Reviews

Judith Kitchen

*Grouching toward Bethlehem: A Look at First Books**

I've always had a dream of growing into a somewhat flamboyant old lady, opinionated but personable, acerbic with the kind of wit that grandchildren don't quite know how to interpret but other people find somewhat charming in small doses. I don't think I've quite reached that age, or that acidity, and I am nothing but putty in the hands of my grandsons, but still I am really pleased that one of my recent *Georgia Review* efforts ("Anthologizing—the Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent," Winter 2003) has itself been rather positively "reviewed" on the NewPages website with the following description: "Kitchen sounds something like a brisk but slightly cranky schoolmarm rapping the knuckles of errant anthologizers." Yes!

So, at the pleasant risk of sounding even crankier, I decided to tackle the substantial pile of first books (about forty of them) that had been growing steadily taller on my study floor, relegated there because whenever I opened one I seemed to get into a tizzy over the fact that, somewhere between the time when *impact* became a maddening verb and the advent of the Ipod, teachers must have stopped explaining the difference between *lie* and *lay*.

What struck me was how few of the names on the covers were familiar to me—not even from my sporadic reading in literary journals. Clearly, there was a generation of poets out there somewhere below my radar, and I was curious to get to know what

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*An essay-review of

THE BOOK OF FUNNELS. By Christian Hawkey. Amherst, MA: Verse Press, 2004. 77 pp. $13.00, paper.

THE CHRONIC LIAR BUYS A CANARY. By Elizabeth Edwards. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon Press, 2004. 95 pp. $13.95, paper.

THE KEEPSAKE STORM. By Gina Franco. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004. x, 90 pp. $15.95, paper.

SEA OF FAITH. By John Brehm. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. x, 63 pp. $26.95. $14.95, paper.

BEAUTIFUL TROUBLE. By Amy Fleury. Carbondale, IL: Crab Orchard Review and Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. x, 50 pp. $14.95, paper.

IN THE GHOST-HOUSE ACQUAINTED. By Kevin Goodan. Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2004. xiv, 61 pp. $13.95, paper.

they were all about. A quick glimpse at the backs of the books, however, brought me up short: the ubiquitous photographs revealed not just the youngsters I had imagined, but a full spectrum of adults—with enough receding hairlines and gray heads to make me wonder why I had assumed that all the authors would be in their late twenties or early thirties, just graduated with their MFAs and eagerly looking forward to being assistant professors at small colleges somewhere as far away from where they grew up as possible.

My attitude may simply reflect the postconfessional time when I began my own reading and writing, but I had always assumed that first books fell into two categories: the very polished, often formal poems that felt promising but derivative, as though they needed to be shaken up; and the rough-edged, emotionally charged poems that still needed all the poet's craft and imagination to be wrestled into shape. The first book, as I had been picturing it, contained a poet's effort to find a voice suited to his or her material, and that material would most probably be autobiographical and rooted in place, a what-to-make-of-the-life-I've-been-given probe into the past. And so I began. But soon—all too soon—my other preconceptions came back into play. Most of these books (even by the older poets) did feel young or at least youthful, but with the slickness of youth polished to a glitter. They reeked of MFA—by which I mean there seems to be a new kind of professionalism, a premature sophistication that leads to poems so crafted they reveal no sense of struggle. Yet struggle is what most appeals in a first book—a sense that a poet is grappling with material and that the resulting poems are merely prelude, the beginning of something that imparts a sense of "to be continued . . ." as part of the work's promise.

If today's emerging writers have been producing what I think of as the first-book poem, those poems have long since been purged of content in favor of attitude. What's left is voice and experimentation, and the poems I found were almost universally either voice driven or device ridden. Usually the voice was engaging—wryly self-conscious, inventively aware, ironical, and clever. Often too clever by half. Brittle. And, for all its seeming originality when confronted in isolation, that voice sounded like so many of the other voices in my stack. A quick look at the biographical material printed on the books, or at the names of mentors the poets thanked, told me that they were not all from the same program, so clearly I was seeing evidence of a new poetic "generation." The devices, then, must be seen as the "fads" (the tattoos and pierced tongues) of that generation: associative games (there was nothing else I could call them), linguistic puzzles (occasioned by a grasp of academic theory), typographical experimentation, and a keen unwillingness to adhere to any of the old poetic adages. "Less is more" has gone out the window in favor of "more, and yet more." "Show, don't tell" has become "Tell, but don't tell what's really at stake." "Make it new" means make it quirky. "No ideas but in things" has been replaced by a refusal to link those two terms in any meaningful way—so that cause and effect are poetically unrelated.

If I seem cantankerous, well . . . what I encountered, time and time again, were polished poems (often published in good literary magazines) that went nowhere and said nothing. Or, to be fair, went somewhere and said something that served linguistic and theoretical needs but left this reader curiously unaffected. When Robert Lowell says, "I'm tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil," he takes us inside; we live through his awareness of the pain he is causing. What I sensed in most of these first books, however, was an external world—one where the internal is essentially covert and the poem plays out on an imaginative screen where anything might happen, and does, as long as the poet can fend off self-confrontation and/or turn it into something cleverly shrouded in irony.

Forgive me while I digress, but if you've seen Werner Herzog's latest movie, *Grizzly Man*—which includes original film footage by Timothy Treadwell, the self-appointed protector of Alaskan grizzlies who was eventually eaten by one—you will understand that without Herzog's voice-over, without his confrontation with and appreciation of Treadwell's oddly innocent genius, you are left with the patter of someone who has imagined himself into annihilation. Many of the poems in these books feel like Treadwell minus Herzog; they simply flail their arms and repeat themselves in an increasingly indifferent world.

What especially worries me is that this trend is aided and abetted by some of our more important senior poets, whose selection of work for prizes only exacerbates this move away from the lived, the felt, the wrestled with. This is not to say these new poets haven't lived and felt and wrestled, but rather that they've packaged their experience in ways that reduce it to gamesmanship.

For instance, I can play fill-in-the-blanks and "make" meaning from the poems in Karen An-hwei Lee's encyclopedic entries for *In Medias Res*, selected by Heather McHugh for Sarabande's Kathryn A. Morton Prize, but in the end, Lee's surprisingly atonal exercise is unfulfilling, the entries beginning to obstruct more than they instruct:

> NEWEL
> *Upright post at the head or foot of a stair.*
>
> NIGHT FLOWER
> Attraction. Drawn to the long ear of a shadow.
>
> NAUTICAL MILE
> *One sixtieth of a degree of latitude or the length of a minute.*
>
> NONPLUSSED
> Intrinsic.
>
> NOUVEAU ROMAN
> *A board used over a window as a valance.*

A portion of the wall below a chair.
A salt-box.

A newel.
Eschewing judgment.
Objectivity.

Yusef Komunyakaa makes an argument for how Kevin Ducey's *Rhinoceros*, which he selected for the *American Poetry Review*'s prestigious Honickman First Book Prize, expands our sense of what a poem can achieve when "images drift into each other till words multiply through signification—in this world and otherworldly," but even with the judge's explanation this book exhibits a bit too much of the Language poet ethos for my taste:

So much depends . . .

The sort of word that throws
you forward:
                    es hängt
it's hanging (a scaffold)
future
          pending
At the time when WCW
wrote
          things
were pending
                    pendeln
                    to swing in transition . . .

Gone the wheelbarrow, the rain, the chickens, in favor of linguistic disquisition. Forgotten, that WCW knew the words provide the link: the broken words (wheel/barrow, rain/water) reactivate the image so that the reader sees white against red, perceives movement and stasis, everything shimmering under the weight of the operative (and activating) verb *depends*. In Ducey's poem, the word merely performs, so the mind relegates the "thing" to the scrapheap in favor of the declared "idea."

Sad to say, the academy has not been a healthy home for writers. They end up overeducated and underexperienced. My advice to young poets? Work anywhere else. Write anything, but write from the heart. This sounds too simple, but there it is: readers are not looking for insight into linguistic theory; they are looking for insight into living in a real and complex world.

Despite my wagging mental finger, I found several first books to admire, and I'd like to introduce readers to some of the better poets who have introduced themselves to me. The following six collections vary widely in what they attempt, but they all manage to do what first books ought to do: they promise something for the future.

Voice is everything in Christian Hawkey's *The Book of Funnels*. It carries the poems through wild imaginative landscapes, welding one observation or image to another so that the end result is much like a sculpture—a large cat, for example, made out of the innards of machines, each part recognizable up close for what it actually is and ingenious in the way it's been used to construct something other. John Ashbery claims that this is landscape poetry in "the true sense of landscape—not a segment of the earth's surface posing for its picture, but an open, undetermined space in which all kinds of crazy mental and physical things are going about their business simultaneously." I might quarrel with his definition, but not with his description of what happens in Hawkey's poems. Still, I might want to label them—if label we must—as mindscape.

The opening poem, "The Isle of Monapia," immediately launches us on a collision course with innovation. The first eleven lines establish the voice (engaging, energetic, oddly intimate) as a rowdy run-on sentence broadens the metaphor:

> A thought drones in, trailing its landing gear—I can't shake it,
> this papery nest of wasps lodged above the eaves,
> my eyes, which is fine,
> let them come,
>
> come and go, some catacombs are only ash, never meant to be dislodged,
> some foreheads simply ladders
> —a few wrinkles,
> a few rungs—
>
> ribs that float a little to the left with each breath,
> each step, I love the way our hands
> close neatly inside another's.

But this metaphor is casually eschewed in favor of others, and yet others, and the actual isle of Monapia (an earlier name for the Isle of Man) only appears in the twelfth and final stanza, as something that the "voice" (as opposed to the speaker) has arrived at. Through a series of imagistic insights—"evening backing into night," for example—Hawkey gives us a rendition of his mind at play. Most of the poems in *The Book of Funnels* develop similarly, amassing meaning through accumulation of real and imagined situations, building an amalgam of image and anecdote held together by the glue of an idiosyncratic sensibility.

Hawkey's craft is evident in the fluidity of his lines, the way they maneuver hairpin turns by repeating words, or sounds, or phrasing. The title "Up Here in the Rafters Everything Is Clear" may very well describe Hawkey's technique—giving us a panoramic view, with a wry take on the world:

> Night, night was a quick-thrash from the gator-pond,
> the silence, just after, widened out in rings

even the fire ants in the dry grass
held still. Hold still
said the branch, lifting in the absence
of an owl, hold still.

The speaker proffers a god's-eye view as the reader watches the distanced gaze perceive itself, and listening becomes the eardrum fluttering "as if it were someone else's and not your own."

Silence is perhaps best heard in the long thirteen-poem title sequence where it is studiously orchestrated. White space (used in large doses) delineates the gaps between the external world of image and the simile-laden interior spaces of the mind. Whatever is poured into the funnel emerges as one compound stream, simultaneously revealed and obscured, a bit like the painting beneath the painting exposed by X-ray in "Goya's Grotesquerie."

My preference is for his poems that seemingly stem from personal experience, although in Hawkey's hands the personal often takes the form of an invented scene. But there's something compelling in the "thick memory" of "Note Left Behind on a Table," with its palpable sense of loss. That absence carries over into "I Return to the O's in Oblivion" as the tongue touches the wound over and over until a name emerges, someone whose sundress on the line is transformed into night itself: "Nights I took down, gently, and put on. / White moon soaking in the backyard."

Unfortunately, the pleasure of a voice spinning out its rush of connections ("Quickly, quickly, we have a few seconds left") diminishes in the totality, and an embarrassment of riches impoverishes the whole. In the end, too much is too much, as might be seen in "Hosannas for the Tatterdemalions":

there in a series of asterisks, annotating
a text (the text was above me, a handful of stars);
there where a memory surfaced, changed
by the surface; where a tongue, caught on a word;

where a cry, caught in the throat;
there in the throat where a breath turns,
turns over, turns into a sound
pulling the ocean into the land, right up

to the mountains, where the cold rivers begin.

And so on . . .

After a while, the voice is spun candy, making *The Book of Funnels* less a "book" than a compilation of individual flights of fancy. For all their references to travel, for all their strange landscapes, these poems are most promising when they stay closer to

home. I envision a second book in which Christian Hawkey mines his quieter, more austere voice, making such plausible leaps as he makes in "Green Solitude," where he conjures a man lost in a cornfield and then moves to John Clare going home through the fields, summer blurred into snow: "And he listened, for a moment, / To the cold wind // Before finding the road again, and the sound / Of his listening was the landscape / Advancing at his approach." One does not need extravagant inventiveness when one can realize an imagined moment with such inspired clarity.

The title of Elizabeth Edwards' *The Chronic Liar Buys a Canary* suggests fabricated scenarios and odder-than-life situations. The back cover gives us three fragmented photos which, taken together, provide an incomplete portrait of the artist as a young woman—and this gesture is indicative of the entire collection. The speaker of these poems is often astonished by incongruity, as in "On the Train from Boston to DC in Dead Winter," where a narrating presence observes the ubiquitous backsides of our cities and comments, "I am suddenly struck / by how little of everything there is." Spray-painted graffiti attest to a world "where someone swore / they'd always love / someone else forever," the past tense telling the rest of the story. In "Cora Chasing Pigeons in Prescott Park, Sept. 13, 2001," the date—two days into an altered consciousness—provides the source of an uneasy collage: the speaker's young daughter flits in and out of shadow as she chases the birds, while images of Vietnam play across her mother's mind and threaten to overwhelm the moment. Then, things finally cohere ("the . . . flock explodes / in a ghostly rush of wings—like chopper blades / blowing the veneer off the world") to illustrate collective fear and vulnerability.

Perhaps the best poem in this vein is "Lindow Man." As scientists giddily unearth his body from the bog and try to reconstruct his face, Edwards reminds us what lies behind the discovery:

> the real man clutches his stone talisman
> with the bits of hair woven through it;
> remembering the men
> who came down in the spring;
> and his scream which never
> broke the surface.

When Edwards' voice is at its strongest, it can carry a poem into new territory. "The Name of the Game" begins, "This is about doing ninety on the Pennsylvania turnpike / the whole way home and no ticket" and proceeds to be "about" so many things that it leads to a mini *ars poetica* in its penultimate stanza, "About the way the world sweeps you up on certain days / and lets you be a part of it." The presiding voice of the collection is breezily confidential, a bit amazed at what life has offered up, but willing to see what may happen. Plenty does, from yard sales to arranged marriage, from baseball

to forged art, arguments, affairs, chain gangs, and merry-go-rounds. Much of all this takes place on another plane, drifting as in a fever. Sometimes the poems feel manic, made to order, exploring the imaginary to fend off the real; at other times they feel contrived, though the pairing of "Hammer" and "Nail," for instance, allows for an interesting array of images that can lead to such conclusions as "how love needs fear / to keep its feeble heart alive."

I prefer the poems that use the imaginary to probe the actual. In " 'Unidentified Boy by the Monongahela River: Circa 1917,' " a previously unknown photograph in a library book brings the speaker's grandfather acutely to life as he probes evidence of his own past—seeing at the photo's periphery his mother's hand reaching out to him, a tactile substantiation. The accidentally present hand—proof of the woman's connection to the boy (and to the poet)—intrudes on the poet's sense of time. There is a dual perspective: grandfather and speaker share a single object of perception; the narrative shifts between them to encompass the old man of the present, the hard-working woman of the past, the enduring river, and the boy who holds a flat stone in his hand, refusing to hear his mother's call. To grandfather and speaker alike, that youthful figure remains "the boy" of the photo's caption, yet each adds an individual, intimate knowledge to the otherwise anonymous scene. The boy cocks his head, everything on the brink of action, then stasis is shattered as he "hears something, shakes it off / and everything thunders out of his hands." When Edwards uses her imagination in this way, it becomes a necessary component of the poem, and "Unidentified Boy" is exceptional.

Edwards has real facility with form, and the collection is punctuated by one villanelle and two sonnets. In addition, she pays special consideration to sound, using intricate slant rhymes to call attention to the aural similarities in such words as *riven*, *shivers*, *forgive*, and *sieves*, to give one example. Sometimes her rhymes are so subtle that they slip past the ear, making themselves felt as a kind of aftersound. I'll quote in full one sonnet to illustrate what she can do when she combines traditional rhyme, an inventive enjambment, and contemporary imagery to forge her own inimitable style:

THE GLASS ALLIGATOR

is what my daughter heard me say so when
the elevator lurched and Pittsburgh slipped
away, she grabbed me, screaming. Dredge cranes ripped
up ochre earth stories below where men

planned the new stadiums. They'd found iron
muskets and Lenape beads and chipped bisque
dolls. Buried while the mills rusted to crypts
and dark hands doused lit forges. Now woken

by blasts, this alligator's I-beam bones
stir with life in river swamp. My girl shakes.
His scales of emerald-crusted windowpanes

flash sun signals westward. Listen. Alone
inside the lizard's eye, the glass sky quakes;
we pitch—then rise into his twitching brain.

This shows real talent, but still *The Chronic Liar Buys a Canary* has the feel of something slightly premature: disparate poems fueled by voice and innovation, but with seemingly little in the way of an organizing principle. The book never quite achieves the trajectory that would help a reader define its underlying concerns. If this poet takes her time, future books will probably achieve a more natural arc and prove the full range of her capabilities.

"You want real?" Gina Franco asks at the opening of *The Keepsake Storm* and then proceeds to give "you" a reality infused with autobiography, science, personal history, and local history, as well as an imaginative entry into other lives: those of her parents; of the miners she grew up with in Clifton-Morenci, Arizona; of Mexican Americans in the border towns of Texas. Franco moves as easily in and out of these characters as she moves in and out of English and Spanish. She underscores the point that she is at home in either language by refusing to italicize the Spanish, incorporating it naturally into her lines without translation: "the men with their stories, / when Johnny got pissed, Cabron! Como chingas! / the women sighing, his heart, his heart, the cousins / in gold and black sombreros, Y volver, volver, volver—" Such easy transition was not always the norm, and "Del Rio" describes a life at once familiar and alien, voicing the immigrant child's predicament:

Meanness: only the first language without firsthand
knowledge of the second, only the voicelessness
of the river building sadness inside her
that she might come to match the inaccessible hush
of the current sweeping in to sweep her within it.

The poet becomes both observer and commentator, acting almost as translator; the lives of her characters are rendered in the language and diction of poetry—lyrical, cadenced, figurative, charged.

Franco distances herself from the past as she examines it in hindsight, making an exchange between the "I" and the "she" of the poems, moving easily into a third-person "girl" who is clearly an earlier self brought to the surface of memory. Yet memory intrudes on memory as "Velvet" mixes a number of associations with rabbits, sensory perceptions of the desert, and disturbing scenes of violence. The word *velvet*

flickers in and out, appearing a total of seven times, highlighting vulnerability in a harsh world:

> The bird dog lifts his ears to the sound
> of velvet, the girl listens to the drawn
> cries of a crow, her father walks
> with the silence of the shotgun, waiting
> for the pointer to find scent, the rabbit
> at the end of it blinking, its wide eyes
> shrinking from the scuffle of their feet like
>
> velvet settling, laid over lines, drying
> across the ceiling of an uncle's garage
> where they talk inside the smell of salted
> skin.

This technique is enlarged in "These Years, in the Deepest Holes," where the speaker begins in first person ("A summer kite. My father's") and then shifts to third-person memory ("a man's hand loosens the twine / a little, a little, and a girl picks through the bushes") before introducing a shadowy "you" whose presence seems to accompany each memory: "You sit nearby and want me to watch you— / that is your way." The "story" is oblique—there is a hint of sexual impropriety—but the speaker is overtly wrestling with the material, and the reader willingly enters the struggle. So when we hear that in the "greater scheme of things" it is "nothing," "it" still seems like *something*—rising in memory, mixed now with the "flattened infant graves" and the "you" who haunts the author as she watches a girl long gone and yet still present in the "I" who beholds her.

Another kind of imagination fuels "Where the Bodies, Half-Dressed, in Pieces." Not quite a traditional persona poem—the speaker is identified in the dedication but does not appear until more than halfway through the poem—this account begins in the aftermath of a flood in Del Rio, Texas, in August 1998, then moves to vivid present-tense reportage of the flood itself. The past enters with the "I" of the poem, visualizing her last minutes, and it honors the drowned "mejicanos" whose names were never known. The poem changes tense: "so there is miracle"; "so there is belief"; "so there are numbers"; "so there is home"; "so there was also hope." The hope is extinguished by the definitive voice, the assurance that this is—however much her daughter cannot recognize her—Carmen Rios.

The poems in *The Keepsake Storm* are uneven, however: some bog down in mere description of the exotic, and one e-mail sequence takes far too long to make its not-so-original point. I was therefore unprepared for the sustained accomplishment I found when I came to the third section of the book, comprising a long thirteen-poem title sequence—an account of nursing an elderly woman (K.) that ends up outlin-

ing, piecemeal, K.'s somewhat astounding biography. Much like the speaker, who is encountering another's keepsakes in the form of ship's logs, journals, photographs, and stories, the reader is forced to put together the facts of a lifetime and, in the process, to reconstruct the delicate balance between nurse and patient, present and past. "This is who we are together," says the speaker, and many of the poems posit a third person ("K. and me," "dividing you from you and me," "where I am she") consisting of this unlikely pairing. The sequence revolves around the tensions inherent in the situation, the roles that must be played and sometimes breached.

The unfolding life is quite remarkable: marriage to a man who wanted to live onboard his boats, eventual divorce that ended with K. owning the boat, two other marriages, summers in Antarctica, winters in St. Croix, drinks with Robert Oppenheimer, finally a house in the Arizona desert, and now round-the-clock care as her life wanes. The ending of the final poem in the sequence, "Archaeopteryx, an Elegy," demonstrates how a combination of image, diction, and linear orchestration can reveal what is not overtly stated:

> What is possible in memory is disingenuous.
> Limestone, impressed with the archaic smile
> of bone and reptilian wrists, wishbones and feathers,
> describes. It cups the transitional form,
> naturally selecting one's best side. There was
> the time you forgot your legs no longer
> could recall how to stand—then rose up straight and sang
>
> *You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me*
>
> Probably I've been thinking of that since August.
> The indelible wrens grate like shovels
> outside—exhumed, one voice rises from wilderness,
> echoes,
> settles, rests
> —then another, and,
> between them, the keep of an unerring quiet.

The various sections of *The Keepsake Storm* do not quite cohere, but Gina Franco builds for the future, demonstrating a compassionate imagination and an English freshened by Spanish constructions. The final sequence is so finely wrought, so nuanced and complicated, that it alone heralds an exciting new presence on the poetic stage.

John Brehm's *Sea of Faith*, selected by Carl Dennis for the 2004 Brittingham Prize, has such unified consistency of tone and sophistication of approach that it is less a debut than a confirmation. The voice is urbane, humorous, and amused—distanced just

enough to poke fun at the world and itself alike, to be able to see the ironies in every predicament. The poems are orchestrated to perform on the page; they are informally rhythmical—what I would call naturally iambic—and, with rare exceptions, they gain energy from their stanzaic structures, which act as both organizer and impetus. Brehm seems, always, to be reining in an imagination that threatens to run away with him, keeping the poem in a state of high tension until it reaches its unexpected but inevitable conclusion.

Brehm knows what it is to live in a fallen world, knows what it is to live with a less than perfect self, and knows that rendering this state of being strikes a universal chord. You simply can't resist reading many of these poems out loud to someone else. So easily do they make their way inside you, you might be tempted to think of them as "easy." Yet each poem is original, and if they feel familiar they do so because Brehm has given voice to the complexities of being, handing us back to ourselves through the surety of his craft.

One has the impression that Brehm gathered his singular pieces into three thematic sections to discover just what he has been about. The title poem examines the very heart of the poetic enterprise when a student admits to being confused by the words "Sea of Faith" in "Dover Beach." "Is it a real sea?" she asks, precipitating a riff on figurative language that includes a natural progression: "Sea of Ignorance," "Rope of Salvation," "Sharks of Desire," "Ship of Fools," "Fountain of Youth," and "River of Forgetfulness." The poem would be hilarious if it stopped there, but Brehm knows enough to realize that he has only opened the door to self-examination. He thinks back past his own betrayals and being betrayed to wish that there were such a literal sea

> that you could wade out into,
> dive under its blue and magic waters,
> hold your breath, swim like a fish
> down to the bottom, and then emerge again
> able to believe in everything, faithful
> and unafraid to ask even the simplest of questions,
> happy to have them simply answered.

What is fascinating here is that Brehm, while exhibiting a quiet inner voice, seems to be obsessed with what an inner voice can do to enrich an otherwise ordinary life. "The Poems I Have Not Written" takes the concept to its outer limits, giving the speaker—in the form of alternative poems—"the life I have not lived, the life // I've failed even to imagine, / which they so perfectly describe." "Sotto Voce" explores the undersides of silence, and "The Inner Life" wrestles with the "wrangling voices and combustible insights" of the interior spaces until it provides the guiding principle (in a Socratic epilogue) for all the poems:

> "Know thyself." Sure, of course,
> you must. But afterwards,
> the project is to make yourself
> a stranger to yourself once more.

So, as stranger to himself the poet gains perspective. "Supplication at the River" begins, "And then I would turn away / and into something other, / as if the way the water moves, / confluence of sources, metaphor / for everything, but essential and itself, / would be my way of moving," and this might be said to be the organizing principle for *Sea of Faith* as Brehm allows the poems to flow around him in order to find his own personal sources. One is clearly the city, with its "jumble of songs and jackhammers and / roaring garbage trucks," along with its storehouse of interesting people. One is nature, where he discerns the reflection of a variety of human moods. Another is self-knowledge, so that he can begin "Getting It Wrong the First Time" by claiming he is "Hard-wired for lightning-fast indecisions" or turn the great good humor of "When My Car Broke Down" back toward the memory of his father teaching him about engines:

> Even then I was hopelessly afflicted
> with the disease of the Wandering Mind.
> Even then I was dreaming myself
>
> across magical landscapes, just like this,
> and learning all he had to teach me
> about standing rooted to one spot,
> wishing I were somewhere else.

This shows yet another essential optimism—one that does not mask the hard questions with humor, but instead finds some levity in them; his dramatized speaker uses humor not for its own sake but for ours, and in doing so he also finds a kind of faith. "Reasons" begins in the lived world, then moves quickly into the mind:

> This morning the air stays thick
> with darkness and lush fog.
> It hangs on like a bad mood,
> unspecific, pervasive, without origin.
>
> It's a foggy mind that sees
> in the fog an image of the mind.
>
> Let's just say one of the selves
> you once were made some big mistakes,
> impossible now to undo or understand.

The poem delineates a long list of "reasons" why things are going wrong. The ending, however, is quintessential John Brehm—surprising us with how accurately he's pinned down the stuff of daily living. His very informality packs a punch, and if the ending brings us up short, it's meant to:

> And a million reasons hang
> upside down like sleeping bats.
> For God's sake don't disturb them!
> Relax. Tell yourself it's just a bad mood,
> that it'll pass and then return
> and pass away again, like
> everything else. Like the rain
> and fog this morning. Like everything.

At once playful and serious, *Sea of Faith* remains a collection of singularities, unified by a voice that, like the rain, we will want to hear again—and yet again.

Amy Fleury's *Beautiful Trouble* opens on the Kansas plains where she grew up, establishing a perspective from which we can understand its particular passions. "That girl / always a string bean child" will reach puberty, bringing with her the willful self who can thirty-three pages later call out from "Commotions of the Flesh," saying:

> To hell with the mind
> and its pursuit of its own
> proper good. I am concerned here
>
> with the commotions of the flesh.
> Living in the fissure between desire
> and the having, I have failed,
>
> failed, failed to control myself.

The voice here is at once intimate and authoritative, determined by that elusive element we call "tone," which in this book is inquisitive and feisty. We're in the presence of someone who is willing to thumb her nose at the conventional as she honors a life where "there was trouble all around and everywhere little mercies."

The prairie resides within the poems, acts as backdrop to the smaller dramas that play themselves out on the human stage. Fleury captures the land's essence in quick watercolor brush strokes—wheel rut, cottonwoods, barbed wire, stubble fields—that move toward the figurative: "gray clods of our dreams," "days piled like stones lifted / and placed by the side of the field," "the scribbles of twigs / caught in rainspouts." These, in turn, give way to extended metaphors, exacting in their precision, novel in their approach. And these, in *their* turn, return to the image, reversing its terms: "sky as

stark / as prairie in winter." In this landscape, emotions stand out in bas relief. Finally, the images hold both person and poem in place: "There was always the rusted water pump / and section of rotted fence. / Always and again something / to keep her."

Beautiful Troubles is a fully realized book, a female child's coming of age—the very title names the tensions, coming as it does from a poem entitled "The Fugitive Eve," linking yet again a curious mind and the body's desires. "Pink" moves from a rejection of ruffles into a world where, come spring, there are "brash azaleas / and bright zinnias blazing." "Blaze" might be a good word for what these poems do as they ignite the kindling of place and explore the more explosive mix of emotions. "Wherever the Dancing Is Done" states it this way:

> But I am bound to this place,
> wherever the dancing is done,
> left with the wish
> to be easy in my body
> and the clumsy belief
> in flung arms and these dirty feet.

To be easy in the body, to be at ease with its turbulence—the poet probes that haunting underside of the poems at every opportunity and from every angle. It becomes a quest, culminating in a moment when the poet sees evidence of such ease in the natural world. Still, the mind will insist itself, and "Nemaha County Nocturne" weds place with grammar, even as it follows its rumbling *r*'s into the quieter landscape of *l*, the lines paring themselves down to one muted repetition:

> The difficult stars parse the night into silence,
> benediction, dream. Between soil and silo thrums
> the grammar of grain and all of Kansas rests.
>
> The slender roots of weeds suck at the dirt,
> and the listing windmills and ruined barns
> lean toward their beginnings. Flowing north,
>
> our river glides through glacial cuts
> and those ghosts of primitive sea.
> A turtle, overturned dish
>
> of flesh and patience, swims
> against history's blur.
> Locusts resurrect
>
> the wind and with
> reluctant tongues
> we name it

holy
holy.

From this point on, the book's tone shifts somewhat, becomes more quietly contemplative. Many of the poems are quite short—brief lyric impressions that capture a moment of being. Often, though, they arrive at an insight so keen it stays with you. One such moment occurs in "Elegy for the Living." There is grieving for the not-yet-dead, and it takes place over time and is not often expressed. The final two lines of this poem, however, express it for us:

Absence has its own life.
We listen when it speaks.

Fleury shapes such wisdom almost seamlessly; it arises from her material and her imagery, but it surprises us with its simple intelligence. She seems to move gracefully to places poets like William Stafford came to as well, and it may be no accident that they share the shaping lessons of the Kansas plains. But Amy Fleury's poems have a hotter vein, a sexual fervor that smolders, leading her from her first "whiskey kiss" to the opening of "Burning Back":

Once I was a girl with a truck
and a tackle box full of jigs and treble hooks.
We sat on my tailgate to watch pasture scorch,
and he traced my bones—hip, thigh, shin.

Burning back the grass becomes the process of the poems themselves, so that like the poet, standing "at this edge of fallow field," they seem to be knowingly on the brink: "Like a brittle weed I want to know again / the prairie's need to burn and burn." The poems of *Beautiful Trouble* enrich the fields, burning themselves into both mind and heart.

In the Ghost-House Acquainted is also rooted in place—the Montana mountains where Kevin Goodan grew up on the Flathead Reservation, and the rolling hills of western Massachusetts where he farms—made more real for the precision of the language that realizes it. Consider the opening three stanzas:

Gunshot in river-mist.
A mime of geldings

round the paddock
and the world draws in, serried

by weather,
sheaved and sundered.

The familiar farm is there, rendered as sightless sound, soundless sight. Throughout, we see the things of this world: “pigeons erupting from a barn,” “shavings / from hooves fresh-shod,” llamas “with their eyes filled with pastures of another world.” Under the transforming power of metaphor or keen observation, the world is refreshed: “Daylight is five mares straining / the wires as I pass,” “The screen door a telegraph for the wind,” “How in trees wind turns air silver,” “The darkness / that comes after fire.” But more important, these poems are embedded in a reality so deep they seem almost to resist language. The back cover calls Goodan’s poems “austere,” but this book is not about austerity so much as authenticity—an authenticity that can contain the sparse language of the image and the incantatory language of liturgy. Indeed, Goodan’s poems find their natural cadences and shaping gestures in the Book of Psalms.

“I for my part will go down singing,” says the speaker, but if these are love poems sung in praise, it’s a complicated, problematical praise sung to a world of grief as well as joy. With loss at their center, the poems are understated; they refuse to tell a “story,” though their speaker states, “This is not a story / we can leave untouched.” They “struggle with the dead” by loving life enough to note its every nuance. Like most farmers, Goodan takes an unflinching stance. “Near the Heart of Happening” tells of a mare straining in the throes of birth: “Haboo I say reaching in / where the hips have locked / as she groans and falters. / Haboo for the shanks I grab / and jerk, for the spine / popping and the hips coming free.” And then the coda:

> Haboo for the foal lying in the dirt
> as the mare nudges
> and cleans its body
> as the breathing stops.
> Haboo as the body cools
> as we stay with it after
> as light begins,
> as I regard the still air,
> the meadowlark, the weight
> of its bright singing.

The speaker implicates himself further in “The Lambs, the Fire”:

> Not to rise up
> but smolder down
> into embers, into ash.
> When the first slackens
> we throw on diesel.
> We pull more lambs from the tailgate,
> their legs slick with birth.
> Like cordwood, Mike says

as we pour on more diesel,
as the flames dim then flare.
We wait, throw on more lambs, more diesel.

Fire becomes a dominant image as the poems examine it again and again—both literally and figuratively. In "Saudade," we experience the fire of memory:

I spread flame in the windrow
to vetch the underbrush
but not damage the spruce
as I glimpse your face from
across the fire. The roaring heard,
the burning.

So Goodan explores the liminal space between worlds—not so much between heaven and earth as between an earth containing those he loved and one without them. In the title poem, the speaker walks through a shadowed place in which things dissolve and reappear. "As it was in the beginning," he says, and the mind instantly supplies the phrase that is not there—deliberately not there: is *not* now and *never* shall be, except "as I remember that world / pouring into this." Everything teeters on the edge of balance, and such a state of disequilibrium is reflected in Goodan's choice of diction as well. Starlings "unsilence" and windbreaks "disavow" themselves of leaves. This might seem contrived, but not in the sure hands of someone whose ear and eye are in such synchronicity. Each image seems to contain a "before" and an "after." The seasons turn, and with them the poems turn on the lathe of acceptance. "And so the days go on like this," until the underlying sorrows—there are glimpses of devastating loss, of parting and illness and accident—are divested of drama in favor of their natural place in the order of things.

If these poems are haunted—and they are—they are also inhabited, first by the natural world and then by the elusive "you" whose absence makes itself felt at every turn, an absence that seems, always, to be itself disappearing: "and already what I yearned for most / has lost all definition." Bereavement moves toward appreciation of how this world works and of how we work at knowing the world. We work because of, not in spite of, Goodan's ultimate statement:

Because
nothing lasts.
Not even lasting.

A characteristic move for Kevin Goodan is to alter traditional syntax, creating the effect of breaking open the image with the thought it provoked, sometimes heightening this effect by repeating the maneuver to the point of litany, as though incanta-

tion were the means to understanding. One reason this book is so satisfying is that Goodan wants to "get it right," and doing so involves silence as well as speech, leaving the unspoken center to resound in the reader's consciousness. I wish I could quote the numerous times that, in image after image, Goodan hands me my accustomed world and makes it new for me. I'll have to settle for quoting two poems in full—one for its moving simplicity and one for its ecstatic attention to sound and sensation:

LOSING SOMETHING IMPORTANT

You hear ice tightening in trees—
great birds driving through the wilderness.
And when the beasts shift in their stables
it is with a steadiness that once belonged
to paradise. Plant me in your soil she said
and I will become your earth.

*

COME YOU WHITE MARE, COME STRIDING

In the hour before birds
In the naming of a few stars
In a few leaves fallen
In ash, ember, Come—
In the *splick*, *splick* of a water trough
For in this late month—
I hear so clearly for the first time
Crickets, the weeds—
In mist seeping in from the river
In field, in bone
You white mare
In rain that peens a curved world flat—
Shadow among shadows
Among voices, Come—
Through every weather between us
Come O come you white mare
Come thunder, come silent
Come peal, come sweep, come striding

At once celebratory and elegiac, *In the Ghost-House Acquainted* won the 2005 L. L. Winship/PEN New England Award for Poetry, selected by Mary Oliver. Kevin Goodan appears to be one of the youngest of the poets considered here, but his wisdom feels as though it is the culmination of a lifetime. I'd bet my money that his next book will have equally perceptive insight that sees through to the heart of happening.

So what happened to the curmudgeon? Ah, here she comes again. A quick spine survey of all those first books in my pile reveals a somewhat dismaying fact: except for Faber and Faber, an affiliate of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, there's not another major New York publisher in the lot. Can we call them "major" when they are not willing to take a risk on unknown writers? When they wait to see what the poetic market will bear, then "appropriate" their poets after they have established a reputation? Where are the innovative editors of yesteryear, the ones with the courage of their taste rather than fear of their marketing departments? For the moment, they appear to reside in university presses, in a number of established small presses, and in quite a few brave new ventures. So here's to the eight presses whose books I've noted here—Alice James, Arizona, Wisconsin, Southern Illinois, Verse, Carnegie Mellon, American Poetry Review, and Sarabande. The future of poetry rests in their hands—and in the vision of others in my pile who open their doors to new voices: Graywolf, Story Line, Nightwood, New Issues, Cavan-Kerry, Cloudbank, Pittsburgh, Yale, Milkweed, David Roberts Books, Northeastern, Pleiades, LSU, Laurel Poetry Collective, BkMk, Kent State, WordTech, Ausable, West End, Copper Canyon. Instead of playing catch-up, they have the courage of their present-tense convictions. Even the Grinch could admire that.