



Trinity House Review

Eastertide 2021

Trinity House Review

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Editorial

Due to a variety of circumstances (including new babies, moves, pandemics, and over-committed editors), this issue of Trinity House Review has been delayed. This Eastertide issue is quickly turning into an Ascension/Whitsun edition. No matter – the poems included here are of a quality and subject matter that is timeless and which we believe you will read and re-read in the months to come. Thank you to the contributors for your excellent, lasting work and for your patience.

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Ernest Hilbert

FUNERARY

Standing in December twilight before
The grave, clutching a spray of fragrant,
Cold holly; berries pop free; green barbs sting.

I hear a choir with the earth-rumble
And aspiring flutes of an old organ
In the darkened slate chapel, enormous

Engine circulating air through chambers
In the unsalvaged darkness—then a knoll
Of flame rolling from a dragon-ship,

Pushed out from rocks into the dark calm
Of a Baltic bay, billowed smoke darker
Than the night sky, smudging a half-moon,

Lighting like dawn miles of sleeping water.
The chapel's stained glass is black. Clouds
Seal the stars. In the wind, pines groan like hulls.

Ernest Hilbert

GREAT EGRET OVER LAKE LUXEMBOURG

From its perch, almost invisible
In the rot of a red cedar snag,
A great egret, slim as a javelin,
Springs aloft and swings over us, full-
Winged and white as a noon cloud. We drag
The water, slowing, so we may watch it turn.

It coasts like a balsa wood glider,
Wings stiff for stretches, spanning the lake,
Receding into a cooler shade of eastern hemlock.
Our oars of northern white ash slide
Along the mahogany coaming. When we make
Our way once more toward the dock,

They shine wet gold as bronze blades
In the sun. As we dip and pull, freshly drawn
Beads collect into clear pools that slosh
In the boat's varnished belly, catching the cascades
Of clouds overhead light as the bird, now gone.
Its flight into the air is like our push

From shore to lake, partway free.
My body lives by an element
That makes me and keeps me
Here on earth, at all times present
In an errant life skimming ever smaller years,
Filled with wax and rainforests of flora,

Slick eels and nestled snails of organs, tears
And bile, seepings beneath the aura
Of mind that makes mood, sense, and motion,
Floating in our bright, resin-sealed kayak,
Balanced by exertions, filling with a notion
Of having vanished and somehow come back.

J.L. Wall

IN THE FETAL DIAGNOSTICS WAITING ROOM

This Eden's tree bears knowledge only of ways to fall

The fruit on your tongue's been tunneled
by cardboard serpents twisting
knots along your wife's knuckled
palm. They won't stop hissing.

Let them open a vein in your arm
and draw blood, for the life
of all flesh is its blood, red germ
sacred to the Lord. Don't cry.

It's just a needle. Whoever
eats of it shall be cut off
for the life of all flesh weathers
in the blood—and you are the trough.

The life of all flesh is the blood,
hieroglyph of control
that is given unto you
to make atonement for your soul.

J.L. Wall

ECHOCARDIOGRAM

They wheeled you away. I followed, the nurse's
warning—you might turn corpse-blue, or grey—tracing
frenzied circuits down the hall. Two surgeons
introduced themselves. Those thin wails pealing,

a tinfoil brattle. "Strong lungs," one said;
"Her heart is not," I heard, and gave you over
to a stranger, your mother still in bed,
exhausted, delivered. Now the monitor

glows your heart's ghost. I think of radio
static, heaven's rough whisper from the deep.
But this? The aquarium glass between us
no thicker than the screen on which blood weeps

across ventricles, keening to be redeemed.
Bewildered pilgrim, you screamed and screamed.

J.L. Wall

ODYSSEUS IN KENTUCKY

He's just a wayfaring stranger, codeine-blown,
Chewing pain-clinic clover in green-grey pills.
Lay him down in bluegrass when the fellbloom's grown.

Morning in a parking lot (Payday Loans)
He kneels on the asphalt and sings his fill:
A wayfaring stranger, like codeine blown

Purple against glass. Forgetfulness atones
For all his past—the years he wandered, the fables
He's told, down in the bluegrass where fellbloom's sown.

Slipped a disk hauling junk, an image he's shown
So often the X-ray's tattered as the sail
Of a wayfaring stranger. Codeine-blown,

He prays each night, *Come down, angel, come down:*
We'll drink whiskey with boiled asphodel
Then lay down together where fellbloom's grown.

You'll find him wandering now from town to town
Mumbling something about manna in the hills.
He's just a wayfaring stranger, codeine-blown;
He'll lay down in bluegrass when the fellbloom's grown.

Peter Spaulding

BIBLICAL METANARRATIVE

A bouquet
of pressed, long-dead flowers
I gave her over the years
(themselves now
just a memory of life)
makes a book of its own
between the yellowed,
gold-tipped pages.

It is our gloss,
our footnotes in the history
of so many leavings.

Andrew Szilvassy

KYAKING AT MIDNIGHT, I PAUSE TO REST

The liquid-slate undulates much like the earth
recorded in deep time.

The stars stretch out on melting peaks.
Shade revels in its prime.

In quiet, all is speed—the presence
of the Absentee

hisses at a neuron's fringe,
dissolving between trees.

I search the lake and land and sky
and find only earth.

The paddle dipping into dark
cleaves to both death and birth.

Marly Youmans

A RABBINIC TRADITION

His pinky nail could lift the rocks and trees
When God began to make the universe;
The hollow of a hand held seven seas.

He made the small, the ants, the wrens, the bees,
He made the lily, rose, and lady's purse;
His pinky nail could lift the rocks and trees.

He dreamed up rain, snow showers, and a breeze
To warm or cool the earth and then disperse:
The hollow of a hand held seven seas.

One eye sparked light; the other aimed to seize
The future—looking *backward* at the curse.
His pinky nail could lift the rocks and trees.

This story is all paradox and tease,
Embodying the bodiless in verse:
The hollow of a hand held seven seas.

To know unknowables takes myth; to please
The soul, tradition will repeat, rehearse:
His pinky nail could lift the rocks and trees;
The hollow of a hand held seven seas.

Marly Youmans

THE OLD QUARREL

Soul:

The air at zero in the night
Etched fairy forests on the panes
That now, dissolved by morning light,
Look like a map of dotted veins,
Magician winter's hand-worked sleight
Exchanging frost for watery chains.

*So dawns of loveliness unfurled
Reveal the spirit of the world.*

Body:

For us, what uselessness is this?
As useless as the shade of trees
That flings a blue-meshed loveliness
Across the snow, and shifts with breeze,
Though eyes may find some passing bliss
In winter's melting tapestries.

*The tree that's burled, the oyster pearled
Say pain weds beauty in this world.*

Soul:

But you have felt in every cell
The sluicing starlight of the Muse,
And when you shivered in her spell,
You sensed the sharp, unworldly news
Of how her beauties come to dwell
In us, and knew her golden clues.

*A name, a mystery is curled
In every thing in all the world.*

Lisa McCabe

THE ARM

Eventually it wakes you up — your brain,
to tell you it has lost your arm. No, no
not really lost, though as you strain
to lift it now, you might believe it so.

For there it lies, dispirited, quite cool
to touch and unresponsive when you poke
it with its twin. Your panicked mind unspools
through all the warning signs of stroke.

Now tingling nerves! Now blood returns!
All sense restored as your terror dims.
You're most alive when you start to burn.
The master re-masters the puppet's limb.

Think this a dress rehearsal for a time,
your soul suspended above your bones,
before it departs to a warmer clime,
gives vain command to make matter moan.

But reminds you more of a winter night,
you are stranded on a storm-bound road;
your father's Chevy won't ignite
and while you stare beneath the engine's hood,

a frantic girl with no earthly thought
of how you might make the damned thing go,
(wishing desperately you had been taught),
you see a searing beam through driving snow

and raise up your arm to flag it down,
in wonder you can move at all — you are
so cold — you take a breath before you're drowned
in light, step without fear into the car.

Mischa Willett

SEE, I NEVER LEFT MY HANDS OF MY WORKS

After A Line By Julian Of Norwich

How much descent, how down
this dove, this now
I know comes in the hush and how
arrived the night backs, summits grade,
the pent and meddlesome winds
shaken as from a purse take their place,
and sea stills.

If so,
 if this low,
 if *inmost*,

then I am hemmed and all beclothed,
even gross ghost, even nude decent,
even still sent.

Coleman Glenn

CHICKEN RUN

You saw them just before we crossed the road:
escapees in the yard, uncooped and gone
free-ranging — four hens foraging the lawn
for fallen berries buried in the mowed
mid-autumn grass. Love, you did not explode
or raise your voice or even touch upon
my failure to nail all the mesh back on.
Instead, you sent me for a bucketload
of chicken scratch, and with their favorite food
you slowly coaxed our ladies through the door.
Then, getting low and face-to-face you cooed
respectfully to them — just as before
you've often spoken to our other brood,
our flock about to grow from three to four.

A.G.S. Gordon

THIS SCHISM

God loathes a diaspora, a scattering.
God loves the prodigal, the stutterer

who mutters nothings in his ear — the rue-
racked bones with which he's smitten.

He takes our buttered bread, our furrowed bed,
the clutter in our halls of wormwood furniture,

and leads us, chattel, into rock.
And, yes, despite the pillow talk or clash

of mind on mind, upon the field
or on the page — and as we strive to

smooth his likeness on the throne or earthly stage —
he yet will have his day against the last that laughed,

the genial laodicean and all the beautiful craft.
How would it be to shamble on as if we were alone?

Easier to swallow a sword on fire
and miss the heart but taste the flesh and ash.

Daniel Gustafsson

IN MEDIAS RES

We sluggish ones, who trail
the leading edge of every laden cloud,
will find ourselves beneath a shroud
again. For now, to pass
an hour in this muggy pub
is all we ask; with glass

in hand, to watch the play
of flames on floorboards swept by winds alone
and sooty beams that sag and groan
with age. To sit and spout,
with half the journey done, is half
the point of setting out

at all. Now legs may rest
while roving minds retrace the vanquished dales,
retouching steps to fit our tales
to famed ancestral feet.
Barrow up, barrow down, we've slogged
to catch the breath, the beat

that hammers home. And so,
much as we'd like to linger here, to while
away a wee dram longer, miles
on miles of sodden moor-
lands' lavish gifts from leaden skies
await beyond the door.

James Owens

ERRATICISM

for Erin

The tumbling white and lemon butterflies
veered over chicory, as if in doubt,
never flying straight to the obvious prize,
askew for love of the round-about.

Just then I remembered that your eyes
share blue with the chicory flower,
how my detouring hands settle, startle, rise,
light here, glide there, then stay an hour.

Did the flyers' wavering make harder prey,
or were they breezes' weightless fools?
I never learned if their eccentricity
was faulty aim or secret rules.

James Owens

ON THE DEATH OF EROTION, A CHILD OF FIVE

from the Latin of Martial

1. Her passage to the underworld

Epigrams 5.34

Fronto and Flaccilla, father and mother, to your care
I commend this girl, this sweet one, my delight,
so that with you little Erotion might not take fright
at Cerberus's triple roar or the phantoms there.
She would have lived to count six years old,
If she had borne six more days of winter cold.
With such familiar protectors, let her trick and play
and still lisp my name, as she used to do.
May mellow sod veil her brittle bones, and weigh
lightly on her, kind earth; she was light on you.

2. Her epitaph

Epigrams 10.61

Here, in early dark, Erotion sleeps through death.
Her thieving, sixth winter reft her away.
Who governs this field, beyond my final day,
please keep the yearly rites for her frail wraith—
then your house and people will thrive, and the one
grieving thing in all your acres will be this stone.

Martialis 5.34

Hanc tibi, Fronto pater, genetrix Flaccilla, puellam
 oscula commendo deliciasque meas,
parvula ne nigras horrescat Erotion umbras
 oraeque Tartarei prodigiosa canis.
Impletura fuit sextae modo frigora brumae,
 vixisset totidem ni minus illa dies.
Inter tam veteres ludat lasciva patronos
 et nomen blaeso garriat ore meum.
Mollia non rigidus caespes tegat ossa nec illi,
 terra, gravis fueris: non fuit illa tibi.

10.61

Hic festinata requiescit Erotion umbra,
 Crimine quam fati sexta peremit hiems.
Quisquis eris nostri post me regnator agelli,
 Manibus exiguis annus iusta dato:
Sic lare perpetuo, sic turba sospite solus
 Flebilis in terra sit lapis iste tua.

Marcus Valerius Martialis, known in English as Martial, was born in Roman Hispania around 40 A.D., moving to Rome as a young man to establish a literary career. He is known for his epigrams, of which he published over 1,500, mostly satirizing urban life and contemporary morals. The two epigrams translated here are of a tenderness unusual in his work and probably commemorate the death of the child of a servant in his household.

Josiah A.R. Cox

NIGHT-FISHING AT LONGVIEW LAKE

*Any wuss can slap dog on a hook.
The good stuff's tubbed in the cooler.*

He hiccups air, erupts a bullfrog
belch into Longview's placid vastness,

moonlit grace & tuning wings
absorb the violence of his crassness.

*Catfish loves a squirming thing.
Hand another brewski, will ya son?*

He shimmies the can into coozie.
The Styrofoam container is tangles

of pink-collared nightcrawlers,
bruise-hued tubes of poop & guts.

*C'mon, never mind slime! It's like snot.
You pick your nose, don't y—ah, hell.*

He rises & kneels as if at Mass, although
he grew up Baptist & no longer goes.

*Hold my drink, & give the rod
—his fingers swiftly plow clod,*

pluck & pinch, extract one half
like a robin after rain—*like a sock,*

see? That's how it slips onto the tip.
He smudges crud across denim leg,

then clamps lead shot to the string
before he flings all his weight

as far out & down reluctant bait
will drown his own regrets.

A momentary plunge—the bobber
resurfaces like a gambler's confidence:

lurking within this murk & dreg
whiskered redemption swims.

Josiah A.R. Cox

AN ASTRONOMER DISCOVERS THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPH
OF A BLACK HOLE

O cosmic compactor of space matter,
O super-massive sun-glut swallower—
Einstein's bastard son! In a burning ring,
the almost unbelievable unseen
seen, almost—at last! After having combed
data-stacks from an earth-sized telescope
for my tedious hope, atomic belief,
sonar-knowledge that his general theory
must be right but wrong in your unique case.
But now, glimpsing your backside by this,
this glorious orange glaze, I still gaze
mystery. Your allure is *more* intense.
Let me endure your racking arch, spelunk
your singular dark: Finding is the spark!

Erin Wilson

THE GREAT APPRAISAL

after "Great Aso" by Tatsuji Miyoshi

Coming upon Miyoshi's horses
standing in the hushed rain
is jarring, the inverse of motion
in this hurried world.
It feels as though there waits,
between the folds of rain,
a great grasshopper
who watches me
with lakes for eyes.

Maurice Manning

EAVESDROPPING, EARLY MORNING, EVERYTHING ALIVE

When dew drips down from leaves
to land on other lower leaves
and shines them to reflect the sun
with such precision that the reflection
presents the brighter light, I conclude
when going into the world to see
what morning has brought to it, one may
be looking simply for something to praise
without expecting to halt in the gaze
soon so clearly going both ways,
and that will shine all of the day
and riddle anything to say,
even when sleep and darkness call,
and so when praising, praise it all.

AS PLUCKING BLACKBERRIES IN THE FACE

As plucking blackberries in the face
of a sullen praying mantis—O, dalliance
between hand and the mystic pose!—so holiness
deprives the one who lives by hunger—though the fruit
may bruise, and the fingers blindly reaching out
may come back pricked by thorns, or love.

Maurice Manning

THE PENCIL LEAD IN MY FATHER'S FINGER

It was a little bluish dot
stuck in the ring finger knuckle
of his right hand, and left there by
a boy from early school days,
who I imagine now is also
dead and mostly gone from the world,
unless there are those memory
of the boy from the later-1930s
hillside-violent-Kentucky
keeps something of that boy alive.
It wasn't an accident, the stab.
The boy was fighting, my father said,
when I myself a boy had asked
about the dot of blue stuck in
his finger, and he told me the story
behind the dot. I can't remember
all of it now, but I can see
the dot, a bluish spot in the finger
that isn't in the world at all.

Donovan McAbee

MAMA'S BODY

i. 2004

The nurses remove the IV, take the tube
from your nose, move the bed to the center
of the room, so we can circle and pray.

Your spirit, because I believe on this day
in such a thing, has abandoned its husk,
lifted from the room, or walked out the door.

The marriage of body and breath broken—
Mama not-Mama Mama my first home

ii. 1960

You woke to the sound of a vase
toppling off an end table—ran
from your bedroom down the hallway
to the door of the living room, where
your Mama lay on the floor, your Daddy
standing above her, calling her names
you were told not to repeat. You ran
back to your room, like you always did.

Years later, you tell me how you'd cover
your body in the sheets, pull the blanket
over your head, close your eyes
and pray to disappear, that the mattress
might swallow you like the ocean.

iii. 1966

Some things better left unsaid,
so you thought for two-and-a-half
decades, while those secrets nursed dreams
that crawled through your nights—

how, after supper, your friend's Dad
would play strip poker with you
and her at the dining room table
when you were eleven, how he'd
take you later from the bed
where you slept, your friend's Mom

always in the kitchen washing up

iv. 1977

You at twenty-two sit on the couch,
rubbing your belly. You hold the
little yellow dress with white frills
that Grandma gave you.

At twenty weeks, the ultrasound's
silent scan. Daddy takes you
to the hospital, where the doctor
delivers the stillborn and carries it away.

Two years later, you put the yellow dress
on me, so you could imagine how beautiful
your little girl might have been.

v. 1985

I nuzzle into you on the couch,
rest in the crook your legs make
as you lie on your side. You stroke
my curly hair, and I go to sleep,
while you and Daddy watch TV.

You carry me then, down the hallway
to my bedroom, sing an ocean lullaby,
tuck me in snug-as-a-bug for the night.

vi. 1993

You reach out for me, while we drive down 26,
put your hand on my knee, like you've always done—

I draw back, refuse the touch. You reach out
with your words to ask about my week, to find out

if there's some girl who's caught my eye. You make
this 350-mile round trip twice every other weekend—

more often when I ask you to, just to see me.

After the divorce, I fortify myself, won't let you

touch me. Won't let Dad touch me.

Don't want to let anyone touch me ever again.

vii. 2001

Your arm bandaged to keep edema
from settling in. You retch into the plastic
pail the nurse gave you, a reaction
to the anesthesia. You apologize again
for the inconvenience this has caused me,
as I look at the wound under your arm,
where the surgeon removed the lymph nodes.
I take you, next morning, back to the house
to wait for pathology to give us the verdict,
not breast cancer, as everyone has told us,
but melanoma—that word (melanoma) we hear
(melanoma) spread through (melanoma) every
word (melanoma) we speak (melanoma) those
three (melanoma) last (melanoma) years.

viii. *date uncertain*

there must have
been moments
when it felt
like yours

when it didn't belong
to fear or pain
or to a man
or a child

times when your
long dark hair
brushed your shoulders
on a windy day

when the sun
warmed your skin
and you felt the glory
of this other belonging

Greg Hutson

AN HONEST MAN'S WORDS

It is as if each one were scheme
or plot, the line of an attack,
initial pressure of the steam

that thrusts an engine over track.
As if each were the word of God,
the alpha of a sovereign knack

that would, if clever, sever sod
from house or man from wife or rows
from gardener, splinter good from God.

It is as if each one were blows
that shatter drums and raw-most hearts,
abrupt imperatives of crows

that caw and fill the air with darts
at lesser birds that flee to brakes
that will, they hope, have quiet parts.

Were imprecations, bilious snakes
with rattles and unnerving eyes
that give each grayish rodent shakes.

As if each phrase were hazard's guise,
another wallop on the beam
that links us all in small white lies.

The Harvest and The Lamp

Poems by Andrew Frisardi

Colosseum Books /Franciscan University Press, 2020

Review by Lisa McCabe

One of the great blessings and principal attributes of a good book of poetry — one which survives past its brief Twitter moment — is that it leads you down tributaries of study, thought, and feeling that extend well beyond the poetry itself. Poet, Dante scholar, and translator Andrew Frisardi's recent collection, *The Harvest and The Lamp* is such a book. Simultaneously learned and witty, rich in literary and biblical allusions, this is a collection that not only inspires reflection and re-reading, it will also send the attentive and curious back to their Inferno, their King James, and indeed even to their Henry James. That said, Boston-born and Italy-based Frisardi's exquisitely crafted, multi-layered poems also stand simply and brilliantly on their own — accessible in subject and vocabulary, intentional in form, musical in sound and motion.

While this is Frisardi's first full-length collection, his poems (and poetry translations) are widely published and those he includes in *The Harvest and the Lamp* display all the characteristics of having been written from a position of maturity — wise, observant, without a trace of youthful neurosis or middle-aged cynicism. Covering the great subjects of the Western lyric tradition (time, mortality, our relationship with God, the natural world, with one another), these are poems that yearn toward the mystical and the ineffable at the same time they maintain a jubilant grasp on sensual and earthly pleasures.

In "Aubades," a poem which gives a gentle nod to Philip Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb," love and youth and age are seductively entangled, while intimations of passing time and death loiter in the shadows:

When I woke up today, my lips
Smooshed against your shoulder,
Your face's outline was a blurred eclipse
Of yesterday, a light that had grown older.
My palm and fingers curved atop your breast
Like effigies at rest.

In "First Signs of Spring" the sun has its one brief 'unclouded' moment while the 'you' in the poem struts like a rooster, announcing "The king hath laid with the queen!" In "The Last Sunday Before the Cruellest Month," "A baby yowls, while Time and Eternity loudly / Get it on." The speaker in "Fall Moon" understands all too well that "It is getting late" as he puts up his harvest of oil and wine.

In Frisardi's poems the living and the dead are well-rehearsed dance partners — thinly veiled, shrouded in mists, ushered in by breath and wind, delicately balanced on the mutable threshold between light and dark. He begins the poem "Easter Morning":

At dawn, the shapes of cypresses in fog
Were fingers pointing up from graves, as if what's born
Might rouse the dead into an epilogue
Of mist that lifted, leaving swatches in whitethorn.

He continues "My breath's the ectoplasm of a ghost / In ringing air." In a tender sleight of pen, in "The Casket and the Crib" our first and final resting places converge in a transforming and destabilizing moment of grief and memory:

I wept — like any raw, extracted rib.
I was an infant now, *she* gazing down
At *me*, the casket suddenly a crib
I was inside, held by her eyes' soft brown.
With her now dead and me again just born,
I started living where she had been torn.

In the collection's closing poem "The Harvest and the Lamp," the speaker moves us through a series of negations — where the dead are not — toward that liminal space where, at the end of all our searching, we might find them:

It's not. It's always where they were,
Like a fire still burning in an empty camp.
We leave the door of the dark ajar,
For things in their lives are the eye of the lamp.

In "Commute," a mere 'slippage of wind' cracks open the tomb's lid and in the extraordinary and enigmatic "The Poetry of Absence," the words of the living (written in a beautifully executed tetrameter) are offered up and received by the dead:

He speaks the brightness of the dark.
His heart already out at sea,
The angel-pilot guides the barque
Of souls to where his words would be.

In *The Harvest and the Lamp*, renewal and resurrection are closely intertwined with the cycles of the natural world, memory and its attendant sorrows, ritual and the writing of poetry itself. In "The Apricot Tree," what "seemed a splintered twist of bark" blossoms with the promise of new fruit. In "For That Which Has Fallen," "Moisture-seeking crawlers/ And palsied hands of leaves / Unclasp summer's trophies" and "that which has fallen / Returns." The repeating triolet lines of "Remembering Sunflowers" "call love back" and in "The Yellow Moth":

Flesh has given way to vigils and ash.
And yet this ancient custom happens right
When spring is set, as if to say rebirth
Is not a given, it's what we create
By art amid the accidents of fate,
And in our times of dying — call it grace.

The poems in *The Harvest and the Lamp* are written for the most part in traditional fixed verse forms and rhyme schemes (terza rima, triolet, sonnet, cross-rhymed quatrains, rhyming couplets), employing a variety of meters (iambic and otherwise). Frisardi's approach is formal but never rigid, displaying a practical elasticity to accommodate an elevated, yet contemporary voice. Likewise, the free-verse poems which make up the balance of the collection perform no great contortions; they are generally regular in line, natural in syntax, reflectively conversational in tone, with a loose pentameter and occasional rhyme sounding throughout — good or excellent poems all — but you do get the sense that Frisardi is at his happiest and arguably most powerful when he writes in form.

Sonically, these are quietly stylish poems, where the poetic devices provide pleasure but do not overwhelm. That said, Frisardi can 'Hopkins' with the best of them as in this first stanza of "The Last Sunday Before the Cruellest Month":

An O of sky proclaims *Cerulean*
Above the heathery hallelujah hills
And cypress-evergreens' air-tower controls,
A perfect landing pad in power blue
For putti, but the gunmetal cloudbank
Girdling it glowers down and blackly says:

As for diction, Frisardi can hit the high notes as well as the lower octaves, expertly tuning it to his subject matter. There is a measured and contemplative nobility to lines such as those in the opening tercet of "Roll Call at Acheron," a favourite poem in the collection. Written in the voice of the dead gathered on the banks of the mythological Acheron, the poem begins:

The sound was coming from so far away
We thought at first it was the breath we missed
The moment we were dead, that very day.

It neared us like a moan inside a mist
Of wishes, harmonizing with the hum
Of silence from a newly pulseless wrist.

Propelled by the steady beat of the pentameter and the compulsive energy of the terza rima, the poem builds towards its inevitable and haunting concluding couplet:

The sound each heard as either grace or blame
Was wind that called us: name by name by name.

Frisardi can also recast classical and religious subjects in colloquial language to both amuse and disarm — the humour more often (but not always) hinting at darker matter. “Etruscan Tomb: An Inventory” includes “Ten partying patricians; / And happily, a whore.” In his translation of Dante’s sonnet to Guido Cavalcanti, Frisardi bestows on Dante a vernacular swagger: “And we discuss — guess what? (it starts with L). / And they would be delighted with us beaus”). Darkened storm clouds in “The Last Sunday Before the Cruellest Month” announce “Til further notice the sensuous ya-yas / Of spring will be postponed.” The wit which Frisardi weaves through the collection brings a spiritual lightness to themes which under a heavier hand might easily lean toward the bleak or depressing.

The Harvest and the Lamp, like numerous books of poetry that made their debut during the pandemic, has not received the notice that it merits — its original voice, it would seem, drowned out by a deluge of less considered works written in knee-jerk response to the latest headlines. I would argue however that it is in times such as these that the poetry in *The Harvest and the Lamp* is exactly what we should be reading. With its studied and steady gaze set upon our most human and universal concerns, this is a collection that rises above the anxiety and chaos of the moment. Steeped as these poems are in literary and religious traditional, they bring order and perspective, reminding and reassuring us that what we face now is not new; that the cycles of death and rebirth repeat themselves season after season, that life remains a joyous thing despite our great losses, and that a resurrection of the body and the spirit is still possible by way of beauty created and grace granted. Andrew Frisardi’s poems are both graceful and beautiful and as such deserve our attention and our praise.

Why Poetry is Meaningful to Us: Vladimir Nabokov and the Theology of Poetry
Erik Eklund

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) belongs to that group of writers whose names, when invoked within a few breaths of religion, and the Christian religion in particular, is fated to the evocation of mixed feelings and raised brows. Perhaps the foremost inheritor of the Flaubertian tradition, according to which the author vies with God for primacy within his fictional worlds, Nabokov is famous for asserting his authorial sovereignty over his created worlds, comparing his characters to galley slaves (note the pun) and relating in an interview that since childhood he had always been fond of performing simple tricks, turning water into wine and other trifles. Nabokov even goes so far as to blame Nikolai Gogol's artistic demise upon his loss of the ability to create from nothing.

Nabokov's belief that true artists are defined by their ability to create *ex nihilo* conjures an authorial image which could not be more different from that of J. R. R. Tolkien. Though both authors reasonably assert that God is the supreme creator, Nabokov, who was not religious by any stretch of the imagination (though this hardly matters), understands the freedom of artifice to be humanity's share or participation in the divine freedom of creation. True artists create substantially new worlds. Tolkien, on the hand, considers true artists to be sub-creators—creators after the fact of God's act of *creatio ex nihilo*—and thus that some there are some conceptions of authorial originality which are condemnable upon the grounds that they seek to impinge upon God's uniquely divine right to make anything and everything of nothing. Yet, while Tolkien is surely the more orthodox of the two (which is irrelevant), for all of the intricacies of his world building, Tolkien's literary art, in terms of style, flickers dimly by comparison to Nabokov's masterworks—*Invitation to a Beheading* (1935–36/1959), *The Gift* (1938/1963), *Lolita* (1955), *Pnin* (1957), *Pale Fire* (1962), *Ada* (1969)—which shine with a brilliance rivalling Proust, Flaubert, Dante, and Shakespeare, through and perhaps *as* whom (so Borgesian legend tell us) God dreamed the world.

Yet we not only may, but must speak of something of a theology in Nabokov, even in spite of his commonly misunderstood disinterest in organised religion and mysticism. Very much like Kafka in this regard, Nabokov's theology, which is a real theology of the literary word, is concerned with the analogy or the exchangeability of the terms of fiction and reality (Nabokov was adamant that 'reality' should always be imprisoned by scare quotes). His metafiction, therefore, is never merely self-conscious fiction laying bare its fictionality. Rather, it is always 'meta-meta-fiction', to borrow a phrase from Christopher Link, which is to say that it is always a metaphysics of literature aimed at expressing, by some trick of the text, the self-reflexivity of reality, which Nabokov believed to be the artifice of some unfathomable Trismegistus, and literary art.

Borrowing a term from Celtic mysticism, Gennady Barabtarlo invoked the notion of 'thin places' to describe the analogy of fiction and reality—and so of metafiction and metaphysics—which Nabokov sought to express throughout his fictional worlds. 'Thin places' are spaces where the distance between this world and the otherworld is reduced to a distance no greater than two or three feet. There remains, however, a perennial difficulty in pinning down the exact meaning or approximate location of the otherworld in Nabokov's private dictionary, and it lies in the very indeterminateness of the term, such that it means little more than a Borgesian e/Everything and n/Nothing after the twelfth century French theologian and poet Alain de Lille. For at various points throughout Nabokov's oeuvre, the otherworld may be said to refer simultaneously to the fictional

world of the novel (which is so often aware of its artificiality); our world defamiliarised in a prism of Shklovsky crystal; a kind of prelapsarian paradise from which we are exiled by the panopticon of time; and a post-mortem state of being or consciousness, neither here nor there (wherever there might be), poetically similar to and surely as evasive as Cusanus' God.

However one chooses to parse Nabokov's otherworld, what remains to be appreciated and what I believe to be most interesting about Nabokov's otherworld is the unique role played by the imagination in creating, navigating, and abiding in these 'thin places' which bring together or mediate between the two equally indeterminate realms of reality and the otherworld. The uniqueness of the imagination lies in its offering to us the opportunity of participating in the otherworldliness, which is to say the transcendence relative not only to the work of literature, but to those other realms and states of being about which Nabokov speculates and which his literary art seeks to evoke, where art, conceived as a transcendental comparable to beauty in the Dionysian mystical tradition, is the norm. This is so because the work of the imagination, in which the artifice of reality mediated through individual consciousness and the artifice of self-conscious literature commingle, abides in the short distance which separates the eye from the series of squiggles which, through some miracle of the mind, we are able to translate into sound and thought.

The imagination's work of translation and its relation to the otherworld in its fourfold form is among the main themes of Nabokov's most fantastical metafiction, *Pale Fire*, which I believe gestures to an answer to the question implied in the title of this essay, 'Why is poetry meaningful to us?'. A hyper-realistic metafictional novel, the structure of *Pale Fire* comprises a 999-line poem composed by the late John Shade, an expert on Pope, and an *apparatus criticus* consisting of an epigraph, foreword (!), analytic commentary, and index by Charles Kinbote, a crazed and Christian professor of surnames at Wordsmith College. It is important to recall here that Nabokov's is a metaphysics of literary 'thin places', of the various ways that literature might express the analogy between the twin discourses of metafiction and metaphysics in a tripled gesture, first, to itself as self-conscious fiction; to the world outside literature ('reality'); and, finally, to the realm or state of being, whatever and wherever it is, beyond temporal consciousness. Here, literature is a site of divine play, a unique metaphysical and even theological discourse which deploys the terms of literature to consider questions concerning human origins and ends, and our relation to first things—that of which we are, so the title goes, pale fires.

Pale Fire's hyperrealism—its status as mock academic commentary—is of utmost importance in this regard, and the mirror and the complimentary repetition figured therein is the preeminent image and medium of the novel's hyperrealism, which is also the key to its intimations of transcendence. Working to defamiliarise a unionised conception of 'reality', *Pale Fire's* baroque *mimesis* refutes the idea that the imitation of art is founded upon a pedestrian realism which thinks that 'reality' is objective, *out there*, knowable in itself, rather than a work of the imagination, a cooperation, according to Nabokov's non-unionised 'optimysticism', between the supreme imagination of some contrapuntal genius of human fate and our own.

Sensing an intimate connection between his literary art and transcendence, Shade begins his poem with a gesture of defamiliarisation as he reduplicates an ersatz iconic mirror (an image of transcendence and infinity which is transformed into a series of eights and lemniscates, ∞ , throughout the rest of the novel), which affords him occasion to forecast himself imaginatively into another plane of existence:

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff—and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.
And from the inside, too, I'd duplicate
Myself, my lamp, an apple on a plate:
Uncurtaining the night, I'd let dark glass
Hang all the furniture above the grass,
And how delightful when a fall of snow
Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so
As to make chair and bed exactly stand
Upon that snow, our in that crystal land! (ll. 1–13)

Evocative of Icarus' fall toward the Aegean's liquid sky, the waxwing's deadly impact upon Shade's window unveils the lambent palimpsest of the world beyond the glass and the world reflected in it. The refracted duplication effected by Shade's windowpane (the poem's first line was intended to have been repeated in the poem's final, one-thousandth line, had Shade not been stopped short by a bullet) thus becomes the medium of otherworldly vision, which Shade's poetry reduplicates within itself so that he might probe more deeply into the abysses of time before life and life after time.

Shade's commitment to heroic couplets, moreover, which had fallen out of vogue long before (as Shade and Nabokov well knew), is for Shade a formal requirement of his transcendent art. Indeed, as Nabokov's *riposte* to the distancing of rhyme and personality which Eliot sought to effect in 'Four Cantos', Shade divides 'Pale Fire's' 999 heroic couplets into four cantos of complementary length (Cantos 1 and 4: 166 lines; Cantos 2 and 3: 334 lines) and utilises the coincidence of rhyme, reason, and plot to argue for the perdurance of identity in artifice, reality, and the beyond:

. . . I feel I understand
Existence, or at least a minute part
Of my existence, only through my art,
In terms of combinational delight;
And if my private universe scans right,
So does the verse of galaxies divine
Which I suspect is an iambic line. (ll. 970–76)

For Shade, formal poetry is the optimum medium for the imagination aimed at eternity. And Nabokov, in his turn, suggests that the defamiliarising work of the poet's individual art lays bare the presence of 'thin places' in our seemingly mundane existence. For it precisely as this act of making-strange lays bare the artifice of reality—its being otherwise than it could be, our being otherwise than we might be, and our being in spite of having not been before—that we come to a greater appreciation of the analogy between artistic and divine acts of creation.

Nevertheless, there remains evidence of a very blatant unoriginality throughout Shade's poem which might seem to run counter to the divinity of the poet: 'But *this* transparent thingum does require / Some moon drop title. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire*' (ll. 961–62). In a wonderful twist of irony, Shade steals the title of his poem from Timon's vilification of cosmic thievery in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* ('I'll example you with thievery. / The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction / Robs the vast sea. The moon's an arrant thief, / and her pale fire she snatches from the sun / The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves / The moon into salt tears. The earth's a thief, / That feeds and breeds by a composture stol'n / From gen'ral excrement. Each thing's a thief'). Some scholars, however, argue that Nabokov's novel, on the other hand, owes its title to *Hamlet* ('The glow-worm shows the matin to be near, / and gins to pale his uneffectual fire. / Adieu, adieu, Hamlet. Remember me.'). I find this hypothesis dissatisfying and largely unnecessary. Regardless, it gestures to the significance of *Pale Fire*'s possible answer to the question of why poetry is meaningful to us, to which I have made some tacit gestures, and it does this by pointing us to Nabokov's hundred-mouthed 'god of iambic thunder'. Indeed, insofar as shared language bespeaks a common memory, as Borges observes, then there is truth in saying that, for English speakers, that in which we 'live and move and have our being' (words inscribed by a person whose name is as lost to us as the name of their God) is not only God but Shakespeare. Each one of us is a grave robber, stealing from the dead logomancer the words and stories which allow us to communicate, to form relationships, to live.

What, then, is my answer to the question of why poetry is meaningful to us? It seems to me that the unique value of poetry lies in its being the very apotheosis of language, which is to say the verbal expression of the imagination's brushing up against the world. The sense of internal harmony which formal poetry requires—its commitment to discovering that Anselmian word than which there is none more fitting so as to best capture and repeat within its own artifice the image, sound, and rhythm of life's cadence—suggests to me that poetry (and all literary art for that matter) trains the imagination best in making sense of the voluptuousness, the magic, the awkwardness and embarrassment of the life I have chosen to live in between two eternities, and then the abrupt end.

Contributors

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