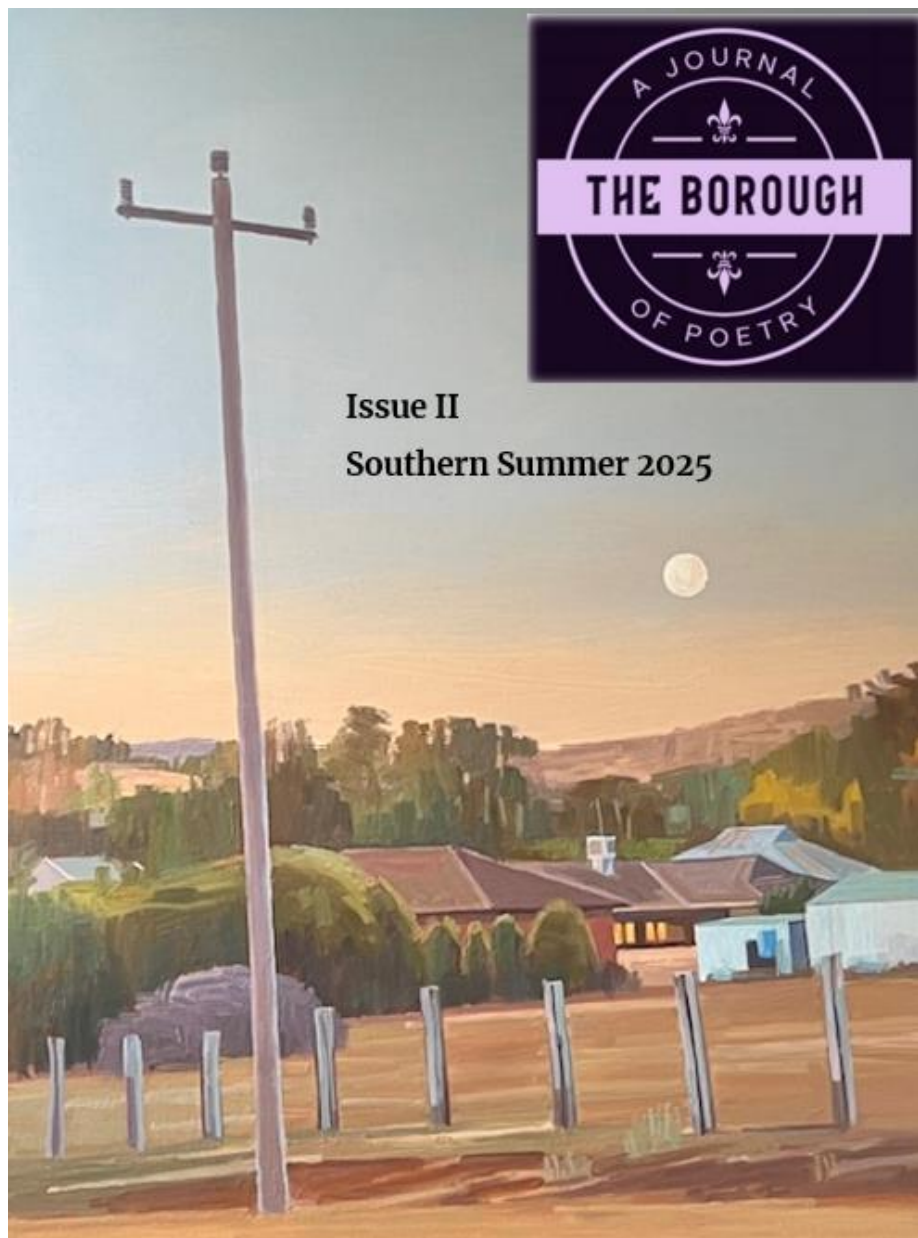




Issue II

Southern Summer 2025



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R. L. Barth

Edmund Blunden (1896-1974)

A shepherd in a greatcoat (the MC
Appended, unacknowledged) you patrolled
Old battlefields, the trenches, no man's land,
The rear, the transports, nature all despoiled,
The shattered houses, farms, and roadside shrines,
But most of all you celebrated troops,
The comrades you remembered all your life.
You would not, could not, let the horror go,
Nor undermine affection for your friends.
I honor you for that. I understand.

Letters from Home

I never understood
Why others couldn't wait
For letters when what good
Came from news three-weeks late?

Came from an alien world
Of proms and family meals?
Took mind from war, unfurled
No memory that heals

But carelessness that kills?
The truth is that you're here
On mountains or foothills
Where life, not home, is dear.

Letters from Vietnam

I didn't write them. What was I to say?
I saw a man whose leg was left in shreds
After he tripped a booby-trap today?
Traumatize those who sleep in warm, soft beds
While saying, in their trauma, they've no clue
Of my reality, although they think they do?

Death on a Bridge

In memoriam, R.E., RVN, 1968

It wasn't just the way you died—
An eighteen-year-old suicide—
But your belief that Nothingness
Was something, more or less.

Flying Home

March 1969

Weapons surrendered to the armory,
My separation papers well in hand,
I look at the dark porthole, where I see
Myself in civvies, ill-prepared to land.

Susan Delaney Spear

For Now

A woman slips inside and whispers, "Hello?"
It is dark and cool. Several votive candles
send prayers heavenward before an icon
of Mary. A slender priest shuffles in.
She shows him a photo and asks "Have you seen
this young man?" He shakes his head, his lips

mime "no." The woman swishes past dried-up tulips
in a vase beside the door and nods goodbye.
The sun burns on the small-town scene.
A vendor sits in shade, selling hand-made candles
and incense. The woman approaches a clutch
of people waiting at the light. A man with a Nikon

strapped around his neck studies the wrinkled icon
of the young man. His eyes fill and his lips
wrangle with the words he wants to say, a mash-
up of "missing?" "son?" "when?" and "oh, hell."
The mother recalls the rows of unlit candles
in the church. "Have any of you seen...?"

Then, in a kaleidoscopic whirl, she's at the scene.
Red lights flash atop the sheriff's cruiser. I-
Phones groan. The sun blinks like a flailing candle.
The searchers and the sheriff move their lips.
She hears nothing. "Oh, no. Oh, No,"
she says to her son's body, bent in that lush green.

Momentarily, a profound hush
falls on this summer suicide-scene.
His spirit rises, flies, and says, "I'm sorry. Good-bye."
Hope smashes on the asphalt like a crystal icon.
She recalls the yellow, dried-up tulips
and regrets she did not stop to light a candle.

For now, when she wakes, she lights a candle
and recites a prayer in morning's hush.
When spring replays, she watches tulips
slice the earth and burst upon the scene.
Those reborn purple, red, and yellow icons
open their mouths and sing, "Hello, oh, hello."

Debussy: “Breyers”

She'd had years of lessons as a child,
Many-more than most, yet here she sits,
On a piano bench with music piled
Around the teacher's baby grand. She grits
Her teeth, strikes the keys and starts too quick.
“Whoa,” he says “You're rushing. Start again.”
He keeps time. She gives her wrist a flick,
Hears the music in her mind, and then
Begins. He bows his head to concentrate.
“Stop. You're right, these lines must fly, but lightly.
Brush the keys with energy, but little weight.
Once again. Imagine these phrases “brightly.””
Skills are hard earned. Progress comes on slow.
You cannot kick a tree to make it grow.

Tomato Sandwiches

The freshly widowed man stares out his window
Across the alley to a lot, a plot
Of earth, overrun by thistles and a dearth
Of care. Now, every day he's over there:
Digging, weeding, turning, feeding the dirt.
After Mother's Day, in early May
He's on his knees in soil planting peas,
Lettuce, tomatoes. He broods over those
Heirlooms, with their tiny yellow blooms.
Soon, the roots coax flowers into fruit.
In his straw hat, he studies the garden patch
And picks the ripe tomatoes, leaving those
That aren't quite ready. He stands tall in thread-
Bare overalls and reaches over each
Neighbor's wooden fence. Without pretense,
He leaves a clutch of vegetables for lunch.
His neighbors savor the comingled flavors:
Hints of maple leaf, a touch of grief.

Mike Alexander

La via dei stelle

It starts in darkness. Someone kneels to light
a candle. Then ten thousand paparazzi
ignite the fireworks, the dynamite
that grills a face without so much as *grazie*.
The standing order is to shoot on sight.
By morning, herds of maenad-limbed *ragazzi*
camp out in front of his five-star hotel.
Thus our most heavenly are put through hell.

Behind the barricade, the ravenous throng
would kill to touch his scarf, to thrum his lyre,
to tear his head off, be it right or wrong,
so powerful this instinct, this desire
that drives his most devoted, to belong
the way a votive wick belongs to fire:
each one, eyeing the penthouse suite above her,
believes herself his predetermined lover.

In time, it ends the way it always ends.
Most do recover from the artificial
intoxication; some remain good friends.
But one poor girl transcends, a sacrificial
virgin, the Bride on whom his rite depends.
A media chorus makes his death official:
*The star known only by his pseudonym
was found this evening torn limb from limb...*

Seven & Up

At seven, he goes clad in corduroys
& Keds. An eye-patch marks a lazy eye.
He keeps his distance from the bigger boys,
who think it is a game to make him cry.
With television tempting him to try
new cereals, new soda pops, new crimes,
he dreams up new, improved, internal rhymes.

At fourteen, he's addicted to old books.
He volunteers to join Library Aids,
puts titles back in place, endures the looks
illiterate sophomores give. His middling grades
come second to his bookshelf escapades.
He slides the spines into appointed places,
while whispering their titles through his braces.

At twenty-one, he's found himself in school,
& done his worst to shuck his innocence.
He dresses punk, as much to ridicule
himself as his professors, poor defense
against the syllabus of common sense;
he'd rather he was left alone to read.
His notebooks should be all he'd ever need.

At twenty-eight, he's faced reality.
With daily rituals that pay the rent,
he now has little time for poetry.
Instead, he seeks a pagan sacrament,
& hours of his evening time are spent
in study of the Tetragrammaton —
sigils he pilfered from the Golden Dawn.

At thirty-five, he's slaving in a bank
to pay his mortgage, line his marriage nest.
He scribbles at his checkbook, draws a blank.
By all accounts, he's losing interest,
& cringes like an uninvited guest
in his own house. He holds his tongue, despite
the voice inside that says to sit & write.

At forty-two he caves to his desire:
one night a week he wrestles to the stage
his stand, his microphone, his amplifier,
so that the chosen of his entourage
can summon echoes from a muted page.
He is the savior of the local readings,
so long as he emcees the brief proceedings.

At forty-nine, he has his manuscript,
& yet he hesitates to send it out
into the marketplace, untimely ripped.
His eyes are red, considering with doubt
unsatisfactory lines he wrote about
an advertised, but not too likely heaven
he first imagined back when he was seven.

Le coup de vent: Mistral noir

This is a drunkard's dance.

Courbet's terrain
distorts a sober regiment of oaks,
into a bacchanal of greens, the strain
apparent in the pressure of brush strokes
& knifework. Boughs, unnaturally skewed,
leaves shaking. Wind-swept canvas, it evokes
the pagan frenzy of a nymph pursued
by satyrs,
 Orphic lute,
 ecstatic cries.

The landscape sprawls, unfettered, like a nude
discarding her quotidian disguise,
more sacred now she's shown herself profane.

Inebriated by a pallet that eyes
cannot explain, she drops what veils remain,
& spins,
 a painter's brush,
 a weather-vane.

D.A. Cooper

Toward the Shining Stars

(Paradiso XIX – Alternate Ending)

“Excruciating pain pervades my soul—
uncertainties and worries I’ve long held.
I eagerly await to break the fast

that has consumed me for so long. Oh, please,
give me the words that will assuage my hunger.
You know the doubt that causes dearth in me:

A man is born upon a far-off shore.
No one he knows has knowledge of the Christ—
no one can speak or read or write of Him—

but all his thoughts and words and deeds are good.
As far as human reason goes, this man
was free of every sin for all his life

but dies unbaptized, lacking Christian faith.
What kind of justice then can damn the man?
Where is his guilt if he does not believe?”

*Now who are you to judge the things of God
when you can’t even seem to see the ground
beneath your feet? You people are obtuse.*

*The everlasting judgement of our God
is far beyond your earthly understanding.
It is much easier for you to see*

*the bottom of the sea with naked eyes
than it will ever be for you to grasp
eternal justice with your mortal mind.*

I pondered on the eagle’s words and said:
“If God’s idea of justice is outside
the limits of the mind, what good is it?

How can we hope to have true justice if
true justice is incomprehensible?
How can we even work toward such a goal?"

The eagle then continued to insult
humanity. It emphasized our lack
of thought, the ignorance upon the earth;

but I had turned away. I felt a loss —
that Heaven I had sought could not provide
answers to questions that still haunted me.

Something about this sphere was incomplete,
and now I felt that I did not belong.
I was about to end my journey there,

go back to earth, when I beheld a dove.
It glided down, alighted on a tree
with golden leaves and fruit of purest white.

*Why have you turned your back on Paradise?
Why have you given up your noble goal
to climb the highest mountain that is known,*

commune with God as Moses did of old?
I didn't want to be rebuked again,
so I stayed silent, wouldn't answer her.

The dove, however, was the messenger
sent from that God who watches over all;
she knew my thoughts, then said these words to me:

*All people are the children of our God
and will be gathered in as little chicks
are drawn beneath the wings of mother hen.*

*All creatures of the earth and sea and sky
lift up their voices, sing eternal praises.
But many think they know more than they do,*

*and even angels spread and keep alive
falsehoods when ignorant of truth. Now come.*
She led me to a door I hadn't noticed

when I first came that way. As I approached,
I saw it glowing like an ember, growing
brighter until it blazed. I knocked. It opened.

The messenger then spoke again: *Go, follow
the path until the end.* I entered in
and walked along a narrow corridor

lit up by brightly shining stones affixed
onto the ceiling and the walls. I sensed
that I was moving upwards, but the ground

did not appear to slant. Each step I took
was lighter than the first, until I felt
the earth at last release the hold it had

on me—my body floated up above
the tunnel floor. I kicked off from the wall,
resumed my journey gliding in the air.

At length, I thought I glimpsed the tunnel's end—
another shining door. As I approached,
I saw a man beside the radiant portal.

He was arrayed in an unblemished white
and silver costume, finely made yet strange
to look upon. Even his head was sealed

in some outlandish crystal dish. He looked
at me and I at him, and then he said
my name. I knew that voice! But could it be?

He lifted up a visor, and I knew
the dear, familiar face of my first guide.
We have been waiting for you here, unsure

if you would wish to make the next great leap.
A smaller door, off to the side, now opened,
another person, dressed the same, came out.

It was my lady, Beatrice! *Hello,*
she said. My mind was overwhelmed by this,
and I was overcome as if by sleep.

When I awoke, I was still floating there,
but looking down I saw that I was dressed
just like my guides, I even wore the dish!

“What is this place?” I said to my two teachers.
“What are these clothes? Why don’t we touch the ground?”
All will be clear, she said to me. *Now come*,

it’s time to leave this sphere. And so I went,
with Virgil and my lady at my sides,
up to that greater door which was aflame

in all of heaven’s glory, and I knocked.
The visors on our helmets closed themselves,
the door began to open. I beheld

a universe more vast and brighter still
than anything I ever could have dreamt.
My master said, *You are now free to leave*

the prison that has held you all your life.
I looked into the tunnel at my back.
The One you seek is not back there among

the artificial spheres, said Beatrice.
That light you knew was but an imitation.
Now come. She held my hand in hers. We leapt

out of the spheres and toward the shining stars.

Hilary Biehl

Landscape

Some clouds have been attempted and a tree
sketched in a little hastily, one limb
raised in a silencing gesture. But that housefly –
or is it an angel – keeps escaping the frame.

The sun is blinking on and off, a beacon
with a delinquent keeper, and the cows –
or are they gargoyles – wear blue robes of lichen,
and the face in the foreground is a ponderous rose.

But was there always, dimly in the background,
a banshee wringing out her tearstained hands
like bandages? The river's a minor wound,
the sky's a blunder nobody defends.

Insomniac

The sea can't sleep. She is folding and folding
her sheets on the shore. She can't get them right,

there is always a crease. There is always the moonlight,
remarking her failure in little white smiles

on the peaks of the wrinkles. There's always a gull
crying out, "Make it smooth, pull it tight."

Vivian Smith

Birthday

Born in the year that Hitler came to power,
I don't do face book, blog or tweet,
I've never owned a mobile phone,
kind of old-school, dressed to disappear,

and yet surprise, surprise, I'm still alive
with poems waiting to be written down
like sign writing scribbled on the sky,
half-erased, already vanishing.

I like my life, the humdrum tasks.
I never hungered for the hippie trail.
Indifferent to fashion, I survive.
Poems can be true in different ways.

I write them down, I do not hold my breath.
I don't just sit around, waiting for my death.

Hymns to the Sun

All those poems written to the sun
I started reading late in bed this morning,
odes, celebrations, hymns of praise,
they seem the product of another age,
cornered in their place in history.

This is this year's bleakest winter day.
I leave the car park in the icy dark
and take the escalator up one floor.
And guess what finds me speechless at the door:
a bucketful of sunflowers for sale.

I'll get some later when I'm back in stride,
headlines warning of another gale.
They fill me with a quick determined pride.
This unexpected bonus will not fail.

A Garden in Van Diemen's Land

This walled garden was the one she loved,
speaking to the Europe of her mind.
It faced the sun with such serene composure.
For those who made it, it was just a grind.

The cruelty of plant life still disturbed her,
the way they use, abuse, and fight each other,
compete for food, for space in which to flourish,
rising up by knocking others down.
They cannot thrive without control and order.
They need the lash, the stake, the guiding twine.

Beauty is a question of appearance,
assurance of the lily, the pertinacious rose
the ivy covets with its cool embrace,
and every flower must settle in its place.

Jane Blanchard

Microsanía imperfecta

She was the one who went off on her own.
She was the one who filed for the divorce.
You gave her what she wanted in due course.
Still she will never leave your life alone.

Available through email more than phone,
You have remained a favorite resource.
She contacts you supposedly perforce,
Less for herself than for a son long grown.

She seeks a certain something left behind,
A sterling ladle or an antique chest,
A recipe or record you must find.
Your common past has yet to enter rest
Since fire so often burns within her mind.
For smoke fly's sake, you try to do your best.

George Witte

Annunciation

It's coming down, not now but soon enough.
The when depends on whether you comply.
Appeasements cease, a red line drawn between
insurgents' blood and this, a child's, erased
to shoes.

Imagine how that day begins—
black coffee, cigarette, then shave and dress
unknowingly, routine your sedative
and grave.

From satellites deployed above
you're data-processed probabilities,
behavior weaponized.

To bargain ends
won't slow the rush of air, the roar compressed
by sheer, terrific wings that vortex leaves
as evidence of will and codify
the time and manner of our choosing you.

Barge

A wake of air bows cattails as we pass

entombed in steel, heads bowed to candid screens.
No god requires such worshipful assent.

From stop to stop beneath slick wheels the rails'
percussive hiss incants an antiphon
to chasten doubtful eyes. Enthralled, we doze

adrift through brilliant meadowlands where dew
tips every stalk. Through automatic doors
a pall of oil insinuates our lungs
and harrows dreams with residue of fire,

soft ash enveloping last rituals
with deep solicitude, as if displayed
for future wonderment: how small we were,

like children hidden under schoolhouse desks,
crouched in basements holding hands, fused in bed.

A wake of air bowed cattails as we passed.

Juleigh Howard-Hobson

Sylvan Episode

He looked at me as if I ought to know
just who he was
but I did not. I looked away, then so
did he. Alas
I didn't recognize the Great God Pan
in human form.
I simply thought he was another man.
I felt a warm
gaze inviting me once more. I turned to
see him changed. A
God again, hooves and furry legs, horns grew.
He gestured "Hey?"
I was too dumbstruck to do more than stare.
He shook his curls and sprinted off somewhere.

Steven Searcy

Monday Montage

A bright, generic storefront advertising
the latest shipping rates—
down the walkway on the lefthand side,
a faded skeleton,
a plastic fork, a tiny line of ants
beginning to inspect
another rat that's newly dead—the box
of bait against the wall.

Around the back, next to the loaded dumpster,
a jumbled pile of cardboard,
a single woman's sandal, cans of Monster
Energy, upended.

Across the cracking pavement, by the cleaners,
another squatting dumpster,
glass shards gleaming on the ground, a dark
discarded toddler car seat.

Back on the road—excess of offices
with rows of tinted windows,
tall crepe myrtles sculpted, arching, lining
the wide mown medians.

A cleaner parking lot—Canada goose
ambling across, another
casually standing in the brilliant grass,
stepping here and there,
pausing to nibble, nonchalant as rows
of shining parked sedans
under the nearly boundless tessellation
of clouds across the sky.

Jakob Ziguas

The Grave of Keats

The daisies sprinkled on this happy field
like pale confetti, could not wait for spring.
Late winter sun endows sight's meagre yield
with chiselled white precision. Each stone string,

still legible in marble like a vein,
eludes all motion but the silent breeze
that parts the altar curtains of the rain,
and stirs the cenotaphs of cypress trees.

All that was mortal is now tight-strung bones,
heroic couplets of denuded ribs,
through which whines song to move the stubborn stones,
as black ink floods a glut of sappy nibs.

The flowers droop like tired courtesans—
mascara smudged—who, in a bitter glass,
still play coquettes behind their lavish fans,
while in the street the masked processions pass.

Upon the copper wall, a twisted vine,
as yet climbs barren of its bloody fruit,
as tangled with its shadow as a sign.
Death plays upon his bones as on a flute.

No memory remains perpetual,
except it gather scattered bones and save
the poor and homeless logos of the soul
to rise embodied from its pallid grave.

Chipped steeples rise among discoloured urns:
motherless cherubs, mossy laurels, dun
drapery, and countless nameless cairns
like pebbles left for Goethe's lesser son.

The motley crows patrol their moirai, fly
across the borders of their shadow-states;
while—unconcerned, in sunlight, getting high—
a couple kiss and mock the kindly fates.

Fiesole

A nearly empty square: the restaurants
are closed for winter; shops are shuttered up;
the only place to drink another cup
of bad espresso—*Café Déjà Vu*.
The ghost of Gramsci haunts a narrow street
that bears his name; only the Fiesole
Centro Estetico invites you in.

The tumbled tomb is full of cigarettes,
perhaps as votive offerings to death.
The massive blocks are not especially cold,
no colder than the monastery wall,
where wind torments the brittle chestnut leaves
and sends them spiring up the narrow path.

A spacious cavea of vineyards, hills
of bottle-green with purple undertones;
like whales the rainclouds—
 grey and massive—skim
as if across a swaying bed of kelp.

A thin blue smoke ascends, a cypress ghost
and, in the foreground (surely pasted in
from Botticelli's allegory of spring),
a tree has flowered early: charcoal bark
is streaked with silver, ornaments
of pixelated pink adorn the high
elaborate hair of an Etruscan girl,
whose movements haunt the body of a crone.

Sparrows

They peck what people scatter,
and scatter having pecked,
are brown as blown leaf-litter,
skittery and stripy-backed.

I pause; I peck. Divine
compulsion of the dance;
this mess of wings is mine,
it rakes the crumbs of chance.

Our ritual disputes
are authored by the hand
that scattered absolutes
on formless, arid land;

this grabby rabble bound
by rites of manic tact
no one can understand,
all live to re-enact.

E.J. Hutchinson

With Friends like These

Catullus 73

No longer wish to merit well of anyone,
Or think that someone will keep faith with you.
All are ungrateful; it is futile to have done
A kindness—more than that, it stymies, too.
Take me, who've been more grievously misused by none
Than him who lately promised he was true.

Wronging Love

Greek Anthology 10.29

To say that you've been wronged by Love no doubt
Feels good; intemperate men are fond
Of putting this complaint
To use, but it's
A ruse.

Fishing

How often we mistake a look
Intended not to mean or be unkind,
And use it as the pointed hook
To reel an innocent with tautened line.
When charity abates, from malice we
Become the monster that we think we see.

Fergus Cullen

Theognis: From His Life and Work

I.

(Ἰδιώτης.) “Ah. There you are, Theognis. All alone,
Eyes in your empty wineglass. Have you found
Something of interest, down among the dregs?
Wisdom, perhaps?”

(Θέογνις.) “Yes, I, alone, down here
Among the dregs, have found the only wisdom.
The wisdom of Silenus. So: shut up.”

II.

Though drunken pranks may mar my name among the sober,
Would I sooner, sober, endure the drunk?
I think not. Your upstanding warnings notwithstanding,
I'll keep my swerving path unswervingly
From tee shy of total to a shade past outrage,
And thus approximate a golden mean.

Wisdom of Working Men

“One thing you must accept,”
Said the butcher — “and I don’t intend this meanly:
To live is to get divided up
And to live well is to divide up cleanly.”

“One thought that made sense of things,”
Said the baker — “perhaps even solved life’s riddle:
To live is to harden in the heat
And to live well is to stay soft in the middle.”

“One principle strikes me as ultimate,”
Said the candlestick-maker — “if not downright holy:
To live is to burn down
And to live well is to burn down slowly.”

L.E. Ward

Sonnet II

When does it end – the vocal dawn, our breath?
I could fill a graveyard with what I don't know.
The stone angel avoids my eyes, looks overhead
as we walk with our participating shadows.

Nobody speaks of my future but you.
I pass skeletal flowers in every sun torn row,
incense burrows to ash, rain rinses its hues,
in cloudy jars sky rolls off the smooth stone.

But not this – our faces pressed in the cold,
our breath, wandering away from itself,
a child free from watchful eyes – if ever called home,
if our spirits rise beyond ourselves,

if death exhumes the sculpture of our bones,
let me sleep in you, buried in all we know.

Joseph Teti

Ptolemy

“Thine eyes are dim with watching...” — Bryant.
Rev 22:5.

I.

When Ptolemaios first observed the sky
he followed Babylon for their insights,
presenting realizations of this world —
the sun an average distance from the Earth
of just twelve hundred radii. And then
he mocked up syntax for the math-moved spheres,
cataloging the motions of the stars,
and demarcating epicycles, thus
unmasking that stringent geometry
whose law commanded galaxies to stir.

II.

Astronomers built on his work for years,
predicting futures, giving sage advice,
some of it even true! For what divine
and heavenly designs could not foretell
at least the daily weather here below?
He saw with secret knowledge tyrants-ides,
the rise and fall of several empires,
and esoteric secrets unsaid here —
all these he saw with fractions of the stars:
an unpolluted sky, still mostly dark!

III.

No wonder our astrologers today
fraudulate the horoscopes in the news —
more accurate to guess these murky times
from darkness visible inside their minds
than to look up, where shapeless, opaque smogs
slouch across blinded cities street by street.
If only we could see all of the stars —
all one septillion suns blazing to Earth!
Poor Ptolemy! What portents would he know
within a seamless sky illumined so
fully that it would be another day?

Robbie Coburn

Anchurus

Life, and the frail presence of life
inside the oracle,
as the gold and silver
disappeared

into the deepening chasm.
he followed the riches down
as he watched them cast
into the darkness,

mounting his horse and riding
away from his father,
entering the wound in the ground
and the hole then sealing.

just as how, when you lay against me,
I long for you to seep
into my chest and feel my heart
close around you.

Arion

You have not died, so I still live —
as at Thebes, when blood billowed
across the sand, as if in water.

you draw breath, so I pursue the air it carries,
as Arion ran to the wounded king of Argos,
carrying him to safety from the battlefield.

you have a body, so I have arms
to cradle each day you touch the earth,
holding your tortured flesh
and drawing your life into my mouth.

Smoke Alarm

At what point did I know
you saved me
and when did I try to recall it —

further from you then,
the last bird awake
falling asleep.

our bodies, unwilling to part
with each other
finally falling asleep.

I dreamed my life was as it was
before you, and of an emptiness

that stood like a mirror
with one face appearing
in the reflection.

until suddenly I screamed
in my sleep

and you woke me so I knew
that you were there.

Daniel Brown

Fan-Letter to Caroline Shaw

On hearing her “Partita for 8 Voices”

As, after an age of kisslessness, a kiss
Can set your innards all delirious
In ways on which you’d largely given up
(So distant were they even as a hope),
No longer does it seem impossible
That music of our time can mean—for all
I’d feared the art had reached a fatal pass—
As much to me as any ever has.

I’d Hope

Were I, this late in living’s day,
To find the providential love
Life half-amounts to dreaming of,
I’d hope to cry “Dear Lord, feel free
To take me.” (Not “How dare you, Love,
To resurrect a rage at death
I’d relegated to my youth
And gotten past, or close enough.”)

Surrender

To go by the crazed terrain we call his sketches,
Beethoven also wrestled with notes, but my
Wrestling was of an abysmally lower order:
Like that of a writer for whom an operation
As basic as hooking a predicate up to a subject
Involves some serious furrowing of the brow.
No wonder I gave composing up, content
To let myself surrender to the crush
Of genius-jaws and feel my struggles cease.

Lucas Smith

Fences

Good fences make good
Neighbours, *someone* said,
But we have none on
Our left side; neighbours
That is, and it's a good
fence but the chickens
Have scratched out the dirt
Underneath. They're skilled
As refugees, despite
The bricks and branches
I've blocked their diggings
With. They wander past
My window but we
Leave them till evening
To donate fertiliser
To the neighbour's yard.
You have to crouch down
And look from their
Perspective to find
All the gaps. Stymied
They drill on the window
like woodpeckers and
Squawk at the door.
Only when they've turned
the yard into a food
Desert will they peck
At the packaged seed
Like a child returning
Softly to cold porridge
After a fuss but even
Then they undermine
A plank or brick after
A few days and know
There's a reward of cheese
(parmesan) or left-
Over steak to entice
Them to return. Tomorrow
The wire goes down.

Portsea Sunset, Chopin

The baby responds pacifically to baroque.
Bach, Buxtehude, even Zadok
compels her gaze into the middle distance
for the few minutes her mother needs
to whip up dinner. Born with taste, by chance.

Chopin is another thing entirely, entirely
Useless in domestic practice.

I am away from home at dinner-time.
At my desk, gazing off,
caesuras reflect off the orange clouds
at sunset over Indented Head
with after-school gloom,
 autumn moodiness
spared infants who have but two registers:
baroque delight and battle-drums.

Away from home at dinner-time, enclosed in
blush orange through moonah tinged with gray
and lavender hedge-rows, the adult
 pleasures of sevenths, clarity, diminished
melancholy chord-fall, chromatics rising,
I hope these will swoop you too one day.

Claire Miranda Roberts

After Beauty

Through which we become
aware of objective
order;

virtue of any kind
is something
in itself.

We can in no way govern
but assert the reality
of beauty—

*the highest rank
of becoming a martyr.*

Slip

after "God's Grandeur"

Some slip of
beauty goes

by heavenly bodies
(ah, bright thing!)

Listen, I am a run
through.

The soil is bare,
nor can foot

*feel into
your wings.*

Privata

Signs from the Northern Fires

(After Goethe's "Erlkönig"; written during the Canadian wildfires of 2023 and their effects on the United States)

"What rises so red in the afternoon sky? Is it Mars
Shining sooner and closer to warn us of war looming huge?"
"Our local star, my child, no more. Don't parse
The sky as script. The smoke is not imbued
With signs. What smarts our eyes and bloods the Sun
Is nothing but the northern fires' ash."
"My father, my father, what makes you deny? Day is one
Endless dusk, and the air hangs malignant like poisonous gas!"
"The evil of our time is manifest.
It shows itself without analogy.
Your gaze, in youth at least, is better cast
Away from signs. Enough is plainly seen."
Their eyes converged. Now nothing to be said,
They squinted at a world aflame, half-dead.

Megan Cartwright

They Colonised the Moon

Night. A room more coffin than bed.
I run a can-opener around my scalp,
pull back the lid, let my mind seek out

the heads I lopped from succulents.
I spy, with my telescopic eye, the pups,
multiplied. Cerberus gardens in full bloom

across the face of the turned steel moon,
food just out of reach of pastel giraffes
pinned by the weight of breathing apparatus.

Selkie

In my childhood, my mother and I toured tiny coastal towns,
her marvelling at the charm of deserted watchtowers,
me in her wake, striving for a smile I hoped was a beacon.

Her temperament told of the currents that called her.
My mother should have been a lighthouse keeper,
fused with lamps and lenses.

I tell myself she spluttered ashore; seal skin trailing.
I tell myself I am no briny Rapunzel atop a spiral staircase.

Clarence Caddell

Aetiology

There was a girl inside the big strong man:
A dryad lodged inside that broad
And virile trunk. How did she get in there?
At any rate she hid as if outlawed.

Perhaps her face was that of his own mother,
Or of the little girl with whom
He'd been caught showing his and being shown
Inside the walk-in-robe in her parents' room.

No one touched him like that; his awe-inspiring
Father seldom had reason to raise
A hand to him, though to his elder brother
And younger sister he came in third place.

There was that time he humped his mother's pillow:
His father spanked him then, the shame
And pleasure shifting him outside himself,
Until the fact that he bore his father's name

Might mean that he was both parents at once.
Later such feelings made him cut
Himself, and loathe her languid movements in
His breast and loins—the parasitic slut

Who'd never show her face. In future he
Would prove his manhood man to man;
And he grew hungrier and hungrier
For proof from those whom he was manlier than.

And he found many who'd present the rump
As soon as look at him. A share
Of that elusive Her he found in some
Because it was himself before him there,

In bed or elsewhere, in the one he fucked,
His sacrifice. Soon as he was done
He'd send them off into the desert. Thus
He almost found a way to be alone.

But every now and then he'd throw a match.
And at such times the bear was baited
Not outwardly but by the bitch within;
Then nothing could fill him; he was never sated,

But wearied, finally. And thus he caught
His death, although he lived just over
A decade, gradually sickening.
Then he was doubly glad to have nor lover

Nor family except the younger sister
Who cared for him. When he appeared
To her post-mortem, head within her lap
Nothing about the dream struck her as weird;

She'd had like dreams before, though in this one
She saw him changing, bristly face
Becoming smooth, his features feminised
And juvenescent—and yet more than a trace

Of him behind the eyes remained. So she
Rejoiced, and later, at her twelve-
Week scan found out she was to have a girl.
A lovely dream! Not that she would delve

Into occultism or superstition;
Yet all the same, could it be true?
The birthmark on her daughter's chest, did it
Resemble her late brother's dragon tattoo?

And other signs would come over the years:
Take for example an old song
Her little girl must more than once have heard
For her so fluently to sing along.

And she grew beautiful—astonishing,
Such beauty! so that her endeavour
To cover or deface it might be only
Bashfulness—no, they never could believe her,

Not when she had childishly complained,
Nor as a strident adolescent
Renewed the same not just in tears but blood
Also—that just a while had seemed quiescent.

Though surely neither parent made too much
Or little of her nascent beauty,
As if what eyes or dreams or mirror saw
Devolved upon her in the form of duty.

Was she her uncle come again? No more
A happy thought! Or was she rather
Become a host to something yet distinct—
Think of it: a wicked fairy godfather!

The girl fought hard and yet harder again
When mother nature drew first blood.
A perfect Amazon, except that she
Stood outside any form of sisterhood.

Born too early, she found none to abet
Her autoandrophilia
At first, but hung on till they came around,
Her breast tissue at last replaced by scar,

With worse to come. Had she or they or he
Come more to hate than to desire
What there was no impediment before,
To torture nature, prove the bitch a liar?

Perhaps there rests some archive over yonder,
Repository where one might find,
In theory at least, an explanation
To satisfy the sorry heart and mind.

Robert Krishna

Sora Nostra

I have not always loved her, for at first
she was a rival whom I greatly feared –
I knew not who she was, felt not the thirst
of love with which, so greedily, she peered

over the cradle that we shared – and later,
I would resent her snatching all my treasures,
with the claim she possessed in them right greater
than mine, but afterwards, in careful measures,

in fossils amber-wrapped, in fragments crumbled,
in the resurrections memory bestowed,
in the ambition of desire, humbled
and forced to beg for what it thought was owed,

she'd dole them back to me, as she was moved
by pity or by whimsy or another
fair mood of protean love which often proved
stronger than our common lust to gather

the world into our arms, and I discovered
that things I loved grew dearer by her love,
for they, in her abrasive grasp, recovered
the sheen use had begrimed with dust above.

So now, though I begrudge her each defeat,
and she in her turn craves my every conquest,
we've learned, as siblings must, to find delight
in this exchange of loss in daily contest.

Another, someday soon, will come and steal her,
and that undying all-consuming lover
will not return her. No more will I feel her
breath as she runs me down; nor will I ever

hear her sing for triumph, see her dance
for joy; her hands will nevermore enfold me;
nor will the laughter of her eyes entrance
mine to entrust her with the means to mould me.

But I will not miss her, for she will have left
in all my rescued treasures that fine trace
of her inescapable embrace no theft
in heaven or earth can evermore erase.

Contributor Notes

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George Witte is the author of four poetry collections: *An Abundance of Caution* (Unbound Edition Press, 2023), *Does She Have a Name?*, *Deniability*, and *The Apparitioners*. New poems are published or forthcoming in *Consequence*, *Five Points*, *Revel*, and *Think*.

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Megan Cartwright is an Australian poet and college Literature teacher. Her work has featured print and online in journals and magazines including *Barrelhouse*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, and is forthcoming in *Island Magazine* and *Verandah*.

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Mike Alexander lives in Houston, Texas, with his wife, his cats, & his guitars. He has one full-length poetry collection: *Retrograde* (P&J Poetics, 2013). His work has appeared in numerous journals, such as *Rattle*, *Measure*, *Texas Review*, *Texas Observer*, *Borderlands*, *New Orleans Review*, etc.