

POETRY AND DIALOGUE WITH BURT KIMMELMAN - SPRING 2008

Monet's Garden

*Giverny, 20 August 2005*

The lily's charm is not  
its colors but how it  
floats, as if free, upon

the pond's dark surface. We  
make our way over his

wooden bridge and then pass  
the shrubs and flowers he  
planted, arranged just so

to paint. How carefully  
the pigment would be placed,

how gradually the world -  
its daily businesses -  
would become still and deep.

House, Normandy

21 August 2005

The bee bends to  
the thistle. The  
chestnut tree lets

go of its fruit.  
We cling to the  
late summer light.

The hedge around  
the house has grown  
wild, yet the gate

is open to  
show we are home.  
Stone walls have stood

these four hundred  
years - since someone,  
much like us, first

thought about the  
sun, rain and wind.  
This bright morning

we sit and sip  
our coffee, the  
dew everywhere,

moss on the bricks  
beneath our feet.  
The day will come,

perhaps, when the  
the forest will  
enfold us all.

Even the stones  
will disappear,  
left abandoned.

### Crumbs upon the Table

We sit together  
in the early light,  
only half awake,

eating the first food  
of the day, and let  
some crumbs fall upon

the table, talking  
about the terrors  
in the morning news

on the radio -  
and I think of how  
beautiful you are,

and imagine what  
you will do when you  
leave for school, what peace

I will make with the  
world, what bargain will

be struck. Casually,

you brush the crumbs to  
the floor, turn your back,  
pick up your coat and

bag, peer into the  
mirror a moment,  
and go out the door.

*Laocoön and His Sons*, Museo Vaticani  
12 August 2005

The ancient Greeks knew the way  
of muscle, the way of bone,  
the torque of desire, the

look of pain, of yearning for  
release, the ecstasy of

sinuous bodies as they  
enfold one another and

the cold animal thrown up  
from the sea - how tightly it  
winds itself about them, the

agony of belief and  
their shock of recognition

in the serpent's grasp. Standing  
before my mirror, I run

my hands over my shoulders  
and chest, the musculature

of an aging man thinking  
about athletic love but  
also your simple touch, your

hand. What swirling flesh would then  
enfold me? We will lie down

together, having made a  
peace with the world, its lost time.

## Susan Sontag Has Died

Time—over time  
the body slips

away—nothing  
is ever what

it is supposed  
to be, illness

as metaphor.  
As if without

fanfare, slowly,  
in increments,

we lose the ones  
we love. And we

lose ourselves. Death,  
with the softest

of hellos, an  
old friend we have

never met, drops  
by one day for

a coffee and  
conversation.

The body, the  
body fails, at

last disappears  
—yet we keep on

talking. A light  
streams across the

table, its cups,  
saucers and spoons,

these the remains

of a good life.

Fra Angelico at the Met

2 December 2005

The careful, golden light  
holds them all - the wounded

suppliant, leg crooked and  
bandaged foot, the rotund  
cleric who drops a coin

in an open palm, the  
calm virgin, and the child  
on her lap, reaching out

to the world - the solid  
flesh, round limbs and faces,  
peaceful eyes. What burdens

there are - the crucified  
God, somehow in repose,  
or the crippled beggar

balanced on his crutch - are  
made beautiful, an all-  
too-human transgression,

a strange kindness, so that  
the torment of the sick,  
of the tortured martyrs,

their headless bodies that  
once were bathed in pain, and

are now covered with the  
light of grace, are simply

a matter of course, bright  
red spatters of blood an

inevitable turn  
of events, like the folds  
of the red and green robes

of witnesses and of  
victims alike. Rilke

must have been thinking of  
him when he asked, whom can  
we ever turn to in

our need - the light, at last,  
a mystery to the  
lost and to the redeemed.

"Queen's View" of Loch Loman\*  
10 August 2005

Rooftops of a village  
and a stand of trees in  
a valley, the heather

bellying down to the  
water, Ben Loman just

beyond, as if we could  
make our way there, old heart  
worn down by wind, by rain -

time comes to those who walk  
the hills in mist, in sun.

Here, today, we follow  
the ancient path she loved,  
earth heaved up long ago.

\* A favorite trail of Queen Victoria

Lido Cristoforo Columbo  
16 August 2005

Rome is the city of bells  
and fountains whose water has

run down from the seven hills,  
and cars, trolleys, buses that

mark the stands of palm and pine,

cutting off pedestrians,  
crossing each other's path - and  
trains taking everyone to  
some other destination.  
Rome is the city of popes,  
but today we prefer the  
sun and summer breezes of  
the beach, and so we hop the  
lido transit that leaves on  
the half hour, making its way  
inexorably to the sea  
where the wind carries the cries  
of children who stumble out  
of the waves, as if they have  
lost their way in the heat. We  
lie still in the bright light and  
somehow remember the bells.

#### Poem for Jackson Mac Low

Jackson Mac Low is no longer  
among us, yet as luck would have  
it, on my way up the street, this  
early March day, heading to his  
memorial at St. Mark's Church,  
I hear a sparrow, of all birds,  
whose wants have always seemed the most  
simple—to nest unoffended,  
to gather with its neighbors what  
is needed for getting through the  
dark time, whose chirp, a workaday,  
ordinary sound, makes a lie  
of the busy, complicated  
life it leads after all—singing

in the bare branches and bright sun  
an exquisitely intricate

spring song. I stop at a café  
to sip a strong coffee, and through  
the picture window take in the  
light while Judy Collins's voice,

serendipity itself, as  
delicate as "the sweetness of  
the new time," fills the room. I can't  
help thinking of his oddnesses,

mysteries of number and name,  
how the line would play itself out,  
and then the next, and then the next,  
the moment about to happen.

### Taking Dinner to My Mother

My mother sits on the edge of her bed,  
a scarf on her head to hide the gray hair  
she can no longer manage to dye black,  
her flesh falling away from the frame of  
her face and shoulders, loosened by the loss  
of weight when the body betrays the soul,  
when the body's pain forbids all desire.  
But tonight she is hungry, and I have

come bearing corned beef and pastrami, bread,  
sour pickles and a kasha knish.  
I help her to the table in slow, small

steps, a *pas de deux* we have carried on,  
I realize, for almost sixty years, and  
I think of how, some time before, I held  
my daughter's hands, bent over, as she learned  
how to walk - the fact of balance, which we  
live with until it abandons us - and  
how my mother, in a photograph, held  
me in the same way. Earlier today,

I had stopped at a café and, sitting  
still for a moment, looking up from a  
book, I watched how, at a nearby table,

a new mother fed her infant daughter,  
who sat up in her baby carriage, some  
bits of crustless bread held between thumb and  
forefinger, while her grandfather talked on,  
the smell of her mother's hand mingled with  
this first food, a small bird in her nest. At  
my mother's table I fix her sandwich  
and tell her about her granddaughter who

met a boy for a moment in a flea  
market, who is now a first love, but my  
mother's eyelids are starting to lower,  
her head nodding forward slightly, so I  
gather her up and walk her back to her  
bed, sit her down and swing her swollen legs  
up and then under the covers, turn off  
all the lights but one, close and lock the door.

Your eyes were downcast

*Wondering if they'll ever touch*

Unread,  
Implications of unsurity

### **STUDENT INTERVIEW - ST. JOHN'S POETRY WORKSHOP - SPRING 2008**

Stephen Paul Miller: In Norman Fischer's essay in CRITIPHORIA, which can be found at [http://www.critiphoria.org/Issue1/Norman\\_Fischer.pdf](http://www.critiphoria.org/Issue1/Norman_Fischer.pdf) Norman Fisher describes how in both the Buddhist and Jewish traditions silence morphs into language and language into silence. Fischer describes Buddhist and Jewish strategies for accomplishing this. We sometimes think of the process starting with language with Judaism and silence with Buddhism. Your work seems very much in keeping with Fisher's observations. For instance, in "Monet's Garden," it seems that the artist's intention is a kind of language that "silences." Similarly, through measured grammatical equivalences, "House, Normandy" moves toward a "silence" of "disappear[ance]." Norman puts his finger on how the kind of lyrical abstraction I enjoy enables poetic discourse, but how would you situate your poems in light of Fisher's essay?

Burt Kimmelman: Without silence there cannot be language and in some imaginative sense without silence we cannot have a world, an engagement. Silence is at the very least reservoir. I try to write poems in which there is a palpable quiet, and I like to end poems not necessarily with a clear sense of

closure but with a quietness and I wonder if the two can't go together though they very often do not; my idea about ending poems hearkens to a number of poets but immediately so to Paul Blackburn, especially in a collection like *The Journals*, but I also learn from and pay homage to George Oppen and William Bronk. It is not accidental that Bronk wrote in a letter, "Silence is the term for the unspeakable which is what we are always talking about but never are able to say. It is what we come from and go back to but, attentively, we never really leave it. No need to wait for the time. I think our lives would be unbearably trivial without it."

Amanda Montali: In "Taking Dinner to My Mother," a "pas de deux" is a ballet dance in which a man carries a woman. Is this referring to the "circle of life" that mother helped daughter and now vice versa? Or is it a reflection that the daughter is always the helper and the giver? The reason I ask is because at the end of the poem the daughter seems to try to share with the mother about the granddaughter falling in love and the mother falls asleep. Was this consistent with their relationship throughout the daughter's lifetime?

Burt's Answer: The circle in the dance had not occurred to me but it works nicely. I was thinking of a dance-step for two people, as the expression I believe suggests colloquially. I am a man and sons don't always attend to their mothers the way daughters usually do. The mother's falling asleep as the grown child is speaking can connote the mother's way of behaving toward her child historically but there is no other word or words in the poem that could corroborate this. The denotation is that the mother is weak and tired, is dying.

Lulieta Popovic: In the poem "Taking Dinner To My Mother" are you writing about your mother because you miss her or because she had just passed away and it brings back memories?

Burt's Answer: I began the poem the day after I last saw my mother, when I took that dinner to her. She died the day after I began the poem. It took me some time after that to finish the poem. Writing is a gift in many ways, one especially is that it can be cathartic and can provide insight. The writer can benefit enormously from the writing.

Melissa Holian: Also in that poem, if the mother is still alive or did she pass? Is he trying to say how when you're a child your parents take care of you but as you become older the role seems to change?

Burt's Answer: Yes there is a role reversal when a parent becomes aged and not able to fend for herself or himself.

Catalina Russell, Are you comparing your mother's current state to that of a child? You use several different references to children when describing how you helped your mother.

Burt's Answer: Yes I like the idea of the circularity and how things are transformed over generations, etc.

Asia Gaskin: Was the light at the end of "Taking Dinner to My Mother" significant to a feeling undisclosed in the poem, like an underlying message or thought?

Burt's Answer: It's hard to avoid light as a symbol of hope, or knowledge. I try to avoid symbolism and here I'm not sure I have though I would love to read what you might think the light could "mean." I think, furthermore, that metonymy can be more effective than metaphor or symbol in a poem, and so I am trying to paint a scene and let the reader inhabit it.

Maximo Perez: In that poem, are you talking about memories from childhood? Or are you describing role changes when people grow older?

Burt's Answer: Role changes. Though in later life, especially for some reason as my mother was ever more failing in health, and as I was concomitantly raising my own child and seeing family life from a parent's point of view, I became ever more conscious of my childhood and felt haunted by my upbringing.

Amanda Montali: In "Queens View," what is the "heather bellying down to the water?"

Burt's Answer: Lots of heather growing in Scotland. I'm fudging there with "bellying" but in a serious way, as I try to evoke the shape of the hills, the slope down to the valley and the lake beyond.

Michael Grannis: In "Museo Vaticani," do you feel a sense of culture is lost and that people do not realize beauty of ancient culture?

Burt's Answer: This was not the point of my poem as I see it but I can appreciate how one could tease that implication out of the poem as it is written, especially considering that the speaker is a modern individual and seeing an amazing work of art from a distant time.

Joseph Lento: My question is in reference to the poem, "Crumbs upon the Table." Who is the author exactly talking to? Is it a child about to start his or her "journey into the world," a husband and wife in the midst of their morning routine, or a newborn whose parent is thinking about the future.

Burt's Answer. The poem's mode is a common one in poetry, in which the reader is a kind of voyeur. The reader here is listening to the poet's thoughts and he speaks silently to his daughter and yet simultaneously to the reader in a way. The daughter is a school kid old enough to go to school by herself, but not

old enough to care whether she brushes crumbs to the floor (never thinking that someone will have to clean up after her capriciousness) and so she is vulnerable. Yes of course a journey into the world, but the denotation is she is going off to school, and it is highly unlikely that anything untoward will happen to her but for a parent there is always the looming possibility of danger.

Anthony Lombard: In "Crumbs Upon the Table," could the excerpt "talking about the terrors in the morning news on the radio" represent the country at war and going to school is peace because we have the freedom to have an education?

Burt's Answer: Yes indeed.

Lauren Cambra, In the piece, "A favorite trail of Queen Victoria", you refer to Rome as "the city of bells." Is this a religious reference to the churches? Also, in the piece "Fra Angelico at the Met," is that supposed to be the description of the crucifixion of Jesus?

Burt's Answer: Yes there are so very many churches in Rome and there are church bells ringing constantly. As for Fra Angelico's work and my poem that makes reference to a number of his paintings—the crucifixion is central to his work, I'd say.

David Barral: In the Monet poet, what in his work inspires you?

Burt's Answer: In the poem no particular work is inspiring me but I am alluding to his water lilies paintings and evoking the paintings with the Japanese footbridge that crosses the pond.

Gabrielle Lotito: In the poem about Susan Sontag, I am confused how it talks about time and death. In the first couple of stanzas the poem made me feel as if she was talking about one individual, but, as you keep reading, it makes you wonder. Is she perhaps talking about herself, and how when she dies she doesn't want to disappear, and she wants her love and life to live on?

Burt's Answer: I wasn't imagining that Sontag was talking but rather that the speaker in the poem was talking and most likely to himself but also to the reader of course. The world, its physical, palpable "facticity," dissolves before our eyes as we get old, I think, and along with this the social networks one is a part of dissolve as people die, and of course death is incomprehensible.

Kimberly Rodriguez: In "Susan Sontag Has Died", why do you write the poem in the way it is written? Why does the viewpoint change from within the piece to an outside view? Do you want the reader to understand the concept of death the way in which it has affected Susan Sontag?

Burt's Answer: This is an interesting and accurate perception about the poem, which starts with the mind thinking and ends with the eye seeing. I don't want to say, in any case, that Sontag saw death this way, but I did want to stress that there is poignancy in considering the artifacts of someone's life, which are still real in a way that deceased person ceases to be.

Burt's Question: Who if anyone in the class noticed that there is a definite number of syllables in each line of each poem, with a consistency within the poem? These poems are what are called syllabic? Do you think knowing this changes your view of the poems at all?

### STUDENT SYLLABIC POEMS AND KIMMELMAN-INSPIRED POEMS

WHITE ROOM  
by Vanessa Gatt

A worn copy  
of Neruda's sonnets  
on the nightstand  
perfume heavy like  
velvet in air  
smoke still wandering  
out of a thin joint  
lovers between  
sheets with their promises  
and clumsy hands  
making tragedy  
for the night poetry  
for morning

THINKING ABSTRACTLY  
by Matthew Fazzino

In the Caribbean  
They are the same faces  
In both spaces

Tea exchange grasses as if  
The darkness was fine-  
Colored speech

Going home confused speaking  
In seven rhyme time

As when bricks

Expose volcanoes. Zombies  
Bat through an air  
Of magic.

LOLITA AND HUNTER  
by Jennifer Schonwetter

Lolita's cherry lips  
suck on a red lollipop

Parted  
plush  
lips.

*and a glint of fever in the eyes.*

Wolfish and prepubescent  
Innocent and pervy

all at once  
I remember the way *it* felt  
waiting by the door.

Patient dogs  
hungry for dinner.

The freshly painted door with a  
Metal  
    bolted  
    lock.

Meant to keep strangers out

Also, meant  
to keep appetizing men

inside.

Stuck inside  
I fumbled with the keys  
last time I returned.

I forgot  
I no longer had it.

I forgot

we

never had IT.

But there was

*oh*, so much else.

What's IT worth,

when you have

the way

*it* felt

falling

asleep

on your chest.

Now Lolita lies

next to

the

unread

vintage

Hunter S. Thompson

Book

you gave me

when we had dinner

and I tapped my cheek

Your eyes were downcast

*Wondering if they'll ever touch*

Unread,

Implications of unsurity