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ATLANTA REVIEW

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Welcome to the *Atlanta Review*

It's a pleasure to greet you on the front porch of our new magazine. We believe you'll find plenty of good company here—fresh, intelligent, appealing fiction, interviews, personal essays, and, in issues to come, features on the current international literary scene.

But most of all, we are here to bring you that rarest and most endangered of species: real poetry. We have mined through thousands of poems from across the U.S. and around the world, to bring you poetry that does what great literature is supposed to do—refresh the mind, the heart, and the spirit. If the idea of finding delight, even joy, in a literary magazine is a bit shocking, we suggest you sit down before you begin reading the *Atlanta Review*.

There have been complaints lately about the increasing blandness and homogenization of American poetry, what Donald Hall has dubbed the "McPoem." I'm reminded of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story, "The Celestial Railroad." This enterprise, run by a certain Mr. Smooth-it-away, promises to transport modern spiritual pilgrims to the Celestial City in complete comfort, safety, and convenience. The railroad's true destination, however, is a good deal hotter than the one advertised.

Mr. Smooth-it-away will not be our conductor today. Rather, we'll set out, on foot and lighthearted, on the open road, where Walt Whitman promises us, not the "old smooth prizes," but "rough new prizes."

In this issue of the *Atlanta Review* you'll discover an incredible variety of physical, human, and spiritual geography, from "Angel Dances" in Appalachia to "Skateboarding in Sarajevo." We'll traverse every age and stage of human life, from birth to death—and after. This is topography as rugged and inspiring as anyone could wish for. It is also evidence that we have become, to an extent that few of us realize, the vast and varied democracy of poetry that Walt Whitman dared to dream of more than a hundred years ago.

Dan Veach
Publisher
Atlanta Review

Ferris Wheel

Backing up gently to stars,
cradled above simmering fairgrounds
beyond a blare of honky-tonk,
we hold on to this ride
before I jump into high school.
The ferris wheel stops, creaks on the verge,
and its sway makes me mute
at earth rumbling beneath,
constellations a confusion above,
and father by my side
huge and solid against gravity
tugging at my dangling legs.

My father sits unperturbed,
one who has mastered
rocks and heavy machinery. He places his great
calloused hand over my untried one,
proud, believing I will make
the head of the class in America.
He hums a Neapolitan tune of love
and I sit closer to the bulwark of his chest.
I am unsure, but I will not tell him.

In silence we rock,
the gondola high above the Sound's chill
that blows in traces of rotting alewives,
caramel corn, diesel smoke, manure,
an acrid hint of fall.
I want to say, thank you, father
for the good ride. But the wheel
starts its slow-motion shush,
my knees shake, I am breathless,
there is no end to our descent,
no bottom to our separate darks.
We drop dazed into a blaze of carnival lights.

Geri Radacsi

Men at Work

My father rises from the grave
at dawn. He always left early for work,
slammed the door behind him
with a hammer's bang. I watch him
vanish once more in the graveyard-colored
morning, his lunch bucket dark
with the mysteries of working men's lives.

Father where's the work you went to?

This dawn I trace him back
to the coffee shop where he meets
with other men who'd worked themselves
into the grave. As before, I gaze
at their world through the picture window.
They shuffle in, large and alone,
and file past the coffee machine as if
punching in. Their cups still steam
like smokestacks; their fingers,
too thick for handles, are still wrapped
tightly around the warmth.

Father I can't find my work.

Time lets me enter. I sit with him
sipping the years away. Men speak about
work, jobs they left unfinished,
assembly lines that carried them away.
Men with nothing but time
watch the wall clock and wait to be
whistled to work. Men without tongues
argue about why the sun's so late.

The machinery's stopped, father,
the factory's shut down. There's time
for refills while you toothpick
the blackness from your nails. Father
tell me about work.

Sherman Pearl

A Rose d'Isfahan in Maine

You can cut turf in the grown-over
weedy dooryard
of the old farmhouse by the sea,

turn up a crop of buried stones,
then snug down
the tendril roots of your shrub rose,

sod it in, pour on the necessary
bucket of water.
Good luck. Neither your rose's pedigree

from the arms of a Norman duchess
and, before her,
the pleasure garden of a Prince of Persia,

nor its portraits, minuscule on vellum
or by Gobelin,
prinked in stitches, will impress the weather.

Leave it to the wind's ministrations,
to fog as cool
as a seal's breath, and the intermittent

skillet of the sun. So may it thrive with yarrow,
uncouth dogbane,
and milky ways of daisies in the rumpled meadow.

Daniel Hoffman

Ghost Month

It is ghost month in Taipei, Taiwan,
the gates of the hereafter have opened,
letting the spirits out to eat,
sightsee, create mischief,
whisper to the undead.
Marriages are down, and
real estate sales slow.
Even the doubters offer small feasts
to hungry ghosts
in front of store fronts.
The beaches are less crowded.
No one wants to be seen in trunks or
a bikini by deceased grandparents.

Here in Akron, Ohio,
my future husband has demanded
my father's ashes not move with me
when our households join.
He feels uneasy about
having an urn in the living room, or hall.
I have stopped talking to my own reflection
in the black marble face,
except for occasional editorials,
birthday wishes,
monologues during moments of weakness,
and honestly, the urn is covered
in ash-like dust right now,
in my half-abandoned apartment.
Anticipating marriage, I
am planning our Caribbean honeymoon
from my fiance's bed
for when ghost month is over.

Still, before interment,
perhaps a feast.
Homemade spaghetti just like
I made for him the week before he died,
black coffee and
a whole pan of fudge.

Tiff Holland

Onion

This onion is a god. In its brown wrapper
It's come to beg for shelter for the night.
Do not turn it away. It may look like
A beggar but underneath its wrinkled skin
It has a strong, firm, tight, smooth body.
It will leap into action if you cut it.
Your tears prove its great and hidden strength.
Its juice will heal your wounds and it will guard
Your kitchen to the death. Take it with you
Into battle and you'll remain invincible.
Your weapons will strike home. No one will stand
Against you. You'll blow everyone away.

Peter Huggins

350 Lb. Poem

My sisters appear in monosyllabic bikinis
nibbling haiku on beds of lettuce.

Bulimic blank verse girls
and centerfolds of prose
wearing short words and skimpy devices.
You run your fingers down their soft vowels,
across their slender stanza bones,
watching the line breaks belly dance
across the page on Dexatrim.

Remember, they are only figures
of speech,

laying out on the page,
slathered in sunscreen,
wearing punctuation marks
that barely cover
their assonance.
They part their titles
and kiss you villanelle.

I,
with my appetite
for date-filled description,
bite rotund adjectives and bloat paragraphly.

I down the lexicon whole,
snarf a raw thesaurus,
lick the spell-checker,
binge between dark pages,

and break out in boils and ballads.
I put on bulky clothing
to cover up my large vocabulary
and try to appear in
small print.

Tenaya Darlington

Circling This Morning the Tall Bright House She Lands and Sings

for P. Carey Reid

Birds everywhere: fluff-
finch, cherry-pincher, flustering blue
conundrum—not
what you called them, yet somehow
in your style, that darting
quick-alert
smile, as you beckon
me next to you, leaning
at the window midway up
your polished stairs. We watch as wee
tuft-knitters circle
your seed-packed
feeders, two-step the tough

March ground and scratch maybe just
for the sound
of it. "Heart-wings are looking
especially bright
this year," you say, then we pray the shady
soulsearchers somehow will stay away

and let the lighter spirits
feast. I point out prints in the powdery lawn
you can't explain, which pleases
me: it looks as if
discoveries can be made
from here, and mysteries
can unfurl the sky,

the way you open up your palms like wings to me
and let me fly.

Diane Wald

Public Art

The first lesson in the wax museum
Is to keep moving. Bend a knee or elbow,
Blink conspicuously, lest—
As once happened to my grandmother—
Someone touches your cheek and recoils
In terror, crying, "It's alive!"

The man on the museum steps
Has not learned this lesson;
He has not moved since morning.
He is off somewhere else,
His skin left here to hold
His place on some invisible line.
Passersby check to see if
He is a Segal or a Duane Hanson,
A random bit of public art.

Secretly, of course,
That is what he wants.
He wishes to be mistaken
For a sculpture of some himself
He has, just for now, stopped being.
He is a work in progress,
Hanging in some warm gallery
Of the imagination
Where the floor is softer
And the draft not quite so chill.

Ted Taylor

Bones in November

Bone weary, still, I half sleep in bed.
I have no bones.
It is too early in the day to have bones.
They don't form until I have coffee.
I am weary from the sheer motion of the week.

The chimes on the patio move delicately,
Careful not to make too much noise,
Like the first one up on Sunday morning.
The old cat (all bones by now), stirs at the motion,
Jumps off the bed and begins to eat at last night's food.
I should move, I should feed him. He'll be sick as a dog.
Part of my brain says cats cannot be sick as dogs.

Part of my brain is eleven again, in panhandle Florida,
Six men wait with me in a barbershop.
They have crewcuts and bib overalls and tattoos.
They begin to argue why cats have nine lives.
They debate the whole time I am there.
Finally, they decide that cats live nine lives
Because they have no bones.

And early on a November Sunday morning,
Thirty or so years later, lying still in bed,
I realize that sharks are always in motion
Because, having only cartilage,
They can never be weary down to the bone.

Ted Taylor

The Old Folks Remember

1.
When we were young
and had no other place to go
we made our bed
in the county cemetery
and rolled through the summer nights
oblivious to the buried dead

though at times we heard them
bang their low ceilings
like irate neighbours
trapped in stuffy tenements. What did
we care—we were young
and had no interest
in the personal problems of corpses.

2.
I'm sorry if we interrupted
the monotonous tune
the dead hum. Sorry if we broke
their concentration
with our thoughtless moans
and sighs. Sorry
if we forced them to remember
what they were trying
to forget.

3.
Now we are old
and often catch ourselves humming
that same vague melody. We feel ashamed
of time, and cannot look each other
in the eye.

But sometimes in summer
when the earth smells
of a woman's love
the wind blows the years away
like so many cobwebs
and we fall back gladly
to that place
among the tombs and willows.

Once again I plow
that fertile ground
with her long and beautiful
backbone
and she groans and whispers
"We are still alive."

Jack Evans

After Lightning

for J.

I think of you each time I pass the tallest tree
beside the lake. It has to do with lightning,
how a streak cracked its whip so close
I screamed inside its blind flash and the children
came racing from their rooms.
Later we found the tree, upright, but with a deep
tear from crown to root, huge shards of bark
thrown down upon the grass. Now when

I look at you, so many months since the death
of your son, I see the tree, the damp persistent
wound, the permanent bolt of white in your hair,
how it flowers in the dark.

Lisa Horton Zimmerman

Midwife

She has learned in her own life how to wait,
how not to watch the clock.
She trusts the ticking in her own body,
trusts the elastic
of tendon and bone, the way to ease the
wet cranium, tiny shoulders, the bony
buttocks of a breech, and how much blood
is too much.

She brings with her to the house
direction, endurance, deep quiet.
Fathers calm in her presence
sensing she understands this landscape
and how to shorten the distance.
Sometimes the women see her
back on the threshold they've just crossed
as they whirl down and down
she is still there, dark figure on the edge
holding the one rope, steady.

Afterward, when life takes its new shape
she ties the blue cord, rinses blood away,
makes tea, always on the periphery,
intimate stranger.

Unnoticed, she takes herself home
to her house with its own needs,
chaos of laundry, supper, tall
rebellious children, to sleep
the sleep of the newborn.

Lisa Horton Zimmerman

Words That Must Be Whispered

1.
The crows,
and their dark brothers
the ravens, watch me.

They sit in the green
curl of the cottonwoods,
in the glossy blue-black

above the river's brown
spine, and they stretch
their ruffled necks above

the ragged shroud
of their wings,
and they watch me.

2.
I know now that the birds
are waiting
for me, waiting

for me to shed the hard skin
of the past, to grow
lustrous black wings

and come to them,
among yellow leaves
at the trees' tops,

come to them
to hear the words
they are holding for me,

for me alone, words
that must be whispered
beneath a canopy of leaves.

3.
I have watched these birds
where they knifed across my days,
ravens as auguries, crows

as black bits
broken off from my dreams.
And I imagined them

mute, obsessed
with children, arrogant
atop helical shafts

of heated air,
pitiless,
these black birds

4.
expect too much, are asking
too much
of a man

like me,
a man
with children.

But the birds just watch
with their crow eyes
and their crow thoughts,

and they wait
with their words
among the leaf-green shadows.

Gerald N. Callahan

The Magic Door

As I grow older
I grow more alone,

and lonely
for something
I cannot name.

Like a tree
fully clothed in sun
and turning toward the night,

I search
for the magic door
of nakedness.

A cup
near the window
fills with light.

Green tomatoes
pulse on the sills.

Do these pears
still breathe yellow
when I turn away?

Every day
my eyes paint a world
and feed it to the fire.

All day
wings paint wind.

The trees
keep their ivory
a secret,

but in the night
they let it speak,

an owl of bone
gleaming in ebony.

Sarah Patton

Gathering the Light

In the church across from the *jardin*
in San Miguel, the Mexican women
walk down the aisle, their dark rebozos
covering their bowed heads.
Each woman carries a candle.

I am a tourist here and have no candle.
Only a sad heart,
and a walking stick with a curved handle
on which I rest my forehead when I pray.

This is the summer before the stroke
that will paralyze my left side,
leaving me feeling frantic,
trapped in my own body. But today
I memorize the strong, determined faces
of the Mexican women, candlelit and beautiful.
And I gather the light in my heart
to take home.

Margaret Robison

Mother at 75

An ocean, wild and vast
is now my mother's mind.
The pelicans glide in loose
formation out of her eyes.

I sit quietly and trawl,
gather in nets and try
to read the random tides.
Sometimes they turn up clues,

an octopus on a Minoan jug,
the incense cask of a village
priest, with bells that still ring
through the rust. I sift,

toss back strange whelks,
the pipefish whose faces I don't know.
Some snapshots surface, a man
on a dock in uniform.

His arm circles the ripeness
of a woman in summer dress.
More faded, an older woman
whose face wears loss like an island

home, by the mustached man
who clutches a round-backed mandolin.
Four children gather at their feet,
the one girl looking as though

she knows you, or did once.
The brine runs out, slips
between my fingers. I hear
the distant shorebirds cry.

Derek Economy

Dying in Early Spring

There are things of common beauty
here: jonquils and cherry blooms.
I wish that you would bring
something from Bombay or San Francisco.
And yourself. The familiar and dear
faces of friends are not enough.

If I must, and it seems I must, go
into that dark cave Oblivion, I think
it would be loving of you to hold
a made-in-Taiwan statue of Elvis
above me, in such a way that children's
grief could not hurry my leaving.

For the silly sake of all we are and were,
sing "Gatherin' o' the Clan" loudly,
lewdly; unhush this reverent air
with scandal while I become (My world!
My friends! My children! All I know!)
the memory of a lady who made bread.

Neva Vinetta Hacker

The Poetry Receiver:
An Interview with David Bottoms

Deborah Browning and Capers Limehouse

David Bottoms' first book, *Shooting Rats at the Bibb County Dump*, was chosen by Robert Penn Warren as winner of the 1979 Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets. His poems have appeared widely in such magazines as *The Atlantic, The New Yorker, Harper's, The Paris Review, Poetry, American Poetry Review,* and others, as well as in numerous anthologies and textbooks. He is also the author of two other poetry collections, *In a U-Haul North of Damascus* and *Under the Vulture-Tree*, as well as two novels, *Any Cold Jordan* and *Easter Weekend.* Among his other awards are the Levinson Prize from *Poetry* magazine, an Ingram Merrill Award, an NEA fellowship, and an Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. This interview was conducted by Deborah Browning and Capers Limehouse on March 17, 1994, in his office at Georgia State University in Atlanta, where he teaches creative writing.

Browning: Could we start by asking about your progenitors? I wonder if you can trace specific instances of their influence in your poetry, or is the influence more unconscious?

BOTTOMS: The first real influence I remember, and it was a large one, was when I was a student at Mercer University. Everybody at Mercer in the late '60's was writing like Dylan Thomas. And so was I. I was writing very bad, good-sounding poems. My initial impluse was musical, all my poems were coming from sounds. I thought if you came up with a great line and you put thirteen more behind it, you had a sonnet, and a sonnet was a poem. So I wrote a lot of poems like that. Then I'd go back two weeks later and read them again and find them totally incomprehensible. About my senior year, when I was editing the school literary magazine, I found a new direction. I met my very first living poet, a man named James Seay, who teaches now at Chapel Hill. Jim had just published his first book, *Let Not Your Hart,* and he had come to Mercer to do a reading. It was the first poetry reading I'd ever heard, and I was pretty amazed. He's a very sort of striking figure—a tall, thin guy with long, blond hair and a black eye-patch over his eye. Very swashbuckling. Just what you might picture a poet to look like. He was born in Panola County, Mississippi, and his poems had a strong narrative content. I really liked them, and I latched onto him. I was trying to learn something. We spent three or four days together while he was in Macon, and I think he directed me to the poems of James Dickey. Then I started reading Warren and other Southerners. But from that point on, I

going. I stopped looking for poems in sound, and I started looking for them in the situations of my life. And suddenly they started to have some content. They started to mean something.

Browning: I'd call that an identifiable influence.

BOTTOMS: James Dickey was a big influence also. But that was later on. I think when I was in my early twenties, I was too stupid to know how good Dickey's poems really are. I've heard a number of Southern poets say, poets mostly of the generation before me, that Dickey's work was just so good that they felt discouraged reading it. A professor I had at Florida State told me that once early in his career he was trying to do the same sort of thing Dickey was doing and after reading Dickey he felt like he had to change his whole approach. Dickey intimidated a lot of writers in this way. I'm lucky, I think, because there are 27 or 28 years between us, and I was too dumb to be intimidated. I just went on and did what I felt like doing.

Limehouse: I wonder if you were just being self-protective?

BOTTOMS: Maybe. But I didn't discover the real force of his poems until I was in my late twenties, I guess.

Browning: So you didn't let his influence thwart your early development.

BOTTOMS: That's right. I know I learned a great deal from him, but I don't think I knew enough then to let his poems frighten me off my home turf. Does that make sense?

Limehouse: Yes. So do you think now that you write like Dickey in any way?

BOTTOMS: Actually, I don't. We've written about the same things occasionally—we're from the same part of the country, and we have many of the same interests, and because of that people like to toss us into the same boat—but we don't approach things in the same way. Fred Chappell said one time that he thought Dickey and I were about as far apart as you could get in terms of our approach. I think he's right. He said that Dickey writes these big, expansive poems, and I write these muscular, compressed poems. Dickey tends to expand and I tend to compress. My approach is actually a lot closer to James Wright or to Roethke. But I love Dickey's poems and he's been a great and positive influence.

Browning: There's been a lot of talk recently about the role of narrative in poetry. I heard you say something once about the "narrative surface" of a poem. What did you mean by that?

BOTTOMS: Well, I meant just that. All of my poems depend heavily on narrative, but I mean it to work only as a surface for the poem. A lot of stuff goes into poetry—I know that. But what has always been most fascinating to me is the way language can work figuratively. Narrative is interesting, but it's not enough. You can open up any literary magazine these days and

find a poem that's just a little story chopped up into 25 or 30 lines. To me that's not what poetry is all about. I want the poem to suggest something beyond the literal, and the narrative provides an opportunity for that. It provides a context in which the language can work figuratively. What I mean is this—a good poet can find ways of embedding triggers in the narrative surface to make the language leap to another level of meaning.

Limehouse: Could you talk about that in terms of "Under the Vulture-Tree," say, or "Sign for My Father," poems that seem to be extremely successful in that way?

BOTTOMS: Well, that baseball poem depends entirely on word-play. The figurative meaning develops out of a series of puns that come near the end of the poem. By the time the reader hits the last word "sacrifice," he or she has come to understand that the poem is not so much about learning to bunt as it is about the sacrifice the father has made for the son. The narrative surface, the story about the father teaching the boy to bunt, is interesting, of course. But to me it's really important only in the way it works figuratively in the poem. That's what we call in my classes the DHM, the Deep Hidden Meaning, a phrase I lifted from my friend Jim Seay. And it's the word play that allows the figurative possibility to reveal itself.

Limehouse: So the narrative just provides a literal level for the poem?

BOTTOMS: Yes, usually. It has to work literally first. Another interesting thing about narrative, though, is that it can operate figuratively itself, apart from language. This happens when the narrative pattern touches the mythic or the archetypal.

Browning: Can you give us an example of that—one of your poems?

BOTTOMS: I'd say that poem "Under the Boathouse." When the swimmer in the poem dives to the bottom of the lake and gets caught on a fish hook, he follows the pattern of submersion, symbolic death, and resurrection. The pattern itself is archetypal—like baptism. I think Jung called it the "myth of the night journey." A good example is Jonah and the whale—the big fish swallows Jonah, takes him down to a symbolic death, then surfaces and spits him out into a new life. The pattern repeats itself in any number of myths.

Browning: I heard you say once that people accuse you of having "hard closures." What exactly do they mean? Do they mean the poem ends too neatly?

BOTTOMS: Yes, I think so. Maybe "accuse" is not exactly the right word, but people have said that. Often the poems will turn near the end and try to make a figurative leap there. But not always. I've always liked that, though, because it seems to give the poem a final punch, and I've developed it steadily over the years. I remember somebody writing in *Poetry*, somebody reviewing *Under the Vulture-Tree*, that these poems

that. But I don't remember making any conscious effort at that. I haven't experimented much with form or approach in my poems. I hit on what I wanted to do relatively early, I think, and I've been pretty content in my efforts to try to perfect it. And that's okay.

Limehouse: We did want to ask a question about how you've changed over the years. Do you feel like you compete with your earlier self in any way or that people maybe expect you to?

BOTTOMS: Yes, I think so. If you write some stuff you like and live long enough to look back at it, you'll always feel like you're competing with yourself. I'd like to write another poem as good as "Vulture Tree" or "Under the Boathouse." But maybe I have and just don't know it. After taking time out for two novels, I'm writing poems again, and I like some of them very much.

Limehouse: Is that a difficult transition?

BOTTOMS: Yes, for me it is. It's a totally different kind of imagination. It's really hard to write fiction, to concern yourself with everything that goes into a novel, the fleshing out of a situation, characterization, plot, then go work on a poem, which is a distilling, a condensing.

Browning: So you think that the two processes are more dissonant, that they don't really inform each other?

BOTTOMS: To me the two processes are almost opposite. I much prefer the poems to the fiction. Maybe I'm just better at it, I don't know, but I much prefer the poems.

Limehouse: You said it takes a different sort of imagination. What do you mean by that?

BOTTOMS: Maybe sensibility is a better word. Fiction and poetry are just made in different ways. Fiction requires a long commitment to the page. You plot your novel out in a few weeks, and you work on it for two or three years. You don't work eight hours a day for a year on poems. You work just as hard, I think, but it's a different kind of labor. The imaginative experience is much more intense. People who say they sit down at their typewriters every morning at nine to write poems are suspicious to me. Poems just don't come that way.

Limhouse: Where do they come from?

BOTTOMS: Well, I'm not sure I know. I wish I could just go to the kitchen faucet and turn it on and have a poem come out, but that's not what happens. They come from the world, of course, but they also come through you.

Browning: Are you saying that the poet receives poems in some way?

BOTTOMS: Yes, I see the poet as sort of a poetry-receiver, the same way your stereo has an FM receiver. But you don't get the poem all at once the way your stereo picks up something off WABE. What you get from the world is an initial signal that a poem needs to be written. You take that signal, that idea or image, and you take it to your typewriter or your word processor or your No. 2 pencil and you flesh it out. You apply what you know about writing and try to make a poem out of it. The trick, I think, is learning to recognize the signal. Tuning in.

Browning: And how do you do that?

BOTTOMS: I think it has to do with the way you lead your life. First of all, you read and you learn how poems work. Then you simply make yourself as receptive to the world as you can. You watch for the signals to come in, and you wait. Jarrell described it as standing out in a thunderstorm. Seamus Heaney talks about the same thing in a very fine essay called "Feeling Into Words." But you don't sit down at the typewriter cold and expect to write a poem. You'll be there all day staring at a blank page, or just simply at a collection of words that don't mean very much.

Limehouse: I'm interested in the time issue, maybe because we are basically the same age. I wonder about this thing of being middle-aged. It seems to me we live in a culture where it's difficult to be a middle-aged poet. I don't know what we're supposed to be when we're over 40. Do you ever get that sense?

BOTTOMS: I don't know. I edited a book with Dave Smith called the *Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets*, so I'm at least partly guilty of promoting some of that younger writer stuff. And now I'm not a young poet anymore. Yale sort of defined the term for us, didn't they? After forty you can't win the Yale award. In some ways I don't mind all the emphasis on younger poets—the Lavan Younger poet, the Yale Younger poet, *The Morrow Anthology*—because writers who are starting out need encouragement. But what we middle-aged folks have to remember is simply this—it's not a race. Good poems are written by poets of all ages. And the poem is all that counts.

Limehouse: But don't you think there's also this sense in our society, especially for artists, that you have some sort of special creative genius when you're in your early twenties, like Keats, and if you miss that moment, it's just too late?

BOTTOMS: Maybe there's some of that. But I don't think of poets in that way. Look at the late poems of Warren. Nothing he wrote in his twenties can stand up to *Now and Then*. I think I know what you mean though. There's a strange phase a writer passes into when he or she can't barter on promise any longer. Suddenly you're not a promising young writer anymore, and you're not distinguished yet either. There you are, just a writer, hopefully a good one, but nevertheless a writer who's stuck between promise and real accomplishment. And it's a frightening phase because there's a much larger leap between good and distinguished than there is between promising and good.

Browning: Haven't we touched on the question of ambition here?

BOTTOMS: Yes, but it's a foolish question. Any ambition beyond the poem itself is a misdirection. And dangerous.

Browning: Dangerous in what way?

BOTTOMS: In the sense that ambition beyond the page interferes. Too many people in this country see poetry as a career. It's not. Poetry is an art. You don't go to an MFA program to get a degree and get a job. You go to hone your writing skills. There are careerists and politicians in all the arts; poetry's no different. But none of that stuff makes your poems any better.

Limehouse: What do you think it means to be Southern in terms of your being a poet? People do tend to label poets as "Southern." Do you think it matters? Also, can you contrast how living in the South might be at work in your poetry versus, say, living in Montana, which also seems to have influenced your work.

BOTTOMS: I think it's very strange. We have a real literary heritage in the South, but it's always been sort of at odds with the rest of the country. I didn't really understand this until I moved out of the South for a while. I first started to understand how other folks look at us a few years ago when I went to Columbia University to do a reading. It was a symposium on Southern writers. I was there with Charles Wright and Robert Morgan. Cleopatra Mathis was there too. We had a good audience and they were very receptive, I mean, the place was full. I don't remember any specific questions, but there was a sort of Tobacco Road curiosity. Also, when I lived in Montana, I found out that in many parts of the country, folks don't like Southerners very much. My wife was very prejudiced against Southerners. She had this terrible notion that all Southern men are misogynists and racists and all Southern women are bimbos. So there are liabilities that come with being a Southerner. We're still regarded as cultural primitives. But the South is a fascinating place. We have a culture that's still unique. Wasn't it Faulkner who said that the past isn't dead, it's not even past? I live about a mile and a half from a Civil War battlefield, so I move through a piece of history every day.

Browning: What about the poems? How does living in the South affect your poetry?

BOTTOMS: Well, the history and the culture obviously enter the poems, but I think that the South has a unique feel to it also. The landscape, the animals, the trees, all give it a special feel. Even the weather. That turns up in the poems. I think that "Shooting Rats" could've only been written in the South.

Browning: Did Montana have a special feel also?

BOTTOMS: Very much so. Most places do, I think, once you get out of sight of the Golden Arches, the Burger Kings, and the Pizza Huts. But yes, Montana has a very strong and individual feel for me. It's one of the most unique places I've ever been. First of all, the landscape is amazing. The open spaces are overwhelming, and they make you feel totally insignificant. And the wildlife is, of course, very different from the wildlife in the South. You don't feel a great sense of history there, but you feel a much greater intimacy with the wilderness. They have grizzlies and mountain lions, so the woods can be very dangerous. And so can the winters. If you aren't careful, the elements can kill you. But living there for a couple of years was very good for me. I got a new perspective on my life and on my poems. I had a new country to work with and some pretty good work came out of it. I'm grateful for that.

Limehouse: When you were talking a little bit earlier about the South as a place, the traditions, and using this as material, a phrase came into my head, "a sense of sin."

BOTTOMS: Well, we live in the Bible belt.

Limehouse: But maybe sin also has to do with racial issues, and maybe with the whole Faulknerian family stuff, and maybe somehow with the density of the landscape, with the land being almost too green, too lush.

BOTTOMS: I don't know how much of that I feel personally. Probably not much. Certainly, I don't feel any racial guilt, though I feel the cultural burden of that, which is a different thing. Someone asked me in an interview once why I didn't write about racial issues. My response was something like "Wouldn't it be great to write *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" But Harper Lee already did that, and I don't believe I could top it.

Limehouse: Talking about the Bible Belt brings up something else. You use a lot of religious imagery—*In a U-Haul North of Damascus, Any Cold Jordan, Easter Weekend.*

BOTTOMS: Yes. I was raised in the Baptist Church. I'm a Christian, so that's a natural bag of images. If I were a Buddhist the images would be different.

Limehouse: Of course, you're not going to find that in the average *New Yorker* poem.

BOTTOMS: No, no. You're not. Which is neither good nor bad in terms of the poetry. But it may be a comment about the country we live in. It's a fairly secular place. And I don't like that much. I appreciate the mystery. And that's another thing I believe good poems do, they define the mystery for us. Not solve it, of course. But they teach us the right questions to ask.

Browning: What about religious music? Do you think there is any connection between religious music and the sound in your poetry?

BOTTOMS: No, not really. I think most Southern writers are influenced by the music in the King James Bible, but beyond that, I don't know. I don't think consciously about sound when I write poems. I've just learned over the years to trust my ear, and I'll go back and look at the poems and say, "Yes, there are sound devices working here. I can hear these vowel sounds operating, I can hear this happening." But I don't think consciously about it, not in the first few drafts anyway. I just let my ear operate. Mostly what I'm after, again, is dealing with something that's important to me, getting it on paper, and making the language work figuratively.

Limehouse: Does trusting yourself as a poet get easier?

BOTTOMS: It gets easier. That doesn't always mean you're right in doing it. I think as I've gotten older I spend less time at the typewriter searching for poems. Twenty years ago, I had the fire. I'd write a poem one afternoon and get it out in the mail the next morning. I'd keep 15 batches of things out in the mail. If I didn't have 15 out, then I was a failure. And if I didn't write constantly, I was a failure. One thing that's happened over the years is I've learned to do more editing in my head. I've learned what's going to work and what's not, so I don't beat myself up. I trust this sort of internal editor to tell me whether I need to go sit down at the typewriter.

Limehouse: I was just thinking when you were talking that there's a quote from Auden in *The Dyer's Hand.* He talks about a poet only knowing that he or she is a poet at the moment of finishing a poem. Up until that moment they were someone who was about to write a poem, and after that moment they are someone who has written a poem and may never write one again. Can you speak to that?

BOTTOMS: That's true, in a sense. When you know you're writing a good poem, you don't want to let it go. You don't want the whole creative process to end. It's euphoric. Another thing that's happened to me over the years is that I've learned to take a lot longer with a poem. I sort of relish the whole business of tuning it up. It's nothing now to tune one for six or eight months.

Limehouse: You wouldn't have done that when you were young?

BOTTOMS: No. Not enough patience. And I felt a terrific urgency to publish then that I just don't feel anymore. Now I'd rather get it right before I send it out.

Limehouse: Is that a function of maturity?

BOTTOMS: It's a function of understanding that you're never going to be rich anyway. Or famous. Or if you think you're famous, you'll never be famous enough. And what does all that account for? I think it's just a matter of settling down and understanding what's really important—and that's simply making the poem as solid as it can be.

Limehouse: That leads to another question. How has having a child affected your work or your perception of your work?

BOTTOMS: It's changed my perspective a great deal. I'm not the center of my universe anymore. I used to think the story of creation ended with

me, and I was put here to write about it. All writers have this sort of ego. A child in your family makes you understand how really unimportant your life is. If I had my choice of being a great writer or a great parent, I'd always opt for the latter. I think any parent would. Having a daughter rather than a son has also been a very interesting education for me. It's made me much more aware of the ways our culture discriminates against women. It's made me aware of a lot of ugliness that I'd never noticed before and perhaps had even participated in.

Browning: Is there a place for poetry at the end of the twentieth century and what do you think that place might be?

BOTTOMS: I hope so, but I don't know. Our culture places so little importance on the arts and even on a liberal arts education. I'll give you an obvious example. I read in the paper a few days ago that the legislature is thinking about revising the requirements for a high school diploma because graduates can't get decent jobs. There's something very strange about this attitude, I think. College, also, is constantly pitched to students for the purpose of landing a job. The purpose of education, especially higher education, is not to land work. The purpose of education is intellectual and emotional growth. The arts play a significant role in this, but they're threatened in our culture because we emphasize the wrong things.

Limehouse: And how do we change that?

BOTTOMS: For one thing, all of the arts need to be more accessible. I heard on NPR yesterday that Joseph Brodsky and a friend have started a new program to put poetry in hotel rooms, right beside the Gideon Bible. I think that's a great idea. As they said, instead of a little mint on your pillow, you get Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman. And maybe Robert Frost too. That's great. The folks distributing these books are even encouraging people to steal them. This is the kind of activism we need in the arts. People are hungry for cultural significance in their lives, and the serious arts are too inaccessible. Artists have an obligation to do everything they can to correct that.

Limehouse: Does that mean the Atlanta Symphony doing free concerts, or the Alliance Theater giving away free tickets, or poets doing free readings?

BOTTOMS: Yes, to a certain extent. And arts groups do this already, though not nearly enough. After all, it's in everyone's best interest to reach out to audiences who haven't been able to reach us.

Browning: So what do you think the function of a literary magazine should be?

BOTTOMS: To do what we've just been talking about. To reach out to an audience and make good poetry and fiction available and accessible.

Now, Since

Now, since he's had children, my brother's become them,
rises in the body of our father
to brush the girls' hair,
clean their fingernails with his silver penknife.

He fixes breakfast for everyone,
holds them close to the table
like a man working horses, feels a pain in his chest,
as our mother did, when they scatter to school.
Like her, he sits in the car
stretching his mind after them, folding his body
into a student's desk, and raises his hand behind each one
to clarify what's too complicated for a child.

But then like our father he goes to work
and forgets
the children, spends whole days
winding himself in ropes
of his own manufacture
until by dark when the girls come in
he is exhausted and touchy.
By now his house is unfamiliar to him.
While supper dishes clatter
like an overture,
he lies in the darkened bedroom,
a caricature of himself as a child,
waiting for one of the beautiful girls,
the one who looks like our mother, to come get him.

Charlie Smith

Falling Asleep with Your Children

for Victoria Speckman

Such pleasure in weariness!
the week falls away, falls
away—and you are safe
in the ambulance of Friday.

Such weariness in pleasure!
It is joy to drop the world
at last, to let it bounce
into some uncharted corner.

And goodbye to death
in the small arms
of your children, goodbye
to pettiness in their petite

desires. Such pleasure
in this easing back, this late
surrender. Oh, it is good to yield
to what is sweet and genuine—

this lull in the storm of breath:
to feel their heads fall back
against you, to feel the world
fall back.

Charles Fishman

Discovering the Old Language

I stalk this room of no windows and one door
While my students ponder and scribble.
She doesn't notice when I stop
To watch over her shoulder.

She makes a list of metaphors
As the assignment calls for
And counts them on her fingers
To be sure the number is right.

She cups them in her hand,
Tumbles them all together
And rolls out a new alphabet
Like hieroglyphic dice.

Sensing a pattern in the world of chance,
She stirs a line and shapes a sound.
Suddenly the old language laughs a deep laugh
And pushes a poem like a pie in her face.

Clusters of images cling to her lashes;
Phrases fall from her lips and drip down her chin;
A splatter of cryptic footprints crosses the blank page.
She follows them out a different door,
Forgets to ask her grade.

David Hightower

The Snow Is Also Here for Scribbling

I.
I pointed past the kitchen window
Sunday morning. Darling, look how beautifully
it covers everything. Yet snow is rare
in Georgia. Only every hundred years or so
a blanket deep as this one floats down
like a miracle in mid-March, baffling the eyes

with all its whiteness, opening the ears
with so much silence. Now it hid the mangled patch
of sod and splintered bark behind the porch
where, clumsily, I'd split our last three logs
late Friday. *Oh*, the crocuses are dead, I thought
and, opening the front room curtains, sighed

to see the deep drifts burying the daffodils,
just now in bloom, the tulips, tall as rabbits' ears,
forsythia and coral pansies bedded since December.
Seven days before official spring: our lawn,
our cars, hell, almost everything of shape and color
swallowed by the white-tailed dog of winter.

II.
Even so, the silvery glow was overcoming
as the radiance of birth—or seeing someone's soul
if that were possible. I thought of Mrs. Beemer
and our chalky fifth grade blackboards. Punishment
back then was keeping us an hour after class
and making us erase the sentences she'd diagrammed,

the music teacher's lessons, fractions,
long division exercises, names of birds and trees.
She made us wipe away the leaves we'd traced:
the shiny, gentle-fingered *Quercus alba*,
saw-toothed beech and star-shaped sweet gum—
even *Acer saccharum*, the gold-veined

maple hands we'd held and drawn. Erasing them
that spring was sweet and sad. Just like the snow
this morning, covering impartially
the young with old, the good with bad:
a painted flower pot, a gaping driveway crack,
a green narcissus stem, a long-neglected, rusted bike. . .

III.
It didn't mind that I forgot to prune last week—
or that another pink-toed 'possum found our compost pit
and made a feast of buried cabbages and bacon fat.
Last autumn, from an aircraft cabin
twenty thousand feet above the North Atlantic,
coming on the frozen coast of Greenland
and its vast immeasurable unbrokenness—
I thought I saw the scattering
of well-worn paths, the zig-zag trails
where walruses and seals had left the ocean,
crossing small peninsulas of white
to reach a neighboring inlet. This was far

too beautiful a thing to be erased,
I thought: warm-blooded chalkmarks in a wilderness.
I couldn't take my eyes away from it. Nor from
the solitary path I later saw, meandering
across the snow plain toward the ice-encrusted shore,
the bright red circle where it ended: polar bear.

IV.
Beneath the arbor seat I built last year
three rufous-sided towhees scratch and jitterbug.
They're looking for the seed I scattered
by the handfuls yesterday. Beyond them, squirrels
are tunneling for corn. And Carolina wrens
and titmouses contend for peanut butter perches.

Later, when the neighbor's kids have dragged
their obsolescent sled a hundred times across the yard,
slicing the jonquils, battering the English ivy,
when their tracks look more like lawyers'
endless cross-examinings, I guess I could be sad
or angry—yell out "Damn it all!" But no,

the snow is also here for scribbling. Remember,
Darling, how a pair of chipmunks wrote their little love song
while we sipped our tea this morning? It reminded me
of Vogel Park last winter. Fireplace and cabin,
camping naked in that weekend blizzard, how we rushed
outside and blessed the unwalked white like fallen angels.

Jack Hayes

Mrs. Moore, in Biology

There she stood, extolling trillium,
while we were fifteen, watching her
rooted to the spot beside the desk,
its shadow reaching us, to stunt
our growth. This Woman of the Plants,
as we called her, denied us our blood;
we wanted passion to course through us
faster than xylem can flow, faster than light
can turn its green miracles with chlorophyll.
We nodded to one another like daisies
caught in the early breezes of spring,
until one morning Mrs. Moore was replaced,
as though out of season, by Rupert Frank,
Vice Principal in Charge of Chastisement.
We found out and believed much too late
the truth of her absence, of her flight
into a country we still dreamed of, her
journey with Vincent Panelli, local
disc jockey, fueller of flames, grower
of the most secret orchid of all.

Robert Parham

Unemployed

Daffy Duck throws his deck chair into the blue pool;
tees off on a dynamite stick. Featherless and smoking
to the laughter of three mice in sombreros with guitars
and maracas who planned it that way.

Daffy Duck's problems aren't as great however as the Coyote's
who has just been hoodwinked by the Roadrunner and who is
just now realizing the light at the end of the tunnel is
a nuclear blast.

Ch. 2: A car chases another car.

Ch. 4: A car and a helicopter chase a truck.

Ch. 6: A car, a helicopter and a truck chase a motorcycle.

Ch. 8: A car, a helicopter, a truck, a motorcycle, four SWAT-
teams and six black and whites with flashing lights
chase a man on foot.

On Ch. 9 Mister Rogers changes shoes; tells me he likes me
just the way I am.

The Three Stooges, on 88, after serving cornbread made from
cement mix to the ladies of high society, fall asleep
in a single bed, snoring at each other's feet.

My daughter wants to know why they sleep with their shoes on.
My wife brings me a hamburger with an olive eyeball. Wimpy
reaches out of Ch. 90, snatches it off my plate and swallows it.

I run out the door into the street which has turned into a
tunnel. Featherless and smoking. Wishing everyone felt
about me the way Mister Rogers feels.

Seaborn Jones

Development

Woods forbidden by parents—
snake-filled, tick-ridden,
vine-strangled and razor-stalked,

our secret home, escape
from home, war zone
and shelter, nighttime

hide-and-seek's most feared
and daring hiding place,
shape for our unshaped

imaginations, where poison
sumac and honeysuckle
flowed over each other.

One morning on our way to school
we saw two yellow trucks pull up,
four men get out and start to measure.

Behind our backs it turned into
the corner house that never sold,
the seeded yard picked bare by birds.

The darkness there at night was all
one shade, square as the picture window
we dared ourselves to look through once.

Nothing we could see looked back
at us, an emptiness within
that none of us had known before.

Eric Nelson

Woman with an Orange

for ST

Simple as a ball, it absorbs her.

She rolls it in her palms, senses
the pressure she needs
to peel away the firm
protective layer without
puncturing the flesh within.

The rind unrolls from her hands,
reveals the ball inside the ball.

She goes deeper, slides
her thumbs inside the dimple,
pushes to the center and pulls
the whole into halves, a single
bead gliding toward her wrist.

One by one she frees
the perfect crescents
and gives them to her mouth,
her lips swelling and darkening
with each disappearing.

Consumed, it remains—
an aura of orange around her.

Eric Nelson

My Mother Teaches About Apricots

Taut skin never could fool her.
Her fingertips detected fraud in
ruby-red tomatoes, burstingly purple plums.
From her, I learned alertness to the pale flesh
below the surface, the disappointment
lurking, unseen.

Although I longed for milk chocolate bunnies,
she taught me the tart bite of an apricot,
the rough skin that makes the tongue
attempt retreat. A child could never
be too tender, she said, to learn
the taste of grief.

Enid Litwak Baron

Lines for a Visitor in Space

*for C.M.**

When I looked for the sky
It wasn't there
I breathed within a faultless lung
My weight grown lighter than my final skull
Every star I ever memorized gazed back at me
From somewhere in the pages of my roll
Hands flew up and clutched the universe
But every name I called on echoed light
Where was time going?
Shouldn't I be grading?
The whirl of density made galaxies
Of loss, of tomorrow, my lift-off infinite
As eyes of children staring at my chart

Larry Rubin

*Christa McCauliffe, the schoolteacher who died in the Challenger disaster in 1986.

Place Name, Proper Name

On the side roads
the banks feather
into scrub pine
and juniper,

slope down
to intimacies
dark from last night's rain,
the frazzled stems

of goldenrod
and poison ivy,
occasional clumps
of wild blackberry.

I could name the town
and place it on a map,
but someone would be bound
to misunderstand

my meaning.
Believe they could find it here.
Forget a town
isn't a place

but a journey.
Ripe with patchwork fences
(some your own),
whatever's stray,

and creeks that only
local children name.
Driving this road
I remember

I never learned
the name to,
I want to say
that now I'm part of this;

I've lived here long enough.
That sometime back,
some afternoon
we both forgot,

my name became
indigenous.
Its sound
in your mouth,

even when I hold you,
now weathered
to the smoothness
of the front porch sway.

Its syllables
as familiar
and unmappable
as gravel scattered after rain.

Jack Stewart

A Blade, Stropped

The man alone in the barbershop at dusk
by only the light of the striped pole
that drips its ensigns of blood and water
among the piles of different-colored hair is
Mace, the master barber. He closes his eyes
remembering when he practiced shaving balloons:
hollow grins expressed in black marker;
necks squeaking at the slightest touch.
He held his breath and pulled the razor
over their whipped cream coiffures,
the bitter bite of the septic comb in his mouth
as he trimmed their sideburns. The dabs of stubble
around their crudely drawn blue smiles.
How all the while the nervous balloons
casually nodded.

Philip Kobylarz

Sitting behind Ben-Hur

The drumbeat sets the oar-stroke, cruelly;
But then we do not choose our heartbeat.

Manacles confine us. Who, however,
Can be really said to venture?

If in the battle it is row or drown,
We row. The lash is often on us.

It is an incentive, in its way.
The rowing builds up shoulder muscles.

I've a tan. I look at backs a lot.
I deeply understand teamwork.

I live in filth. Was I fastidious
When I was free? Here sharks will have us;

It's not as though elsewhere there are no jackals.
Bear up. Hand and heart grow calloused.

Turner Cassity

God's Acre

From the chain of backsliders
that show up each year
just before third Sunday in May
to work the dirt
into cultivated mounds, get rid of
honeysuckle and kudzu, to sweep
and whitewash dusty headstones,
one can feel the weight of blood.

The cemetery floods
with sisters who'd
long ago parted ways
over caches of china
and company sheets,
black sheep cousins, the outside child
people whispered about. Everywhere,
an unction of shovels
and joblades toil in a kind
of Protestant Feralia for the good
of common ground.

The toads and spiders stampede
toward a beautiful refuge
of tombs unscathed by duty or love.

Here, even among friends,
there is hardly ever more
than cautious chat of weather,
how tight the soil has grown.
It takes too much to forget
harsh last words, how thin and silent
one can become, too much
not to dwell on heaven or hell,
just to survive till these sparse Sundays
when remnants come with iris and roses,
big yellow and pink kleenex mums,
when the hard ghosts of living
are buried for awhile
under a covenant of blooms.

Claude Wilkinson

Baptism with Water Moccasin

> *And the Lord said to Satan, "From where do you come?" So Satan answered the Lord and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it."*
>
> *—The Book of Job*

His bulk amazed us,
the way he'd maneuvered his folds
onto a switch of elm
directly above the baptizing hole.
After all, Cedar Creek offered
numerous spots for a snake
to wile away a Sunday, but only one
fit to baptize in.

Not even the brilliance
of proselytes, a rite of sheets
fluttering about them
in the early morning breeze,
had moved him. Not the most
floral, feathered, tasseled of hats,
nor the highest notes of a Doctor Watt
being held till the last thread
of their power—
nothing made him so much
as shift that plated lozenge of head,
shovel through the chilly fork of his tongue
to even feel us out.

It was as if he already knew
what was going on, as if
he had been returning for ages
to blaspheme the Creek.

While the deacons
crawfished into place,
one could scan the bank of faces,
almost hear people calling up Scriptures,
favorite prophets to deliver us.

The sister in the blue crepe de chine
sees Joseph released from Potiphar's prison,
and the old man there
with Stetson still on
is remembering Daniel in the lion's den.
Over there Jonah is being spat up . . .
Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.
Everywhere shields were rising,
going forth against the tree.

A few boys with the story
of David and Goliath
burning their hearts,
gathered stones to make war,
aimed to chuck the devil down
into the cloudy waters below,
but Pastor Gamble, an old hand
at this sort of thing, cautioned
"Leave him be, chillun.
Long as he up there,
we knows where he at."

Claude Wilkinson

Hunting Dead

Son, one more favor
for the old man.

Take this body and burn
it, burn it up,

and seal the ashes
in a 12 gauge shell.

Bolt it in the cool
chamber, aim behind

the horns of an 8 point
buck, standing alert

with its ears up.
Wait, then squeeze,

let me rip flesh, crack
bone, drop him like a

vice. One last kill
for the old killer.

Gay Brewer