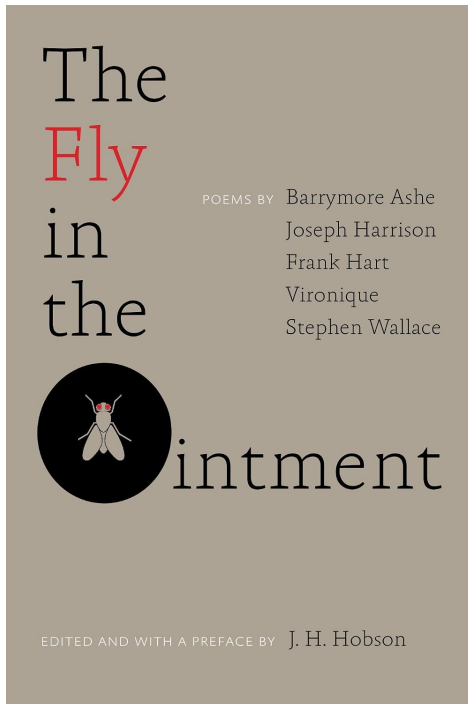




Ned Balbo

Parnassus in Sight

The Fly in the Ointment: poems by Barrymore Ashe, Joseph Harrison, Frank Hart, Vironique, Stephen Wallace.
Edited and with a preface by J.H. Hobson. Towson, MD:
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According to its back cover, J.H. Hobson's definitive edition of poems by the Baltimore collective known as "Fly" shares a close kinship with celebrated literary collaborations such as *Lyrical Ballads*, *Des Imagistes*, or *The Lion's Tail and Eyes*, the joint 1962 volume by Robert Bly, James Wright, and William Duffy. What such luminaries might say in response, we can only guess, but *The Fly in the Ointment* does offer a fascinating glimpse of a broader literary moment as reflected in one city's local scene. Most intriguing is that poets steeped in disparate traditions managed, for a time, to collaborate in performances that brought new energy, and controversy, to Baltimore's reading circuit before the untimely death of the collective's central figure. Fortunately, *The Fly in the Ointment* aptly captures that brief interval (1989-1994) when Fly was an organic (if fractious) coalition of edgy, competitive young poets eager to make their mark.

Originally produced by Fly impresario Barrymore Ashe and published on his Gone Tomorrow Press (Hobson mostly relies on the May 1994 version), the present volume features the work of five people. Only one, Joseph Harrison, is still active as a poet (Harrison's third book, *Shakespeare's Horse*, recently appeared from Waywiser), but two others—Stephen Wallace and Frank Hart—also contribute standout poems. The two figures known for their stage charisma—Barrymore Ashe and Vironique—are represented by work that made its debut during the Fly's contentious appearances. As Greg Williamson observes in a shrewd encomium, "There aren't many books that make one ask, 'What is poetry, anyway?' This one does." We might still disagree about the answers after reading, but Fly's intent was to make us question our preconceptions.

Barrymore Ashe, Fly's central figure, is the author of just over half the poems included here. That he drowned in a boating accident on Maryland's Pretty Boy Reservoir shortly after the collective's last Baltimore show in 1994 adds a poignant note to the proceedings. In a press release, C.B. Stein recalls Ashe—his substance abuse, the brawls he picked, his confrontational mood shifts—without using the term "bipolar disorder"; still, I wondered what sort of professional help Ashe would have received today. He courted risk for its own sake. On reading one poem, "Vertical Invasion," which concludes, "'He's got a gun!'" Ashe reportedly threw lit firecrackers into the crowd. This provocative act earned Fly a lifetime ban from the Loft, a venue that, afterward, focused solely on hardcore punk. This cycle of audience provocation with artistic rejection and/or outright expulsion proved wearing to the collective's other four members but further reinforced Ashe's sense of being an outcast. Even so, his poems are unmistakably his own, and though less explosive on the page, well worth discovering.

Ashe's hostility toward authority provides frequent inspiration. "King Arthur" opens, "So he was the king, it was supposed to be a big deal," while "Coach Jesus" asserts, "When you want to win so bad you'd die for it. / That's when you're ready to play for Coach Jesus." Here, Ashe hurls barbs at the ultimate father figure, God, through his self-appointed earthly representative: a sanctimonious football coach. Exploring the coach's delusional indifference to his young athletes' welfare, Ashe echoes the voice of this self-righteous sports fanatic: "'Gotta play through the pain, boy. / Jesus died for your soul, boy, you can stand pain.' / He crippled the boy, he won the game."

Elsewhere, Ashe compensates for feeling marginalized by adopting an exalted role, as in "The Prophet." He describes himself in the third person:

His mutterings were hailed as oracular truths.
Elaborate plans were keyed to his hints and inklings.
Catastrophe only enhanced his reputation...
In the future, whatever would happen, he'd seen it coming.

In such lines, Ashe is both Ezekiel and street preacher, visionary and outcast, in this case reversing our expectations (and perhaps his own) by finding himself *believed*—a poem of wish-fulfillment, perhaps, in a career thwarted by critics and bouncers. (On the nights he performed it, Ashe would arrive in character: unshaven, garbed in a shabby coat, a bottle of cheap wine ready.)

Ashe's best poem lends its title to the collection. "The Mischief" catalogues a series of small disappointments that add up to a catastrophe much larger—the catastrophe that, in Ashe's view, is life itself:

Everywhere it went it was the mischief.
The bug in the telephone, the knock in the throttle.
The little word the wrong way.
The terrible luck of meeting the Mortons there.

Eschewing enjambment as usual, Ashe concludes, "The riddle was anything. / Politics, the shape of the noise we live in. / The crack in the violin, the fly in the ointment." Given this perspective on the world, it's no wonder that Ashe's collaborations were fraught with conflict. But though his death remains

unexplained (no body was ever found), we can be grateful that Ashe's words, angry yet truthful, survive their maker.

We know from Hobson's preface that, in its early '90s printings, *The Fly in the Ointment* omitted participants' names, "fully intending to call into question the accepted model of authorship" in order to achieve a "composition in numerous voices, at play with each other." For historical purposes, Hobson lists author's names solely in the table of contents so that readers who skip that page can encounter the poems as Ashe intended: without a single author identified. But even without the names, the voice of each poet is unique. The member least represented (only six poems in all) is Frank Hart, the art lover and environmental activist whose best poem, "The Painter's Portrait," appears third in the selection. In fluent free verse lines that incorporate prose from other sources, Hart sketches a brief history of Juan de Pareja, slave of Diego Velázquez and painter in his workshop who was later freed to pursue his vocation. (Velázquez's portrait of Pareja may be seen in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Pareja's own work may be viewed at the Prado and elsewhere in Spain.) Addressing Velázquez's portrait of Pareja, Hart writes with admirable precision.

How many faces
Have you witnessed
Disappear

From your pose
At the cusp
Of time?

...
Elsewhere the master painted
The constipated nobility,
The humiliated dwarf.

But here with exact gravity
To His good trusted hand
What has he done?

Hart's shorter poems near the end of the book include flashes of brilliance ("One foot on Nepal, the other on Peru, hand cupping the moon," in "Not You") but fall short of "The Painter's Portrait": he pushes the use of collage too far, at the cost of coherence. By contrast, Hart's other standout, "Ode," extends over four sections that feature sustained, evocative passages:

Printing a broken line
The feet stay almost dry,
The water just ahead
Or just behind

Each footstep measuring
The trembling edge
Of the old distinction,
Sea and land.

"Ode" ends as a kind of nocturne, memorable and haunting:

There's fear
In every photograph,
The frailty
Of all we frame,

The folly of building
By the sea.
And terror
At the total dark between...

Hart's stage presence, reportedly, was never very vivid, but the quality of his work makes me wish Ashe had included more.

Before closing with the two poets most often at odds, I should mention Vironique, whose work presents a challenge for this reviewer. The poems either don't make it *off* the page or don't quite make it *to* the page. "Veronica," for example, consists of a blank page under the title—an allusion, possibly, to Saint Veronica's sudarium, which would bear Christ's acheiropoieton after he held it to his face during the Via Dolorosa. In performance, Vironique, wearing a pink feather boa and a glittery blue ball gown, would sweep up to the microphone and whisper huskily, "Veronica." The room would fall quiet as the audience waited for more from this striking figure; suddenly, Vironique would turn around and rush haughtily off the stage, as if demeaned by the brief temptation to perform. On the page, we have nothing—only the title—so the drama of the moment simply isn't possible.

By contrast, "Shape's Horse"—several lines that, seen together, sort of resemble a sideways horse—lives *only* on the page: read aloud, its language falls flat. Vironique's most successful poem is "Huck Finn," shaped like a river: "the long winding / mingled waters / slowly widening / come follow / the brown central / heartstream of America"—a beautiful moment. Vironique is regarded fondly by Fly aficionados, but in the unfortunate absence of photographs or video, the full range of Vironique's input remains uncertain.

Which brings us to Stephen Wallace. An autodidact who read in a striking basso profundo, Wallace was talented but prone to fits of aesthetic jealousy; in fact, Wallace's antagonism drove Harrison from the group. Only years later, after Wallace himself had resigned from Fly, did Harrison rejoin, maintaining his onstage calm out of loyalty to Ashe when Wallace showed up at events to heckle his former friends. It's a shame that Wallace was so envious since his poems fuse metrical skill with a flair for the visual. The eloquent "Landscape with Snow Monsters" explores that unsettling moment when "each drifted knoll of fallen crystal" reflects back on the "cold blank mirror of the wintering mind"; but instead of the nothing that is not there, Wallace shows us something that *is* when "[c]ascading from ascendant horns and thighs / And massive from its nap the musk ox rise." Equally impressive is "John Quest" which reinvents the protagonist of Hanna-Barbera's 1964-1965 animated adventure series *Jonny Quest* as a grown man who's seen "oasis on oasis turned mirage." According to Wallace, "No vision can deliver you the palm / For shade on the

pristine shore"—nor can it deliver Race Bannon, Hadji, or Bandit to banish their friend's ennui.

Wallace's eight richly textured poems repay rereading, especially "Legend": despite stylistic differences, its "cautionary history of the world" shares Ashe's ambition to figure out where Creation went wrong and what language had to do with it: "The ape broke into the garden and ran wild. / He smeared each fruit and flower with a name / And since he owned each name he owned each thing." Wallace has more in common with Harrison, however: both poets are capable of compelling metrical verse, both are poetically ambitious, and both possess a stunning ear, though Harrison—more tender, and highly attuned to shifts of register—is clearly the superior poet. Since Harrison is the only Fly who's achieved some literary success, it is tempting to ask why and to look for signs in his early work. They are not lacking.

Of seven poems, his singular contributions are "Frost Heaves" and "Ivan Ho." The latter—an inventive ballad in rhymed iambic pentameter quatrains—begins by recounting the exploits of its half Russian, half Chinese protagonist, an orphan whose story fuses with our own and that of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*:

Why tell you, more than I already have?
You've got your story, just as I've got mine,
And could compare adventures line by line:
It starts with misdirection by a knave

Then sketches the essentials of your life.

Even more impressive is "Frost Heaves" which pays tribute to the cantankerous New England bard while expressing playful exasperation at every landmark named for him:

You cross the Robert Frost Memorial Bridge
To see, on the Robert Frost Memorial Drive,
The Robert Frost Interpretive Nature Trail,
The Robert Frost Memorial Wayside Area,
And then a crooked stick-sign, with crude letters,
Warning of shocks from shifty weather: FROST HEAVES.

("Frost heaves" are upsurges of soil caused by buried ice that pushes upward in freezing weather.) As it unfolds, the poem examines the contrast between Frost's public persona and that of his best work, which knows "love's white backward gaze of grief at loss." Eventually, the "frost heaves" of the title become a multifaceted metaphor—for Frost himself, for uncompromising vision, for the severe truths that emerge when "Frost will wrestle stone from underneath / And crack our polished, placid surfaces..." It's fascinating to discover a then-youthful Harrison wrestling not with rivalries among friends but with Robert Frost himself, a major figure of the art, by confronting Frost's terrain (both aesthetic and literal). Maybe that's what sets Harrison apart: his Frostian "lovers' quarrel" is with poetry itself and not with other poets, as was the case with Barrymore Ashe.

Of course, we'll never know what would have become of Ashe. Set on an irrevocable course, he picked fistfights with bad poets, cajoled then insulted

supporters, self-medicated to the point that the pain that he sought to dull got worse. With such a captain, the ship that was Fly could only run aground, yet Ashe engendered loyalty: in his preface, editor Hobson numbers himself among "the friends of Barrymore Ashe [who agreed] that something should be done to commemorate the 20th anniversary of his death." C. B. Stein's press release comments hint at similar affection, eulogizing Barrymore Ashe for all that could have been:

[W]ith his talents, both organizational and performative, [Ashe] would have benefitted from the greater regard now given the spoken word: he was out ahead of the general culture in this respect, as in others. And of course, in a world turned digital, he would be everywhere: Ashe and Fly would be all over YouTube, and poetry devotees around the world, or even just people who like to be entertained, could see, and hear, what the fuss was about.

In "New Hoyle and Improved," Ashe wrote, "The best part of making up games is inventing odd rules." For him, poetry, too, was a game with rules that made it "fun, or hard, or hilariously impossible to compete." Its closing line may be taken to sum up the life cycle of Fly: "It was fun while it lasted, original fun." As Ecclesiastes tells us: "Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour" (10:1). By contrast, J.H. Hobson's Twentieth-Anniversary Edition of *The Fly in the Ointment* offers something sweet: a glimpse of poetry's past through five truly fascinating figures who joined in rivalry and friendship to put Parnassus in their sights.

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