

The 2River View



16.2 (Winter 2012)

New Poems by Bonnie Arning, Caitlin Jackson, Judy Katz-Levine
John McKernan, Andrea Mehaffie, Adam Peltz, Bertha Rogers
Robin Scofield, James Valvis, Jason M. Vaughn, Tracy Youngblom

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photograph by Brent Pallas

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Jason M. Vaughn

First Snow

Its fledglings fell almost invisibly,
so light as to sometimes be drifting up

or traveling virtually motionless
like hay motes through a barn stall.

The next moment it was dropping
in clusters as ample as autumn leaves

that had a mind to smother the world
but only hushed it and then expired,

having furred the dark humps
of our cudding Black Baldy cattle

and in the process drawn something
of those congregated forms

out of the dusk for us, as well as etched
the barn's great peak from the sky

so we might look with less fear into this
and every darkness.

Bonnie Arning

Death Long Distance

The night you died I tried to find a sign
of your passing. Something obvious:
dry leaves swept up in a dust devil, a spider
the red of your hair. It was you

who taught me to make a bird by hooking my thumbs
and inching apart my fingers. Fitting then,
how your doctor should use that motion
to mimic the tumor as it swooped across your back.

We sent you to die twelve-hundred miles from
your stone bird bath and the chiropractor
who never left his wife for you, hooked
to a mechanical bed scribbling journal entries like,

*today I ate an apple and felt my hair sprouts
shift and glow.* I should have called—I should have
asked a nurse to hold the phone to your ear
while I sang *shantih shantih shantih* in a soft voice.

Why didn't I have the courage to tell you, death
is no betrayal—die when you want to. The chemo,
the injections, the amputated leg: you did it all
for us. Instead of going to your service

I should draw faces on the foam heads
that hold your wigs. I should draw your face
in eyeliner all over my room. Come back—
the trees here are hungry for your ashes.

Yesterday I glimpsed movement in the milk-fire
of your rough-cut healing crystals. Energy
in the palpitating ribbon of distant heat. Wasps
swarm and ride each wave. You—

swarm and ride each wave.

Bonnie Arning

On all the nights you leave me a spider crawls into my head

legs fat as fingers, a bloated body swathed in fur; my own night priest
bristling in a thread-black gown. My doctor says every milk black
eye hole—a simple misfiring of neurons, my doctor says,
if you want to be cured accept the spider is with you all the time;
when he might have said, accept your husband leaves you to the dark
with a moon crumpled small and a jagged sizzle as the streetlamp,
that once lit your window, shorts, explodes sparks and glass—
such a dangerous night confetti. So I bite my pillows and I scratch
my face and when I wake the bed sheets are patterned with swirls
of my own blood. My mother once advised, if you're afraid of something
deep inside—you'll see it; so I imagine the spider weaves a web of
constellations,
that she's a mother tending a nest of sweet clear children. I study her
anatomy
until she seems human, cling to the vulnerable image of blood
easing through the slits that line her fragile thumbnail heart.

Caitlin Jackson

Awash

I

To step out into it from the shower--
not neat lines of small round capsules
but fist mashes of blue, white, yellow.

And to lie down when it's over,
Feel the salt slap of rearing,
snorting waves. Feel the comfort
of the ending

of a book read once.
Long skirts dragging,
then nothing but sea.
Feel sluggish hope pried free
and that warm watery
taste of approaching,
of far off final peace.

II

Now you call.

Insistent songs. First like sirens,
crashing over
something out of slept-
through cassette tapes.

Then sharp. Nothingness
split. And after curled up
crunched air gasp out

the shame sting
of salvation is what is left. Entire oceans
drained away.
Long since fled.

Caitlin Jackson

First Response Negative

I'll admit, for a week I hoped
rather than dreaded. Listened
for ghost heartbeats with my head cocked.

No one cooed on crowded busses
or pressed ear to belly button.
My feet braced for planetary shifts.

And my tongue came loose to tell you the news-
scrambling upward like life clawing its way to light.

And I could see the mouth open,
agape in yawn and scream.

Yet longing was all there was
of this sinewy bridge to you,
thumping on the air
with fists that look like yours.

Judy Katz-Levine

Afternoon Parable

They have a strange and beautiful relationship. Here, have some tea. The hydrangeas in bloom in the dusk. Her son was afflicted with cancer. The cabbage soup goes down well. The relationship between the two lovers ascended like a Monarch butterfly. They exchanged words limned with rye grass. They have a covenant. Here, turn on this lamp. The phone call was far more than they expected. Laced with parables of French horns and oboes. The curtain came down on the boy with cancer, then lifted up for a soccer ball's ascent in the mist.

Judy Katz-Levine

With Dignity

I could dignify this response with the way we are polite to each other when times are hard. newspapers fly off like starlings. the seer in me wants a back pocket. the prophet in me wants a sunrise over a moth orchid. I'll take my spare change and ride with you. sometime.

I'll be doing that cascada dance. you'll be listening at the kitchen table, and I'll be taking you in. arms spread open.

the exquisite voice of the lilac is almost more than I can stand, but I take her in anyway. I'll be reading my poems in the streets, you'll see.

John McKernan

I Am Here for the Day in Subiaco, Arkansas

In the graveyard where Frank Stanford
Has been for a long time

This is where he designed the shield
For Jean Cocteau to wear
In Frank's unfinished silent film *Our Sun*

Down the grassy dirt road
Across the lane
From the Academy
And the Benedictine Monastery

A beautiful young woman
Has pedaled her bicycle to the edge
Stands Then kneels for a half hour
Beside what seems the newest grave
Praying the gold rosary in her hands

She is crying
Mounds of thick flowers
Still fragrant in the warm air
There are golf balls everywhere here
I like that she is praying
On the outside And also On the inside

John McKernan

My Greatest Crimes

Were at the Walt Whitman Birthplace
Near Huntington Long Island

Where I walked impudently across the lawn
With its large sign
DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS

Where I ignored the small warning
DO NOT ENTER
In front of a shed
Full of hand tools & power mowers

Inside which lay chunks
In cool sunlight
Of bright green sod
One of which I snatched
And stashed in the trunk of my car

All of which I planted
At different places
Around my yard here
In West Virginia
Driving away I stopped my car
And picked bunches

Of dandelions beside the road
If I had seen a lilac shrub anywhere
I would have ripped
It from the earth with my bare hands

Andrea Mehaffie

Fast Enough

He pulled my tooth that day.
It loosened on an apple
I picked from his tree.
With fingers hidden
under a damp washcloth,
he pulled it away.

He held it in his hand
as I ran my tongue through the space.
It felt known, though
I had never felt that part of me.

Make a wish, he said
because wishes were better
than quarters under pillows.

I wished to have more teeth to pull,
to see his face that close to mine.

I can still see it,
bark of a willow tree
melded into cheek and chin.
His eyes, scotch and water,
resting on my face.

I couldn't help but love
the blood that flowed
from my mouth.
Warm and soft,
a river that only rushes.

Andrea Mehaffie

If I Knew You Were There

The stuff of magic he used to say, as if magic could be found
somewhere, could be a stuff.

I used to stare at those two-yellowed fingers thinking that was
where the magic was, his magic.

The smoke always did surround him, blurring the wrinkles
around his eyes.

I would watch him as if he was my magic, as if those dollars he
gave me came from smoky stars.

I'd watch, as he would rub his leather wallet, so soft I thought
it might dissolve. Leaving the bills folded neatly beneath
change and plastic.

It never did dissolve. It probably has now.

When people die we are afraid of the bones, the puzzle pieces
that made the smile we miss.

If I ever saw his bones I would hug them, those crooked
kneecaps, the yellow finger bones,

And I would remember the magic and the smoke that filled the
convertible we sat in for a while.

Adam Peltz

Winter, New York City, 1893

after Israel Kasovich

The kettle rattles in an East Side kitchen
where I look out among rooftops and listen:
Coaches' bells, their tempered cries, wail up
to belittle grandmother's staccato and slur
of her accordian. Where once a kaiserman and troika slipped
over tundra, now a peddler with his pushcart bears into
the golden streets: How many versts will he walk
through frozen memory?—for Little Pereshtchepina has fallen
and all the wheat is gone. Like borscht boiling
the uprooting came quick; the village was left behind.
It is strange here, this cold mixture heating slowly
as the beets cook down the old world.
I can almost make out woodsmoke, the granary,
the dawn steppes, tracks trailing away....

Adam Peltz

Ash Wednesday, New Orleans

In my northern childhood—the precious moments’
porcelain faces, falsehoods stored in china cabinets beside
plastic-coated sofas, urns, photos
of matriarchs and saints, though no dreadlocked jesus—

my delinquent hometown:
Stories where some of the kids sacrificed cats
next to the highway
in the only rugged terrain left in that world.

Most of us went to the beach, nine miles south,
a couple of us swam in the runoff ditch
with the rats and pesticides.
Bubonic silt grazed our thighs.

Today, at dawn I rise, a man in a red necktie
chosen to match my eye-whites;
but I watched the Carnival closedown
and this morning I swallowed the whole body

of the RTA’s exhaust at the I-10’s mouth.
I pedaled past the thousands
of shimmering hong kong beads. No one,
nothing parted the way on this wretched day.

Bertha Rogers

Old January

Out of somewhere we don't know comes less than zero. This shrouded hour is so cold that coyotes quiet among the Cimmerian spruces they call home; mountains crack open. This is how it ends—world warmed, wrought so by our hectic hands; ice born of hordes; inside-out weather. The spent planet freezes bodies off its grated curves while they sleep. It's four in the morning; this day will fall further, then ordain a swathed sun. All feathers will shiver and stiffen, all song will cease. We protest; we have done no wrong.

Bertha Rogers

Winter Trip

Her car—she no longer controls its mass—
slides across the road, ice directing
precarious journey. *Wait*, she pleads, in
the blue dark, wait, *I had in mind to drive
north, not west*. But the aroused vehicle
continues—steadfastly determinist,
yet slowly enough that she will not perish—
not this time—in the utterly dark ditch.
Her fingers lightly grip—*Like this?* she thinks—
the wheel, learning what she knew—that brakes won't
do, not tonight—steer the wheel toward the slant,
relieved to be relieved of accountability.
And there, facing the minor abyss, she waits
for the truck that will come; unfinish her.

Robin Scofield

Maelstrom

An obsessed lover lives in the crawl space
beneath the house where the object of her desire resides.
She taps the phone, working with a flashlight in her teeth,

canceling appointments and erasing messages.
The woman above is sure she has a family of possums,
and the woman down there has hair like a rat's nest.

Both have wavy hair like Medusa.
Both are afraid of the wrong thing.
The frontal lobes above the hearth

make us feel safe that we are not that hidden woman,
sleeping with scorpions, whose governor has resigned.
We may ignore what thrives below the floor:

the boxes full of wires, the white crickets, the snakes
at a level so low we have forgotten we stay
there too in the dirt of our unreturned love.

Robin Scofield

To my Mother's Backbone

I would not tell you I would
not even if your cobweb mind
could trap the other story
of how your curses hurt me
a cockroach flying at you
an unwanted transmission
a vibration your spider
heart cannot trace no I would
not tell you even though
you asked me once and I thought
to but then again what good
would come of it when you
have shrunk in all ways
feeble as a late autumn fly
dragging a dead leg behind you
at the decayed temple where
what's deaf as snakes cannot pray

James Valvis

The Philosophies of Loneliness

1. Western

Nothing matters. Except your eyes.
They might matter. No, nothing matters.
Except your lips. They might.
Nothing matters except your legs,
but when I see your breasts
your legs don't matter. Nothing matters.
I think, therefore I am
not with you.
It doesn't matter that I think.
It doesn't matter what I think.
God is dead. Therefore, I am God.
Therefore, I am dead.
It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter to you.
You are God.
You matter.

2. Eastern

Life is suffering.
The Way comes and goes.
You come and go. Away. A Way.
A way I don't understand.
I don't understand away.
All suffering arises from attachment.
All attachment arises and goes away.
The one gave birth to the two.
The two gave birth to the none.
The none gave birth to me.
I am one of the ten thousand things.
You are the nine thousand-nine hundred-ninety-nine.
You are my suffering.
You are my way.

Tracy Youngblom

To the Dark Barn

There was also a silo and a corn crib that huddled at dusk
under the crowning stars—then the unease of gray geese hardly
audible
murmuring into their wings.

Behind me the windmill groaned
and the bone-like structure of its steely legs shadowed
my hunched progress:

they rose

I rose

we rose

while I watched
for the hatch of light as the barn door
tore the darkness open

and I approached because something
had pursued, had beckoned.

Tracy Youngblom

At the Chicken Cemetery

One at a time, their heads fly off. Bodies leap
then spasm to stillness, flattening
the grass. For gravestones, clumps of tall grass

doused in blood. Does it ever pass from red to rust?
No one tells me. Feet held, they're dunked
in a tank of boiling water, the cord

of the electric heater snaking toward the barn.
We all pluck them, wet feathers sticking to our hands
and shaken to the grass, white peonies soaked by rain.

Inside, the singeing and gutting: slurp and suck
of entrails that shake the table as the women agree,
Forty birds is a good day's work.

I stand at the sink, accept what I am allowed
to handle—gizzards I slice along the seam
without piercing the crop. Giblets for stuffing.

I pare carefully around each globe
as if it were a peach, parting it, hips pressed
to the drain board, refusing to be tired.

At eight, I am as conscientious as my grandmother,
whose praise I will wait for all day,
whose image I can't blink out of mind: she'd catch

each chicken in the yard, bundle its gnarled feet
in one strong hand, then talk to it in the same voice
she used telling stories at night, *The Little Red Hen,*

The Bremen Town Musicians. And just as I did
on the pillow, each bird lay down its head
without protest on the block, closed its eyes

and failed to see what was coming with such speed
and force. *She does not waste anything*, I think. *The dogs
have probably eaten all the chicken heads by now.*

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Contributors

Bonnie Arning is pursuing an MFA in poetry from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, where she is the managing editor of *The Blue Mesa Review*.

Caitlin Jackson works as a technical writer in Orlando, Florida, and is also pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Central Florida.

Judy Katz-Levine is the author of *When The Arms Of Our Dreams Embrace* (Saru 1991), *Ocarina* (Saru 2006), and *When Performers Swim, The Dice Are Cast* (Ahadada 2009).

John McKernan has retired as a comma herder after teaching 41 years at Marshall University, where he continues to edit ABZ



photograph by Brent Pallas

Press. His most recent book is *Resurrection of the Dust*.

Andrea Mehaffie recently graduated from the University of Tampa with a degree in writing. Her work here at 2River is her first publication.

Adam Peltz lives with his wife Ashley Miner and their cats in New Orleans. His publishing credits include work in *A Bad Penny*, *Literary Magazine Review*, *NOLA Fugees*, and *Platte Valley Review*.

Bertha Rogers is the author of *Heart Turned Back* (Salmon Poetry). Her translation of *Beowulf* was published in 2000; and her translation of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Poems is forthcoming.

Robin Scofield is the author of *And the Ass Saw the Angel* and the forthcoming *Sunflower Cantos*. Other poems appear in *The Mas Tequila Review*, *New Border Writing: A Still Life in Words*, and *The Warwick Review*.

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Jason M. Vaughn has published, or has poems forthcoming, in *Big Muddy*, *I-70 Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *The Little Balkans Review*, and *The Same*.

Tracy Youngblom is the author of *Driving to Heaven* (Parallel Press, 2010). New poems are forthcoming in *New York Quarterly*, *Ruminate*, and *Weave Magazine*.

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About the Photographer

Brent Pallas lives and works in New York City as a craft and home decor designer.

About 2River

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View*, occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series.

Richard Long, Editor
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www.2River.org

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