

New Poetry by WBT Editors

This special September Poetry & Fiction issue brings you poetry by WBT Editors Adrian Bonenberger, Drew Pham, and Matthew J. Hefti.



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Poetry by Matthew J. Hefti

Poet,

Why do you speak of beauty?

Why do you invest

in currency that pays no dividends,

in one drop of dew on a thirsty blade of green grass?

Why do you search for sweet simile,
like a myopic infant rooting for her mother's breast?
Why pine for the radiant jasper of the New Jerusalem
in one perfect metaphor?

Why agonize over an alliteration that accompanies
the princely prancing of your perfect pet,
or the comrades, cots, cannons, and killings
you can't seem to forget?

Why do you expend the energy
of the world's strongest man, chained and bridled,
pulling a rusty green Volkswagen van with his teeth
just to capture one singular image?

Why do you abdicate the embrace of the sun
and the caress of the wind
to seek pleasure in the squeaky office chair,
the cracked coffee mug, and the sticky backspace key?

Why do you carelessly drop
the dingy cotton bathrobe of your self
to leave your own wounded soul on the white page naked,
obscene, hairy, and a little overweight?

Poet,
Why do you sate yourself with words
while the world falls apart around you?

Poetry by Adrian Bonenberger

The Dogs

Four soldiers stand atop a fort's broad walls,
grandsons of an itinerated lot,
alert for local mischief, native grief,
the hostile truth beneath provincial eyes,
they watch, Hellenic marble statues all,
aloof, scanning the hills around, flex backs,
gulp coffee, water, soda, more-chew bread,
defeat the empty seconds one by one,
with puffs on Pakistani cigarettes.

An enterprising soldier yells and marks—
The Afghan dogs are out! Amid the shit!
the fort's high pile of refuse teems with dogs,
they've risen unexpected from the dross,
ten mottled muzzles nestle, snap, and gnarl,
yip and growling, which to scarf the most,
their hoary feral stomachs brook no pause,
as heavy, reeking discharge spurs them on.

One man can stop the plunder, one look-out:
the sergeant bounces out to shoot them off
astride a monstrous four-wheeled greenish toy,
and punctures every canine, clatters full
each heaving hairy breast with hotted lead,
then roars the iron steed back through the gates,

his purpose-full demeanor purpose-slakes.

Below, the sergeant by his noble mare
reminds the picket of its evening task:
*Don't let them take us unaware again,
to eat our trash, our shit, it's just not right,
therefore you must keep circumspect, all night,
to triumph in this brutal, dry campaign.*
to underline his will, the sergeant points
at each young soldier in their trembling turn.

But as the sergeant's kingly finger falls,
the ablest soldier lifts his voice anew:
*The Afghan dogs are back, let loose the cry!
They've come again, in greater numbers yet,
a host of mutts now twice the normal size!*
This new band feasts on the dead dogs' hot guts,
barking and howling blissfully anew,
paw-deep in dysentery's awful stench,
they tear and bolt the corpses of their kin.

The sergeant's iron steed has frozen stiff,
appalled at the uncivilized repast,
it coughs and stutters, mocks the sergeant's hand,
while loud, ecstatic crunching echoes near.
*Fire, the sergeant yells, don't stand there, shoot!
these hellish curs cannot be let to root
among their fallen mates, the dead to loot!*

Two of the guards align the fort's defense:
machine guns drum and spit their lethal pills,

entail the feasters, shred their wolfish snouts,
flake howls of pleasure into howls of pain,
remorseless hammered argument unchecked,
until the routed lot, abled, retreats.

The sergeant eyes his men, now, sees their stock,
too little ammunition, says his gut
to guard this place from any more attacks.
No time to state this knowledge, for, a shout
compels his vision to another place:

*The Afghan dogs again! Now from the East
and North they lope, hundreds of feral curs
a bolder pack, unlike we've seen before!*

Light dew bedecks the sergeant's upper lip,
he bids it leave, as more slides down his brow,
the shuddered knee he firms, puts fist in mouth
then climbs atop the wall, aims at a face:
make each shot count, he calls, and flames the dark.

Dauntless the dogs press on, now used to death,
they've seen their comrades slain and know the why,
ignore the feculence and blood beside,
united in their newfound quest: the fort.

Rifles, machine guns stutter out their waltz,
then one by one fall quiet, bullets spent,
a rug of twitching paws and fur-filled forms
becoat the fort's encircling, emptied glebe,

their numbers thinned, the pack drives on despite.

As growls and barks the solid gateway near,
a lusty vengeful wave prepares its swell,
high-howled crescendo jars the stolid walls,
beats fear beneath the helmets lined above.
One soldier turns, *what feud have they with we?
Surely this cannot be because our crap
is of such value to the savage tongue—
how could what we reck little, they think great,
and fling their precious lives away for dung?*

The sergeant claps the soldier's nervous arm,
draws out that old device they'd boggled with:
the bayonet, tool of a bygone age,
salvation to the military eye.
*Like Patton, George and Chamberlain before,
we've but to show these strays our steel, once tamed
by brave display, they'll trouble us no more.*

With that he knifes the rifle's edgeless front,
urges the four young soldiers follow suit,
so armed by five crude spears the team descends,
the sergeant's thrice-swept clout compels their haste,
beyond the iron gate to stand athwart.

Outside the fort's immense protective shell,
those great chthonic wire-basket stacks,
a gibbous moon now lights the dusty sea,
non-Euclidean shade titanic grows ,
strikes mute the men, a vast nocturnal blank:

the cunning foe has vanished in the night,
and spurned the group's aspiring gameful blades.

No dogs patrol the garbage hole, munch trash,
lap crud-incrusted metal bowls behind;
none harvest corpses of their fallen mates,
nor swarm the fort in hundreds, hunt for blood,
The desert's bare of life beyond the five.

Well lads, that's done the cheerless sergeant sighs,
deflated by the mission's sudden lack,
we should feel happy, for, we've won, he says,
then slumps, slouches back to the peaceful post,
til safe, they wait within the pebbled pen.

They won't soon bother us again, I think,
one soldier claims, *we showed them mongrels good*
then jumps—a booming, mournful howl erupts,
and farther in the higher hills is joined
by all the weary province, near and else.

Poetry by Drew Pham

War is a Place

(after Yehuda Amichai)

What did I learn about Americans
Once, only glimpsed on TV screens
in blue jeans
The first ones I saw came out of the air
spilled onto the earth by mechanical dragonflies
They wore clothes the colors of earth and leaves
They bore every possession on their chests and backs
Like traveling peddlers selling nothing
but a presaged defeat
trailing each man like a wavering pennant
And they took homes
And took fathers
Though he arranged my marriage to a stranger
I did not wish that he disappeared in the night

What else did I learn. To smile always
A smile could buy a clicking pen or sweets
If it might save my brothers from my father's fate
I smiled
In refugee camps a smile meant
a quart more of cooking oil
traded for a clamshell of rouge
There too, Americans
Faces like night or the moon
Eyes hypnotized by a screen, fingers on
keys Smiles can end with visas, plane tickets

Above all I learned in America, war is a place
Terrible, always, but also somewhere else
Not here, but across a sea
I saw the ocean for the first time in New York
Once, I thought the mountains were great
Now I know they are meager rocks
compared to walls of water and salt

Now I see America
Why they found us
Why they seared the earth
Why they took my fathers
Took me
One day Americans will take my son
he will go over the ocean, just a blue field
And to him the mountains will be immense and
endless

Poetry by Matthew J. Hefti

What Poetry Is

When I was a prep-school student,
I translated, "Gallia est omnis divisa in partest tres"
from the dead
ancient language.

But I didn't care how they plundered and divided Gaul,
so I scratched evidence of my presence
into the cheap clapboard desk.

Its underside was covered in chewed bubble gum;
its top side was covered in names,
and that was poetry.

I moved on to university
and read Keats and Wordsworth and Shakespeare and Longfellow
and more *dead*
ancient language
in musty, highlighted, used textbooks.
But that too was dreadful,

so I scratched my feelings
all over college-ruled notebooks with black and white
spotted covers,
and I sometimes spilled beer on the pages,
and that was poetry.

I read and I dreamed and I read,
but soon everything I wrote bore a certain resemblance
to all the *dead*
ancient language.

So I stopped writing,
all except the occasional haiku in magic marker
on the forehead of my passed out, red-headed roommate.
I melted into the velour flower sofa
and watched a whisper of smoke at the end of a pipe
climb up to heaven like a prayer
or a whimper,
and that was poetry.

Somewhere and sometime after that, life happened,
and wars happened,
and we dropped blood onto sand,
and that was poetry.

I traveled around the world countless times (eight to be
exact),
and I visited countless countries (twenty-three to be
exact),
and I lost countless friends (twelve to be exact).
I woke up in starts in cramped economy seats,
always with a dry uvula and a chin covered in drool.
Each cattle-car airplane was the same
no matter which exotic desert we flew from,
and it was impossible to rest.
So I'd scratch the names
of the dead

on frequent flier ticket stubs,
and this was poetry.

Then for years I just tended the lawn
and plugged ear buds into my head
and turned the music up way too loud
to bury my own thoughts
and the dead
as I made perfect passes along the front of my perfect
stateside house,
alternating directions each week to make the green really
pop
the way the carpet pops after a fresh vacuuming,
stopping only to drink more beer and admire the straightness
of the lines.
And that was poetry.

It wasn't long before I caught a fever,
and the music wasn't loud enough to bury anything,
let alone the dead,
so I bought notebooks with black and white spotted covers,
and I let them pile up on my shelves
until the tilted stacks nearly collapsed.
But there was potential in those blank pages
and I could feel it,
and that was poetry.

Now I light the same nag champa incense every night because I
once read an article
that said to create you must create a Pavlovian response in
your writing
environment.

I light the incense and sit with a chewed up ball point pen
in hand

and I scratch a bunch of drivel into the notebooks;
i.e., the college ruled notebooks with black and white
spotted covers,
and I sometimes write something that somehow
buries all the dead,
and that is poetry.