts it, "...I find your hand/ in the hereafter." And later, the speaker stands "a few feet from your rendering of Jerome./ Close enough I can rest my right hand/ on his shoulder, touch the rim of his collar...." Here, the hands—all of them: the boys' prodding the heron, Lotto's painting Jerome, Jerome's whipping himself, the speaker's on Jerome's shoulder—clasp. It's a beautiful confluence of desire, a desire so strong that the speaker comes clean, admits that:

In truth, I have never been to Bergamo,
but I know what kind of rain desire is,

the color it turns falling into rivers,
hard as sand from torn sacks,
how it's felt like stone or canvas.

I don't feel cheated or duped here. Quite the opposite; I admire the poem, and the collection, even more. It doesn't matter if the speaker's never been to Bergamo, or anywhere else for that matter. He's been to the imagination; he's able to show "how it's felt." That's the only truth worth telling, the only history—familial, artistic, religious, whatever—worth documenting.

History, specifically familial history, is *the* muse for Ted Genoways' *Bullroarer, A Sequence* (winner of the 2001 Morse Poetry Prize, Northeastern University Press). In her three-and-half-page introduction, Marilyn Hacker says

In a language of visceral accuracy made concise and more memorable by metric structure, Ted Genoways tells an American story that is also emblematic of American history—a history of expansion cruelly compressed by the Depression, a history of the movement from rural to urban and suburban life, from the collective autonomy of the family farm to the depersonalization of hired labor.

Hacker aligns Genoways historically with the likes of Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott, among others; that's high praise. I'll let Time decide whether Genoways

will continue to be mentioned in the same breath with Nobel Laureates.

Nevertheless, *Bullroarer* is an impressive first collection in its thematic and formal project alone. This is a big book contained in a little space. Upon first reading, some explaining of who's who proves helpful, though Hacker's introduction—and Genoways' poems—do much more than that. Finally, *Bullroarer* simultaneously charts, commemorates, and recreates one American family's history across generations, a history of hardship and survival, both of which are borne from work in slaughterhouses and traditional prosody alike.

I must admit that I felt challenged by *Bullroarer* for the wrong reasons. I found myself repeatedly doubling back to make sure I had the characters right. “Ok, which is generation is this? Is this the grandfather, great-grandfather? Are we in the slaughter-houses yet, or again? What year is it? Is it World War I or II? Is the Great Depression over yet?” This is more indicative of my scattered memory of history than it is a negative comment on Genoways' architectural choices. Still and all, I was distracted. So, to rid myself of such questions, which at first might seem tedious but finally are utterly crucial and vital, I shifted my attention from narrative structure to formal facility. Basically, I moved from content to form (*that false dichotomy*). And as I did this, the narrative inevitably clarified.

Genoways is either one of those poets blessed with perfect pitch for formal prosody or he is one of those poets who has worked long and hard at perfecting traditional forms. Given *Bullroarer's* prevailing subject—work—, my guess is that he's among the latter group of poets. (Does anyone exist in the former group?) But isn't

the objective of such labor to give the effect that one is, in fact, blessed with perfect pitch? Genoways accomplishes this. He works deftly in numerous forms: terza rima, villanelle, sonnet/crown of sonnet. (Yes, this is a *first* book.) And more often than not, the form does what it's supposed to do: simultaneously support enhance the poem's resonances while doing everything in its power to remain invisible.

"The Cow Caught in the Ice" is the book's first poem proper, and the terza rima carries the otherwise quotidian existence of the poet's great-grandparents. Of course, the everyday for this couple is brutal, and each day survived on Nebraska plains is no small victory. Rest is precious:

...This is the time she covets:

when the stove is cool enough to touch, each hand pressed

hard against its belly to feel inside what's left

and almost breathing. The last four children drowned

in their beds before the pastor could hold their heads

under. *Jaundice*, doctor said, their stomachs so round

they were ready to pop. She can't live for the dead;

seven live mouths hang open....

Or I should have said, *physical* rest is precious, for there seems to be no psychological

and emotional rest. The *memento mori*—the four lost during childbirth—roam the house and the book. Whereas this poem purports that one can't live for the dead, death—avoiding it, confronting it, accepting it, denying it—is precisely what motivates the Genoways family in *Bullroarer*. The terza rima is more reminiscent of Robert Pinsky's translation of *The Inferno*, with its slant rhyme, which supplies a more “natural” cadence and texture to the language while still adhering to formal conventionality. A very difficult balance handled with (effortless?) ease.

Part I of “The Bolt-Struck Oak,” “Labor,” tells the story of the book's main character, Theodore Thompson Genoways, the poet's grandfather and name's sake. There's much more to it than that. We learned in “The Cow Caught in the Ice” that childbirth is risky, at best; to survive it a minor miracle. What Genoways the poet implies is that survival itself should be praised. Labor, then, is something to praise. While the poet's great-grandmother is birthing, the great-grandfather and eldest son Wallace chop wood for the fire that boils the water. And there's a wicked exchange—wholly motivated without malice, mind you—between this father and son. It is, rather, indicative of how the family anticipated any newborn's death:

Wallace buckles the saw to free it from binding,
 but three tines snap. He feels the break, gap-toothed and wet
 with sap, then turns to his father, stacking behind him,

 and calls, *should we save out in case of a casket?*

The midwife wipes her glasses, grips the baby's crown,

whispers, *now when I tell you, I want you to bite,*

then twists, so the shoulders slip past. When he cries out,
 she cuts the cord. His father—in the day’s last light—
 bends Wallace to the stump, belt arcing like a scythe.

Wicked, cruel? No. Real, brutal? Yes. Understandable? Absolutely. Wallace’s question, to my mind, seems harmless enough; for him, it’s a practical matter of survival. For the great-grandfather, it’s a reminder of wounds-never-to-be-healed, of greatest-losses-never-to-be-recovered. It’s also, perhaps, the first glimpse the great-grandfather has of his son taking in the world with very little emotion, sanctity, and awe. *Some live, some don’t*, Wallace might be thinking, and why should he think otherwise? As we see in Hoch’s poems, the compression and complexity of narrative, coupled with formal dexterity and lyrical impulse, is astonishing. I love that Genoways never utters the verb “whip,” never blurts out the nouns “hurt” and “loss” and “death.” And I have to remind myself—see, I already forgot—that this is *terza rima...and* that this is a first book.

When Genoways takes free verse as his form, we can see and hear how well his formal regimen has served him. Read “Landscape with Crows,” “Uncle Earl and the War to End all Wars,” “Ashes,” and the title poem, “Bullroarer.” In “Bullroarer, I especially love the ending, not only for what it says about the grandfather, memory, nature, and poetry itself, but also for how it’s said:

And in keeping I find significance
 each night circling the tracks outside my window,
 the same engine inside that bullroarer
 static, yet spinning, something singing
 with the energy of motion. Call it train,
 call it thunder, but there is something
 white-eyed and bawling that stares and storms
 generation into generation, something
 demanding a sacred name, something
 spinning of its own determinate will:
 call it wind, call it breath.

Strict pentameter would deflate the rendering of this recollected excitement, this over-balance of pleasure mixed with nostalgia. There's form here, too; anyone can see how the repetition guides us through the flourish and keeps the speaker in check. It's also carefully orchestrated so the crescendo happens penultimately, with wind and breath serving as a coda. And I'd be doing a disservice to Genoways if I neglected to mention the very subtle allusion to Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," its anti-penultimate line: "The river glideth at his own sweet will."

"The Killing Floor" is the collection's final sequence, and documents (this time in tercets, not terza rima) the grandfather's experiences in the Omaha Union Stockyards and Swift Slaughterhouse one November day during the Great

Depression. Genoways elects to focus his attentions on one twenty-four-hour period rather than attempt to tackle the entirety of that epoch. In a way, I'm wrong in saying that Genoways doesn't tackle the entirety of the slaughter-house experience, for he does. What happens in one day, Genoways implies, happens in so many ways, shapes, and forms every other day. In this way, Genoways is also echoing what William Styron gets at in *Sophie's Choice*, how daily carnage and its evil banality obliterates the soul, and how memory, pain, and story-telling can—and should—stave off that obliteration. The strongest section of "Killing Floor" is section V, "Horn." The grandfather, Ted, and two coworkers, Johannsen and a nameless gambrel-man, are on the assembly line doing their work: "Bone-crush and moan." Gruesome foreshadowing here. Genoways' descriptions of this particular center of hell—the Swift Slaughter-house (and, yes, the pun stings ironically enough)—are eerily reminiscent of *the most* horrific and tragic death camps (trains, moans, screams, mass deaths) that would be set in motion ten years later. We also learn that the men get "bold on sour mash" while on the job. Then we get:

...the moan, the *scream*—

Ted pivots to see Johannsen slumped on the floor,
his purple thigh raveling like frayed hemp, then streams

of blood threading his fingers. Ted hits the buzzer

and runs, dragging Johannsen away from the pen
where the staggered steer froths and smashes his horn, hooked

on the bar, till it snaps and bleeds. When the cut-men
hoist him on the litter, Johannsen stutters, *I'm cooked*.

Once he's gone, each strikes the dead bull for fear or luck.

The militant imagery and lexicon—cut-men, litter, the other men “in the unit” paying respects to their fallen comrade through more violence—convey the brutal nature of modernized frontier life. At the same time, Genoways’ rendering of it is calm, beautiful, and hardened by similar experiences involving death. But he isn’t so hardened that he forgets the dead, as he says in the collection’s last poem, “The Dead Have a Way of Returning:”

...In the way geology films
speeding the action forward
so eons pass in seconds,

so he imagined himself
sliding into this darkness,
both past and also present,
into the chance that he might touch

the echo

and vanish, yet

he becomes a hundred children.

The “he,” of course, is the grandfather, but it’s never stated explicitly in this poem. It’s also a universal “he,” and in this way Genoways suggests that his family’s story is at once singular and representative of a larger experience. In a book so exclusively about one family on the surface, Genoways comments quietly and gracefully above and beyond his immediate subject. Did I mention this is a first book?

There’s a similar depth and breadth to Major Jackson’s first collection, *Leaving Saturn* (winner of the 2000 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, University of Georgia Press). Like Genoways, Jackson’s poetic method and vision reflect his experiences and history, and vice versa. Jackson comes (and writes) from the city, the country’s birthplace, Philadelphia. In the foreward, Al Young captures the impetus behind and essence of Jackson’s poetry:

Understanding, as poet Michael S. Harper pointed out again and again, that history is your own heartbeat, Jackson embraces his own personal history and—braiding it with the complex history of his family, his friends, his communities, his city, his country, his civilization and imagination--he whispers and groans all the highlights to us, his umbilicus, in the primal language we still share.

And, no, it's not too much. Jackson's most formidable strength is his ability to capture *and* give life to (or is it "give life *back to*"?) *all* he's loved and grieved...and he has much to pay homage to. Jackson can sustain the long poem with compelling narrative and formal dexterity (see "Urban Renewal," "Rock the Body Body," the sequence of Sun Ra poems that conclude section three, and "Called.") Alongside his swooping inclination for narrative and history is a lyrical impulse that crystallizes these very same narratives and histories (see "Blunts," "Born under Punches," "Pest," and the villanelle "Sandpaper.")

"Urban Renewal" opens *Leaving Saturn* and is the collection's longest, most ambitious poem. There are eleven sections that bob and weave through history. In this quasi-autobiographical neocosmology—part bildungsroman, part historical précis—Jackson takes us from the very word he's writing to the 19th Century (what he calls "the silence of Victorian evil") back to present-day Philadelphia to his school days to Taoist China to block parties in his boyhood north Philadelphia neighborhood to Sunday service to the Catskills. Along the way, Jackson introduces us or alludes to Stevie Wonder, James Brown, Michael S. Harper, *The Roots*, Modigliani, Cézanne, Dickens, Sonia Sanchez, DuBois, Mao Tse Tung, Ellington, Chinua Achebe, Afaa M. Weaver, Red Foxx, and Auden. *That's* a party, among the other things. Part ii ("Penn's Greene Countrie Towne") gives us, as Young says in the foreward, the book's tenor:

The city breathed an incurable lung (TB in that time), trolleys

clanged the day's despair. Workers in cotton mills and foundries
shook heads in disbelief, the unfolding theme caked on ashen faces.

What's implied here is that nothing's changed in the last century. And so the speaker
forces himself (and us) to take it in, to

Step on a platform in our time, the city's a Parthenon,
a ruin that makes great literature of ghostly houses
whose hulking skin is the enduring chill of the western wind.
Stare back down cobbled alleys that coil with clopping horses,
wrought-iron railings, to grand boulevards that make a fiction
of suffering: then stroll these crumbling blocks, housing projects,
man-high weeds snagging the barren pages of our vacant lots.

What's not so implied here is that literature, for Jackson, *must* go beyond its
recreational facility, its status as fireside fodder for the "privileged" imagination.
Jackson forces us to think back to just how wicked the 19th Century was, and not just
in our own country; slavery, colonialism, and imperialism were global epidemics. But
Jackson manages to resist the soapbox's tempting perch. Instead, he remains firmly
on the ground, in his case in the projects, in the vacant weed-ridden lot. The poem *is*
didactic, mind you; we *are supposed* to learn something, there *is* an indictment here...
but we're not cracked over the head with politicized (i.e., hollow) rhetoric. And
Jackson has my thanks for that. The time-travel here, too, is refreshingly swift, and

upon further reflection, frighteningly illuminating. In a simple turn of the penultimate line, Jackson moves from the splendor of 19th Century spoils to the urban decay of 20th Century neglect. All the speaker does is stare at the street, yet what he (and we) come to realize through such gazing is the simultaneous flux and stasis of History, more specifically of the dispossessed's immovable place in History despite the passage of time. All in a simple turn of a line, as if it were a knife. Style. This is the kind of wicked beauty and crystal-clear vision one can find in all of Jackson's poems.

There's so much more I'd like to talk about in this poem, but my time and space is running out. Look at part iii, and take note of how Jackson juxtaposes antiquity and modernity, but in a different context from that in part ii; take note of how he arrests in verse the timeless nature of decay, how he riffs on Keats' storied urn. Ask yourself, perhaps, "how would Jackson conclude then? 'Truth is Decay, Decay Truth?' Or would he say, 'Dissolution is Beauty, Beauty Dissolution?'" Then read a little further and underline two words in the penultimate line of part vii: "All's combustible..." Do that, I'm thinking, and you'll begin to feel where Jackson's coming from...and it's not just Philly.

Like "Mr. Pate's Barbershop" during "the summer of '88...the year the funeral homes boomed..." The barbershop, typically, is the male bonding ground, but for Jackson it's a place in which to grieve and pay respects through memory. The poem's structure and rhythm are supported through anaphora: "I remember...the room..." "I remember the old Coke machine..." "I remember the way the blade gleamed..."

These are the mundane, endearing details of a bad time, as are the “...clippings of black boxers—/Joe Frazier, Jimmy Young, Jack Johnson—....” And while the poem does for a moment focus on the self, it finally is a poem about—and for—Mr. Pate, who would always

return Saturdays, collecting, as an antique dealer
collects, growing tired, but never forgetting
someone has to cherish these tiny little heads.

Work is survival: cutting hair, writing poems, whatever.

“Euphoria” is another Philly streets poem. The scenario comprises a crack addict, a hooker, and teenage boy. All of this is infused with pathos when we learn the crack addict is the speaker’s mother, the hooker sixteen, and that the teenage boy (the speaker) pays the hooker a five-spot for a trick while his mother also gets

...the ride of her life,
studies pavement cracks for half-empty vials,
then looks back at bricked-over windows
as though what else mattered—
a family, a dinner, a car, nothing
but this happiness so hard to come by.

This is the only “family” poem in the collection (though a case might be made for “Called”), and who knows—and who cares—whether it’s true in any autobiographical

sense. What's at stake is a need to escape the "sidewalk even teeming with addicts," among the other things. The poem's dramatics, simultaneously going down, are incredibly cheap and sad and damaging. But the poem itself, in its language and observation, is indeed euphoric. Certainly, we as readers have the privilege of distance; we're not there, and most of us would never dare get lost in that neighborhood. Nevertheless, it exists and the speaker remains non-judgmental, accepting. This is home. Among the crumbling buildings and crumbling lives, there's pleasure in this. Not happiness, not contentment. Just incomprehensible pleasure, five bucks' worth. And in this way, in the reading of the poem—by understanding how it turns in on itself ironically—"Euphoria" yields much, much more pleasure.

The sequence of poems about Sun Ra, the avant-garde free jazz artist, may be a bit esoteric, perhaps even incomprehensible for those unfamiliar with the musician and his music. Sun Ra claimed Saturn as his home. He was an arranger, keyboardist, and philosopher (of sorts). Among the most avant-garde musicians, he was considered *the* most avant-garde; or as the free jazz idiom would have it, he was way out there. So, Jackson writes from the voice of the celestial band leader/composer, and brings him back to earth:

If what I'm told is true,

*

Mars is dying, it's after

The end of the world.

So, here I am,

In Philadelphia,

*

Death's headquarters,

Here to save the cosmos,

Here to dance in a bed

Of living gravestones.

Initially, I was confused by Jackson's choice of form here, specifically the use of asterisks between the quatrains. I was distracted by them at first, but in an attempt to reconcile the choice, I came to the half-hearted conclusion that they are used to demarcate musical measures (the capitalization of each line might aid my cause a little), specifically something in four/four time. I don't know. And I don't know if the poem loses any of its imaginative power and intensity if the asterisks leave the poem. Nevertheless, this sequence, while not as directly narrative as "Urban Renewal," showcases Jackson's range. What these two poetic sequences share, what's at the center of Jackson's vision, is outrage:

...How else

To explain a people

Willing to groove

The Founding Fathers
 Till they sweat abundantly
 In nods, shuddering
 Out of control.

Jackson's talking about history here, the history of slavery and racial oppression in America, and the history of ignorance and apathy perpetrated upon African-Americans. And if one thinks back to the sources of jazz—the blues, and how the blues came into being on the southern slave plantations, and how the blues over time morphed into jazz, then into *free* jazz—then one can see how and why Jackson gravitates so strongly to Sun Ra. Sun Ra is the next voice articulating the collective pains and joys of the African-Americans; and thereby, in some way, Sun Ra is the next of voice of freedom. Taken in this context, which is afforded by Jackson's sequence, Sun Ra all of sudden doesn't seem so out there.

Kate Northrop's *Back Through Interruption* (winner of the 2001 Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize, Kent State University Press), conversely, never leaves the earth... despite the speaker's numerous attempts to do just that, to achieve some kind of provisional ecstasy, to flee the expanding claustrophobia of irresolvable conflict (six poems, for example, have *landscape* in their titles). For *Back Through Interruption* is a book of polarities: imagination and intellect, passion and reason, woman and man, sister and sister, artifice and "reality." But it doesn't so much investigate through heuristics difficult relationships; rather, the speaker documents, quite calmly and elegantly, her psychological and emotional vacillations as they transpire in the

moment. Given the immediacy of these poems, one might be justified in asking something like, “well, then how does the speaker have any epiphanies...*an* epiphany? How does she turn all of this messy chaos into something called poetry if everything is *in medias res*?” Because Northrop is acutely in tuned with her narrative-lyrical impulses and linguistic medium. In other words, her strongest allegiance is to the page before her. These are stories, just stories, Northrop implies; which is to say, the latest version of the truth...that mercurial abstraction.

Just as the speaker and her characters hover between the polarities at work in these poems, the formal qualities of these poems have a similar airiness to them. It’s difficult to characterize, which is good; it’s not quite Whitman’s expansiveness, not quite Merwin’s levitation of his lines without the tethers of punctuation, not quite Charles Wright’s low-rider line riffing on metaphysics and Buddhist tracts. It’s kind of all of these...and none of these. Pick up *Back Through Interruption* and simply flip the pages slowly with your thumb; notice all the white space. One can breathe in, and with, these poems...even if the speaker, at times, feels as though experience itself has knocked the wind out of her. It’s a very delectable irony; the content, *against* its will, mimics the form. The longest stanza Northrop has is the quatrain. (“The Servant Girl” is 27 lines with no stanza breaks, but appears near the end of section II, on page 42 of a 63-page collection; in other words, the mood has already long been set, the voice firmly established.) The lines, to my mind, most strongly resemble Larry Levis’ late poems, specifically his sequence “The Perfection of Solitude” from *The Widening Spell of the Leaves* or the gorgeously dark series of elegies in his posthumous *Elegy*. In

these Levis poems, and in Northrop's, there's no set line length, yet there's some serious improvising going on between one, two, and three-line stanzas. Stanza breaks are purely dictated by emotional flux. Whereas Levis was more influenced by jazz in this way, Northrop is guided by—scratch that—is *fully resigned* to the narrative moment. Look at and listen to the end of the opening poem, “Iowa and Other Accidents:”

...On the road,
swirls of snow. On the road

the car hovering behind you, a witness,
unfortunate & so unlike the audience permitted
the distance of fictions, the artifice

of plot. And worse, of course, the law

of cause & effect: *I looked up,*
it started to fall. You must attach

subject to verb, must say

I saw, and did, in your rear view, the car you'd thought nothing of,

the gray sedan lifting slowly from the common snow,
 turning, and the accident
 always there, about to happen.

At first glance, this might appear free and wild; it might, even, lend a little credence to Frost's mistake, the one about tennis...at first glance. It's so *uneven*. But, really, how else could it be? The scenario is one replete with unwanted, and therefore uncontrollable, violence. Furthermore, Northrop's formidable intelligence compels her to at least try to make some kind of sense of it all. And she does. She stops time (*the aim of art, of poetry*), and insodoing salvages something beautiful from an otherwise terrifying occurrence. We hover there in that sacred, impossible place: the about-to-happen. The lines—their rhythm, their tentative expansion and inevitable *breaking*—hold us, arrest us, and finally throw us back to our moment, which is, of course, the act of reading. Very smart, but not bookish. Very controlled, but not contrived. Quite vertiginous, but not in the least blurry. Of all the books I've talked about across these pages, this is my favorite moment; though "moment" isn't even the right word; really, how many "moments" are happening here? It's the simultaneity I love, and the hush over it all.

There's a hush over much of *Back Through Interruption*. Maybe that's so because in these poems nothing's happened yet...and everything's already happened. These poems are suspended from Greenwich Mean Time and are situated in the moment of meditation and reflection; the past is present, the present the past. As in

“The Affair:”

Was there ever an option? For example,
how could she have known? How could she

have *not* been on the train
pulling into the station, a constant
arrival, repeating itself

in the blue Russian wind? The good people
keep waiting. They’re beginning
departures, shifting position,

getting ready....

Northrop meditates, riffs on fate; how it binds us to both desire and time, and how fate, desire, and time undo us. “They’re beginning/ departures, shifting/ position,/ getting ready....” Well, yes, the train is preparing to leave the station, but soon enough we’ll also realize what and who else will be departing (family), shifting (in their seats), getting ready (to tryst), and why (who knows...desire?). The “good” housewife commits adultery, and becomes “...*the kind of woman who—....*”

But Northrop is too wise, too shrewd, and too aware to craft a poem *merely*

about adultery. “The Affair”’s primary concern is, as are most of her poems, with the text’s relationship with the reader, *that* affair: “...and right now/ a stranger to me, the reader, and to her, the woman/ in her assigned seat, married,/ traveling without family....” Northrop’s aesthetic *very quietly becomes quite apparent* (for that is her method); the affair between text and reader is one destined for failure (or at least heartache), yet desire pushes both text and reader toward consummation.

Notice, too, how Northrop further complicates this already complex situation by distancing the speaker from the poem’s narrative. The speaker is a voyeur, or sorts; this is how Northrop dismantles time:

...Earlier/

in her room, in the unblemished morning,

when she was folding her clothes

into quarters, brushing out a blouse,

wasn’t she at that moment

a good wife? Or was she always

moving toward this, accruing traits, characteristics

that would make her *the kind of woman who—...*

But then, in the poem's final turn, the speaker brings all of this upon herself:

I don't love him there at the splintered
end of the novel,

but in the station? In the station, it's possible,
I do. When he's alone

and turning to watch the train
scheduled in the distance, coming on, pulling through.

The erotic imagery, the naked statement of desire (“...it's possible,/ I do...”), the floating couplets, the vicarious intimacy and heartache...all of these implicate the speaker in the multiple affairs, the trysting and the reading. Very smart and very alluring. It's as destructive as it is sexy.

In “On the Hotel Balcony” Northrop gives us another gorgeous scene: sunset in Miami, wine, fruit, man, and woman. Here, as in “The Affair,” the imagery is suffused with eroticism:

...He sketches her feet up over the sea

and watches while she turns
softer, touched by light which turns the leaves
watery orange--

It turns her face

so he sticks to particulars: the long sweep, underside of thigh, the
hollow

below the ankle, a sharp curve
of bone.

Yet, always coupled with the erotic is something “hollow” and “sharp” because

...It’s the moment afterward
that’s taken and set them adrift. Each

will go over the ocean

and it’s no matter if the sketch
bears a certain resemblance,

it cannot attach her to the world
nor can he now
say her name quietly enough

to draw her back through interruption,

make her stay.

Again, time intrudes and reveals the reality of desire-as-devastation. Darkness sets up house among the pastels of watery orange imagery, yellow bicycles, wine, fruit, and Floridian sunset. I love that complication. More than that, though, is the speaker's handling of time. We're flash-forwarded to *after* the break-up, which the woman character's been thinking of all along. Oh, and the poem is twenty-three lines long. That might be its most admirable, enviable trait.

This prodigious economy, formidable intelligence, and unmitigated lyricism run through the entire collection. Northrop loves to play with the possibilities extant in the truth-as-fiction/fiction-as-truth paradigm, which is simultaneously supported and complicated by memory. While the poems consistently utilize the post-modern device of self-reference, it's consistently executed with elegance and purpose. Northrop isn't pandering to trends, buckling under the weight of style. None of these poets are, and that's why, among the other reasons, they've won prizes. It's safe to assume the poets here are aware of the poetic trends and "schools"--those factions that sometimes damage poetry through division and elitism rather than better it through dialogue, absorption, and synthesis--but...oh, I'm preaching.... It's just that I'm so happy I had the chance to read five new books of *poetry*. That is, books in which each poet expresses something new while saying nothing new at all. Let me have Eliot, again, explain what I mean here:

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency

to insist, when we praise, a poet, upon those aspects of [his] work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without his prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously....

Sure, there's individuality—style, if you will—in these books, but they're not stylish. There's also an engagement with tradition that's not merely "formal." As happy as I was reading these, I'll be equally unhappy if these are the last books we see by these poets.