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By Increments

The Kitchen Sink: New and Selected Poems 1972-2007. By Albert Goldbarth. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007. 370 pp. $26.00, hardcover.

The Corpse Flower: New and Selected Poems. By Bruce Beasley. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006. 224 pp. $24.00, hardcover.

Quiver of Arrows: Selected Poems 1986-2006. By Carl Phillips. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. 207 pp. $24.00, paperback.

Messenger: New and Selected Poems 1976-2006. By Ellen Bryant Voigt. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007. 192 pp. $25.95, hardcover.

Not long before he died, I asked the poet Alan Dugan how his writing had changed over the years — an innocent enough question, I thought, and I was unprepared for the ferocity of his reply. He proudly proclaimed, in a tone of voice that made unmistakable his contempt for even being asked such a question, that there was no difference between the poems he wrote in the 1950s and those that he authored half a century later. The belief in change, he went on to say, was a capitalist conspiracy. I knew better than to ask him to follow up on that last point, and I should have known not to ask my question in the first place. Dugan was, after all, one of our sternest and most militantly antiromantic poets. In an early poem he had characterized Rilke, that tireless cheerleader for self-transformation, as a "prig," and I suppose

Dugan wasn't being completely disingenuous in his answer to my question. You'd have to be a far more perceptive reader than I am to see much difference between the work gathered in his Yale Prize volume, *Poems*, which came out in 1961, and that of his last two volumes, *Poems 6* and *Poems 7*. And, of course, the fact that Dugan chose to number his volumes in this way rather than tart them up with actual titles says something significant about his position as well. For whatever the reasons, Dugan chose to write the same poem over and over, not so much because he had succumbed to self-imitation as because he chose to remain faithful to his particular bitter but unbowed vision. To consciously adopt such a stance would seem to put a writer in fairly select company. The why-fix-it-if-it-ain't-broke school is ostensibly rather small. (Hardy is the great example from an earlier century, and among Dugan's contemporaries there's Philip Larkin—but who else?)

I begin with this anecdote because the four books I have before me are selected volumes, and I think we tend to be of two minds when we read poets' career-spanning collections, especially when we are revisiting in a new context the work of poets we've known before. On the one hand, *Selecteds* tempt us to impose a narrative, an archetype—we see the writer's promising (or wobbly) beginnings as often as not give way in midcareer to a new sort of authority and vitality. The growth-of-the-poet's mind clichés we employ to characterize these changes tend toward the mystical: writers, usually around the time of a third or fourth book, "find their voice"; they reach their "full powers." On the threshold of middle age, Luke Skywalker is now finally able to let the Force be with him. This myth is attractive in no small measure because contemporary poetry is relatively rich in notable examples of such a pattern. The brilliant self-appraisals of Lowell's *Life Studies* continue to thrill me in part because they mark such a definitive departure from the Hopkinsian grandiosity of his first collection and the cumbersome mannerisms of his second. And there's Wright with *The Branch Will Not Break*, Rich with *Leaflets*, Williams with *Tar*, Levine with *They Feed They Lion*, to name just a few. Of course, not all of these writers really got better in these supposedly ground-breaking volumes, and some in several key respects got worse. Furthermore, contemporary poetry abounds in examples of writers who "find their voices" and then get stuck with them. Merwin reached

an astonishing pinnacle with *The Lice*, and then spent a couple of decades rewriting that book, with ever-diminishing success. We tend, however, to ignore such niceties in favor of the self-transforming narrative. Berryman rather stridently insists that poetry aims at "the reformation of the poet, as prayer does," that it enables the poet, "gradually, again and again, to become almost another man." Seductive notions, to be sure. But as I read them part of me is mindful of Dugan: poets don't turn into butterflies; they don't typically get reborn like Saul on his way to Damascus. Instead, if they're fortunate, they get older. And perhaps, as their waistlines and CREF accounts expand, by increments, in a slow and compelling fashion that is ultimately just as mysterious as Berryman's oracular notion of reformation, they get better. Witness the four *Selecteds* under discussion here, all exemplary.

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I begin with Albert Goldbarth because he is the figure among the group who has written the most and changed the least. The sheer volume of his work boggles the mind. The "also by Albert Goldbarth" page of the new volume lists twenty-three other collections of poetry, a dozen chapbooks, five volumes of essays (and the essays of this most discursive of poets are for the most part interchangeable with his poems) as well as a novel — and you suspect that somewhere along the way Goldbarth may have forgotten to list a chapbook or two. You would think that a writer who produces so damn much would have to be uneven: the *Collecteds* of many of the marathon runners of the last century tend toward the unreadable in many places. No one in his right mind could read the poetry of McDiarmid, Neruda, or Conrad Aiken in its entirety, and you can imagine what a test of stamina the inevitable Ashbery *Collected* is going to be. But Goldbarth is that rarest of birds, a graphomaniac who is always interesting. He's like William Carlos Williams and Auden in their *Collecteds*, or the largely forgotten Robert Penn Warren in his — even the unsuccessful poems hold our interest. We read the new Goldbarth less for his masterpieces — though there are a few — and more for his sustained ability to engage us. He's one of those writers who, even on one of his off days, possesses some irrefutable charms.

Goldbarth's signature poem is highly voice-driven, a raconteur-ish display of wise-ass charm, combined with a vast and undisciplined erudition that mixes science, history, high culture, and a very large dollop of low. The poems arrive with a dizzying array of special facts and eccentric musings, but at their best the wacky barrage of info becomes the writer's means to confront emotive basics. In a better Goldbarth poem, everything you'd ever want to know about canopic jars will give way to an elegy for one of the poet's parents, or a meditation on an obscure Dutch genre painting will become a means to mourn the end of a marriage. The poems are evidence of an interesting mind rather than an interesting life: Goldbarth has for the past couple of decades made his home in Wichita, one of those cities that always lingers near the very bottom of the "quality of life" surveys, and yet you suspect that even if he lived in Paris or Venice he'd rarely leave the apartment. To work with Goldbarth's particular sort of associative ardor, a certain reclusiveness is probably essential, as well as a certain impatience with refined technique. Goldbarth has plenty of prosodic skill, but to display it ostentatiously would only slow him down; his approach to form is meat and potatoes, characterized by a line that tends toward a loose pentameter and a reliance on a sort of free verse sonnet and sonnet sequence. Given Goldbarth's mad scientist obsession to hybridize forms and lavishly quote from his research, he is more comfortable with longer suites and sequences than with shorter lyrics, but he's no slouch at the latter. What does Goldbarth sound like when all of his cylinders are firing? The opening passage of a three-page poem entitled "Coinages: A Fairy Tale" typifies his style:

> On May 1, 1947, when *airlift* barely existed, my father
> lay down beside my mother. He wasn't my father
> yet, she wasn't my mother, not technically, the late sun
> played the scales of light on the lake at Indian Lodge State Park,
> and *rocket booster* was new by a year and *thruway*
> only by two, and *sputnik* waited somewhere
> in the clouded-over swales of the future and, beyond it
> *pixel*, *rolfing*, *homeboy* floated
> in a *cyberspace* too far-removed and conceptual
> even to be defined by a cloud. He stroked her. She stirred
> in her veil of slumber—when was the last time
> anyone "slumbered" in a poem?—but didn't wake.

Not that he wanted to wake her: only to stay
in contact with this singular, corporeal thing they'd made
of themselves amid the chenille and gas heat of the room.
It would be night soon. It would be dusk, and then
the dreamy, let's say the oneiric, nighttime.
Macrobiotic would come into being, *fractal* and *rock-and-roll.*
The first reported use of *twofer, LP, fax* is 1948.
Spelunker, 1946, and *cybernetics, TV, vitamin B-12* were
newfangled, still as if with the glister
of someone's original utterance on them. Others,
say the *kit bag* that they'd lazily left open near the radio, as in
"pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile,
darn you, smile"—were even now
half insubstantial, like a remnant
foxfire glimmering richly over a mound of verbal mulch . . . (134)

Goldbarth takes the hoary contemporary poetry cliché of writing about one's conception and invests it with the requisite tenderness; juxtaposed with the zany and relentless etymological riffing the poem becomes something more as well, an expression of wonder at language's protean ability to remake itself. Of course, as kit bags get replaced by cyberspace and fractals, and even a word like "slumber" is seen as somehow imperiled by this process, the poem grows elegiac as well. True, the catalog of neologisms is overlong, but if you're a fan of Goldbarth you're accustomed to forgiving him such indulgences. Once you get beyond Goldbarth's frenzied desire to entertain, you encounter a writer who insists, much in the way that the High Modernists did, that poetry can regain some of the cultural primacy it has lost to science and other art forms. His repeated allusions to pop culture—especially sci-fi and cinema—are not merely a fan's rhapsodies, but an attempt to co-opt these disciplines in order to somehow rejuvenate poetry. It should not surprise us that many of Goldbarth's poems are versions of the *ars poetica*. In a manic, Kenneth Kochian ode to reading called "Library," he tells us, in dead earnest, that "This book can save the world." And in "Shawl," which opens the collection, Goldbarth takes Stevens's "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" and sets it on a Greyhound. It's a deft (and uncharacteristically terse) setting forth of the Goldbarth credo:

Eight hours by bus, and night
was on them. He could see himself now
in the window, see his head there with the country
running through it like a long thought made of steel and wheat.
Darkness outside; darkness in the bus—as if the sea
were dark and the belly of the whale were dark to match it.
He was twenty: of course his eyes returned, repeatedly,
to the knee of the woman two rows up: positioned so
occasional headlights struck it into life.
But more reliable was the *book*; he was discovering himself
to be among the tribe that reads. Now his, the only
overhead turned on. Nothing else existed:
only him, and the book, and the light thrown over his shoulders
as luxuriously as a cashmere shawl. (5)

Goldbarth surely faced a challenge in trying to cull from his gigantic corpus a representative sample of his work, and he has certainly not used his previous two selected volumes as models — only two poems from his 1993 *Selected* are reprinted in the new book, and only four from his 1983 *Selected*. Goldbarth hit upon his signature style very early on; his method is more or less already fully realized in his third full-length collection, 1974's *January 31*, so a strictly chronological arrangement of the poems would make little sense. And Goldbarth's published collections have not always gathered his very best work. (If you're a poet of a certain age, you remember all the Goldbarth poems that shone from the pages of half a hundred mimeographed poetry journals of the 1970s, many of which never made it into a collection. To encounter in the book at least one of these efforts—a previously uncollected poem from 1972 about Houdini that appeared in George Hitchcock's stridently ugly but then hugely prestigious *kayak*—is oddly invigorating. It's not merely that the poem presages many of Goldbarth's mature strategies, it also summons up a now mostly forgotten little era of literary history, but I digress . . .).

Goldbarth tries to meet the challenge of how to put it all together by devoting a good bit of space to new poems, and then dividing the rest of the work into over a dozen thematic and descriptive categories—as well as subcategories! Aside from Jarrell in his 1955 *Selected*, I can't think of another poet who has arranged a selected volume in

this way, and the divisions often seem a bit labored, with titles recalling something you'd find in a child's encyclopedia or a high school literary anthology—there's "This Thing Larger Than a Self," "Ancestored Back," and "The Rising Place for the Dough," as well as more conventional monikers along the lines of "American Days" and "Human Beauty." All in all, however, the structure seems to work, and it helps the reader to avoid the sort of Goldbarth-fatigue that invariably occurs when you read long stretches of a poet who is as relentlessly inventive as this. I don't mean to sound belittling here—quite the contrary. Goldbarth could probably put together two more companion *Selecteds*, neither one of which would reprint anything from *The Kitchen Sink*—and both books would be almost as impressive. American poetry will never again see a figure quite like Albert Goldbarth, and I hope that with this new collection he will finally be given the recognition he deserves.

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Bruce Beasley is a decade younger than Goldbarth, and shares with the older poet a number of concerns and approaches. He, too, ranges widely in his subject matter and draws inspiration from sources which other poets might find daunting or esoteric. His 2005 collection, *Lord Brain*, is an extended ode to neuroscience, and "The Craps Hymnal," one of the many impressive new poems in the collection, is an attempt at homegrown divination, going so far as to include illustrated records of various dice rolls—the *I Ching* goes to Vegas. Yet where Goldbarth is Borscht Belt, Beasley is High Church. He is, above all, a poet of spiritual ardor, a dyspeptic believer in the Geoffrey Hill mode, and Beasley's penchant for complicated nonce forms, although they sometimes come across as nutty Rube Goldberg constructions, attest above all to his cranky devotional fervor. Writing of Donne in a recent essay, Hill insists that for a certain breed of poet, style *is* faith, and Beasley may well be such a writer. His many allusions to mystical esoterica—Meister Eckart, Julian of Norwich, the Gnostic gospels and the *Corpus Hermeticim*, (not to mention plain old Bible verse)—are evidence not merely of Beasley's learnedness, but also of his belief in the poem as a kind of heterorthodox spiritual exercise; he is a postmodern descendant of Herbert, Traherne, and Vaughn. Aside from Hill

and Beasley's former teacher Charles Wright, there are few contemporary poets who can keep such august company.

Beasley's early work is much influenced by Wright, and is characterized by the same lavish verbal surfaces and neosurrealist imagery. Like Wright, Beasley is a southerner, and deeply aware of the peculiar aesthetic burdens the southern poet inherits. As we might expect from a southern writer whose concerns incorporate the theological, he alludes to Flannery O'Connor with some frequency in his poems, and possesses something of her black humor and interest in the grotesque. These qualities act as kind of countervalence to the early poems' bleak depiction of domestic violence and parental alcoholism. The concluding section of "Novice" is a good example of Beasley's early style:

> Since spring, the hereafter
> has been closer: the backyard gardens
> threatening into bloom, Judas trees
> smearing the yard with lavender,
> constellations,
> gathered before us, as if heaven
> had dredged up some order.
> One by one, through the dry dusk,
> the porch lights
> come on, each swarmed by moths;
> through the mosquito
> light, a weak
> moon is rising, and the hymn-
> tremolo of Family Supper at church
> and the crickets'
> meaningless amens:
> how safe
> my father seems tonight, how
> absent—
> cloistered, he bides his time, novice
> of his dying, no elegy
> reaches him and my hymns
> filter slowly away through the stained glass. (25–26)

Elegant and measured as this description may be, the metaphors and autobiographical earnestness seem a bit too expected, differing little from the familiar period style of the 1980s. However, with his fourth

collection, 2000's *Signs and Abominations*, Beasley leaves familiar territory behind, and over half of the new book draws from it and from recent work. (Unfortunately, nothing from the recently published *Lord Brain* is included in the selection.) These newer efforts often take the form of lengthy sequences, and their breadth allows Beasley to draw surprising metaphorical connections and to explore at his leisure their implications. They repeatedly examine violent conflations of the sacred and the profane, and engage in an almost bipolar shuffle between spiritual and erotic ecstasy and abjection and disbelief. There's a lot of Goldbarthian cultural slumming in these sequences as well, with references to tattoo artists, "Monica Lewinsky's / blue, semen-stained dress, seized / for DNA," and John Paul in his "Plexiglas Popemobile." These references are all drawn from "Negatives of O'Connor and Seranno," one of the two central sequences of *Signs and Abominations*. "Negatives . . ." amounts to a oddball theological dialogue between O'Connor and artist Andres Serrano—creator of the infamous "Piss Christ." But its last word comes out of the Hermetic tradition—"Super- / Essential Darkness, God is beyond / any name we can give him, any image / that would show Him, Dionysius tells us, *beyond / all affirmation, all negation . . .*" (88).

As this passage suggests, Beasley has a penchant for the didactic, but the poems rarely devolve into spiritual cant. Lofty as the poems' intentions may be, Beasley has also remained true to his early autobiographical impulse, and the best of the new poems are grounded in quotidian pathos—"Is" recalls adolescent sexual awakening while quoting Aquinas's notion that "Being conveys the truth of a proposition which unites together subject and attribute by a copula"; "Hermetic Diary" blends a passage about "Christ's wounds, the five / stigmata" with the speaker preparing a nursery for a child he is about to adopt, and so on. Like Robert Duncan, who was also powerfully drawn to Gnostic and Hermetic thought, Beasley's reading in mysticism has, above all, animated his lyrical acuity. He draws from these traditions not merely for their substance but also to enhance his musical chops. And when he displays those chops, the results can be majestic. This passage from "A Spiritual Alphabet in Mid-Summer," a companion poem to "Negatives of O'Connor and Serrano," possesses a fluency and rhetorical control that no other poet of his generation can match:

A universe seething with life
billions of years ago—

NASA on the radio, carbonite
globule in a meteor

from Mars. Earth itself
seeded by supernal life, perhaps.

We hear it as we drive to the Ballard Locks
where the sockeyes

hurl their battered bodies up the fish ladder,
in twenty-three steps, artificial falls

that repel and attract their surge.
In the Viewing Room, the salmon

beat their way uptide, through a tank of churned bubbles
like Serrano's four-gallon tub of urine

haunted by its plastic crucifix:
god who can't leave matter alone, descending

into what craves
transcendence—

and our urge
upward to return to that place

of our spawning—
universe seething with life—the sockeyes,

skin ripped, muscles taut with leaping, fight
to spew eggs and milt in a gravel run, where hunks

of flesh will drop off
in the stream where the smolts came from,

once the starved, gill-heaving spawners have driven,
having smelled their way back to its rock. (110–11)

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Carl Phillips is Beasley's generational peer, and shares with him a highly nuanced devotional ardor; from the beginning, his project has also been to explore the linkage between erotic and spiritual longing. (In his collection of essays, *Coin of the Realm*, he expresses his affection for Cavafy's erotic poems, on the one hand, and the Metaphysical poets on the other.) But he is an altogether different sort of poet. Whereas Beasley's accounts of the soul's struggles can sometimes seem a bit sermonizing and stentorian, Phillips's testimony is muted, and often private to the point of solipsism. And where Goldbarth and Beasley revel in their displays of dictional and tonal shifts, swerving between two-dollar words and demotic ones in a manner that is familiarly postmodern, Phillips takes the High Road of the Hieratic, as though he stood above the Pomo fray. His language—taut and lean to the point of austerity—and the oddly detached but somehow haunted tone of his poems, harkens back to the Eliotic side of High Modernism. He is not haughty in the manner of Eliot, nor is he by any means an impersonal poet, but he is not a poet given to banter, confessional chest-thumping, or the many varieties of I-do-this-I-do-that poetry that come out of misreading O'Hara. Phillips's poems strive for intimate self-disclosure, and often seem to be spoken to a beloved who variously becomes a stand-in for the divine; his audience is what Celan called "an addressable *thou*." The *volume* of the poems is always turned low; you hear them as a stage whisper, a murmur. And, because the poems have consciously shorn themselves of their capacity to make large shifts in tone or diction, Phillips often relies on syntax alone to carry the formal and expressive burdens of the poem. This passage from a poem in the 2001 collection, *The Tether*, epitomizes both Phillips's style and his themes:

We were mistaken, I think.

I think the soul wants
no mate
except body, what it has

already, I think
the body is not
a cage

no,

but the necessary foil
against which the soul
proves it was always

true, what they said: to stand
unsuffering
in the presence of another's
agony is its own
perhaps difficult but
irrefutable pleasure. (114)

Phillips is most at home with this sort of short line, and his capacity to use it to suggest the complex and hesitant workings of a mind confronting questions as daunting as these recalls the work of another master of the short line, Robert Creeley. But Phillips eschews Creeley's puckish delight in improvisation. Quirky and energetic as Phillips's enjambments may be, his lines always come across as lapidary; our awareness of this paradox, of the poet's ability to render stasis and motion at once, is one of the sustaining pleasures of reading Phillips's poetry. In an essay on Gwendolyn Brooks that appears in *Coin of the Realm*, Phillips praises what he calls her "twist, tact, and metaphysics," qualities equally praiseworthy in his own work.

Although he is an African American and a gay man, it is worth noting that Phillips's slippery and diffident approach also seems to eschew certain of the received pieties regarding identity politics. In one of the most incisive essays of *Coin of the Realm*—tellingly entitled "Boon and Burden"—Phillips argues against the aesthetic limitations

of the Black Arts movement, and in a coming-out narrative included in the same volume, he refuses to aggrandize this initiation. Phillips insists in the conclusion of the "Boon and Burden" that "the best writers produce work that resists easy limitation," yet a subtle but sustained insistence upon issues of sexual identity and public history has continued to inform Phillips's verse. The stately elegiac sequences of *Cortege* (1995) and *From the Devotions* (1998), Phillips's second and third collections, derive from the AIDS pandemic, and after he meets the aesthetic and thematic challenges of this occasion, Phillips's work takes on a new urgency and authority. Halfway through *Quiver of Arrows*, beginning with the poems from *The Tether* (2001), Phillips arrives at his mature voice, and the twist and tact are in abundant display. Witness the conclusion of "Luck," another deft example of his ability to simultaneously suggest stasis and restless movement, and to suffuse the quotidian with the elegiac. Four men are playing horseshoes, and the rigorous composition recalls the chiseled mystery of a Cezanne painting—

> . . . not far from where
> in the uncut grass we're sitting
> four men arc the unsaid
>
> between them with the thrown
> shoes of horses, luck briefly as a thing
> of heft made to shape through
>
> air a path invisible, but there . . .
> Because we are flesh, because
> who doesn't, some way, require touch,
>
> it is the insubstantial—that which can
> neither know touch nor be known
> by it—that most bewilders,
>
> even if the four men at
> play, if asked, presumably,
> would not say so, any more

than would the fifth man, busy
mowing the field's far
edge, behind me,

his slow, relentless pacing promising
long hours before the sorrow
of seeing him go and,

later still, the sorrow
going, until eventually the difficulty
only is this: there was some. (103-04)

Passages of similar vividness, always presented with an unobtrusive brio, abound in Phillips's later work. Yet Phillips also seems in danger of making this sort of gesture seem like an easy tour de force. He's not by any means as prolific as Goldbarth—how could anyone be?—but he has produced five collections in the past seven years, and in recent books the method has come to seem ritualized, like the products of an accomplished ice sculptor, whose swashbuckling skill with his chain saw can whip up a pietà in record time. I am reluctant to express such a caveat, because Phillips's work is so richly accomplished. But we don't, on the other hand, want to see him fall into the Merwin-rut and spend decades replicating himself. This is, let us hope, a possibility rather than a likelihood.

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Long, long ago, in the 1980s, there was a short-lived interest in narrative poetry, and some perfectly respectable contemporary poets were labeling themselves as "neo-narrativists," were authoring laudatory essays on the likes of E. A. Robinson on their new "word processors," and printing in "neo-narrative" journals their generally rambling and benumbingly linear efforts to get storytelling back into contemporary verse. This movement quickly fizzled out, due mainly to the fact that most of its members were less interested in narrative than in fighting some sort of rear-guard action against the dark forces of Postmodernism, who were represented by movements such as the Language Poets, whose disdain of linearity and fluency in literary theory—*French* literary theory, at that—rubbed the narrativists in

the wrong way. It wasn't long before the neo-narrativists came to be seen as the last Neanderthals, huddling in their caves while the Cro-Mags took over the hunting grounds.

Narrative did not have to end so ignominiously, and Ellen Bryant Voigt's new volume reminds of this. More than almost any contemporary poet, she has thought long and hard about the place of narrative in poetry. As readers of the sensible and penetrating essays gathered in her 1999 volume, *The Flexible Lyric*, know, this is not because she is a narrative partisan of the 1980's mode; she has instead sought throughout her career to strike some sort of Platonic balance between the lyric and the narrative modes, to erase the dichotomies that ensue when we speak of these impulses as though they were rigorously demarcated genres. Many poets have addressed these matters in an inchoate way, but few save for Voigt have sought to explore them so urgently and systematically. Voigt's biography doubtless has something to do with this desire. Like Beasley, she is a native of the South, but she has spent much of her life in Vermont, and it is therefore not surprising that she owes a debt to Frost, that great master of narrative subversion, and the rural settings of her poems—hardscrabble and antipastoral—descend from him as well. She has also inherited what one of her essays calls the southerner's "cultural compatibility with narrative," an inheritance which both energizes and vexes her poetry. Just as important, Voigt pursued a career as a pianist before turning to poetry, and perhaps one of the results of this training is an unusually keen awareness of the possibilities of the pentameter, especially its capacity for generating tonal and syntactic surprise. She is not a formalist in the strict sense of the word; it's instead a finely honed prosodic attentiveness, and especially a sense of the *line* as a distinct expressive unit—whether it comes in meter or as free verse—that has informed her work from the start. The poems come across as *worked-upon*, though only rarely do they seem overworked; the madcap improvisational giddiness of Goldbarth is simply not for her. The rigor of her language serves the poems' thematic purposes especially well, for Voigt is above all an elegiac poet, and perhaps it is her awareness of the elegist's responsibilities that best unites her lyric and her narrative intentions. "Song and Story," the poem which closes her breakthrough fourth collection, 1992's *The Two Trees*, begins with a stark description of a comatose infant:

The girl strapped in the bare mechanical crib
Does not open her eyes, does not cry out.
The glottal tube is taped into her face;
Bereft of sound, she seems so far away.
But a box on the stucco wall, wired to her chest,
Televises the flutter of her heart—
News from the pit—her pulse rapid and shallow,
A rising line, except when her mother sings,
Outside the bars: whenever her mother sings,
The line steadies into a row of waves,
Song of the sea, song of the scythe

Old woman by the well, picking up stones
Old woman by the well, picking up stones (110)

The poem then shifts to the Orpheus myth. We see him first "beating rhythm with a spear" on the deck of the Argo, and then follow him to Hades in his attempt to retrieve Eurydice. But after the somber dejection of the poem's opening, Voigt cannot apotheosize Orpheus. His threnody, she insists, "wasn't the music of pain. Pain has no music, / pain is a story." And yet, as the poem concludes, Voigt is able to honor both its mythic motifs and its initiating dramatic situation—Orpheus, on the one hand, keening from what Rilke called his "lament heaven," and the bereaved mother, bending to sing to her afflicted child:

The one who can sings to the one who can't,
who waits in the pit, like Procne among the slaves,
as the gods decide how all such stories end,
the story woven into the marriage gown,
or scratched with a stick in the dust around the well,
or written in blood in the box on the stucco wall—
look at the wall:
the song, rising and falling, sings in the heartbeat,
sings in the seasons, sings in the daily round—
even at night, deep in the murmuring wood—
listen—one bird, full-throated, calls to another,
little sister, frantic little sparrow under the eaves. (112)

The method of this poem is characteristic of Voigt's later work. As Phillips does, she favors a diction that is elevated but unfussy, and her

braiding of two unlike motifs prefigures her later interest in multi-layered poetic sequences. Her most ambitious effort in this regard is the 1995 collection, *Kyrie*, a series of character studies and monologues, written as loose sonnets, all involving victims of the great 1918 influenza epidemic. Yet Voigt's most searching and musically various work in longer forms appears in her 2002 collection, *Shadow of Heaven*, and especially in "The Feeder" and "Messenger," the two sequences which frame the collection's group of new poems. The latter poem, a meditation on mortality prompted by a beloved's illness, is flawlessly modulated, its syntax managing to suggest the self in crisis while at the same displaying the formidable rhetorical authority which has come to exemplify Voigt's late style. The opening section—like "Song and Story," the poem begins in a hospital room—suggests something of Voigt's current approach:

> First I smelled it, hovering near the bed:
> distinctly saline, as in a ship's wake:
>
> a bit of dust and mold, like moth-found fur;
> also something grassy, crushed herb, sharper.
>
> After that, when they turned the ward lights out,
> the space ship glowing at the nurses' hub,
>
> his pod stilled and darkened, only the small
> digitals updating on the screen,
>
> then I could see—one "sees" in deep gloaming,
> though ground-fog makes an airless, formless room—
>
> how fully it loomed behind and larger than
> the steel stalk, the sweet translucent fruit.
>
> One doesn't notice wings when they're at rest.
> One doesn't notice the scythe of the beak at rest:
>
> opaque, like horn, or bone, knobbed at the base,
> but tapering, proportionate to the head.

In Quattrocento paintings, Mary's face
Is mirrored by the messenger's radiant face:

that's meant to comfort—*see, they're just like us.*
No, they're not like us. This had no face,

and its posture was a suspect courtesy,
stolen from a courtier who nods

to the aging king, head bowed, and holds aside,
lowered, but unsheathed, the sword. (232-33)

The skill with pentameter and Voigt's use of near- and off-rhyme is flawless, but the agitated, switch-backing syntax is perhaps even more impressive. It, of course, suggests the speaker's troubled bedside vigil, but also something deeper, an awareness, perhaps, that human limitation and the limits of language are one and the same. William James, who came from a family that knew quite a bit about syntax, once lamented that "life defies our phrases . . . because it is infinitely continuous and subtle and shaded; whilst our verbal terms are discrete, rude, and few." Poets, Quixotic creatures that they are, may tend to be more aware of this discrepancy, and at an earlier point in their development, than writers who work in other genres, and yet they are apt to profess—a bit unconvincingly, I think—that the problem doesn't really bother them. But this is a matter which *has* bothered Voigt, and she has addressed it with a calm persistence.

And it goes without saying that she also possesses the sort of unassuming command of technique that takes a lifetime of slow and deliberate practice to develop, and it is bracing to see such labor culminate in the splendid new poems of *Messenger*. Her work also reminds me, just as the poems of Goldbarth, Beasley, and Phillips do, that Alan Dugan was right about many things, but wrong about self-transformation—for the best poets it does occur, not invariably, and not without terrific struggle. This is not a fashionable notion, but neither is it a capitalist conspiracy.