
Final Cut: The Selection Process for *Break, Blow, Burn*

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B_{REAK, BLOW, BURN}, my collection of close readings of forty-three poems, took five years to write. The first year was devoted to a search for material in public and academic libraries as well as bookstores. I was looking for poems in English from the last four centuries that I could wholeheartedly recommend to general readers, especially those who may not have read a poem since college. For decades, poetry has been a losing proposition for major trade publishers. I was convinced that there was still a potentially large audience for poetry who had drifted away for unclear reasons. That such an audience does in fact exist seemed proved by the success of *Break, Blow, Burn*, which may be the only book of poetry criticism that has ever reached the national bestseller list in the United States.

On my two book tours (for the Pantheon hardback in 2005 and the Vintage paperback in 2006), I was constantly asked by readers or interviewers why this or that famous poet was not included in *Break, Blow, Burn*, which begins with Shakespeare and ends with Joni Mitchell. At the prospectus stage of the project, I had assumed that most of the principal modern and contemporary poets would be well represented. But once launched on the task of gathering possible entries, I was shocked and disappointed by what I found. Poem after poem, when approached from the perspective of the general audience rather than that of academic criticism, shrank into inconsequence or pretension. Or poets whom I fondly remembered from my college and graduate school studies turned out to have produced impressive bodies of serious work but no single

poem that could stand up as an artifact to the classic poems elsewhere in the book. The ultimate standard that I applied in my selection process was based on William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming," a masterpiece of sinewy modern English.

Ezra Pound, because of his generous mentoring of and vast influence on other poets (such as T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams), should have been automatically included in *Break, Blow, Burn*. But to my dismay, I could not find a single usable Pound poem—just a monotonous series of showy, pointless, arcane allusions to prior literature. The equally influential W. H. Auden was high on my original list. But after reviewing Auden's collected poetry, I was stunned to discover how few of his poems can stand on their own in today's media-saturated cultural climate. Auden's most anthologized poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts," inspired by a Breughel painting, felt dated in its portentous mannerisms. A homoerotic love poem by Auden that I had always planned to include begins, "Lay your sleeping head, my love, / Human on my faithless arm." But when I returned to it, I found the poem perilously top-heavy with that single fine sentence. Everything afterward dissolves into vague blather. It was perhaps the most painful example that I encountered of great openings not being sustained.

Surely the lucid and vivacious Marianne Moore, so hugely popular in her day, would have produced many poems to appeal to the general reader. However, while I was charmed by Moore's ingenious variety of formats, I became uncomfortable and impatient with her reflex jokiness, which began to seem like an avoidance of emotion. Nothing went very deep. Because I was so eager to get a good sports poem into *Break, Blow, Burn* (I never found one), I had high hopes for Moore's beloved odes to baseball. Alas, compared to today's high-impact, around-the-clock sports talk on radio and TV, Moore's baseball lingo came across as fussy and corny.

Elizabeth Bishop presented an opposite problem. Bishop is truly a poet's poet, a refined craftsman whose discreet, shapely poems carry a potent emotional charge beneath their

transparent surface. I had expected a wealth of Bishop poems to choose from. With my eye on the general reader, I was keenly anticipating a cascade of sensuous tropical imagery drawn from Bishop's life in Brazil. But when I returned to her collected poems, the observed details to my surprise seemed oppressively clouded with sentimental self-projection. For example, I found Bishop's much-anthologized poem "The Fish" nearly unbearable due to her obtrusively simmering self-pity. (Wounded animal poems, typifying the anthropomorphic fallacy, have become an exasperating cliché over the past sixty years.) Even splendid, monumental Brazil evidently couldn't break into Bishop's weary bubble, which traveled with her wherever she went. It may be time to jettison depressiveness as a fashionable badge of creativity.

Charles Bukowski was another poet slated from the start to be prominently featured in *Break, Blow, Burn*. (Indeed, he proved to be the writer I was most asked about on my book tours.) I had planned to make the dissolute Bukowski a crown jewel, demonstrating the scornful rejection by my rowdy, raucous 1960s generation of the genteel proprieties of 1950s literary criticism, still faithfully practiced by the erudite but terminally prim Helen Vendler. I was looking for a funny, squalid street or barroom poem, preferably with boorish knockdown brawling and half-clad shady ladies. But as with Elizabeth Bishop, I could not find a single poem to endorse in good faith for the general reader. And Bukowski was staggeringly prolific: I ransacked shelf upon shelf of his work. But he obviously had little interest in disciplining or consolidating his garrulous, meandering poems. Frustrated, I fantasized about scissoring out juicy excerpts and taping together my own ideal Platonic form of a Bukowski poem. The missing Bukowski may be the surly Banquo's ghost of *Break, Blow, Burn*.

Feminist poetry proved a dispiriting dead end. Grimly ideological and message-driven, it preaches to the choir and has little crossover relevance for a general audience. Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," a big anthology favorite, is

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symptomatic of the intractable artistic problem. A tremendously promising master metaphor—Rich uses deep-sea diving to dramatize modern women’s confrontation with a declining patriarchal civilization—collapses into monotonous sermonizing and embarrassing bathos. The poem’s clumsiness and redundancy are excruciating (risible “flippers,” for example, loom large). I was more optimistic about finding a good feminist poem by Marge Piercy, who treats her woman-centric themes with spunky humor. Piercy’s work is full of smart perceptions and sparkling turns of phrase, but her poems too often seem like casual venting—notes or first drafts rather than considered artifacts. I finally chose for *Break, Blow, Burn* two forceful, lively poems by Wanda Coleman and Rochelle Kraut that are not explicitly feminist but that express a mature and complex perspective on women’s lives.

I had glowing memories of dozens of poets whom I had avidly read (or seen read in person) after my introduction to contemporary poetry in college in the mid-1960s: Denise Levertov, Randall Jarrell, Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Duncan, John Berryman, W. D. Snodgrass, Robert Creeley, John Ashbery, and Galway Kinnell, among many others. But when I returned to their work to find material for *Break, Blow, Burn*, I was mortified by my inability to identify a single important short poem to set before the general reader. Live readings seem to have beguiled and distracted too many writers from the more rigorous demands of the printed page—the medium that lasts and that speaks to posterity. All of the above poets deserve our great respect for their talent, skill, versatility, and commitment, but I would question how long their reputations will last in the absence of strong free-standing poems. Beyond that, I was puzzled and repelled by the stratospheric elevation in the critical canon given to John Ashbery in recent decades. “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (1974), Ashbery’s most famous poem, is a florid exercise in strained significance that could and should have been compressed and radically reduced by two thirds. Can there

be any wonder that poetry has lost the cultural status it once enjoyed in the United States when an ingrown, overwrought, and pseudo-philosophical style such as Ashbery's is so universally praised and promoted?

Given my distaste for Ashbery's affectations, it would come as no surprise how much I detest the precious grandiloquence of marquee poets like Jorie Graham, who mirrors back to elite academics their own pedantic preoccupations and inflated sense of self. That Graham, with her fey locutions and tedious self-interrogations, is considered a "difficult" or intellectual poet is simply preposterous. Anointing by the Ivy League, of course, may be the kiss of death: Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney, another academic star, enjoys an exaggerated reputation for energetically well-crafted but middling poems that strike me as second- or third-hand Yeats. As for the so-called language poets, with their post-modernist game-playing, they are co-conspirators in the murder and marginalization of poetry in the United States.

For the contemporary poems in *Break, Blow, Burn*, my decisions were based solely on the quality of the poem and never on the fame of the poet. As I stumbled on a promising poem in my search, I photocopied it for later consideration. Once the finalists were assembled, I pored over them again and again to see if they could hold up to sequential rereading. Did a poem retain its freshness and surprise? Some of my finds were soon dropped when I noted how a powerful opening was not sustained by the rest of the text. It was highly distressing to see what might have been a remarkable poem self-destruct or wither away, as if the poet failed to keep pressure on his or her own imagination—or perhaps to hold the poem back long enough to let it develop and ripen on its own.

An example of this latter problem is William Stafford's "The Color That Really Is." The poem begins stunningly: "The color that really is comes over a desert / after the sun goes down: blue, lavender, / purple. . . . What if you saw all this in the day?" Stafford sees the rays of the sun as swords that "slice—life, death, disguise—through space!" These

amazing, even shamanistic perceptions about existence are followed by an arresting second stanza sketching a stark scene of chilling specificity: the poet glimpses a woman's "terrible face" under the light of a casino table in Reno. That ravaged face reveals "what a desert was / if you lived there the way it is." The juxtaposition of sublime, visionary images with a gritty slice-of-life portrait is brilliant and daring. But then Stafford attaches a jarring finale—a stanza awkwardly inserting himself in a posture of mawkish piety: "Since then I pause every day to bow my head." What a waste!

Again and again, there were poems that had provocative or inspired first lines but that then fell flat, as if the poet were baffled about how to proceed. For example, Bill Knott's "More Best Jokes of the Delphic Oracle" (wonderfully sly title) begins, "I vow to live always at trash point." What satiric pleasures that bold line promises, but the poem never delivers. Sometimes an ambitious poem would find its natural architecture but then neglect smaller details of workmanship or tone. An example is Bob Kaufman's "To My Son Parker, Asleep in the Next Room." An African-American Beat poet, Kaufman, like his colleague Allen Ginsberg, was directly influenced by Walt Whitman. This memorable poem is an epic chant that surveys human history from "shaggy Neanderthals" marking "ochre walls in ice-formed caves" to artists and priests in far-flung cultures from Egypt and Assyria to China, Melanesia, and Peru. The rhythms are forceful and insistent and the images compellingly visual or visceral. The poem ends in an exalted if uneven coda celebrating freedom.

After working with Kaufman's poem, however, I became disillusioned by its needlessly simplistic politics: India is "holy," while Greece is "bloody"—as if India's soil has not been equally drenched in blood. And there are rote hits at "degenerate Rome" and "slave Europe." These angry value judgments, exalting all non-Caucasians over Europeans, have become so hackneyed through political correctness

since the 1960s that they undermine the poem, whose ultimate theme is human aspiration and artistic achievement. The poet would have served his poem better with a more expansive, forgiving, and authentically Whitmanian vision. As is, it is too close to a rant. Kaufman's sadly self-limiting poem demonstrates how progressive American poetry began to isolate itself from general society in the last half of the twentieth century. When poets defensively cluster in a ghetto of homogeneous opinion, they lose contact with their larger audience. Great poetry never requires a political litmus test.

A poem that emerged from a quite different social milieu is Morris Bishop's "The Witch of East Seventy-Second Street," which was published in *The New Yorker* in 1953. Though my primary critical sympathy remains with the rude, rebellious Beat style, I find Bishop's poem far more effective than Kaufman's in reaching its artistic goal:

"I will put upon you the Telephone Curse," said the witch.
"The telephone will call when you are standing on a chair with a
Chinese vase in either hand,
And when you answer, you will hear only the derisive popping of
corks."
But I was armed so strong in honesty
Her threats passed by me like the idle wind.

"And I will put upon you the Curse of Dropping," said the witch.
"The dropping of tiny tacks, the dropping of food gobbets,
The escape of wet dishes from the eager-grasping hand,
The dropping of spectacles, stitches, final consonants, the
abdomen."
I sneered, jeered, fleered; I flouted, scouted; I
pooh-pooh-poohed.

"I will put upon you the Curse of Forgetting!" screamed the
witch.
"Names, numbers, faces, old songs, old joy,
Words that once were magic, love, upward ways, the way home."
"No doubt the forgotten is well forgotten," said I.

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“And I will put upon you the Curse of Remembering,” bubbled
the witch.

Terror struck my eyes, knees, heart;

And I took her charred contract

And signed in triplicate.

Catering with its chic uptown address, well-appointed decor, and sophisticated whimsy to the affluent readers of the glossy *New Yorker*, “The Witch of East Seventy-Second Street” nevertheless manages to tap archetypal imagery for eerily unsettling effect. Poet and witch have an odd intimacy: she breaks into his ordered routine like an ambassador from elemental nature. Is she a malign proxy for mother or wife, as in fairy tales? She speaks in ominous parallelism, like the witches of *Macbeth*—four curses in four stanzas, culminating in the parodic “triplicate” business contract, “charred” by hellfire and signed by the defeated poet.

As with Jaques’ melancholy speech about the seven ages of man in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, human life is mapped as a series of losses, with the elderly regressing to an infantile state. The witch’s “Curse of Dropping” attacks the body (fingers and hands stiffen; the belly sags), while her “Curse of Forgetting” attacks the mind (memory lapses, especially costly to poets with their bardic mission). Everything valuable in life—emotion as well as sensation—seems to recede. But the worst is the “Curse of Remembering,” which overwhelms the mind with regrets. Remembering is too crushing a burden. Better to remain in the fenced preserve of quaint connoisseurship (the Chinese vases), into which modern technology can barely penetrate (the sputtering telephone). The poem presents the poet as isolated, refined, and removed from collective joys (the “popping of corks” at unattended parties), but vulnerable to attack from mythic forces. It’s as if, with their active imagination, poets are the vulnerable point in modern civilization, where the archaic can invade and retake spiritual territory.

Bishop’s poem, for all its virtues, finally seemed too arch or pat for *Break, Blow, Burn*. A poem that came very close to inclusion, however, was Gary Snyder’s “Strategic Air Com-

mand.” (I decided to use Snyder’s “Old Pond” instead.)

The hiss and flashing lights of a jet
Pass near Jupiter in Virgo.
He asks, how many satellites in the sky?
Does anyone know where they all are?
What are they doing, who watches them?

Frost settles on the sleeping bags.
The last embers of fire,
One more cup of tea,
At the edge of a high lake rimmed with snow.

These cliffs and the stars
Belong to the same universe.
This little air in between
Belongs to the twentieth century and its wars.

VIII, 82, Koip Peak, Sierra Nevada

Snyder’s opposition of serene nature to ethically distorted society is classically High Romantic. The two men camping out in the Sierra Nevada mountains hear the “hiss” of a military jet, the serpent in the garden as well as an avatar of impersonal industrial mechanization. The jet’s passage near the planet Jupiter in the constellation and astrological sign of Virgo suggests that male authority figures (as in William Blake) have become cruel or sterile. God’s periodic encounter with a virgin (as in Yeats) can lead to a destructive new birth. The rogue satellites are the all-seeing eyes of government surveillance, agents of a global system of mutual hostility and fear.

The visitors seek a spartan simplicity. They have stripped down to essentials in order to purify themselves, like tea-drinking Buddhist monks at the “high lake rimmed with snow.” The fading fire (as in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73) represents an elemental reality, like the frost settling on the sleeping bags, prefiguring the beds of the dead. The men’s humble comforts, with their tactile immediacy, contrast with

the jet's dehumanized perfection and arrogance. Earth, air, water, and fire: these endure, while political events flare up and disappear, like the jet. The poet contemplates the largeness of the universe, compared to the narrow band of the earth's atmosphere, where the jet, representing the war-torn twentieth century, cruises. Skeptical questions could certainly be asked: would Snyder return society to the preliterate nomadic era, when humans lived desperately hand to mouth and were helplessly vulnerable to accident and disease? But that does not invalidate his protest. The poem is prophetic: machines, dazzling artifices of the mind, may gradually be robbing humanity of free will, but nature is ultimately unreachable, unperturbed by human folly. Wars, like the jet's "flashing lights," are mere dying sparks in nature's harmony.

Because Allen Ginsberg had made such a huge impact on me in college, I confidently expected him to play a prominent role in *Break, Blow, Burn*. But *Howl*, my favorite Ginsberg poem, proved thornily difficult to excerpt: the notorious opening section (starting "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked") seemed too strident and unsupported on its own. Ginsberg's oft-anthologized "A Supermarket in California" was a possibility, but I found its prosy humor a bit too blatant. There was an obscure early Ginsberg poem, however, that obsessed me—"The Blue Angel." But its traditional format (six four-line stanzas) is so unrepresentative of Ginsberg's work as a whole that I felt it would mislead a general audience. Furthermore, because the theme is Marlene Dietrich, it might seem as if I had chosen the poem merely because it's about a movie star—a charge that might well have been true! (My first book, *Sexual Personae*, argued that cinema, prefigured in Plato, is the master principle of Western culture.)

The title refers to Dietrich's breakthrough 1930 film, *The Blue Angel*, where she plays a cabaret femme fatale. The poem begins: "Marlene Dietrich is singing a lament / for mechanical love." Ginsberg portrays Dietrich as "a life-sized

toy, / the doll of eternity." She is a streamlined objet d'art: her hair is "shaped like an abstract hat / made out of white steel." But her face is ghoulishly "whitewashed and / immobile like a robot," with a "little white key" protruding from the temple. Her eyes, with their "dull blue pupils," are "blank/like a statue's in a museum."

Ginsberg's poem works on multiple levels—cultural, biological, and psychological. First of all, the Dietrich doll, like a surreal construction by Salvador Dalí (who did mock-ups of Mae West and Shirley Temple), represents the artificial projections of Hollywood, the studio-created stars whose machine-made images infatuated audiences around the globe. White-blonde Dietrich is a modernist abstraction, an *idea* of sex removed from the sensory. She is eternal because her celluloid image will never age.

More disturbingly, Ginsberg also portrays female sexuality as a brute, fascist imperative. That there is personal projection here seems proved first by a tagline identifying the poem as a dream that Ginsberg had in Paterson in 1950, and second by the despairing coda, introduced by a hasty dash: "—you'd think I would have thought a plan / to end the inner grind, / but not till I have found a man / to occupy my mind." A startlingly frank gay revelation for that repressed period. But after so vividly hallucinatory a poem, what strangely bland language. Here Ginsberg plainly suggests that his homosexuality was a route of escape from the drearily grinding occupation of his mental space by demanding, domineering women—above all his mother, whose mental breakdown and institutionalization he would memorialize in *Kaddish*. Walt Whitman's longings for a male comrade were couched in far more effusive and tender language. But in Ginsberg's poem, all of the drama and glamour belong to a pitiless female automaton.

Related questions: is Dietrich, with her "lament / for mechanical love," a personification of random, anonymous gay sex, with which Ginsberg was perhaps feeling fatigued or disillusioned? As a gay male icon at the time, was Dietrich a

symbol of gay men's own enforced, artificial construction of self? Is Ginsberg implying that gay male love is a flight from real women—a jailbreak toward male identity and freedom? Woman's image here is godlike yet cold and terrifying (like Yeats' desert beast with its "blank and pitiless" gaze in "The Second Coming"). Dietrich sings, but she does not speak. Was poetry Ginsberg's way of reclaiming and liberating language?

Gay men's cultish attachment to movie stars in the closeted era before the 1969 Stonewall rebellion, which sparked the gay liberation movement, is also registered in a sprightly little untitled poem by Frank O'Hara that begins, "Lana Turner has collapsed!" O'Hara, who always wrote quickly, tossed it off on the Staten Island ferry on his way to a 1962 reading where he scandalized Robert Lowell by impudently reciting it. I was very tempted to use this increasingly popular poem in *Break, Blow, Burn* but decided instead to treat another O'Hara poem, "A Mexican Guitar," which has never to my knowledge received critical comment or even been publicly noticed.

At the time O'Hara wrote his Lana Turner poem, most intellectuals accepted European cinema as an art form but still dismissed Hollywood glamour movies as trash or kitsch. The "Method," ultra-serious and socially leftist, was the prestige style in acting. But splashy Hollywood movies, with their ferocious or suffering divas (Bette Davis, Judy Garland) and their frivolity and excess (Busby Berkeley, Carmen Miranda), were defiantly central to gay male "camp." Andy Warhol's hyper-colored silk screens of Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe cheekily turned movie stars into Byzantine icons.

Angst-ridden, suicide-studded confessional poetry was then at its height. Lana Turner, fresh from a series of lurid scandals, was a symbol of glitzy tabloid celebrity and not remotely an appropriate subject for a poem. "Lana Turner Collapses on Movie Set" was an actual headline, a version of which O'Hara evidently spotted on a New York news-

stand. The poet describes the weird muddle of rain, snow, and city traffic through which he hurries, distracted. The headline, with its boldface visual clarity and exclamatory, telegraphic diction, breaks on him like an electrifying epiphany. The grey mediocrity of everyday life seems transformed, and the slippery ambiguities of language and definition in which a poet dwells are temporarily transcended. Lana Turner's soap opera traumas are like a ritual martyrdom, a sacrament avidly witnessed by her millions of fans. O'Hara's last line: "oh Lana Turner we love you get up." Who is "we"? Presumably gay men, who found themselves sympathetically bonding as fans with a vast audience of mainstream movie-lovers who normally ostracized them.

Lynn Emanuel's poem "Frying Trout While Drunk" is far more sober. Instead of the kinetic urban landscape of O'Hara's fancy-free sophisticates (the Lana Turner poem refers to "lots of parties" where the poet "acted perfectly disgraceful"), we are now in a crimped realm of psychological entrapment and wounded memory.

Mother is drinking to forget a man
Who could fill the woods with invitations:
Come with me he whispered and she went
In his Nash Rambler, its dash
Where her knees turned green
In the radium dials of the '50s.
When I drink it is always 1953,
Bacon wilting in the pan on Cook Street
And mother, wrist deep in red water,
Laying a trail from the sink
To a glass of gin and back.
She is a beautiful, unlucky woman
In love with a man of lechery so solid
You could build a table on it
And when you did the blues would come to visit.
I remember all of us awkwardly at dinner,
The dark slung across the porch,
And then mother's dress falling to the floor,

Buttons ticking like seeds spit on a plate.
 When I drink I am too much like her—
 The knife in one hand and in the other
 The trout with a belly white as my wrist.
 I have loved you all my life
 She told him and it was true
 In the same way that all her life
 She drank, dedicated to the act itself,
 She stood at this stove
 And with the care of the very drunk
 Handed him the plate.

As autobiography, if it is that, Emanuel's poem seems influenced by Robert Lowell's seminal *Life Studies* (1959). (I used a Lowell poem from that book, "Man and Wife," instead of this one.) Admirably condensed and finely written, "Frying Trout" distills an entire life of helpless observation and pained reflection. Food, drink, and sex are literally and symbolically intertwined. Everyday routine and rituals, such as cooking, are punctuated by erratic and impulsive breaches of convention. The daughter both admires and pities her mother and tries to understand her weaknesses and compromises, which she fears she has inherited via the time-dissolving act of drinking. The mother is betrayed and humiliated by her own desires and foolish trust. She accepts exploitation and betrayal as the price of sexual pleasure, a mime of love.

Emanuel's intense imagery, skillfully underplayed, is tremendously evocative. The knife and white-bellied trout suggest sex but also a masochistic vulnerability. Exquisitely caught details abound in quick scenarios: the mother's knees turning green in the car's radio light; bloody water trailing to a gin glass; buttons of a fallen dress "ticking like seeds spit on a plate." Flesh is fruit here, carelessly devoured. This poem patiently, methodically offers its story without sentimentality or melodrama. There is no flinching from harsh facts and yet no gratuitous self-dramatization either. Emanuel's technique is quiet, steady, and scrupulously exact. "Frying Trout While Drunk" is a tour de force of courageous truth-telling.

Two poems about women rockers nearly made the final cut. In “Marianne Faithfull’s Cigarette,” Gerry Gomez Pearlberg describes a scene of charged suspension and voyeurism. Spare and ritualistically structured, this poem has a cool Baudelairean perversity. Marianne Faithfull, “bored,” is chain-smoking while a crew of daft academics is “talking, talking, talking.” The poet is transfixed by the singer’s discarded cigarette, branded with its “ring of lipstick.” There is an idolatrous fetishism in her desire for the butt, but she asks someone else to fetch it. Abashed, she herself will not cross the aesthetic distance to the enthroned star, whose insouciance is wonderfully caught.

The poem becomes the words that the poet could not speak in the star’s presence. I love the gap between the academics’ inflated discourse and the squalid litter of Faithfull’s red-smearred cigarettes—a tainted beauty that the fascinated poet tries to capture. However, I did not include Pearlberg’s poem, which so perfectly captures my own cultic attitude toward stars (such as Elizabeth Taylor, Catherine Deneuve, or Daniela Mercury), because I was uncertain about its interest to a general audience. Furthermore, I had qualms about the finale: “Watching her light up was like seeing the Messiah. / Or Buddha’s burning moment under leaves of cool desire.” This is way too much. Faithfull’s oblique, imperious divinity is already well caught by the poem. We don’t need the Messiah and Buddha, with their centuries of accumulated associations, to come crashing in like colossi. All the poem needs at the end is a haiku effect, words floating off like smoke.

Alice Fulton’s “You Can’t Rhumboogie in a Ball and Chain” is a tribute to Janis Joplin. (“Ball ’n’ Chain,” a blues song by Big Mama Thornton, was Joplin’s hallmark.) The first two stanzas are a knockout:

You called the blues’ loose black belly lover
and in Port Arthur they called you pig-face.
The way you chugged booze straight, without a glass,
your brass-assed language, slingbacks with jeweled heel,

proclaimed you no kin to their muzzled blood.
No chiclet-toothed Baptist boyfriend for you.

Strung-out, street hustling showed men wouldn't buy you.
Once you clung to the legs of a lover,
let him drag you till your knees turned to blood,
mouth hardened to a thin scar on your face,
cracked under songs, screams, never left to heal.
Little Girl Blue, soul pressed against the glass.

The heavy sprung rhythms and eye-popping imagery, rattling the reader with hard consonants and alliteration, are reminiscent of the poet-priest Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose ecstatic techniques are deployed here for far earthier and more carnal purposes. Even Fulton's rugged slang scintillates. Through a series of sleazy snapshots, Joplin's pain and defiance and her bold explorations of the netherworld are rivetingly captured.

If it had continued at this sensational level, "You Can't Rhumboogie" would, in my view, have become a contemporary classic. But over the next four stanzas, the sense of urgent compression is lost. We get tantalizing glimpses of seedy diners, "nameless motels," and bad memories of senior proms, but the bruising shocks of the wonderful opening stanzas are repeated and done to death. "Blood" pops up in every stanza; there are simply too many traumas and tortures for the beleaguered reader to process. Instead of sympathizing with Joplin, we feel resentfully penned in a gore-spattered emergency room. While the powerful rhythms and images did all the work at the start, there's now a turn toward editorializing and psychoanalysis ("self-hatred laced your blood").

The final stanza is clever but makes too radical a shift in tone:

Like clerks we face your image in the glass,
suggest lovers, as accessories, heels.
"It's your shade, this blood dress," we say. "It's you."

Well, we've sure left Texas. That's Sylvia Plath coming through the door—a far more middle-class and coyly ironic voice. Fulton has unfortunately abandoned the proletarian percussiveness of her opening, which explodes with the vernacular.

David Young's "Occupational Hazards" still enchants and intrigues me. It draws its inspiration from riddles, fairy tales, children's songs, and emblematic chapbooks with roots in medieval allegory:

Butcher

If I want to go to pieces
I can do that. When I try
to pull myself together
I get sausage.

Bakers

Can't be choosers. Rising
from a white bed, from dreams
of kings, bright cities, buttocks,
to see the moon by daylight.

Tailor

It's not the way the needle
drags the poor thread around.
It's sewing the monster together,
my misshapen son.

Gravediggers

To be the baker's dark opposite,
to dig the anti-cake, to stow
the sinking loaves in the unoven—
then to be dancing on the job!

Woodcutter

Deep in my hands
as far as I can go
the fallen trees
keep ringing.

The poet's pure pleasure in improvisational, associative play with language is registered in the mercurial puns and quirky metaphors. Young's catalog of occupations echoes the children's limerick "Rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a tub" ("The butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker"). However, each vocation here—baker, butcher, tailor, gravedigger, woodcutter—can be read as an analogue to the practice of poetry.

The butcher going to pieces is the poet exploring his or her emotional extremes, out of which may come "sausage," the inner life ground up, processed, and strung together in linked stanzas. Such a life requires intestinal fortitude. Rising long before dawn, bakers (normally beggars) "can't be choosers"; like writers wrestling with their material, they are under compulsion to knead their sticky, shapeless dough. With a strangely active dream life, the bakers see metaphorically: "buttocks" and "moon" prefigure the raw white loaf (compare the slang term "buns" for buttocks; flashing one's buttocks is "mooning"). Poets, the "kings" of their own "bright cities," have a tactile intimacy with language, while their sources of inspiration range from the coarsely material to the celestial.

A tailor at work resembles the poet cutting, trimming, and stitching his verse. The needle is the sudden penetration of insight, while the flexible thread, assuring continuity and shape, is dragged in the rear as a secondary process. The result is "my misshapen son": art-making by men is an appropriation of female fertility. The end product, like Frankenstein's "monster" with his stitched-up face, may seem ugly or distorted (in an avant-garde era). But the artwork is the artist's true posterity, a child of the intellect rather than the body—a distinction made by Plato.

Young wittily says that the merry gravedigger ("the baker's dark opposite") must "dig the anti-cake" and "stow the sinking loaves in the unoven"—as if the bakery has gone through Alice's looking-glass and turned into a graveyard. Cake and corpses: this morbid mingling of sweets and rot is

a brilliant conflation of motifs from *Hamlet*, with its jovial gravedigger and its satirical imagery of the murdered king's body served up as "funeral baked meats" at a too-hasty wedding banquet, where the main dish is the queen (*Hamlet* 1.2.180). Meditating on elemental realities, the poet faces death and turns it into artistic sustenance and pleasure ("dancing on the job"). Finally, the woodcutter is the poet who ruthlessly topples his lofty forebears to clear mental space for himself. But their words still ring in his mind. They have seeped into his bones, to the deepest layers of his psyche. Poetry, a form of making, is a mission he cannot escape. The battered hands of the craftsman dictate to the soul.

I often regret not including David Young's marvelous poem in *Break, Blow, Burn*. But in perfect truth, I wondered if I could do it justice. It was weighed against May Swenson's "At East River," which has a similar list-like format and childlike sense of wonder. I ultimately went with Swenson because of her poem's intriguing parallelism with Wordsworth's panoramic sonnet about a modern metropolis tranquilly embraced by nature, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," which appears earlier in my book.

A. R. Ammons' "Mechanism" upset me severely and still does. This poem should have been the dramatic climax of *Break, Blow, Burn*. In fact, it should have been one of the greatest poems of the twentieth century. Its vision of complex systems operating simultaneously in human beings and animal nature is at the very highest level of artistic inspiration. But in execution, the poem is a shambles, with weak transitions and phrasings that veer from the derivative to the pedantic. "Mechanism" is my primary exhibit for the isolation and self-destruction of American poetry over the past forty years:

Honor a going thing, goldfinch, corporation, tree,
 morality: any working order,
 animate or inanimate: it

20 final cut

has managed directed balance,
the incoming and outgoing energies are working right,
some energy left to the mechanism,

some ash, enough energy held
to maintain the order in repair,
assure further consumption of entropy,

expending energy to strengthen order:
honor the persisting reactor,
the container of change, the moderator: the yellow

bird flashes black wing-bars
in the new-leaving wild cherry bushes by the bay,
startles the hawk with beauty,

flitting to a branch where
flash vanishes into stillness,
hawk addled by the sudden loss of sight:

honor the chemistries, platelets, hemoglobin kinetics,
the light-sensitive iris, the enzymic intricacies
of control,

the gastric transformations, seed
dissolved to acrid liquors, synthesized into
chirp, vitreous humor, knowledge,

blood compulsion, instinct: honor the
unique genes,
molecules that reproduce themselves, divide into

sets, the nucleic grain transmitted
in slow change through ages of rising and falling form,
some cells set aside for the special work, mind

or perception rising into orders of courtship,
territorial rights, mind rising
from the physical chemistries

to guarantee that genes will be exchanged, male
and female met, the satisfactions cloaking a deeper
racial satisfaction:

heat kept by a feathered skin:
the living alembic, body heat maintained (bunsen
burner under the flask)

so the chemistries can proceed, reaction rates
interdependent, self-adjusting, with optimum
efficiency—the vessel firm, the flame

staying: isolated, contained reactions! the precise and
necessary worked out of random, reproducible,
the handiwork redeemed from chance, while the

goldfinch, unconscious of the billion operations
that stay its form, flashes, chirping (not a
great songster) in the bay cherry bushes wild of leaf.

The pretty goldfinch flitting in and out of the poem symbolizes nature unconscious of itself. Flashing through the cherry bushes in the last line, it carries a valedictory blessing like the ones in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Wallace Stevens' early poem "Sunday Morning" (which ends with flocks of birds sinking "on extended wings").

But it is the doggedly philosophical late Stevens, notably in "The Auroras of Autumn" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," who is exercising a baleful and crippling influence here on Ammons, as on so many other American poets of his generation, including John Ashbery. (Two examples of luminous early Stevens appear in *Break, Blow, Burn*.) Over time, Stevens' language tragically failed him. He ended his career with a laborious, plodding, skeletal style, employed in self-questioning poems of numbing length. Gorgeous images or lines still abound, but pompous, big-think gestures have become a crutch.

The obtrusive "ideas" in late Stevens have naturally pro-

vided grist for the ever-churning academic mill. But poetry is not philosophy. Philosophic discourse has its own noble medium as prose argumentation or dramatic dialogue. Poetry should not require academic translators to mediate between the poet and his or her audience. Poetry is a sensory mode where ideas are or should be fully embodied in emotion or in imagery grounded in the material world. Late Stevens suffers from spiritual anorexia; he shows the modernist sensibility stretched to the breaking point. Late Stevens is not a fruitful model for the future of poetry.

In Ammons' "Mechanism," Whitman's influence can be felt in the cosmic perspective and catalog of organic phenomena. But there isn't nearly enough specificity here. Whitman was able to invoke nature's largest, most turbulent forces along with the tiniest details of straw, seeds, or sea spray. Ammons was on the verge of a major conceptual breakthrough in his willingness to consider the intricacies of human organizations, corporations, and management as expressions of the nature-inspired drive toward order. Whitman's melting, all-embracing Romantic love is no longer enough for a modern high-tech world. Connecting sexual "courtship" to state-guaranteed "territorial rights," Ammons is using an anthropological lens to focus on the ancient birth of civilization itself in law and contract. And by conflating history, science, economy, and art, he would end the war between the artist and commercial society that began with the Industrial Revolution and that has resulted in the artist's pitiful marginalization in an era dominated by mass media.

"Mechanism" approaches a view of consciousness itself as a product of evolutionary biology. The minute chemistry of enzymes and platelets is made almost psychedelically visible. The poem makes us ponder huge questions: are we merely flitting goldfinches in nature's master plan? Is free will an illusion? Is art too a product of natural design? But the poem is fatally weakened by its abstruse diction, bombastic syntax, and factitious format. Why did Ammons choose these

untidy staggered triads? They seem forced and arbitrary, out of sync with his own music. While David Young's cryptic "Occupational Hazards" uses a concrete, vigorous, living English that connects us to the sixteenth century, "Mechanism" relies on a clotted, undigested academese that strains at profundity.

And the poem is too long. Shakespeare's sonnets, bridging his piercing emotional experiences with his wary social observations, demonstrate the beauty and power of high condensation. In his great sonnet, "Leda and the Swan," Yeats showed how a vast historical perspective could illuminate shattering contemporary events. Perhaps "Mechanism" should have been a sonnet, a worthy heir to Shakespeare and Yeats. But the poem shows the increasing distance of the poet from general society, which Ammons is analyzing but is no longer addressing in its own language. It prefigures what would happen to American poetry over the following decades, as the most ambitious poets became stranded in their own coteries and cultivated a self-blinding disdain for the surrounding culture.

notes

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