

Book Reviews

Paul Zimmer

*Batter My Heart**

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend.
—John Donne

We had spent two splendid months in France, indulging ourselves with sights, sounds, food, and drink. As we were returning to the United States through the airports, hustling to wait in the long security lines, and hauling our carry-on bags, I noticed a slight shortness of breath that I attributed to the stress of travel.

The flight back was soporific—bland food, a dull book, and an insipid movie to watch. I tried to walk a bit in the aisles to get some exercise, but plane walking—stepping over sprawled legs, and sliding past food carts—is like playing pickup sticks. Mostly I just sat in my seat and put my brain into neutral. However, I noticed my chest was not in neutral. It was sending out small pains that pointed across my sternum to my left arm. I tried to ignore this. My heart was saying something to me, but I felt certain it would pass like most small twinges of my body.

When we finally got home to Wisconsin we had many things to tend to, and so I put this episode out of my mind. A few days later I was walking the incline of a dirt road on our farm when my heart palpitated, my gorge suddenly rose, and I almost went down on the gravel.

*An essay-review of

LOT OF MY SISTER. By Alison Stine. Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2001. 25 pp. \$4.75.

THE SCOTTISH CAFÉ. By Susan H. Case. Sleepy Hollow, NY: Slapering Hol Press, 2002. 37 pp. No price listed.

THREE. By Stephen Philbrick. Easthampton, MA: Adastra Press, 2003. 20 pp. \$10.00.

RENDERED INTO PARADISE. By Jean Feraca. Madison, WI: Parallel Press, 2002. 35 pp. \$10.00.

LOST RIVER. By James Tate. Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2003. 36 pp. \$8.95.

A TREE OGHAM. By Marcia L. Hurlow. Rosemont, PA: Nova House Press, 2001. 20 pp. \$5.00.

EARTHBOUND. By Roger Pfingston. Johnstown, OH: Pudding House Publications, 2003. 36 pp. \$8.95.

SINGING TO THE GARDEN. By Roger Pfingston. Madison, WI: Parallel Press, 2003. 32 pp. \$10.00.

LIGHT MADE FROM NOTHING. By Susan Elbe. Madison, WI: Parallel Press, 2003. 32 pp. \$10.00.

A few hours later my doctor looked at my cardiogram in his office and, as calmly as possible, sent me on a rapid course to the emergency ward of the hospital. When I arrived I was reprimanded, told that I was fortunate not to have fallen permanently in France or on the dirt road.

I don't remember much after this. I dimly recall talking to many doctors and nurses. Normally, I am a cooperative and grateful patient, but I am not certain that I behaved well or showed any degree of character under these circumstances. I was completely surprised by it all. The drugs took me down to basic feelings and reactions. I did not want to endure all the pricking, probing, and wiring that prepared me for the bypass operation. I wanted to go home. I *really* wanted to go home. Suzanne tells me that, at one point, she peered into the room and there were ten people working on me—most of them holding me down. Finally they sedated me completely. I do remember being shocked to see the concerned faces of my children—who live at some distance—standing by my bed. Then I realized finally that I was into some very serious business.

When I woke up from the anesthetic after the operation, I felt as if the doctors had cut me open, removed all my bones, put them in a dirty bag, cracked them with a hammer, and then stuffed them back into my body. Fortunately, this dire feeling eventually passed. Utter soreness and discomfort were what I felt, more than pain. Suzanne and my children brought me drinks of water and talked to me. They kissed my face and stroked my brow. I sensed their ordeal through the touch of their fingertips.

As soon as I was out of intensive care, the nurses hauled me out of bed and walked me up and down the hall. There wasn't much to say. I slept a great deal. I recall one interesting, surrealistic dream about a large room, with fabulous paintings sliding down green walls, that I tried to physically enter like a poem. I slipped out of bed and groped down the ward hall, unable to understand why the nurses were scolding me and escorting me back to bed.

I was assured by all that everything had gone well—and finally I started to believe them. It was the beginning of the long way back, and I have resolved to walk the path firmly.

I used to try to be funny by saying, "I'm not going to worry about my heart until it tries to stop." Usually when I said this I had a beer or glass of scotch in my hand. Ho-ho! And, like most poets, I occasionally referred to my heart in my poems. Now I ask myself, what was I thinking when I did this?

I was not thinking about the beating organ itself, but something deeper and more encompassing: love, sorrow, grief . . . character. *Heart* is a generic word for writers, and it covers a lot of territory. For instance, it can mean spirit, courage, attitude, intellect, understanding, conscience, character, compassion, feelings, mood, goodwill, or zeal.

All of these things are made possible by the regular squeezing of this perdurable red muscle, not much larger than a red delicious apple.

As I write this, in late 2003, it has been almost two months since I had the attack and subsequent operation. I have not worked on poetry; I am too busy attending rehabilitation classes. But I have been thinking about the connection between poetry and the heart. I am healing—but I must admit that, as yet, I do not feel “poetic.”

The surgeon drew a diagram of what he had done to my heart. Four new connections, four veins, taken from other parts of my body, bypassing the old clogged arteries and dispensing the heart’s freshly pumped blood into the aorta. The drawing looks like a calabash with catalpa pods welded onto it.

Over four hundred years ago Sir Philip Sidney wrote, “Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite, / ‘Fool,’ said my muse to me, ‘look in thy heart and write.’” I look at the doctor’s rough sketch of my mended heart and wonder, is this where the poetry came from? I certainly do not want to insult my heart under these conditions, but does poetry really come from this silly looking, fervent gourd? Okay. Okay, then. Be still, my heart! Take it easy.

Since I am currently thus preoccupied, I skimmed these chapbooks under review for the word *heart*. It occurs at least once in each of them. Roger Pfingston refers to the heart as a polluted septic tank. Jean Feraca thinks of it as a repository of happy music. Stephen Philbrick writes of a woman friend, “The world a drawing of her heart, / Her heart a drawing down of evening.”

These are ingenious references, demonstrating again that the heart can be a lively image in poetry. If I seek a single, straightforward definition of the heart and its operations, I find it hard to improve on William Harvey, the English physician and anatomist, who wrote the following almost four centuries ago in his essay “On the Motion of the Heart & Blood”: “Thus it is that while the heart remains unharmed, life can chance to be restored to all parts, and health recovered. But if the heart be either chilled or affected with some grievous ill, it must needs be that the whole animal will suffer and fall into corruption.”

No more corruption for Zimmer. To hell with that! No more polluted septic tank. I will be reckless and obsessed, full and capable of large deeds. I will feast on my new oxygen. I have been given more time to live. I will, by God, in my heart of hearts, be the *star* of my rehabilitation class.

In her chapbook, *Lot of My Sister*, Alison Stine’s poems are sanguine. The word *blood* appears more than half a dozen times, and she even includes a poem called “Blood Music”; blood engorges the organs and sometimes flows from wounds and operations and menses. Stine’s writing is full, and everything is carefully considered. Upon occa-

sion it seems forced, as she labors for full effect, but her work has energy and always a delicate, attractive sadness. The first poem, “Fields Beyond Fields,” begins carefully:

Since we lay in the fields beyond the high school,
the boys have returned to claim them. The season
is beginning. Lights rasp the grass yellow;
the painted stripes shine like skin.

Stine goes on to portray the lovely innocent/not-so-innocent moment of young womanhood, when the “big question” (or what *used* to be the big question) must be addressed. She proceeds with a recitation of the familiar details of high school—teachers, nicotine, chalk, halls, lockers, pebbled window glass. In the third stanza she writes, “We lay in the fields, and I swear to you, nothing happened. / I was there. I loved him, and nothing / happened.” In her wistful conclusion she says, “The car headlights swept our bodies, skinning us yellow, / roaming over us like hands, which skim but do not touch.”

The poet assumes a more experimental mode in “Porches.” She begins with details of scraping paint: “With saw brushes, / my love and I strip the porch.” But as she and her friend do this mindless work, laboriously removing the layers of paint, it becomes (as hard, repetitive work will do) a kind of drifting meditation on the seven layers of the skin. The activity of blood is mentioned. Then a black dog chases something under the porch—“moors himself in the crawl space” and has to be dug out—as the speaker of the poem is hoping to scrape away the memory that her partner has of a lost love, carried “like shard from the branch I missed, / running in new snow.” There are transitions back to the layers of the skin, and scattered references to splinters under the layers, and then a fascinating conclusion—the dog “brings the split earth / back on his paws. We work / not to erase, but remember.”

This is intricate, strong, and very tough work. She does the same in her poem “Vincent’s Ear.” The speaker ponders a cosmetic operation to correct a deformed ear. She gracefully segues through musings on the operation, hospital details, an art class taught by her mother in grade school, how she rebelled by imagining van Gogh as her soul mate, how she “looked into his blue-walled room and saw my child bed.” She imagines the operation and herself as “damaged goods” in the eyes of her cruel schoolmates, then thinks of Vincent poised to razor his ear:

I wish I had your power
to cut off perfectness
and hold it out in my hand.
It is a simple operation,
blade into skin, blood onto bone.

A few poems in this little book taste a bit of the workshop (“The Ripper’s Bride” and “Fall Burning,” for instance), but this is a very accomplished debut collection.

The Scottish Café by Susan H. Case relates, in a sequence of poems, a tragic yet somehow buoyant story of a group of brilliant Polish mathematicians who gathered daily in a café in the city of Lvov, a cultural center in Eastern Europe prior to World War II. A notebook called the “Scottish Book” was kept in the café, the mathematicians entering into it their best problems. Those who offered a proof were often given a prize. As the author states: “Many of the theorems and solutions of the Scottish Café mathematicians are widely foundational today in mathematics.”

As war threatened, the scholars, many of whom were Jewish, struggled to continue their intellectual lives as best they could. Some fled—many did not survive. These are the heartbreaking (there is that word again!) stories that the poems relate. Case’s writing is very intelligent and civilized; understandably, she seems to have a greater interest in telling her tales than in the texture of her poetry. There is little variety of tone in the poems, but her message is humane and poignant—and it clearly portrays how human things can be lost forever to brutality and ignorance. More than a half century after the events, the Scottish Café’s denizens still project a kind of courage and doggedness that should be an example to us in our own difficult times.

“Infinite Possibilities,” typical of the tone Case employs, begins with one of the mathematicians:

Banach at a meeting in Georgia
 attends a banquet where there is a long tradition
 one drink of chacha to the health of each person present
 and there are a lot of mathematicians present
 each with a thirst for celebration
 holding a series of tall glasses of Georgian vodka
 paired with strong spirally toasts
 to infinite possibilities
 to generosity and wisdom and virtue and wealth.

This seems more like clean prose than poetry. These are lines, yes, and they are units of sound or units of sense, but the language is not charged, directing itself almost strictly to narrative.

Still, most of the poems work well as stories. In “Numb” one of the brilliant mathematician students, Schauder, has a pain in his chest (oh yes!) and thinks it might be an illness. Banach tells him “over sausage sandwiches and beet root soup and doodles of mathematics” that it is his libido he feels, love for his new bride “who is even prettier than the Wulka hills.”

but [Schauder] feels a foreboding—
 Germany is worsening
 but Germany is far enough away
 it must be the flu
 like the congestion from an unresolved proof
 clogging his ears—his throat
 fevering his blood
 and this winter
 there is the prediction
 of a particularly chest-numbing chill
 which years later
 Schauder will look back upon in wonder
 at how he was so blinded
 as to think it might—as in ordinary times
 last merely a few months.

The poet turns some interesting corners to subtly reach this numbing conclusion—an illustration of how a person can go on with her/his life despite a real sense of foreboding and impending disaster.

Perhaps someday Susan Case will write the story of the Scottish Café in prose for a wider audience. It is the kind of necessary, cautionary tale of a life once lived, but lost under overwhelming conditions, that our heedless, instant-media age needs to be told.

In *Three* Stephen Philbrick (who is, incidentally, the “heart” champion of these poets, using the word four times in his book) performs a private artistic act—which is something that can be effectively done in a chapbook. This small, hand-set volume (in which the publisher misspells his author’s name in the colophon—shame on him!) in an edition of 250 copies seems to be intended mostly for friends of the author and the three subjects of the main poems. But there is a problem with this particular presentation. The poems basically constitute a loving portrait of three stricken friends, who are presented in the titles as S.P., M.A.B., and G.M.F. Philbrick is a veteran poet, and much of the writing has rich, particular qualities:

Even before dark
 Even where there is too much light:
 Too much reflected by mica
 Too much lost in the low places and the other side of things
 Too much loose in the water
 Too much soaked in by rough coat and ruffled leaf
 Too much light now, to sharpen to a spark;
 Even before dark . . .

The poet goes on with the imagery, taking it to “the erotic night” when the light “rises,” through his friend’s consciousness, and then to day again, when

Everything begins to gather
 Everything wants to rise,
 You can hear it crackle in the scrub
 At the ledges it bears the buzzards up.
 All afternoon, all life long,
 Around the bones already bleaching,
 Everything darkens until it must rise.

Sometimes the poet goes on too long, and the poems lengthen to a point beyond their strength. But the big problem with this book is that much of the imagery remains frustratingly obscure. Philbrick refers to “Gene” and “Mare” and “Steff,” but the reader is left in the dark by these private references. One wonders who or what the initialed characters are, what they truly mean—until finally—in a note at the very end of the sequence it is revealed that, “This poem was written in the late summer and fall 2001, when my three friends were overcoming cancer. It is still true.”

Is to write and publish to share with readers? If so, then this book is a kind of Christmas card, a small, well-written treat for some friends of the poet.

I live in rural Wisconsin, and when I am not doing chores or writing, sometimes I listen to the radio. One of my treats was always a weekday cultural affairs show called “Conversations with Jean Feraca.” The program usually centered on Feraca’s discussions with authors about new books. I have listened to many such shows over the years, but Feraca’s was a cut above the others. She had carefully *read* the books under discussion and her questions were always very insightful and probing. She had a talent for moving the dialogue along. I marveled at the time and energy she surely put into this effort, and was I saddened when she gave up the show.

When I began to go through the chapbooks to be considered for this review, I was surprised to come across *Rendered into Paradise* by Jean Feraca. That’s nice, I thought to myself, as I set it aside—this very able, intelligent woman has an interesting hobby to sell to her audience. Later, I read the book.

This writing is much more than an avocation. I find Feraca to be a deeply honest and accomplished poet. The poems focus on travel, family, and especially her ordeal while enduring the long, difficult death of her mother. The poems are full of wonderful surprises and sounds, and they exhibit the vision of a sharp and discerning eye, as in “August II”:

The hollyhocks unbuttoning behind the house
 fumble with their stiffened shirts.
 They crash and fall like drunks across the drive.

Somebody throws the dice hard.
 Walnuts pock the roof.
 Grasshoppers thrum their thighs like punk guitars

as the din, ratcheting upwards, tightens like a scrotum
 and it's hard to breathe the thick air
 plush as plum-skin.

The cat twitches its ears at twilight, a black spot
 pinned into quivering gold, holding alive
 the light that dies in the rabbit's eyes.

I slip a mask inside my mother's coffin.

Feraca can stop you suddenly in your tracks. She even has the unusual ability to bring you almost to tears with a travel poem of only two lines:

Panorama in the Anza-Borrego Desert

This is the only thing
 as big as my mother's death.

There is pervasive sadness through this collection—not cloying or sentimental, not begging for pity, but reminding the reader of what we all sometimes feel behind the mask of our everyday work and existence. It is especially revealing when such a public person lets us know the depth of her feeling through her artistic talent. It is relieving, too, to realize, as we do when reading the title poem, that she rediscovers, and is ultimately surprised by, happiness hiding “right out in the open.” It comes in “like a father / home from work, weighed down / with gravel in his trouser-cuffs, who tiptoes / in his stocking feet to lift his baby out of sleep. // And there it is, the love that dandles you / against all prohibition . . . / plucking the notes right out of your *heart*.” (Italics mine!)

Much has been written about the poetry of James Tate in the last three decades, and there are few national awards available to poets that he has not deservedly garnered at one time or another. *Lost River* is a short continuation of what John Ashbery calls the poet's “homegrown variety of Surrealism.”

The characters in Tate's poems are always entertaining, so sincere and sane in their nuttiness, and yet slightly askew in their sanity. We can never resolve such a paradox for sure, and that is what makes us track with fascination through his poems—his sense of fun and folly is infectious in its eccentricity.

Often Tate's work is oblique narrative, certainly not “poetic,” and yet not unlike Frost's or Browning's or Wordsworth's more playful dramatic monologues. He dares a kind of silliness, twisting the reader gently toward a realization of the absurd. The language is unadorned, almost devoid of metaphor, and the poems are “riven doggeries,” as he teasingly named one of his books.

Never Enough Darts

A bear walked right into town last week.
 It was a big one, too, a male. It pushed open
 the door of the pizza place and ate all the
 pizza off the customers' plates. People just
 sat there with their mouths open, impressed.
 Then he just walked on down the street and went
 in the hamburger joint and did the same thing.
 The cook managed to call the police. The police
 came right away, but they had used up all of
 their knock-out darts at last Friday night's
 high school football game. So they just followed
 the bear at a polite distance. When the bear
 was full it found its way out of town. The
 people I talked to seemed delighted to be getting
 back to nature. As long as they had enough to
 eat they weren't going to complain.

Tate hilariously funnels us toward the outlandish, carefully turning us around corners with his dreamy stories. He plays on our subconscious, reciting our dreams, our suspicions, and our instant, airy decisions about life:

I had fallen asleep on the couch with the
 tv on. Every now and then I would open an eye
 and see someone get stabbed or eaten by a monster.
 Once, a beautiful woman was taking off her blouse.
 And then the phone rang. I couldn't tell if it
 was a tv phone or my own. I sat up, half-asleep,
 and reached for the phone. "Howie," a woman's
 voice said, "Is that you? You sound like you were
 asleep. "I was," I said. I wasn't Howie, but
 I was in the mood to talk to this woman. . . .
 "I love you," I said, and I think I meant it.
 ("It Happens Like This")

As Charles Simic says of Tate, "He does everything wrong, but it sounds right." In these politically, socially, and artistically grim days, James Tate remains a delight, a kind of panacea for our technology-driven delusions and hysteria.

There is a gentle, alert stillness in most of Marcia L. Hurlow's poetry. Dare I say her writing is feminine? It is like the work of Abbie Huston Evans, Kathleen Raine, Jean Burden, Mary Oliver—accurate and respectful of nature. It is deep and archetypal. The work is full of wonderful trees, plants, and botanical history. The writing is intelligent, restrained, and exceedingly well wrought.

Why Write in the Garden

The multi-syllabic
oak leaves that twist
upside down before rain,

the exhausted sighs
of pink and yellow petals
arranged in spider webs,

the long simple phrases
of grass curved too close
to the fence to mow, and

beneath the wild tangle
of stems, roots compose
a slender script of hunger.

Sometimes, as in “Birch,” Hurlow overextends her work, and the poem seems stacked and contrived. “Like a loving hand / inadvertently pressing / a bruise, the birch rises / against the roof edge. / The eaves bend or / bend the white wands.” Or she goes one stanza too far, for instance concluding “August Feeding” (a very good poem about hummingbirds fussing) by taking the focus off the birds to write, almost preciously, “Already the pink petals / sail down, late invitations.”

But when she reflects her interest in archaeology or ancient Celtic literature, she creates some marvelous effects, as in “The Exile”:

Owen trudges uphill from the stream.
Heart-sick, he rests beneath the rowan,
crouched in its roots curled around rocks.
The branches fill with white ravens
snapping up clusters of red berries.

The ravens land in ranks around him.
White leather tunics, restive red eyes,
they rise as warriors.

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Two chapbooks of poems by Roger Pfingston were released in 2003, *Singing to the Garden* and *Earthbound*, constituting a tribute to this accomplished poet (a talented photographer and storyteller as well) and a welcome, full offering of his work. Pfingston has been observing and measuring the Midwestern landscape with his clear, gentle art for at least three decades.

His poems exhibit a variety of tone and viewpoint, but regularly give evidence of a steady, practiced hand. These are the labors of a mature poet, and the work rarely

falters. The scenes—woods, backyard, creek, orchard, porch, house, store, field—are blessedly common; he does not travel far in his poems, but he focuses thoughtfully, projecting and sometimes enlarging his images like a good photographer. The poems are generally exuberant, as everyday scenes arouse his artistic consciousness, but he is also a brooding poet of the stark moment:

Poachers

A moonless night,
 red meat glowing
 in the bed of a truck,
 wet bone white
 as a pearl-
 handled pistol.
 Blood floats up
 smearing the air,
 thick enough
 to lick. It burns
 the eyes of carnivores
 poised in the woods
 at the edge of the field
 where two men work
 so skilled with saws
 and knives there's
 hardly a word
 as the ground darkens,
 drinking the beast.

Pfingston is an artist of place who has avoided the entanglements of the poetry networking scene. We can be grateful that he has *been* in place all these years, to give us these scenes which, if we pay attention, resonate far beyond the familiar territory of his southern Indiana. Here, for instance, is a careful focus that concludes “Winter 2002, Indiana,” a poem about an unusually temperate cold season in the Midwest. The poet is distracted by the sunshine and pleasant weather “instead of zero air contracting / like a steel band around the house.” He ends with this stanza—which says a great deal about the poetic temperament: “Where is she who calls herself Muse / that I might tinker with some newness / free of sunny, high-temp days / a rational man would welcome? / Where is my fever, my *heart's* cabin!” (italics mine).

Susan Elbe is an inventive poet. She has a wonderful sense of movement and a keen ear and eye for imagery. Her poems are ambitious. Occasionally they drift a bit, as in “Garden,” in which she describes a wall sculpture of two lovers at the point of sexual ecstasy, but then lets the air out of the poem by almost moralizing:

for a moment they believe
 everything endures and for a moment
 in the brassy apple autumn light
 so do I.

But there is always something to catch and please the reader in this work:

I'll tell you what love of this life is. It's looking up
 through trees newly bare of leaves
 and seeing there the oldest road,
 a broken line of white stars
 stretching out across the sky.
 It's thinking
 this could almost be enough.

In "Limn" she writes of being disoriented on a dark, still sea—"Night cups us like a match in dusky hands. . . // Maps here are dreamed / from memory, moving over / hummock, salt, and ice." She uses words and phrases such as "dusky," "flat black stone," "indifference," "thin and deeper gray / stroke delimits water from the sky" to divide her scene of despair and loneliness, then concludes her poem with an ultimate threat:

At our backs, a sprawling bog
 of solitude and beyond that
 ladders of cold and slippery light.
 Browsing in blackberries,
 the bear lifts up its crimson mouth
 and all ways look the same.

I'll conclude this review with her poem "White-Radish Moon," because it is about "the heart," and imaginatively returns us to my chosen theme:

The heart, reckless and obsessed,
 is capable of large deeds,
 but always has to choose.

This or that. Now or never.

Like the white-radish moon
 that dangles over rooftops
 each night, the heart
 haggles—stingy meniscus
 or a clamor of light.

