

cal here, nothing of the poet as the ultimate negotiator between the world and meaning. Rather, Shipley is a fellow traveler who guides up and down paths that we might miss in our hurry to a specific destination.

In “The One I Was,” Shipley grapples with how singing is of the body and the soul (or perhaps the consciousness). Language, she insists, is just as complex, ambitious, vulnerable as any natural object. In turn, it can also be as rewarding. She goes on to write about how transformation is a complex process:

The first plunge  
into language cleans a heart’s rivers,  
turns wishes into passions, makes  
  
a spangled universe of a glass of water.  
From then on, there’s danger of change.  
Beautiful danger of terrible change.

I must read this last line as the word “awe” in the word “awful.” Perhaps one cannot survive knowing too much of “terrible change” but the seduction is present just as much as in one’s “passions.” Rather than abdicate this world for some superior or perfect version of it, Shipley looks at it, feels it, owns it and finally, releases it. She understands that she must deal with the immediate, what is still hers (and ours too, thanks to the poems):

Only fools go back  
to yesterday looking  
for absolution, looking  
for who they were.

—*Rane Arroyo*

Ned Balbo. *LIVES OF THE SLEEPERS*. Notre Dame, 2004.

Nearly every poem in Balbo’s second book offers a dramatic moment snatched from history or the archive, where the

desires of the senses, of the body, negotiate their relation to intellectual love, the desires of the soul. “Lives of the Saints” depicts Christian saints subject to rape, torture and martyrdom—the desires of others cruelly forced upon them—and their own relish to suffer and surrender their own blood for a higher kind of love. He does not celebrate this conflict, but explores it and its opacity to a world grown wary of spiritual desires that conflict with more quotidian satisfactions:

And yet, beyond stigmata, there are wounds

We might call self-inflicted: wounds they *seek*,  
Life-threatening, and welcome. Think of one  
Whose governor had vowed to see her fall,  
Turning her clear gaze upward to declare,  
“You’re wrong. I’ll never sin. My heart is pure,  
A temple to the Spirit”—one who speaks  
Her own mind with such purity of vision,  
And such will, she’s bound to feel let down  
When all her prayers are answered but the pain  
Falls short, somehow, despite that pure heart pierced,  
One thrust from a soldier’s sword, her own bright blood  
Flooding the ground.

Until the last few decades, such images would have been intended to celebrate the epic bravery of the saint and to reproach the middle-class reader with his own tepidity. Balbo’s poems do not allow us such an easy morality tale (the heroic past lacerating a boring present). His very restricted use of lyric modes and his practice of weaving complex blank verse and occasional (ingeniously subtle) rhymed stanzas out of ostensibly random documents from historical and literary archives, as well as from the glut of newspapers and New Age “guidebooks” gives his work a character of impersonality akin to that found in the poems of John Matthias and William Logan (although his language is more immediately accessible and supplely varied than either of these poets of the hard lessons of history).

Rather than offer soporifics for the clichés of our age, he documents the almost vertiginous variety of moments where

desire and love conflict or, more frequently, form an *ad hoc* alliance that seems to score the battles of the spirit in the life of the flesh. “Second Circle,” an unrhymed sonnet, serves as a template for this poetics. A line snatched from Robert Pinsky’s translation of the inferno—“Hell in perpetual motion”—conjures up the conjunction of physical movement allegorically elevated to the spiritual (that of the realm of the divinely damned), so that motions of the soul recoil on the movements of earthly lust: “So many souls, / Such bodies passing over, couplings / Never to be re-lived, or never known ...”

The poetry of the young W.H. Auden had identified desire (appetite) and love. As a Marxist and Freudian, he felt he had good materialist reasons to dismiss what most people call love as an epiphenomenon of physical needs. He spent the remainder of his career learning properly to distinguish the two. Those were appropriate projects for Auden and for his time. But considering the tendency in our time either to repeat the early Auden’s error, or, conversely, to exaggerate the separation between physical needs and “spiritual interests” as exemplified by popular interests in New Age, self-help gibberish or watered-down western Buddhism, Balbo’s poems seem prescient and necessary. We fail to understand the complexity of desires when we do not appreciate how those of the intellect or soul turn back upon the physical world and affect it, scoring and scorching it with meaning. The title poem suggests as much in its retelling of the legend of early Christians who, sealed in a cave by a Roman emperor as punishment for their faith, do not die but awaken centuries later in an age where Christianity has become the coin of the realm. The protagonist does not feel vindication or gratitude so much as disorientation and bitterness. In a new world, where their miraculous survival is interpreted by the world at large in the same terms the “sleepers” should understand it, they hear instead the loss of their families, deceased centuries earlier:

As for her voice,  
A music I could not shut out but hear  
Even today, in sleep, my own prayer  
Was that it would grow faint enough to bear

As, through the years, it has.

This sense of one kind of love lost yet ambivalently validated by the divine echoes throughout. “In Assisi” describes St. Clare, foundress of the Poor Clares and a disciple of St. Francis. She became an ascetic holy sister, a lover of God, out of love for Francis himself; earthly desires get sublimated into spiritual ones, but not without cost:

Concealed by nuns,  
She cut all ties beneath his gaze, but once  
She took the lodgings offered her (Godspeed  
To all Poor Clares), could she foresee the tears?  
She outlived him by twenty-seven years.

Balbo’s poems on Dantesque themes and on saints’ lives do riddle the book, because the imagination of Catholicism may be the only one adequate to explore the complex intermingling of flesh and spirit that modern Protestantism and naturalism have tended to sever, scorn or dismiss. But their effect comes from juxtaposition with poems drawn from myths of Orpheus and Eurydice, Cupid and Psyche, and especially mass culture: Hitchcock and suspense films, where the unraveling of unnatural desires give form to plot, as in *Vertigo* and *The House of Wax*. Balbo’s poem of the same name chillingly recounts the story of murder and statuary interment, citing the two film versions as if to suggest murder for an ungraspable passion has itself become the genre of modern life.

His “Desire: A Bestiary” offers fragmentary images of animals and insects in the heat of mating, as if to suggest the incipient intellectual meaning of wild love and violence. Such investigation of wild creatures as a text for our own self-understanding recurs at greater length in “Millennial,” where a clipping from *The New York Times* noting the appearance of misshapen and mutated frogs across Minnesota in 1996, serves as occasion to show how traditional Christian theologies of apocalypse have themselves mutated (rather than disappeared) with the advent of scientific speculation over climate change and the discoveries of modern genetic theory. Finally, the Christian, mass-cultural

(*Star Trek*), biological and technological all merge to devastating effect in “Expectation of a Journey,” a dramatic monologue that movingly gives account of those modern “self-martyrs,” the suicides of the Heaven’s Gate cult, who killed themselves in 1997 in the belief that the Hale-Bopp comet’s approach would initiate the Second Coming. These are brilliant, painful poems that suggest the danger of religious or spiritual desires when they meet the physical world, but also the persistence, dignity and necessity of that sometimes strange meeting.

—James Matthew Wilson

Jeanne Larsen, ed. WILLOW, WINE, MIRROR, MOON. BOA, 2005.

Jeanne Larsen’s new BOA anthology of Chinese women’s poetry is by far the best book of Chinese poetry in translation of the new century, and, unlike the vast majority of books of one sort or another that have been, with greater or lesser degrees of levity, granted a similar celebrity, Larsen’s book is likely to hold the title for a great long while.

By my count, there are presently fewer than a half a dozen “translators” of classical Chinese poetry who are both certified readers of classical Chinese and published poets or authors in the English language. Larsen, a novelist, poet, and essayist, as well as a professor of English at Hollins University, is one of that small group. While some “translators” work pretty successfully with a collaborator who knows Chinese (that is, in fact, presently the dominant model for Chinese) the self confidence in Larsen’s poetic voice in *Willow, Wine, Mirror, Moon*, is a sure sign of a mastery of both the language to be translated and of the art and craft of poetry itself. It seems odd that nearly a hundred years after Pound and Florence Ayscough, in *Cathay* and *Fir-Flower Tablets*, there remain so very few Americans (or other English speakers) who are equipped to do better, but the reader will rejoice that Larsen is one of those.

Scholarship is at the service of poetry here. Larsen chooses her poems from *The Complete Poems of the T’ang* (*Quan Tang*