

The New Formalist

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Editor

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James Bobrick

Gomes Leal, Poet

after Pessoa

Calling, cursed, in your case.
The triple rings ordain
loneliness, rancor, pain.
Eight moons stare into space.

Raised (in Apollo's place)
by Saturn, how could brain,
and heart, bled white, sustain
that black hole's dense embrace?

Through lunar madness? Guess
again. Those rings enthrone
pain, rancor, loneliness,

but, beyond God, now shone
beauty's metastasis—
moonlike, cold and unknown.

Furloughed

As through a viewfinder what's cropped between
the library's twin-pillared portico
tightens this spring's New Bedford genre scene:
street people idling on the steps below.
A hoodie, doubled over with dry heaves,
rucks up the deckled edges of four, no,
five shirts, rocking between his thrust-back sleeves.
And there but for—fill in the blanks—go I,
or went already, as part of me believes.
My teaching jobs, really. Do they belie
that diagnosis: *can't function outside
an institution?* Merely certify?
Our halfway houses merge as they divide,
eclipsing status, race, and class.... There's been
another drug-related homicide.
A guy alights beside me, knowing grin,
tank top, tattoos. He nods. I follow suit.
His voice is casual, "Spare a Klonopin"?
"You'd accept a generic substitute"—
I almost say, but startled from his seat,
at my head shake, he's off, the question moot,
narc or user? Look out. An indiscreet
exchange could mean recruitment for a stay
in the Bristol County Lockup up the street
or on a tandem work crew, aka
chain gang. All volunteers, the paper said,
get dorm rooms, contact visits, merit pay,
other inducements. Ankles linked, in red
jumpsuits, each crew is racially diverse,
shopped for community projects instead
of splitting rock. Still, some towns balk, averse
to how such coffles call up slavery;
a few crew members, though, swear street life's worse,
or so a sidebar claimed: "Shackled but Free."

Plus ça change...

Oh how they hate a British Lord,
Invading lands while he deplored
Their ancient primitive native ways,
Back in the old colonial days.
They hate his supercilious smirk,
The way he sneered (the fascist jerk)
At cultures he refused to know
But ever of his own would crow.

The world is now decolonized
But sneering Lords live on disguised
As scholars whose critiques now blast
Our native European past.
They snort at the benighted state
Of our forefathers and berate
Their ways, and smug as lords condemn
Their failure to be wise, like them.

Indian Summer

Let us rejoice that autumn supplies us
With clear blue skies and temperate winds,
The better to ponder our means and ends
Before we confront the winter's surprises.

We know our own season is running out fast,
And our bodies have grown the worse for wear,
But now we are given a chance to prepare
For the coming chill and the deadly frost.

Think of this moment as like a plateau,
A base from which we must shortly resume
The mysterious, vertiginous climb
Into the future that we do not know.

Or think of this moment as like a bivouac
In which we must plan as if for a war,
Studying our route as never before,
Checking our gear, and praying for luck.

Time goes faster than ever we willed,
And we must be ready when at last there come
The sound of the wind like a rattling drum,
The last leaf fall, and the certain cold.

After the Quarrel

From your final words I smarted so,
I did not observe your departure as such;
Your flaming presence in its afterglow
Stayed with me, more real than sight or touch.

I was like a soldier who finds his sense
Of the enemy made clearer and stronger
Not just by the brute fact of violence
But by the intimacy of anger.

I dreamed that you were a succubus
Who came to my bed like a demon lover
With eyes that were burning and merciless
And likely, I thought, to scorn me forever,

How harshly your spirit ground on my own
In dreadful contention throughout the night,
And how strange it was that we had grown
Never so close as when having a fight.

Piano Composition

There's D, F sharp and A, then D once more
all in the right, the left hand lingering
on two low notes that rumble as they sing
like a quiet storm. The field-like score
exists in seed in measures one through four
that know the moment when the chord will ring
and sympathetically vibrate each string
until sound fades—a slowly closing door.
Beginnings hold the end. An understanding
between composer and idea dictates
that one is slave until the piece is done.
A finished score is simply the unhanding
of what was always there—not work of fates—
but music whole the moment it's begun.

Solvitur Acris Hiems

Horace: Odes I, 4

Now a turning of the winds brings change from the west
and bitter snows melt away. Rolling billows call
and keels are dragged from dry dock. Done with winter's rest,
farmers shun their fires and cattle stamp in the stall.

Now Venus leads nymphs in dances beneath the moon—
their feet shake the earth from its stupor! Vulcan warms
the day as he stokes his forge. His giants hum a tune
as they hammer out lightning bolts for summer storms.

Now let's weave myrtle crowns studded with red and blue
flowers, those jewels the season freely confers.
And in this grove, let's render Pan all homage due
and sacrifice a lamb or kid goat if he prefers.

Death kicks down the doors of mansions and tenements
alike. Listen Sestius, even now hear his tread.
Your ambitions can't extend life's span. When it's spent
you'll go down below to sleep with the fabled dead

and all the other shadow exiles of no name.
No more will you tittle or shoot dice until dawn.
And Lycidas, that lissome youth whose limbs inflame
the hearts of men, he'll go for virgins when you're gone.

After

Some things can't be shaken by reveling
into late hours. Love's the bastard
that keeps me awake tonight, bedeviling

my brain. Others know what I haven't mastered:
how to drink until you reach amnesia.
The others were getting plastered;

I was downing drinks too fast to please a
weak stomach; ended up outside kneeling
on the lawn, sick. So no anesthesia

tonight, just the slow slur and blurred reeling
of images: her, in all her prettiness, the pretense
of romance we kept up. The sick feeling

subsided. Stupor overcame my sense
and sleep came on, mercifully dreamless,
the hours lagging morning's imminence.

Day now steals slowly eastward, the seamless
minutes drag in the light. And the red stain
of dawn seeps across the sky. Day's beams dress

me—still sour with whiskey, beer, and champagne—
stumbling home to try to sleep again.

The Story So Far

Story called for characters.
He claimed you and me, child.
Story needed settings:
He settled on our world.

Story looked for themes.
Skilfully he drew
Your radiance into his plot,
And my staunch love for you.

Story wanted events:
He found the bits and pieces
Of our lost meetings and
Impossible co-incidences.

Then Story made conclusions
Unhappy ever after,
Weaving his narratives of us
With dark tongues of dark water.

Old Story is baffled now,
He cannot comprehend
How two such true originals
Ignore him and invent our own sweet end.

Farm Toys

The toys I loved the most I made from scraps
That littered farms—available and free.
Corncobs with wheels that once were bottle caps
Could be a truck powered by hand and knee.
Sent on an errand, zestfully I rode
My stick horse, almost running him to death;
We always galloped full-tilt, never slowed,
Till he, and even I, were out of breath.
I made a fort from boxes, built a swing,
And learned to skip a rock across the pond.
I played with rope, made fence with sticks and string,
And rolled a hoop with stake and crosspiece wand.
It's pleasing to remember when we boys
And girls put something of ourselves in toys.

Our Feeble-Minded Hired Hand

Pa's year-round hired hand was old John Horn,
A Lacota drifter who had chanced to find
Our farm and asked if he could husk some corn
To earn some meals, if we would be so kind.
Ma had nodded when Pa had glanced her way,
So John became our feeble-minded ward.
He worked with a will, and had few words to say.
Pa liked him, paid a wage we could afford.
These friends grew old together as a team
Working their gardens in our canyon acres
Where John felt equal, safe, as in a dream,
With Pa his shield against all troublemakers.
The day Pa died, the man he had befriended
Told us goodbye, that his life too had ended.

Milking

I like the milking best of all my chores,
Especially in the cold when Holstein flanks
Provide a close and welcome warmth outdoors.
For comfort, then—and milk—cows get my thanks.
I balance on the T-shaped milking stool,
And squeeze the teats, then watch the bucket foam.
Milking can be a kind of country school
That frees the mind an hour or so to roam.
The cows chew cuds and seem to contemplate
Or lose themselves in bovine reverie,
While milking lets me also ruminate
On what's gone by and what is yet to be.
Some winter evenings, I reflect on how
A man could do much worse than milk a cow.

Selling Point

When the virus invaded his cells,
He was put through sixteen different hells
 In the space of three days:
 That's the game illness plays.
That's the spell my elixir dispels!

The Secret

He wrote his secret down. They found it out.
What more is there to say beyond that point?
Buoyed up by certainty, afraid of doubt,
He wrote his secret down. They found it out—
And every word thereafter was a shout,
And every moment was time out of joint.
He wrote his secret down. They found it out.
What more is there to say beyond that point?

Christmas Luck

When the fat man named Santa got stuck
In our chimney and cursed— “These things suck!”—
 Well, we threatened a fire.
 “You will cease to respire!”
And we won toys as ransom. What luck!

Deciding Not To Have Children

The empty outlines follow cold and gray,
But you have condoms, oh, and I the pill,
Though hopeful voices still conspire, “someday.”

An anger comes between us everyday,
Forgotten calls and kisses missed at will,
So empty outlines follow cold and gray.

“Since I can’t even talk to you,” I say
Across the dinner table—lonely, shrill—
And we ignore our old plans for “someday.”

How did this happen? When? Where did we stray?
All I can see from bed is yet more ill—
Their empty outlines waiting cold and gray.

With almost-joy in quiet disarray,
I hate you for pretending that it’s still
Okay. I need you to stop with, “someday.”

At night I watch your hollow chest rise, sway,
And hear desire and fear moan like a drill.
The empty outlines follow cold and gray,
Though hopeful voices still conspire, “someday.”

The Hotel Hooker

On Main Street, Willimantic, yellow brick
Against the sky, café umbrellas spread
On some occasions to promote a quick
Memorial to railroad days long dead:
A time when this hotel was an honored place,
Which lonely men who traveled could admire
For lining evenings with the coarse embrace
Of spun piano songs and flesh for hire.
The rails have long been rusty, and the town
A pale commercial wasteland whose main ware
Is heroin, a sheen on the run-down
Look of the waifish girls who gather here.
They say Seth Hooker, who opened this hotel,
Had no idea—I think he knew damn well.

Faith and Fortitude

We shy at worms
and are afraid
of septic germs,
while in our thoughts,
however toxic,
we are staidly
orthodox.

The Argonauts
of ancient Greece,
impatient for
the Golden Fleece,
against all odds
would wade ashore
with pagan gods.

The Hunter's Warning

Perch in a tree's groin, downwind of the game;
Be motionless and silent too—
Compose his silhouette, as if in frame
Within your telescopic view;
The deer will know your presence, just the same.

Despite assurance of a practiced eye,
Good windage, range, and zeroed sights;
Although you have him dead to rights
And crosshairs, like a benediction, lie
Against his forward flank (but not too high)
You feel that telepathic scorn
His eyes betray before his flesh is torn
And jerk the gun too quickly. He will fly.

First Melt

The puddles roved about the parking lot—
so energetic of them. Chasing us.
Meanwhile the ducks chased them, a zig-zag line
of quacking zip and waddle, world awash:
disintegrating snow sludge. Puddle-tides
went hurtling sideways, missed me by an inch,
and seized a fledgling ice-melt, swallowing
the intervening asphalt. So much wet.
Umbrella blinded, studying my boots,
I dodged a patchwork duckling underfoot—
and mother, wings akimbo. Found the car
(which beeped affectionately), wrestled down
my upside down umbrella, soaked a sock,
and climbed in, soggy—happy. Almost spring.

Last Will

I leave my disappointed heirs
With nothing in the world but words,
Divided into equal shares.

Those six, who were my greatest care,
Must take the gift of one now poor,
And find some consolation there.

For those who filled my days with strife,
May wretched want pursue their steps,
As it dogged mine in later life.

And may my grave on Sligo's shore
Contain these words and little more:

*Preparing for that Great Assize,
Appealing to those judges hence,
He made his last and best defense.*

Back from the Mountains

Inside an empty cardboard box for tea
we brought this hornet's nest that Christof found
after a storm had brought it to the ground
the night before. It lay beneath a pine tree,
secure within its own fragility,
with woven bands of paper all around
its lantern shape, soft gray and purple-brown.
A cap of paper crowned it jauntily.

God knows what moral may be drawn from this.
Let it suffice onlookers to look on
and learn how form and function here are one—
how, when this sailed down through the dark's abyss,
its flight was pointed toward the break of dawn.
Its paper dried before the birds were done.

A Texas Idyll

Fishing in clear green, stone-bound water
in the hill country south of Austin,
catching a rock bass every now and then,
I spent a lazy hour beside the creek
where limestone'd worn away to form a pool.
It was maybe twenty yards across there.
Above the current on the other side
a limestone bluff was topped by cumulus.

And then a sudden movement caught my eye.
A water moccasin slid down a ledge
into the water, swam out to a tree,
showed its cotton palate, flicked its tongue,
slid back into the water, scaled the stone.
Dead silence in its wake when it was gone.

Material Possessions

for James Wright

This jewel that rests behind your back,
was it a green that turned to black?
Perhaps a bone that grew in soil,
a fractured rock that blooms in oil?

At times I've heard its muffled thrall,
a hypnagogic, sacred call.
I feel the jewel strike like chimes
against my ribs in measured time:
but not a dance, and not an air,
a grounded dance, perhaps a prayer.

Ah, Wright! This music must be wrong—
there's nothing left to put in song;
just rocks and prayers that seem to climb
like wind that slips through window blinds.

End of the Pendulum

Sunlight filters through a grimy pane.
A roach inspects a dirty table top.
A stench is emanating from a stain.
A fungus eats away a filthy mop.

Beneath a musty chair a piece of meat
appears to be alive and move. A mound
of mildewed clothes lies on the floor. The street
outside provides sporadic muffled sound.

And silence rules the ceiling and the walls.
And emptiness the center of the room.
And gloom where every ragged shadow falls.
And apathy the dustpan and the broom.

Boy Dreaming

The sun is down
the sleeping town
is deep in shadows

A western breeze
blows through the trees
and moonlit meadows

A thousand bright
eyes of the night
shine in the heavens

He seeks a place
a deeper place
a place of ravens

A place of water
of fire and order
earth air and paradox

Of lions loose
catch the caboose
chaos and Goldilocks

Of happy sad
good luck and bad
going up while descending

Of toys and tears
and falling fears
of hidden treasure finding

A place of flying ships
and melting wax wing tips
of stony gorgons heroines and heroes

Of tombs and wombs and age
and brontosaurus rage
of cowardice and apple-splitting arrows

So he follows where they go
huge footprints in the snow
that may lead him to caves of giant snowmen

and walks beside a lake
to unknowingly wake
a bird that flies above him like an omen.

Notes

James Bobrick's work has appeared in *The Cumberland Poetry Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *the new renaissance*, *The South Coast Poetry Journal*, and *The Worcester Review*.

Mark Allinson's poems have appeared in many leading online journals, among them, *The Chimaera*, *London Poetry Review* and *The Pennsylvania Review*.

William F. Bell is a retired newspaper editor and columnist. His poems have appeared in *The Formalist*, *America*, *Crisis*, *Measure*, and numerous other magazines.

Mary Rae's poems have appeared in *The Formalist*, *Hellas*, *Piedmont Literary Review*, *Plains Poetry Journal*, *Sparrow*, and *The Lyric*, among many others.

Mathew Landrum is an MFA student at Bennington College. His work has been included in *Beloit Poetry Journal* and *The Buenos Aires Review*.

Paul Christian Stevens is widely published online and in print, most recently or imminently in *CounterPunch*, *London Poetry Review*, *Lucid Rhythms*, and *Soundzine*.

Don Thackrey's work has appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *The Deronda Review*, *The Lyric*, *Slant*, *Lucid Rhythms*, and other journals and anthologies.

Tom Riley drinks lots of red wine, and has published more poems in the last twenty-nine years than he cares to keep track of.

Callista Buchen is an MFA candidate at Bowling Green State University, where she also teaches creative writing, as well as serves as an assistant editor of *Mid-American Review*.

Hassan Melehy's verse has appeared in *Contemporary Sonnet*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Borderlands*, *The Hat*, *nthposition*, and *Red Rock Review*.

C.B. Anderson's poems have appeared in numerous print and online journals. His e-chapbook, *A Walk in the Dark*, can be read at the website of *The New Formalist*.

Joseph S. Salemi has published three books of poetry, and has appeared in twelve separate anthologies of contemporary verse. He is the editor of *Trinacria*.

Kathryn Jacobs has published over a hundred poems in a wide variety of journals and (in her prior life) a book on medieval marriage contracts, plus sixteen articles.

T.S. Kerrigan's poetry has appeared in magazines on both sides of the Atlantic, in several anthologies, and on NPR. His latest book, *My Dark People* was published in April 2008.

Roy Scheele has recently had poems in *Lucid Rhythms*, *Measure*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He teaches at Doane College in Crete, Nebraska.

Thom Dawkins is an MFA candidate at Chatham University, where he is a poetry editor at *The Fourth River*. He currently lives in Pittsburgh.

Michael Harmon's work has appeared in *Lucid Rhythms*, *Romantic's Quarterly*, *The Raintown Review*, and *The North American Review*.

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