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TUNNEL VISION

As in, the sky constricts. As in, a seagull’s overhead and then suddenly it’s not, though it is.
All the senses short-sheeted. The distant car horn,

then six steps later the hollered rebuke. The soft brush against your legs maybe fern, maybe fingers-through-the-manhole-cover. Who could say.

Your mind is a dog with a rodent in its teeth, a rodent named Car Wreck, a rodent named Tumor, a rodent named What Have You Done to Stop the Shootings?

You celebrate the streaks: Twenty-Two Days of Actually Seeing Contrails. Three-Plus Weeks of Grapefruit Awareness. Then the inevitable

closing in, the whiting out, the low hum that covers the plash of a kayak oar into the bay. What oar? What kayak? What bay? You’re afloat,

but buoyed on your own disasters, legless because what use are legs in dread’s waters? On the shore someone has poured you a lemonade.

You’ve paddled back. You’re drinking it. You’re smiling and saying words like incumbent and coleslaw and Harper Lee, as the sweet drink spills down through your bodiless body, elegant machinery, remarkable scaffold that holds nothing now but your pounding, pigheaded heart.
POEM FOR MAKEOUT POINT

In my day, we had dew-wet slides
on a padlocked playground.
The lot behind the Methodist church.
We had side streets, hammocks,
the neighborhood tree copse
that passed for a park. We came
home muddy. We came home chilled.
We learned to time our gasps
so we could call up the basement stairs
between them—no, we’re not thirsty!—
our voices static inside their shivering.
Every bit of tongue and tooth,
every dark crocus of heat
that bloomed inside us: hushed
and illicit. We were dirty secrets.
It was us against curfew, us against
the billy club’s car window thud,
us against our parents’ saucer-shock eyes.
And it was us against each other,
mapless in the dark country of lust.
Those days I dreamed of parking
a great finned car on a cliff,
some city shaken out beneath me
like a sequined gown. I dreamed
of the radio dial’s glow over
a boy’s face, soft-focusing him.
I dreamed of scoring my fear
to the Platters’ tacit permission,
velvet voices subtexting it’s fine,
it’s fine. Oh, I dreamed of that
long line of cars, each finned wonder
full of people as desperate as me,
each of us looking down into the abyss
of the city, then looking left,
looking right, seeing inside each
white-fogged window ourselves,
silhouetted again and again.
WITNESS

Slick, cryptic: I swam
toward my father certain
to get there. Come on,
he said, one hand
a flag, the other yes.
He leaned against dark water,
took another step back.
How does water work?
The parts of me I couldn’t
see were most of me.
I swam to him and away
and away and away
from the warm beach, his face
a sunset of thrill, tease, and no.
I never reached him, never.

Once in the city I lie down
alone to see something other
than the cathedral of childhood,
the cage of strokes made by
always moving toward the one
moving away. Under my skin
I see the two of us in perfect liquid
suspension, so much more than
close enough. And the blue
strands, the river inside
me, the stones
I saved and still save to mark
my walk into this life, terra clarity,
with an aisle of mystery
and his shadow and his dust.
Here comes God, breaking elms like a cyclone in his hands. And here sits Anne who will recall it on the porch of her old age, a braid of white hair looping down, turning into a toy for the cat. A cat is something that will claw you to death when you’re trying to save its stupid life, bundling it hissing from the boiling storm, the hated love that smashes what it touches and leaves untouched and trembling the kids that burst from the toolshed, a happy confusion of friends and hangers-on.

From a basement window: Leave it, Anne! Let it go! It don’t love you like you do!

We don’t know if we know the girl or not. We don’t know half our own first names, something or other with the braids and the cat. The cat gets away. The houses blink in shock, in sudden light, bright green. And the cat comes back, scowling and wet, crazy Anne crying its many-hyphened name like some thing she thinks she used to love.
CADAVER IN A LANDSCAPE

The breastbone bobs on a sea of Latin. The scrotum frowns in a forgotten tongue. Toss them a ball or wicker hoop, the hands will catch whichever before the rest of the Resurrection knows what day it is. Find a chimney and light a fire. The stumpy wings of lungs will bite the woodsmoke from the weather, the brain too flush to tell the face the nose is gone, the jaw left hanging in perpetual surprise, airing two perfect horseshoes of perfect teeth. The knife tip they might close on’s bare but for the taste of rain and stubble fields, of the broken ranks of apple trees, the sharpness of a Protestant spire rising, inquiringly, in middle distance. The blood in the brain forgets its hemispheres, grows round and round like the tree lost at the edge of the woods, rooted deep and tall as the cadaver passes by, a promiscuity of nerves, a handsome cranium, some feet unbent by shoes but walking, always walking, in search of all the man flesh has to hold inside.
TO A BAT FALLEN IN THE STREET

Crumpled carbon paper, I thought. Then you moved, humped yourself up and collapsed, using your wings like crutches, straining to inch off the street onto somebody’s lawn, as if you knew the difference.

I bent close enough to see: your small cat ears, gargoyle shape. But couldn’t bring myself to touch, to help, as if I were what you were made to scare off. Terrible, your struggle to cross. I cringed, wanting a door to shut, wanting to jog off

like easy belief, thinking the stars are pure light, not firestorms raging. But there you were, a glimpse of God nobody wants—broken body, dark night with shattered door, and what sonar beyond my ears still singing?
Richard Robbins

DOCUMENTARY FILM

In the bermed hut I lived in for a month,
a peat fire constant in the hearth,
I made the tea and roasted lamb and read,
barely wondering about the man

who lived there too, naked as I, shaved
head to foot, sleeping when I awoke,
awake when I slept, and for a few hours
each day, the one I stepped around, quiet,

the same for both of us, our habits
someone else’s art. We ate and shat
and dreamed wet dreams and read about the war
and wrote letters home, never knowing

how a camera caught us, where on earth
we were. Then the door opened to hills
grassy and endless. Then the two of us
embracing. He heading south and down
to tumbled water, I to the hilltop,
where the wind blew fierce, and clouds scudded
toward city or ocean—they didn’t care—
the hilltop where the chimney of our hut

squatted like a cairn venting its smoke,
where I could look into it and down
and see beyond the glow of earth burning
two men still there, never speaking,
going about their business under ground.
Math time, spelling time, who knows what time
a black phone rings at the back and Corrine
begins crying, we don’t know why. Sister
pulls the receiver to her ear, finds the young

President dead. History, geography,
time to kneel on the floor with colored beads
and sorrowful mysteries, our Agony
in the Garden, his Scourge and Crucifixion.

Everyone knew the Bomb might fall on us,
even as we clung to each other later
on our couches, the week that would not end.
Some blamed Nixon. We did geometry
on our carpets, moved our little brother’s
motorcade through dense weaves, in and out of focus.
Allison Seay

BETWEEN THE AMERICAS

From another continent he phones
to say what are you doing
Sweeping the porch I say

I mean what are you doing
The rhododendrons are dying and

No I mean what are you doing where did you go
I am here on the other continent I say
You disappeared
I wish I could but no I did not

Do you remember the sky was black as an olive
You are mistaking romance and Umbria for the same thing
The moon was the pimento we were the skin

Your English is bad I say
Your Portuguese is worse
True enough

Can you come I think
I will never see you again
Come to Rio

No why because I am a witch

I can teach you
You don’t love me
Love is not the right verb I need more language

Try harder who is speaking
I am lonely for you like a wire through a pole in an abandoned country
Say something else
What is the difference in light and lighting
Everything and nothing
Where are you what are you doing now

I am sipping water alone in my poverty
Something is always wrong I think your beauty is a burden
And yours is an assault
Marianne Boruch

WHEN I THINK ABOUT THE FIRST POPE TO QUIT

that job, 1294, five months in,  
amost Christmas, Celestine the Fifth  
and how before: We need  
an honest man and you’re it, Pietro di Morone, the cardinals  
in their red-lavish showing up at his cave, he  
having visions enough, eating grass in between,  
no, shaking his head no—a lot of good  
that does.

Abducted to elegance, proper meals, a table, real  
linen under the suddenly rich look of him,  
he wasn’t anymore. Or hardened further, a nub quite  
outside himself—though there is no self—shiny as a star  
he’d turn away from every time, big windows  
or no windows.

And why do I quiet and thrill to this decoder ring  
in the cereal box, nuns telling us  
squat-everything else back to zero, the old days,  
little desks, sit up straight.

And why are the long days so short?

The brain is a superpower of play and replay. Certain moments.  
That poor man in his ecstatic loneliness  
digesting his impossible porridge of weeds and sticks  
looks up again to who is that  
down the rocky crevice, how they tripped and cried out like  
babies or the black bird,  
held onto each other trying for regal and upright,  
a colorful flash, a feast  
out of hell to tempt him. Was it
just the flattery? Their bloated want
narrowing to his
least, nothing left to say.

Yes goes so far. Then it stops like time
before clocks got invented by someone who heard
madness, the small deliberate what
isn’t, what is
no. Last. Larger for it.
is night's body, is
out of body. I knew that early.

Find your spot,
I was told many times. She meant
getting into bed, turning this way, that,
settling in like the first snow before
any dreaming up snow.

Remember? Weigh nothing.
No one awake will tell you that
but Keats.

Drift down. Bye. An altitude
in reverse, a fist
you never learned to make—

Snow is
freefall, you
equal to its gradual, its many
far-off and fade or
secret up this

barely this.
Bill Rector

THE PRESSURE COOKER BOMB

The pressure cooker bomb is easily assembled from materials of daily life. A child could make one. Especially a child.

The pressure cooker bomb doesn't tick. It lacks a fuse. It looks like dinner waiting on the stove when you get home.

What enemy would devise such a thing? Who would want to destroy our lives by exploding what is most familiar?

The pressure cooker bomb is set off by a telephone call from the hospital. Afterward everything looks the same.

Then the second bomb goes off.
I slept like brain coral,  
a castle for the eel.

I slept like seafloor.

A captain’s clock,  
my heart ticked in the silt.

I slept ever more deeply,  
as shipwrecks do.

I slept in the gap  
between dot and dash—  
like the corroded core  
of an undersea cable.

I was lost to maps.

Tugged by everyday currents  
I drifted as I sank.

I came to bunk  
on the bottommost ledge  
of the remotest trench,  
where deep-sea gorgons  
bait their fangs  
with living lanterns

and the pressure  
per square inch  
crushes the diving bell  
of a human head  
in an instant.

I slept in my heart.

I slept like two continents pulling apart.
A soul on the brink
of leaving the family
headed for the woods
at the end of West Street.

We caught it by the flaps
halfway out the gate,
lured it back indoors.

We fed it potatoes and cabbage,
fish on Fridays.

When the days turned
cool and frost rimed
the windows, we made

the soul a pallet
on the kitchen floor,
near the hearth.

And why shouldn’t it sleep
indoors, after all,
why not?

The days were beautiful
back then, pulled
by two horses across the sky.
WHAT THE WOODEN DUCK SAYS TO ME
AT NIGHT WHEN I CAN’T SLEEP

I.

What kind of word are you looking for?

An ice-age word, or pre-Columbian, something with feathers on it.

How about flannel.

Or sandpaper.

How about instead we turn on the Weather Channel?

I’ve decided not to listen to the decoy—even if he is hand-carved.

I see a declarative sentence in your future—something bold, with a little malice in it.

I look straight ahead at the tv.

War!

How about remorse, I say.
The aftermath of anything is more compelling.

Yes, a different bird entirely.

The blasted duck is merciless, harbors toward me a sort of ill will disguised as charity.
II.

Any successful thoughts yet?

No, I’m dried up.

You need another word already?

I thought you were going to sleep.

Here’s a sentence for you—
In my generation
you went wherever the man had a job—
the old ‘whither thou goest.’

You know I hate traveling.

I blinked on the train once
and ended up alone and barefoot
outside the village of Calasanz,
irrigating potato fields for strangers.

Dig deeper! they shouted
waving their hoes in the air.

Is that what you’re looking for—
a whole story?

No, just a few good tubers.
III.

You awake? Got another one—

Beckoning Sea.

Not meant for me—
I’m landlocked.

The duck talks
in his sleep,
dreams of the sea.

So after the crackdown
was that you singing

behind the chicken coop?

IV.

Remorse docked her boat
long ago on my shore
the sea
Is that you singing?
beckoned and beckoned
until I could not
resist the sea
the vast, salted fields
Is that you singing?
the handcarts listing with sod
we kneel
Behind the chicken coop
is that you singing?
beside your open grave
a wound that will not close

at supper
we eat eggs
Is that you singing?
from a single white hen
foxes slip into the house
at night
another song departs, departs

oh how I miss you
Is that you?
my tender violet
my downy chick
LETTER TO HIERONYMUS BOSCH

Before a yolk-yellow break
in the clouds, Christ looks down
on pitchforks gathered in scenes
folkloric, the *Haywain* a lurid
moral painted on shutters,
but what I’m asking has nothing
to do with haystacks—though
the impossible pompadour
anchors the central panel,
zaftig, even holy, color
of chamois—as much as it does
with the figure in a wide-
brimmed hat pressing a dagger
to a man’s throat. No one
pays him any mind. Look right
and a blindfolded head dangles
from a pole: medieval terror
like twenty-first century terror.
In your version of hell,
the occupants are always
grotesque, which is far
from what I imagine. I always
believed the forked tongue
sprung from beauty—the devil
made lethal not for his hideous
soul, but his ability to hide it.
I have to hand it to you
for your brutal genius, a palette
of robin’s egg blue studded
with cardinal red. Among
anonymous villagers, there’s a path
to carve with over-sized wheels.
I’m setting forth on it.
Brandon Krieg

BEYOND THE USEFUL LIFE

A crow drinks rain from a paint bucket’s overturned lid.

Two teens lie on a rock after swimming, waiting for their cut-off fatigues to dry.

Steelhead suspend inside the cab of a sunken Ford where the river bends.

A heap of sun-bleached shells shines beside the oysterhouse.

Beneath a stepladder over barbed wire, a garter snake rests.

The barn’s last remaining pane flashes as I bike past.
Emmanuel Moses

FORGIVE THEM

"Forgive them..." a drunkard is shoved by youngsters
This evening of blue snow
"Forgive them"
He could be their father, which makes them nastier, more cruel
How beautiful they are, slender, graceful
While he goes squelching through puddles of frozen mud
Like a bear at the end of his chain
"Forgive them" becomes a refrain in the mouth of the splendid adolescent
A dark-haired girl with gleaming green eyes
She hums it into his ear
The snowflakes fall on her voice
Making it even sweeter
He ends up spreadeagled, his clumsiness, pushed by one of them
Who would know?
The pure vodka he thought he was sturdy enough to drink like water
Has cut his legs from under him, burned his eyes, shrunken his heart
To the size of a walnut
Lost in a body still confusing blood and desire
YOUR SHADOW

That night I dreamed of a novel whose title was your name
Someone had thrown it away in the street with other books
The writer’s name was the same as yours too
Are you here or somewhere else?
Do you walk in the streets all day long
The way you did with me beside the gray river?
What do you think of when you close your eyes, just as you fall asleep?
We don’t see each other any more, or speak to each other
I wonder how you arrange your hours
What you do with words and images
The ones you keep, the ones you throw away, as I do
If you live the present moment like a bridge suspended above an abyss
That the slightest weight, the slightest breath, could wash away
Or like a territory vast as the tundra
With no before and no after
You have gone away taking your sorrow
But you forgot a scrap of your shadow at the door

translated by Marilyn Hacker
INCEST

It’s the gift that keeps on giving:
nothing clears a room faster
than the words
my father, my uncle, my grandfather.
And what if it’s all three?
Look at me.
Do you think I don’t
recoil?
Do you think I don’t know
how you feel? In my house
they passed the kids around
like cigarettes, the way toughs in prison
turn each new arrival into a punk.
But you’ve got to have a sense of humor
about these things.
Look at me.
Do you think I don’t wish
it was Jimmy Page, and me
a teen model
with big brown eyes like Lori Maddox?
There’s a no-brainer.
Hey, it’s okay to laugh.
It’s okay when it’s a rock star,
or the prime minister of Italy,
or a famous director,
whose movies I love,
mourning his wife
with one half of his brain
and dipping into the well of souls
with the other.
Strange what sustains you as a child:
in my case
it was Ed Bishop,
who played Commander Straker
on the T.V. series, UFO.
I thought he was beautiful,  
Ed Bishop, a blond god like Alex  
who wouldn’t look at me in school.  
I liked his jumpsuit,  
and his blue eyes,  
and his air of command,  
and how he fought the forces of evil  
from his office  
beneath a film studio in London,  
all the while pretending  
to be a movie producer instead.  
And when my grandfather died,  
and my mother gave me money  
for Hadassah, to plant a tree in Israel  
in her father’s name, I planted a tree  
for Ed Bishop instead.  
Poor Ed! He wasn’t even dead yet.  
But that’s what the card said:  
“In Memory of Ed Bishop.”  
Up yours, Mom.  
True story.  
That was forty years ago.  
And Ed Bishop’s dead too now,  
buried beside his son in Warwickshire.  
That’s family for you.  
Sleep well, Ed.  
I hope you like the tree.
HISTORICAL MARKERS

Maybe the embattled Indians stood right there not yet noted by anyone other than themselves. Somewhere—maybe in Marseille—a man agreed (for science) to wear special glasses that turned the world backwards and upside down. It took his brain two weeks with them before things looked right again. You take in objects with your baby eyes and you believe them. But it’s okay. You have to start from somewhere.

Broadcasting started as seeds cast across a field and became the first time people in different places heard the same thing at the same time. And then they started speaking with a microphone always in mind. There are still photographs of people who weren’t aware of the camera. It’s overwhelming what you find in the girl’s face.
LATITUDES

She has asked and I’ve promised and so when she turns twelve
I take my daughter to get her ears pierced.
She is unmarked and open as a field.
What mother first said to the needle, Go ahead. Yes.
Sailors were pierced to mark
their first crossing of the equator,
an invisible line designating the invisible.
They tattooed crosses on the soles of their feet
to protect them from the sharks that rose toward sinking ships.
We do not allow for how young they were.
Everything has already happened
at least an instant before we perceive it.
The earth can shake enough to make church bells ring.
Lost, as a child, she returned and stood quietly by my side.
How did you find me, how did you find me, I kept asking,
pointing to my chest (why?) to indicate me.
HUNGER

is first premise when you argue
any eating—a hint of what the goats

must feel as this herd, dozens, eats
off a hillside above the Richmond

on-ramp where I stall in 4 PM traffic,
the freeway below spilled out

glittery & turbulent. You see the goats
working in other urban clearings,

up the East Bay ridge among houses—
selective weeders hired for star thistle

nothing can kill except by the eating
of it—spikey crown a conspicuous blue.

You can see how intent they are
in their devotions, how the goats bow,

take turns to half-kneel. Their eating
is vicarious daring when so many truths

are hard to eat. I am the kind that just
listens to whatever my car-radio

supposes. Bored, I dial through music,
wars & junk-news, maybe hungry

in my own way.
COUNTING

Everyone else is collecting sleep that they are owed, the house all around you a featureless dark. But the TV screen is a lit doorway you go in past vampire movies, the talk shows, to insomniac’s TV—your life played back with bad laugh-tracks. The Bronx half-sister who is stealing the Scarsdale boy—
split couples back together in the few minutes of story always wedged between commercials. Then, suddenly, it’s the former Nina from “Slow Burn,” all of her snugly in her dress, two-stepping toward you, the dance-studio bright behind her.

She is wrinkle-less & still chirpy, not noticing that she is in an infomercial— as she dances, saying, that if you can count, you can dance—dancing is the math you failed in school, the prom queen you never added in. Subtracted to yourself, embarrassed to be in pajamas, you still get up from the chair, & start to count.
THE RADIO BRINGS NEWS

When I told lies, he says, the grass grew so fast, it hid the whole field. The river drowned the men with guns and flowers wilted over their bodies as their apology. But nothing happened if the lie wasn’t good enough, like when I said I love my country, I love my people, I want to be a communist too. And I’d raise my axe and hack the dirt for my spoon of rice, for my cup of soup. The river was clear, the river was fresh. If only I was a log, if only I was a bird. I would have freed myself before more. Once a soldier asked me why I worked so hard. His uniform nice, I lied to him and pounded my fist to my chest and then he left me alone. One night the radio crackled and someone dimmed the volume so fast, you might have thought the sound of static was grass growing. In the dark, I listened closely. I thought I heard escape. I thought I heard Thailand. I thought I heard the soldier asking me if I wanted to run away with him and five others tonight. If I wanted to eat.
COUSIN BANG-SOTA’S INHERITANCE

Strapped on the back
of my cousin’s motorcycle
I’m a sack of persimmons

The road made
of red buttons
my cousin drives
slow

She takes me everywhere she goes, even if I warn her
of dead people selling tamarinds

on the side of the road

We’re going to Kandal anyway
She wants to show me her house

My insides
juggling

I am ripe enough to eat

I’m not scared of dead people
but I don’t know

what to say to someone
I’m supposed to know

*

She carries me into the field

the field which is made of dirt, bones, grass, mosquitoes
wildflowers, and teeth
I open my mouth and persimmons fall out
One by one
they roll away

My cousin takes off her straw hat

Teeth in the field
clatter

The dead people are coming
I say to my cousin
I told you they’d be here

She kneels among wildflowers
waiting for her father

She lights incense
sticks them
in the dirt

*

Her father stands with us
slicing off a rusted peel

hands us each a piece
by the tip of his knife

He tells the dead people
to go away
we are his visitors
these persimmons are his
go find your own family
praying in a field
My cousin bows and smiles
She brings more offerings to him

before asking him for a house
a great big house

Her father points his knife
behind us

I stay in the field trying to eat everything
but they walk away together

A house is calling them home
Cynthia Hogue

AFTER THE WAR THERE WAS NO FOOD

As a boy the man dreamed he lay in a box of mineral salts, ruby, amber, quartz-clear.

He imagined eating the raw meat of the goat whose milk he sucked as newborn.

Death was his mother, match-thin and unsmiling. He loved her fiercely,

voraciously bleating into her sad face as he nursed.

Starving, the boy grew tall but not straight, so lean the wind might sweep him off.

Lately, the man returned to the Forêt de Chinon, which did not comfort him,

so many trees harvested he lost his way. Hunger was all he’d known when a long time ago he pleaded

for Death his mother to feed him. He bent to touch himself because, after all, Death would not.
THE LOST PRIVATE

The desk chair on the mountain top
that the man once found facing the valley

looked too rickety to sit on.
He saw it suddenly from the steep trail

most hikers never took. Not him,
who went off trail every chance he had,

even sometimes losing his way.
Beside the chair lay a blue plastic bag

with identification card (listing an address
on a military base closed 15 years ago),
mold-covered prison release papers,
a suicide prevention plan (writing washed off),

and Deputy Majeho’s legible local phone number
writ large. Parole Officer.

This morning the man leafs through the papers
when a ragged scrap flutters out:

the same neat hand made a note,
Cheryl      573-[unreadable, unreadable, torn away].

Whether and when something was done
or undone the man cannot say—

for years he’d forgotten about the unknowable—
but what he feels among the mold-dust

he breathes in reading the documents
for signs of a lost life

is an indifference to the broken
heart of himself who now alone

could not for the life of
him walk that mountain.
ODE TO A JELLYFISH

Ghost truffle
unruffled
by rough weather,

electrically
whiskered
saltwater whisper,

colorless and odorless,
tangible patch
of poison gas

inhaling, exhaling,
all skirt and no legs,
parasailing

on sigh after sigh
of inner under-
water wind,

your sentient
tentacles
cobweb-thin

serenely
kissing fire
up my daughter’s shin
ÆFEN

In elders’ speech, an emphasis not on dawn,
moment commencing men and women equal drudgery,
but on evening, æfenlæcan,
to grow towards evening,
a time so longed for, sky-watched, it earned
its own music. Æfendream, even-song.

Bring evening in, a neverending net of herring.
Sung by the æfensceop, the bard of evening.

Hard-won leisure for æfenspræc, evening-talk,
and the wide skirts of æfenscina, evening splendor.

The icy night, the mead hall, the hammered helmet
are silent tumuli minus evening’s bright inventions.

What is drunkenness without a well-fermented song
or the sorrow of war without once more drawing
effem blood in the company of one’s kinsmen?
Dull, the splendors of darkness, compared to those of dusk,
when the brown moor ponies are limned with gold
and the seabirds dive deep into the rippling crucible
to return with delicacies of garnet and pearl. Æfen,
hour when even the small ones cast long shadows.
Elizabeth Lindsey Rogers

LOST EXIT INTERVIEW

Can you measure the length of your work and stay?

Not in tea or coffee spoons,
not on wing-pairs turned gold

with August. Not even in sols,
those upbreaths of the red baton.

I counted nights. In the sharp
blanks where crickets should’ve been,

I traced another, blurrier loop:
the old volcano, breathing.

What were your expectations? Do you believe the training you received was adequate?

As angry adolescents, we learned
to remake our insect sounds

by dragging one finger across
the wet rim of a glass.

I wanted, somehow,
to flip this iteration:

re-gender this world
as something humid, more mirrored.
Describe your home and weekly routine, including any obstacles faced.

Some days it is nothing but pageantry, the sting of layers and layers, dust and rock and armor, our terrain’s wrinkled palimpsest. Somewhere towards the bottom, I am water, a blue costume.

Was there a single moment when you realized you had lost faith in _____?

I asked, what is it in this landscape’s warp that hollows my brain toward speechlessness?

Who or what do you blame for your decisions?

She was surely up to something. There was something she was. She was something. She was surely. She was. She was.

Choose the most accurate description of your current belief system:

“Saturn returns”  “Bellweather”  “Lead singer of nothing” ✓  “Against”
When I am lost, I:

A. Look ahead, try to locate a pilot light  
B. Answer cannot be determined  
C. Sketch a scene from a Western  
D. All of the above ✓

And choose the best expression of your loss at this time:

III Three 15/5 3.0000000 ✓

Would you like to make a final dedication (40 characters max, including deep spaces)? If so, you may enter it at this time.

for poor on’ry people

like you and like I...

By etching your initials above the horizon: “I hereby acknowledge that there is no tangible exit, endpoints, or clear return…”

* 

* 

*
You will never forget corpses wrapped in flames—at dusk, you watched a congregation of crows
gather in the orchard and sway on branches;
in the dawn light, a rabbit moves and stops,
moves and stops along the grass; and as
you pull a newspaper out of a box, glance
at the headlines, you feel the dew on grass
as the gleam of fading stars: yesterday you met
a body shop owner whose father was arrested,
imprisoned, and tortured in Chile, heard
how men were scalded to death in boiling water;
and, as the angle of sunlight shifts, you feel
a seasonal tilt into winter with its expanse
of stars—candles flickering down the Ganges,
where you light a candle on a leaf and set it
flickering, downstream, into darkness—
dozens of tiny flames flickering into darkness—
then you gaze at fires erupting along the shore.
IN THE BRONX

Crossing a street, you suddenly hear a strawberry finch,
and, reaching the curb,
catch the smell of a young pig that, minutes ago,
hurtled across the trail;
inhalng a chocolate scent, you approach a small orchid;
neary, two streaked
pitcher plants have opened lids but opened laterally;
a fern rises out
of the crotch of an ohia tree, and droplets have collected
on a mule’s hoof fern;
up on the ridge, sliding mist veils the palms and eucalyptus;
neary, a trumpet tree
dangles orange-scented blooms; you stare at the crack
in a blue marble tree,
at a maze of buttressed roots, just as a man holding
a placard, waving people
toward a new donut shop, turns and, thud, a wild avocado
has dropped to the ground.
Karin Gottshall

POEM WITH LINES FROM MY MOTHER’S DREAM JOURNAL

1.

I was swept a very long distance—
the churchyards along Route 22 filling with snow.
I arrived to find you blank with pain.

The road I had come on was flooded:
sometimes you couldn’t even remember which organ was removed,
what remained.

Eighteen hours in the ER and you told my grandmother through
the phone: give my soul to beauty.

A body floating alone.

You sang in your gown, you thought you were home, the orange
cat walking across the blanket;
  I heard the triage nurse question a patient in the
    hallway:
      Why did you set yourself on fire?
      Have you ever set yourself on fire before?
      What were you thinking when you set yourself on fire?

This I feel to be the work of God, so I submit—

I was thinking I was small and dirty once, and my mother washed
my face.
The seasons of the world were changing.

Weed above, roots below.

I could hear you as soon as I entered the unit: there's someone else in this boat.

Morphine made you a traveler, when it didn't make you sad.

I almost went home last night.

Ninety degrees, no wind. The precision of helicopters landing on the roof as you drifted.

It's terrible to see your mother cry.

I stood outside your room when they changed the dressing, so I wouldn't have to see the scars again.

I recognized her then: a woman pouring spirit into matter.

You said you saw them, so many, above you, on the ceiling.

Later I dreamed I found you walking alone on the railroad tracks. Come home, you're sick.

The seasons were changing.

I left the hospital in the dark, driving over the Hudson River, this is my country now.

I let myself into your empty house with a new-made key—

the weird clicking, grinding sound of my heart.
3.

*I flew past a tree that was hung with little cloth dolls—*

Near the border there was always that same darkness, the smell of river water.

The ICU doctor told me it was my decision.

I followed the dried stroke of a paintbrush up to the ceiling—evidence of the arc of an arm.

He said he had been there before. Believed we come back. When next I am your daughter
I will remind you of that.

They cleared the room to remove the breathing tube.

I remembered at the border, a darkness. My purse on the passenger seat.

You never woke up again, except to cry out when the nurses turned you.

Once I slept in your living room, the weight of the train softly ringing the strings of your guitar,

but now I slept with my head on your hospital bed while the sky turned green before the rain.

This intimacy with your life, your death—I never asked for.

*We were going through a valley and were sad to leave it.*

*The sound was of loud water, and not humming.*

I remembered at the border, a darkness. Something I had carried there with me.
I had just wanted to see the ocean, but you gave me a heavy bowl of water that reflected the constellation Cassiopeia. You asked me to carry it until it evaporated or turned to ice.

This is not my fight:
In your garden I pulled up root vegetables but they were too woody to eat, misshapen from growing between stones.

Now your house hoards its electricity like a held breath. When I step into the river I feel the sockets of my bones, flayed clean.

The beginnings of the dream are lost.
Rick Bursky

I COULD HAVE BEEN AN INVENTOR

I’m writing the history of joy
and will prove it was invented
to shill for pain. A simple demonstration,
you’re hanging a photograph
of you and a lover; joy.
Nail held to a wall by two fingers.
Hammer in the other hand, pain.
Yes, hypothetical, and simple.
Reality is more complicated.

A woman asked me to swallow a compass
so I would always find my way back to her.
At one time or another,
we’re all someone’s sandcastle.
My three favorite things about her:
One, she tattooed my Greek name
on her chest just below the neckline.
Two, she wrote nursery rhymes about me.
Three, she ran her tongue over her lips
to wet them before kissing me.

Joy was invented by Kallias in 2021 B.C.
He wrote that joy came to him in a dream.
It’s now accepted that dreams
are the desperate moans of the past.
Nothing is known about Kallias’ life before joy,
where much of life is lived.
She promised to list three things she liked about me.
She was a disgrace, but so was I.
THE SCAFFOLDING

1

When I left home, all I took was a window—knowing there would be times I wanted to look back.
Life is designed to be open, but you knew that.
Still, when people became nosy I drew the curtains.
This is where language stumbles through its destiny of hiding, privacy and shame. Though I’m past all of that.

2

In each lung, a secret lake, waiting, where everything I own will spend eternity sinking.
How long can a favorite shirt hold its breath and where will it hold it?

3

There are other secrets... hidden in the kidneys.
All that stuff about the heart is nonsense, nothing more than a pump incapable of doing two things at once.
Do you know the similarities between skin and wallpaper? You can write essays about them—I’ve done it more than once.

4

Lovers have used my tongue as a red carpet.
It’s been said my elbows glow in the dark and on hot, humid days I sweat fireflies.
We all have quirks, but this isn’t a contest.

6

A DNA test concluded I’m the descendant of a rusted car and a lightning storm.
Sam Sax

TRANS ORBITAL LOBOTOMY

in through the eye
device adapted from an ice pick
the space between the cornea & tear duct tears
little incisions along the front of the brain
you open the grapefruit
you open the grape
you open
in the 50s there were tens of thousands of performances in the states
sour mess. sour mash. mashup, macerate.
cut a rug. jitterbug. gutter. tug. suture. lacerate.
erasure. erase. raced. e.r. deadened. dead end.
ed. replace.
in the beginning a doctor removed the frontal lobe of an aggressive ape
what followed was a column of ants
your relative made new & easy to manage
a miracle cure
FEVER THERAPY

give me a chance to create fever and I will cure any disease
—Parmenides

i never knew fevers were symptomatic of deeper problems
they’re not what you treat

the body heats the copper pot of your immune system into killing everything not you in you

in those few degrees everything

bacteria & viruses burst into flame as you sweat as you in bed a burning planet turning around its burning star

i watched a video of bees swarm an invading hornet, cooking it alive inside its yellow & black exoskeleton that’s the basic idea

i pulled the curser back to watch the hornet come alive again to be covered in insects & again

& further back they used fevers to treat psychosis

on my desktop, a yellowed photograph of hospital beds lined with faces wrapped in dark wet blankets

all our white blood cells an oven a coven of bees blushing

a mob hurling the winged torch of their young
Soul stress: the clanging of a bell in the strong winds of the eastern front or an avalanche in the snowmobile exhaust's wake. The weather un-chaining, a slow coming apart. Hairline cracks widening in the vase. Over the phone, my friend's breathing sounds ragged, evaporative. As if it were thinning to air. My soul is dizzy, he says. What to call this? Precarious structure, like the soil, disintegrating in the rain? Weakness? Pathopsychology? There is horror in what humans do, and the sensitives, those like him, whose hands sometimes tremble, who have no spleens, having lost them in the accidents of childhood, suddenly see auras and must sit down. Just beyond the normalcy of everyday life: the flammable face of the world. The mind, at the edge, just an organ. Its bluster and dying down. Its retina, a shattered piece of glass.

****

The mule deer, when they spot me on the still-bare ridge, line up in single file at the fence, disappearing into earth-tone with snow-patch on their butts, invisible until the first one jumps. Thought: a small moment. We are made and unmade. The bone smuggler thinks fossils are just rocks. Why should we claim paleontology so important? Wind crosses in front of me, jangling the gate, making the tree caught in another's limbs moan and shift, igniting a flare down the road. I love winter, have loved so many winters. At this point, my life seems overlong. The ruffed grouse that startles into its loud twig-snap flight leaves me with its heart-thunder below. What is left when spirit flees us and the soul is decomposed? Forked feet and belly-drag of her curious chain-link track. Suicide bomber and drone added to the Webster's.

****
Where in the body is the soul today? "Anatomy," not "astronomy." Look this morning at the deer, sleeping on its side in a pile of leaves. Put yourself there, under the stars. Protected, really, from nothing. Having to trust the air. Or gray solitaire on the bare branch of the extreme cold. Where outside the body is the soul today? It will seem as if it is happening all around you. As if the sun had moved into a new phase. Pale, breathless, a bottomless blue, a sentimental crochet of clouds at the edgework. The woman who made her friends promise not to parade her in public after she lost her mind found such joy in the choir that they were torn. Which is a feeling you have forgotten. Hope, one might say. The tilting that is change on the axis. If there is someone in the wind, there is someone in the mountain. If the soul is back there, in the child that was harmed, it is also in the older girl who takes her hand. Leading her through the burning trees, which breathe out emeralds.

****

Asked to describe the soul, some will say a brightness, some an orb. No one mentions the basement apartment. No one says the sickroom, its artificial light. Soul, being an opening, which sometimes gets stuck in place. Barreling or feeding like a silkworm through space, outgrowing itself again in its fifth instar. How to facilitate this, so death comes not as tragedy but as if ministered by girls, whose hands move over the belly, the thighs, adjusting the nightclothes. Their hearts, which might be most alive when broken. Poor, agitated pupa. Crawling out of its skin. Spared: only those who dwell most inland. There is a film flickering from a crack in the earth that those, who are caretaking, witness. Splashed with it, irradiated, their focus shifts. Bring back the dying to ice water in tin cups, butter their dry-skinned faces. And if this discomforts—the soul bulky, a bit obscene, as if it were wearing something intimate too large—sit like a god does and watch them go through it.
Christopher Howell

WINTER COMPANION

When I step outside, February air is chopped ice chandeliers circling themselves in a barn so huge the birds are actually uncertain and with wild twitterings inquire, “Which way to Louisville? Is this Baja?”

And while that’s going on, a transparent beast of light walks among them, turns left at the end of that street where the old woman hates her yard, and howls away toward the river.

Maybe I go back in and maybe I carry a candle out among the darkening cottonwoods where the deer, shaggy in their winter jackets, hold mute convocation. Maybe I whisper a little.

It all depends, I tell myself, hands shaping the distance between shrugging and that waitress thirty years ago who pitied my hapless face and stepped out of her uniform to warm my bones.

If the sky is spitting snow, I keep moving my big old boots so when the wind comes I’m busy and far from that secret he’s always trying to get me to reveal. Fuck the wind.

These are my steps. That’s my door. Inside and out, I am the world and the world owns itself.
I say these things, offer my candle to the chill whether it remembers me
from the old days, whatever
they were, or is simply February's brainless child, breaking things because
that is what it does.
Maybe I remember to forgive its lack of mercy, or maybe,
someplace else,
the fallen leaves
live on as pears and limes, or something indestructible, like hope.
How could I hope to know? I open
the door, I step outside. Maybe my whispers go up smoke-like to
the giant
ear of God, maybe not.

Which way to Louisville? Who owns this barn? What is the name of this
peaceful alarm?
William Stratton

HARNESS

They tell me I was too young to remember the day the horse team spooked and broke the reins and left my father empty-handed, running after them with me on their backs. I rode every time he took them out, Marsha one was called and Angel the other and I was too young (maybe four) to be up on their broad backs, without a saddle, but they were so calm not even a shotgun made them bolt and my father was so young and proud not even his son could scare him. I was never scared, their black manes smelled so good and the rise and fall of their shoulders as I lay on my stomach pulled the horizon up and down and I kept the flies from their face with a long branch. Now that I am a father and my father is dead I think he must have felt, in the moment the reins left his hands and the trace snapped, that all of what his life had led to up to at that point was now in full flight from him, his hands never so empty as right then and it was a beautiful day to lose a son. I was lost for only an hour they tell me, but I know the truth: the horses and I ran to the thickest part of the old orchard and there I passed into Angel and Marsha watched as Angel passed into me and that is why still today on spring days in the sun when the people are all very happy to have the warmth I am remembering a collar and the feel of a boy on my back and the taste of wild apples sour and sweet.
Kathryn Nuernberger

IT'S LIKE SHE LOVES US AND LIKE SHE HATES US

Our whole guise is like giving a sign to the world to think of us in a certain way but there's a point between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you.
—Diane Arbus

Sometimes I feel like that Diane Arbus portrait of a cross-dressing woman with curlers in her hair and a cigarette in her well-manicured hand staring too long at the camera. Sometimes I feel like every character I meet is an allegory of myself. John fell from a ladder in his barn and broke his lawn mower with his body but wasn’t hurt himself at all. It was so astonishing he’s already posted about it on Facebook three times. Reading between the lines, you can tell he’s worried maybe he actually died in that fall after all. So I mess with him in the comments and say something to that effect. He wonders if there’s a German word for this feeling. I tell him there’s a German exchange student crashing at my house right now playing Hot Lava with my kid. And they call it lava in German too. The German short “a” is so much like ours it may as well be the same word. I’m worried that John is really dead and the rest of us with him, because there’s no word for this feeling—not even in German—and that’s how you know. I’ve been writing lecture notes this morning, summarizing Plato’s Cave for nineteen-year-olds who will no doubt conclude getting a little high is the way out. I assume this because that’s what I did. I have to remind myself I am not everybody. Everybody in the cave is chained and suffering. I have an animation to show them that retells the story in clay, like a Gumby episode, except every still
frame echoes that government report on torture released last month that is just one more example of our denials as a society and complicity as a nation, bolstered by the fact the photographic evidence was censored and only later released through leaks. I’ve read torturers come to like their work and any of us could, because we don’t have a way to understand another person’s pain and we really want to understand each other. My notes also include Susan Sontag, who said fifty years ago in her essay on Plato and photography, “Enough with the pictures already.” She was thinking of Dachau and thinking of Arbus. The pictures, she said, feel like they’re breaking something inside ourselves we might have liked to keep. I’d like to remember what picture I was looking at when I was sober enough to realize there is no light but this light. Maybe I just looked out the window, as I did this morning, and saw my neighbor on his mower, smoothing his lawn into that grassy plane he likes so well. I felt a little closer to him, like he’s one of those portraits Sontag was talking about, his face so hardened it’s repelling at first, which is why Sontag derides them so forcefully. I’ve found, though, if you make yourself hold on, the faces Diane Arbus made turn so vulnerably human you start to fall in love a little with this relentlessness of people. Even the ones that are pathetic. Even the ones that are pitiable. Even the ones that repulse and terrify for how much they look like you. John, I think being dead suits me.
Philip Metres, *Sand Opera* (Alice James, 2015)  

The documentary, the historical, the political vs. the lyrical, the immediate, the personal: Philip Metres and Susan Tichy have been successfully balancing these modes for some time. Metres in his first full-length book (as well as several chapbooks), Tichy in four previous collections. But the connection is both deeper and more difficult in their new work, as each explores an identity with ancestral roots that reach uncomfortably into the present—an exploration that seems increasingly to require the taking of innovative risks. Some of the forms of experimentation are quite different, if not opposed: a number of Metres’s poems are, in contemporary poetic parlance, erasures that leave out much of an original text, whereas Tichy, noted for the elliptical nature of her earlier poetry, seems to have been led by the abundance of her historical material to become more of a putter-inner than a taker-outer. But both books are juxtapositionally polyphonic, with multiple voices of history and contemporary events jarring against one another. In both, the difficulty of reading is part of what allows us to participate in the process of discovery that is behind the writing of these informative, challenging, and remarkably original collections.

While his first full-length collection included poems about his Arab American identity, Metres takes on the subject fully here; as he says in the notes, the book began “out of the vertigo of feeling unheard as an Arab American, in the decade after the terrorist attacks of 2001.” He adds: “I’ve found myself split—between my American upbringing and my Arab roots, between raising young children and witnessing the War on Terror abroad.” The split is echoed in both the techniques and the subject matter of *Sand Opera*, which is divided into five sections. Three of these are sequences that juxtapose specific voices and situations; interspersed are two sections of more random poems called “recitatives.” The polyphony within the sequences is perhaps what is most operatic—and also most remarkable—about the book.
This is particularly true in the first sequence, the “abu ghraib arias,” in which three “voices” are heard: American participants in the Abu Ghraib tortures, Arab prisoners who were their victims, and the technical language of a “Standard Operating Procedure” manual. Most of the poems in this section (and some others in the book as well) use some form of erasure, a technique that is also behind the title: as the half-title page demonstrates, “sand opera” is what is left when you erase, or redact, or obscure selected letters in “Standard Operating Procedure.” An erasure “proper” leaves a great deal of white space on the page; its formatting opposite is redaction, commonly seen in government documents that have been censored with large black bars. Metres uses both methods, creating a kind of tension between aesthetic silence and political silencing, and in addition uses the technique of lightening parts of a text, creating a “gray” area in which words are both present and absent.

The erasures have various effects, sometimes overlapping. The first of the several “blues” poems spoken by Americans leaves the reader thinking about what might be missing even as it creates new “meaning” from the remaining text:

four Iraqis at the gate
all of them missing
their hands or their
[Redacted] story

The subsequent section supplies a piece of such an Iraqi story in black and gray type, which allows us to read both a complete “prose” version and a shorter one:

In the name of God I swear to God everything I witnessed
everything I am talking about. I am not saying this to gain any
material thing, and I was not pressured to do so by any forces.

These prisoner sections, all titled “(echo/ex/),” also include some words from Genesis, which become a kind of fourth voice in the sequence, juxtaposing creation and destruction: “I saw myself on the face / of the deep And the darkness he called Night / And Graner
released / my hand from the door.” The resulting equation of God with the man most centrally responsible for Abu Ghraib is one of the more dramatic effects of Metres’s erasure, but it’s not the only one. The prisoner voice becomes increasingly grayed, erased, or redacted as the sequence continues, until only punctuation is left in the last section—but the silence of course speaks volumes.

If the first sequence highlights the book’s central tension between Arab (prisoner) and American (perpetrator), the other two sequences bring the conflict closer to home. The second, which juxtaposes the poet’s young daughters’ lives and the burgeoning war in Iraq, shifts the focus from sight (central to the first section) to sound, taking its title, “hung lyres,” from Psalm 137 (“By the rivers of Babylon... we hanged our harps”) and visually referencing the ear in the “@” that provides a title for each new poem. Even a daughter’s voice marks the shift (while also doing other things): “it’s ‘ear-rock,’ / not ‘eye-rack.’” The juxtapositions here occur within poems, and can be quite startling: “When the bombs fell, she could barely raise / her pendulous head, wept shrapnel / / until her mother capped the fire / with her breast.” Even more unsettling is a poem that conflates Barney the Dinosaur’s song with a prisoner’s cell. Reading in the notes that the poem references the use of the song in the interrogation of a Guantanamo prisoner only increases the tension and irony of the poem, which ends:

...this is the being without

silence / from our imagination / in wave upon
wave / in a shipping container & I love you

in a box of shock you love me / in a cemented
dream / we’re a happy family /

with a great big hug and chains that leave no mark
Won’t you say you love me too?

That we’re able to listen simultaneously to the tender evocation of children in a “happy family” and the horrors of interrogation is one measure of the power of this central sequence.
The final sequence becomes even more personal, alternating between sections of testimony by Mohamed Farag Ahmad Bashmilah, who was tortured in various U.S. prisons, and prose poems in what appears to be the voice of the poet himself, a teacher of poetry and an Arab American: “My son, you are Arab, be proud of it, my Dad would say.” Both voices are foreshadowed in the second and fourth “recitative” sections—the former in fragments that surround Bashmilah’s “overlaid” drawings of his interrogation sites, the latter in more personal poems that celebrate the poet’s experiences even as they are haunted by the Iraq war. Juxtaposition remains central to these individual poems: missing parts of statues in an Iraqi museum suggest actual bodies; a post-911 computer game “fast-forwards” to a drone operator aiming at Afghanistan; love poems come up against war (“as if the body erotic / could shield against the camera’s scalpel”); an Iraqi recipe contains an invasion:

Skin & clean a fat, young sheep and open it like a door, a port city hosting overseas guests

& remove its stomach. In its interior, place surveyors in exploratory khaki, a stuffed goose . . .

Such juxtaposition is perhaps the most striking poetic feature of Sand Opera, but it isn’t the only one. The three sequences develop their own strategies, and the recitatives include subtly altered versions of various forms, including a sestina, off-rhyming couplets, and the ghost of a pantoum that includes completely reversed lines and redaction: “They could not make son hit the father” becomes “Father hit son make not could they.” Again a father and son: “My son, you are Arab, be proud of it, my Dad would say.”

As emotionally complex as Metres’s evocation of his heritage are Susan Tichy’s restoration and contemplation of her own ancestors, from Scottish clans to Maryland slave-holders. While a number of white poets have dealt with race, no one I know has delved so determinedly and deeply into her own ancestry, partly in reference to oppressed “others”—first indigenous peoples, then African slaves—but also on its own terms.
Bookended by a short section in which she introduces her ancestor Alexander Magruder and a postscript in which she addresses him directly, the two central sections of the book are dense with history that takes us back and forth between Scotland and Maryland, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, with brief excursions into earlier times and the present. It’s a lot of geographical and temporal territory, and sometimes the density makes the going a bit rough: if you don’t know your Scots history, you may have to work a little on a first reading. But it’s a process that reflects Tichy’s own, and one that brings with it the realization that none of our personal histories is as simple as we might wish.

Whereas Metres’s prosodic forms are various, Tichy’s are insistently the same: Trafficke alternates large portions of prose with smaller sections of page-centered verse. This is reminiscent of the Japanese haibun, but the distinction between prose and poetry is not as clear here. While the documentary business of “history” is largely relegated to the prose sections, the verse also includes quoted material, and the prose of the final section is as stunningly lyrical as anything in the book. Moreover, both prose and poetry are effectively varied, ranging from the carefully quoted and formal to the conversationally compelling. Collage is an ever-present method in both. Quotations (ranging from a few words to whole sections), etymologies, sans serif sections in which Tichy references herself more directly than elsewhere, lines of poetry ranging from ballads to Ezra Pound: all contribute to a varied texture that effectively contrasts with the sameness of form. But the contrast between dense prose and elliptical verse more or less defines the process of reading, which involves taking in an enormous amount of material on the one hand and slowing down to ponder on the other.

The first two poems introduce both methods. The first is the only poetry that isn’t centered on the page, but its opening lines introduce a number of poetic strategies Tichy will use:

Literate 500 years
For me there is no New World
coir’ a’ chlaidheamh, milord
broomrape reddendum recite

Or scratch, hide, seek
erase-sketch-bird-invent

This forest, mine this noise
I tracked until it turned and showed its teeth

ransack deceive predator
in the narrow passes

Thirty-one miles of metal shelves
hill path in

The fragments of language, including the bit of Gaelic and the trios of single words that seem as semantically random as they are grammatically diverse, suggest but do not quite divulge a context. But they invite us to make connections, most centrally between what turns out to be the wonderfully apt metaphor of “This forest, mine this noise / I tracked until it showed its teeth” (suggesting the geographical territory Tichy has explored) and “Thirty-one miles of metal shelves / hill path in” (suggesting the immense amount of her primary research). Almost all of these lines will be repeated at least once in the course of the book.

The second poem begins with the sharply contrasting clarity of prose: “I was born and raised in Maryland. . . . My maternal grandmother’s maiden name, Magruder, went back to the 1650s, when one Alexander McGruder, of Perthshire, Scotland, arrived. . . . And there was more: As Magruders we were also MacGregors.” The introductory section focuses on those MacGregors, with only hints of complexities to come.

The long second section begins and ends with Alexander, but it includes a great deal of the early history of Maryland, which is intertwined with both the Scottish and English background that explains its complexities, and the more sparse but important history of the indigenous people who had already begun to disappear (“before the
arrival broke out amongst them / / measles smallpox indemnity"), and whose "Old-Fields" the settlers were therefore able to use for their own planting of tobacco.

Puritan Catholic Susquehannah Patuxent
who owe fidelity
two rats nibbling eucharistic bread
two pledged to the hindering

The ghost of a ballad stanza in this summary of the historical "parties" is no accident: bits of actual Scots ballads appear throughout the book, and connect the poet-researcher to her "literate 500 years" ancestors. Geography literally "grounds" the narrative throughout the section, providing descriptive passages and giving titles to three of its four poems, from "Meadow" ("The soil of an huge and unknown greatnesse / Very well peopled and towned though savagelie") to the indigenous "Old-Fields" and back to the Scottish "Heath." But it is the intertwining of histories, with its parallels and contrasts, that most centrally sets up the first rounds of confrontational "trafficking"—of peoples as well as goods—that the book will continue to explore in its even longer third section.

Like a well-plotted novel, the third section of Trafficke reveals and develops two central aspects of history that have been only hinted at in the introductory section, where, trying to imagine where her ancestors lived, the poet holds "something like a jigsaw piece, unable to find a place on the map to set it down" until she comes to "southern Maryland, the slave-owning tobacco country . . . a part of the state my parents never spoke of without scorn." Picking up chronologically from the second section, Tichy moves from Alexander's successful acquisition of property to his will, in which appears, amidst a catalog of other material possessions and indentured servants, "1 man negro named Sambo."

That apparently casual but effectively epiphastic reference introduces the subject that powerfully dominates most of what follows. As in the earlier sections of the book, there is much to be learned from Tichy's extensive research and careful analysis of various aspects of history (the "mulatto bastardy" resulting from white women
“intermarrying” with slaves, the complexities of manumission); but what is most moving is the exploration of the Magruder ancestors’ slave-holding.

The treatment of slavery occurs in two sections, covering several generations, the second picking up in the late eighteenth century; sandwiched between is another excursion into Scottish history, by way of a nineteenth-century Magruder who mistakenly “took as given . . . Alexander Magruder’s descent” from the much-romanticized MacGregors. Again using careful research, Tichy demolishes the assumption with which the book began: that the Magruders “were also MacGregors.”

The discovery of an inflated and fictionalized ancestry is an apt counterpoint to the more extensive treatment of the Magruder slaves. Like earlier parts of the book, much of this history, whether prose or verse, is delivered in a collage of quotation, fact, and implicit or explicit commentary on both history and methodology. Here, almost at random:

Slave ships carried two men for every woman: *preparation toward a Natural and experimental history*. Biafrans, Angolans, Nigerians, Ibos, Ibibios, Efkins, Mokos. Born in Africa, born in Barbados. Skilled in the art of tobacco; or not. Tracing descent from women; or not. In clans or lineages; or not. Had first to find, or make, a common language. Shocked into labor, underfed, *to make them more industrious.*

A Negro Quarter is a Number of Huts

*And cultivate at vacant times, the little Spots allow’d them*  
(edge-stained, water-stained, upper margin illegible)

The reference to “clans and lineages” is one of many implicit and explicit connections made between slavery and Tichy’s own ancestry; among the book’s many often-repeated lines are some that apply to both, including “great iron fetters for men’s feet, small iron fetters for men’s hands.”

Among the most moving parts of the book’s third section are listings of slaves themselves, copied (apparently) from lists of es-
cape slaves ("a likely, bright, Mulatto lad / a swaggering walk and very black / pretends to have an uncle, calls her wife") and wills ("Clem, my blacksmith / Nanny, my servant, / my capenter [sic], Old Basil"). To come upon these longish lists, after the complex histories that have preceded them, is to arrive at what seems to be the emotional center of Trafficke—or, as the title of one of the poems has it, the "Purpose at My Booke."

The journey to those lists, and then to the final section of Trafficke, is, as I've suggested, a complex one, but it's well worth the effort. The final section, a prose poem in eight short unnumbered sections, achieves both sublimity and, in its direct address to Alexander Magruder, a poignant intimacy. Like virtually everything else in the book, this poem is almost impossible to excerpt. But here is a moment—one that evokes one of the first lines of the book, quoted earlier:

Alexander, I tried to escape you, but you have made good on the family promise: survive, come back, gather by night where the day is dangerous. Your animal has tracked me down, your signal fire ignites in my eyes when I close them. I come when you call, back over a continent not fully mine, all the way down to the landing that bears your name: there a woman half black, half Indian, coughs into her hand an idea, and I have to watch.

As we do, while we read this wonderfully rich and challenging book. And re-read it, until Susan Tichy’s history becomes our own—as indeed it is.

Martha Collins
How fine to have an excuse to revisit the remarkable world that Tomas Tranströmer created and inhabited. Patty Crane lived in Sweden, got to know the Tranströmers well, and Tomas and Monica went over her versions with her. They are generally excellent, and having the Swedish across the page is a big bonus for any careful reader who wants, even without knowing any Swedish, to be able to develop an intimacy with this poet and these poems.

The point is not so much that Crane’s book displaces others—a Tranströmer fan will at least want to own *The Great Enigma* (New Directions), Robin Fulton’s “new collected,” which also has the prose memoir, “Memories Look at Me,” and Robert Hass’s edition, *Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), which selects among translators (Bly, Fulton, Swenson, Deane, Charters, et al.) very thoughtfully. It’s rather that one welcomes the opportunity to add another voice to the chorus of interpretation and to have the Swedish originals handy.

I used the term “world” above advisedly. To enter Tranströmer’s poems is to inhabit a special sense of reality, more complex but somehow also simpler, infused with awareness beyond the normal and the everyday, a wondering (wandering) sense of time, space, and consciousness. As many have pointed out, the poems explore border territories involving familiar binaries: day and night, sleeping and waking, life and death, knowledge and ignorance, inward and outward, public and private, healthy and sick. We can approach the borders, cross them, even dissolve them for a time, but they will reassert themselves and ultimately deepen the mystery of existence. All this may sound difficult, but the miracle is that it is accomplished unceremoniously, with seeming ease, as if tremendous concentration—of expression and attention—was the most natural thing in the world.

The early poem “Tracks,” from Tranströmer’s second collection (1958), serves nicely to illustrate his world:
TRACKS

Two o’clock at night: moonlight. The train has stopped out in the middle of the field. Distant points of light from a city, flickering coldly on the horizon.

As when a person has gone into a dream so deep she’ll never remember she was there when she returns to her room.

Or when someone has gone into an illness so deep his days all become a few flickering points, a swarm, cold and slight on the horizon.

The train stands completely still.
Two o’clock: strong moonlight, few stars.

The structure is typical. We get a striking moment in the material world in the first stanza, followed by two stanzas which explore comparisons, dream in one case and serious illness in the other; these extend the interiority of the scene, its psychological and spiritual implications. The sensibility of the poem has become open to the unconscious and to death, as in Rilke. We then finish by revisiting the original moment, now enhanced through our expanded awareness.

Versions of this poem exist by Bly and Fulton. They do not differ significantly from this one. They use “2 a.m.” and “2 o’clock,” easier in English while Crane stays closer to the Swedish. They use male pronouns in both of the middle stanzas while her choice, female in one, male in the other, seems to reflect the original more accurately. And they both say “bright moonlight” in the last line, while her “strong moonlight” seems closer to the “starkt månsken” across the page. We get to have it both ways.

Twenty years later, in his 1978 volume Truth-Barrier, Tranströmer is even more relaxed in his handling of existence and its mysteries. What could be more mundane as an encounter with borders than crossing an ordinary street on an ordinary day in late winter? Yet it provides the poet with a series of dazzled and dazzling insights:
THE CROSSING PLACE

An icy wind in my eyes and the suns dance
inside a kaleidoscope of tears as I cross
the street I’ve followed for so long, the street
where Greenland’s summer shines up from the puddles.

Bly calls it “the street I know so well” and Fulton has “the street
that’s followed me so long.” Fulton and Crane are more literal, but
in this case I suspect Bly has brought the meaning over more suc-
cessfully, while losing a bit of the strangeness, as is also the case with
his title, “Street Crossing.” One might even consider “Crosswalk.”
Bly additionally offers us “snowpools” for Crane’s and Fulton’s more
literal “puddles,” as if to help us with the engagement with seasonal
change and another binary, summer and winter, both more emphatic
in the Scandinavian climate.

In the second stanza, the street asserts its force and potency:

Swarming around me, the street’s full power,
without memory or purpose.
Deep in the ground under the traffic
the unborn forest quietly waits for a thousand years.

The absence of memory and purpose (or desire, as Bly chooses)
seems to evoke new insight in the protagonist, who becomes aware
of a time in which the buried forest both precedes the street and an-
ticipates its eventual disappearance. It is no rough beast but when its
hour comes round at last the forest will be reborn; to wait a thousand
years is not difficult. Again, the enlarging of awareness feels easily
arrived at, unthreatening if scarcely comforting.

Now comes a kind of confrontation, a mutual recognition:

I have this idea the street can see me.
Its sight is so dull that the sun itself
is a gray ball of wool in a black sky.
But right now I shine! The street sees me.
Do the speaker’s insights into deep time and paradoxes of weather make him visible, illuminated? Does he glimpse his own reflection in one of the puddles? Perhaps. It’s a deliberately mild version of the moment when the torso of Apollo or the caged panther in Rilke return the gaze and threaten the gazer’s very existence. But “You must change your life” would not be appropriate here; rich as the moment is in phenomenological implications, it is still just a moment, a crossing of a familiar street. For the late twentieth century we get Rilkean and Yeatsian insights handled casually, as if everyone knows now that crossing a street might brim with possibilities.

In his late work, while some poems are more extended (e.g. “Vermeer”), Tranströmer can be briefer and more cryptic, producing haiku and poems like this:

**MIDWINTER**

A blue light
is streaming out from my clothes.
Midwinter.
Jingling tambourines of ice.
I close my eyes
There is a soundless world
there is a crack
where the dead
are smuggled over the border.

As you might expect, Fulton’s version of this is almost identical. How could it not be, when the Swedish itself—“Det finns en ljudlös värld / det finns en spricka / där döda / smugglas över gränsen”—is so clear and straightforward?

*Bright Scythe* is a delight to page through, well laid-out, the poems thoughtfully selected, the Swedish, as mentioned earlier, alongside in case you are curious (e.g. to learn that “crow-cawing dark” in “Balakirev’s Dream” is “kråkkraxande mörka”), a fine introduction by David Wojahn, and an afterword by the translator that allows us to visit the Tranströmers as she did, experiencing their warmth and generosity. It extends our access to a beloved poet whose death this year reminded us to explore and treasure his remarkable body of work.

*David Young*
The metalmark is a small, glittering bit of biology. Delicate, endangered butterfly, it shares the first few pages of Emily Wilson’s second book with the melodious white-throated sparrow, “secretive soil fauna,” and dried, dropped willow leaves described as “busks” (the rigid elements of a corset).

Like metalmarks, the 48 short poems of The Great Medieval Yellows glitter: they are music-boxes filled with the sort of scientific detail (ranging in scale from the botanical to the geological) that would have delighted Marianne Moore, and phrased in ways that pay homage to the sonic pleasures of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Wilson’s poem “The Garden,” early in the book, refers to “scrupulous detail” and goes on to state that “none / but in the ruined / miniscule tells / what will be done.” Scrupulous is a word that applies everywhere in her work: the care taken with description elevates it to a moral plane. Do I hear an echo of “Thy will be done” in the just-quoted line from “The Garden”? Perhaps not, for this is not a book with a religious bent. (Indeed, “Herbier” ends “for the subtler hand that made thee / no one made thee.”) And yet the way the poet clearly takes on the task of describing the world with urgent, utmost accuracy suggests a responsibility to that world.

Other echoes are stronger. In “Sponges, True and Probable,” I can’t read “my love’s lover’s leaf,” especially just before the pause of a stanza break, without hearing also “lover’s leap”; and the phrase “noxious deeds,” in “The Garden,” brings “noxious weeds” quickly to mind. Such playfulness in no way undermines the seriousness of purpose here.

Syntax and the intermittent use of punctuation first caught my attention and then released it. Here is the opening of the title poem:

Massicot mosaic gold
saffron buckthorn weld—
how to get your gilding on
it will not take part in
ruination of the blue.
This poem appears late in the book, at the beginning of the third of three unnamed sections, so the lyric voice has long been established, along with the somewhat technical diction and what I think of as syntactic ambiguity: the line “it will not take part in” seems to start a second sentence, though that is not acknowledged with punctuation or capitalization. (As an alternative, I can read a suppressed “so” or “so that” at the beginning of that line, but am not confident that is what the poem wants me to do: such strategies do not always work in similar situations elsewhere.) I learned to accept and in fact enjoy the slight uncertainty of such occasions as counterpoint to the sharp-eyed clarity of imagery that abounds here.

I admit visiting Wikipedia fairly often as I read, for the shape of a cyme or panicle, the color of chalcedony, or a description of the Caucasian Wingnut. Well worth it, I say, thinking of Galway Kinnell’s practice of using “endangered” words in order to rescue them from obscurity.

Despite the superbly lyric eye and ear at work here, the poems do not invite us to dwell exclusively at the level of perception. A speaker appears in some poems, questioning the human role in the midst of sensory riches. Wilson’s close observations are themselves observed: art and mindfulness (“just staying with it long enough / to know it is there,” from “Flume”) appear in various poems. When “Mezzotint” begins with the lines “Open the book. Scan the artful / page that pins things up,” the reader identifies the engraver’s art with the poet’s, the book in the poem with the one that contains the poem.

Later in “Mezzotint,” the speaker considers our ability to absorb the images and text:

some question drives—can you live within the resolution of momentary detail, above it, propped up over where the words hang . . . and fail to discern— how do I . . . ?

This moment, and others like it, convince me that the poet’s objective is deeper than the artful pinning of images in readers’ minds; she
reaches for, and reaches, a self-aware, meditative quality. “Sponges, True and Probable” interrupts a stream of images with the lines “bad at this because / it’s hard to be // ‘in it’ they say / for any stay”—and then proves to be quite good at it, so to speak, by returning to that stream with the exuberant “astride the clarifying / ruddy scrolling spicule-sprigging / thing / splendidest bastion.”

Splendidest! That superlative superlative and its adjacent single-word line “thing” attest to the poet’s sense of humor, evident elsewhere in puns and the wordplay of “echoes” I have already mentioned. The title “Lichen Association,” for instance, enjoys the hidden “liken” and its obvious relationship with an association of like(ned) parts. And in “The Garden” the two lines “staggeringly / kept up” are comic in their ironic contrast. Sometimes the pun is a matter of one word: tenor (in “Lichen Association”) can be read in its musical sense or the more general sense of character, and gloss (in “Little Fantasy”) contains both shine and explanation.

The reader can easily enjoy images like these: a particular kind of lichen described as “silvery gritted miniature / British soldiers or / are they spiders’ flagons,” and egrets “stinging / the view with Dutch glints.” But with that enjoyment comes an involvement, a responsibility parallel to the poet’s.

It is not one easily carried, as “Heroic Pigments” makes clear:

Blue Alice blue cyan
akin to something
bristling on azurite
you have to add some
grit to the principal
substance the “carrier”
I think it’s called
though I might never know
the true import
it comes out in
six or seven segregate heads
but in avoidance of
figures developing
much more eccentrically

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This poem may begin with the art of tumbling stones, but it recognizes another art, one before which the "you" hesitates. The word "sticks" works hard here, carrying not only the idea of attachment but also that of discomfort (a sharp object, a "stick in the eye"). To confess or even hint (intimate) that this "it" is important—centermost, in fact—is terrible, in the Blakean sense. Something is being confronted here, something difficult and even painful. Art, the empathic response to a world imagined in great detail, is not easy. These rigorous poems know that metaphorical grit is required.

Both form and content take a turn at the end of the last section, establishing a dramatic finale. Throughout the book, most of the poems are a page in length; roughly a third run onto a second page, usually by only a few lines. "Little Bigelow," however, is a set of five one-page sections (untitled and unmarked, like the book's sections). The title (with its dryly comic "little" and "big") refers to a mountain on the Appalachian Trail in Maine. Here the speaker finds that words are not enough. "You can replace a word / with other words / but not its transverse / slide moving stiff, diagonal / upward," the second section starts. And the fifth: "Nothing serves the obdurate / top, stolid, buzzing / thunderous above / strict pediments."

After the book's skillful investment in the art of description, these statements are a shock. "No / it's neither that, nor this, it is not / even likenable," the poem continues. "Little Bigelow," the penultimate poem of the collection, startles us with a distrust in language;
appropriately, it seems quieter than the earlier poems—less technical
diction, less wordplay.

That quietness carries into the last poem, “Dura Mater,” which
is personal in a way the earlier poems have not been. There are nu-
merous references to a “you” throughout the book, but it has been
the readerly “you,” the general usage of the pronoun. But “Dura
Mater” opens with these lines:

Was impeded
Could not bring myself
To show / care outwardly
Pedimented
You were difficult
To attend
You had a way of
Putting me off
I would be put off
To the small ends
Even when I knew you
Needed

This “you” is a person, I believe (although I did try to read it as Lit-
tle Bigelow, using “pedimented” in the fourth line as a cue and con-
necting it to the “strict pediments” quoted above). The speaker, “im-
peded,” wonders if comfort could be given to the “you” with “tools
of my own making—if I could make them."

These two poems create a startling position with which to end
the collection. It is as if the speaker, having reached some limit of lan-
guage, bursts from the wild richness of the physical world to the
open summit, the “high intimacy” of a mountaintop, and uses it as a
place to stand to consider human relationships—a concern that has
flicked here and there through the preceding pages but was em-
bedded in contexts of science and art.

The mountain stands like a stony skull above the world. The
earlier, miniature perspective—close among British soldier lichen
and metalmark and flower morphology—has broadened to geologi-
cal space and time, and we stand in it, staggered:
It is something.
To stand on it toppling.
Having almost never been here.

Those closing lines from “Little Bigelow” recognize the precariousness of our existence, the unlikeliness of our being. The mountain is toppling, and so are we. Gratitude is expressed so quietly it has the effect of a whisper, reinforced by the emphasis of end-stopping: it is something, something remarkable, renewed for us by these remarkable poems.

Pamela Alexander

*The Falling Down Dance* by Chris Martin observes time as it happens, not in astronomical measures (days, months, years) but how it unfolds in the human body, a baby’s body changing, for example, but also in larger physical dimensions: ash, light, snow, milk. The book’s twin epigraphs by Whalen and Creeley (as well as its being published by Coffee House Press) signal an aesthetic concerned muchly with the way the body itself experiences thinking, music, phenomena.

From the get-go the (mostly) brief lines of the (mostly) brief lyrics take their own time to unfold:

The last star.
The oldest living insect.
The first bloody lip.

The poem continues to tell ordinary events, slowly, suspended against silence, creating a diorama-like effect, one that lingers on the thoughts. It mirrors the way that the baby of these poems, Atticus, begins to experience the world. What I admire is that Martin dares sentiment (to make a baby the hero of the poem and really of the whole book) while not at all shying away from the darker presences of time’s effects. The first poem ends:

A man you’ll never meet fells
the world’s oldest tree and it becomes
tragedy
almanac
timber
house
fire
ash
I happen to think it is quite a challenging thing to create lines from single words, yet here Martin builds up to that impactful ending by the very virtue of the sparseness of the lines which came before. The book designer Mary Austin Speaker (mother of said Atticus) is an equal collaborator here—she builds space between each line, pitch between each letter. The whole book breathes.

The lyrics titled “Time” run through the book and alternate with lyrics on various other themes—“Hunger,” “Memory,” “Dance,” and so forth. These poems seem less abstract in some way, more particular, more “ordinary” in their focus, not in their sonic impact. In “Economics,” Martin considers a tick drowning in his coffee, the ’90s girl group TLC and a picture of a wild horse he has sent via text message:

Wild and pregnant, on an island
made of target practice. Just
munching away. Bursting
with money.

Even though one does feel an oscillation between the very personal and sometimes esoteric musings of the poems titled “Time” and the alternating poems, there is a remarkable evenness of tone, voice and form throughout the book. The formal sameness of the brief lines and jagged line breaks does not bore a reader but rather creates an ambient sense of hush that allows the reader to enter into the musing as if in a lullaby of a kind. This lulling is again complemented by the book’s physical form, its coloring and tactile feel of it in the hand.

The question Martin asks in “Time (ruins)” is indeed worth asking:

What
if these were
notes not
for something more
finished, but for something more
like ruins

He does not dwindle into platitude here; rather, he has a very specific idea of what he’s talking about (“not Gothic / Revival Horace /
Walpole fakes, not stonewashed / jeans, but real ruins, lived in almost / to death..."). This kind of acknowledgment of the real impact of time feels almost (wait for it) anachronistic in the current age of super-speed and instantaneous feedback that Paul Virilio warned us (and keeps warning us) about.

What I appreciate and admire very much about this poetic inquiry is that does think deeply about the effect of "speed" on the human experience. If Martin hasn't read Virilio's work yet, I am hoping that he will. (After all, my drawing of this connection may rather harken to Cristina Peri Rossi's response to the critic who found her book _Evoke_ to be too dependent on a reading of Lacan: "I had not yet read Lacan when I wrote _Evoke_. First you feel, and then you know.") Martin isn't afraid to move from the poetic into the philosophical and he isn't afraid to switch verbal registers either. When describing the ruin as something you might stumble upon in a forest, off the path:

...it wasn't
a way anyone actually going
somewhere would go, a huge fucking
mess, and now it's just
this nothing
pointing
everywhere but at itself, this event
you (now) and only now (you)
are allowed to see...

He's brave enough to raise his own stakes, line by line and poem by poem, and so it doesn't at all feel like a trick when this poem on ruins drifts off at the end and does not complete itself. Sometimes the poem ought to work the way the mind does. Minds so often leave thoughts unfinished, and so why outhn't poems sometimes end adrift?

Perhaps I am so attracted to this book because it seems so rare to encounter a book about fatherhood—one that pays attention to the small and quotidian kinds of parenting, the daily moments, the "candied tedium," as Martin puts it. As the poems explore the relation-
ship between the father and the child, the child and the world, one experiences the newness of that experience through sound:

Sun chiding glut
of flung dust
discos the bedroom
until my nostrils
are swollen, cold of October’s first
day swapping yellow
for green on the maple as you
half doze

Perhaps it is an American book, in that the dangers of the external world do not enter it, or maybe it is that it is a child’s book or at least about the child’s experience. Martin’s attention is tender, even when it is dark. In the end, though, it is a book that closes in on domestic moments, moments of the physical body’s experiences, and these attentions manage to feel somehow profoundly political. For what is more political than the effort to create a space of love:

The world we
together. Mary.
All our fingers.
That world.

Kazim Ali
VERSE-BOUQUETS

(After several requests, we’re reprinting the following review, which first appeared in FIELD 54, Spring 1996.)

Poetry for the Earth, edited by Sara Dunn and Alan Scholefield (Fawcett, 1991)
Poems for the Millennium, Volume One, edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (California, 1995)
Burning Bright: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry, edited by Patricia Hampl (Ballantine, 1995)
A Year in Poetry, edited by Thomas E. Foster and Elizabeth C. Guthrie (Crown, 1995)

The etymology of “anthology” is the bouquet, the nosegay, though it may already contain, with the logos part, the idea that the gathered “flowers” are going to be verses. “Florilegium” is the Latin version, suggesting that the logos stems not from “word” but from “gathering.” The term goes back to the Greek collections of epigrams, where the brevity of the selections made the flower comparison particularly apt. And when we look that far back, and further, we realize that we owe to the anthologizing impulse the survival of much poetry from the distant past that would otherwise be lost. Chinese poetry is particularly fortunate in that culture’s long-established collecting and arranging instincts. Some of the old anthologies are packed with the entire canons of poets who were not handed down in any other form. The late T’ang poet I am working on, Yu Xuanji, was not considered important in her time, largely because she was a woman. Someone nevertheless thought it worthwhile to gather up and include her forty-nine surviving poems (forty-eight and a group of fragments, actually) in a huge collection of verse from the period. There was an urge to be inclusive, accompanied by an instinct to be generous, even complete, and I am grateful for it, this millennium or
more later. Take the long view and you have to feel anthologies are worthy, even indispensable.

Their importance isn’t just based on survival value. Anyone who studies the role of a prominent anthology over time, one like Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, is sure to be impressed by the power that a popular and widely disseminated collection can wield to shape tastes and, yes, form canons. Who’s included, and who’s omitted, and by what principles, is seldom addressed and often little calculated by the most innocent picker and arranger of the flowers, but that does not lessen the singular impact that selection and perpetuation can have. Overlooked and omitted poets suffer the most, of course. For included poets, too, being known for a certain poem or poems can become a frustration and a misrepresentation, since anthology makers, especially in the modern world of textbooks, tend to act like sheep rather than like shepherds, or, to retrieve the original metaphor, to pick the same old flowers from the same old gardens.

Looking at a batch of recent anthologies has made me consider how my attitude to the genre has changed over the years. Once upon a time anthologies were sites of exciting discovery. Untermeyer! Oscar Williams! Selden Rodman! George P. Elliot! Does anyone besides me remember e.e. cummings’ little “pre-epitaph” for Louis Untermeyer?

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Mr. U will not be missed
Who as an anthologist
Sold the many on the few
Not excluding Mr. U.
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Untermeyer was actually pretty generous to cummings, in retrospect, but the anthologist’s penchant for falling in love with his/her own work, not to mention that of special friends and associates, has always been worth a chuckle. But cummings was not choosing a harmless target; Untermeyer’s anthology-making, from the twenties through the fifties, had wide and powerful effects, some useful and some lamentable.
The anthology as site of discovery has diminished over the years, as my familiarity with the field of poetry has widened. I make my discoveries now in less mediated ways, and I like my students to do that too. As a teacher I have come to feel a mild loathing for most textbook anthologies, and much prefer, if it’s within the realm of the affordable, to have my students handle whole collections, by poets dead and alive, rather than trying to be acquainted with them through somebody else’s sampling. The filter of selections, annotations and introductions is already something of a distortion. If you then think to “know,” say, Wordsworth by submitting yourself wholly to the particular choices that somebody like Harold Bloom selects and presents with a surround of tendentious interpretation, your “knowledge” will be so imperfect as to be nearly worthless. I end my introductory poetry course these days by making each student go find a book by a living poet. They read the entire collection, as the poet surely hoped and intended they would, and then come and report their findings and reactions. I hope by this means to give them a measure of independence they can never gain by dwelling in the cloud-cuckoo-land of, say, the Norton anthology (good enough in its way, no doubt, for some purposes, but lamentably ignorant about contemporary poetry and given to the most laughable ideas of how to be ‘representative’ year after year, profitable edition after profitable edition).

I should confess at this point to the personal implications. Having made several anthologies, I can say I know the trade from the inside. I am familiar with the constraints of selection, the pressures that surround the question of how to be representative, and other such odd features of the process as permissions fees, which play a larger role in determining the nature of the anthology than most readers suspect. I am that spotted, furtive creature, an anthologist, raider of parks and gardens and, yes, even a maker of textbooks. I have assembled anthologies of fiction and criticism as well as of poems and prose poems.

I am also a poet and a translator, so I have had the experience of being left out of anthologies, as well as the more pleasant experience of being included in them. Some of the ones that land on my desk, in fact, arrive because I am in them. Never fully enough, of course. It’s
still better, most poets figure, than not being included at all, though that notion may deserve re-examination in some cases. No one would aspire to be in the famous book of bad verse, *The Stuffed Owl*, but there are a lot of other stuffed fowl around, masquerading as something else.

One has to watch out, meanwhile, for letting exclusion color one’s attitude too greatly. I always feel slightly virtuous at achieving enough disinterest to say a good word about Al Poulin’s anthology of contemporary poetry. Not only does he omit a number of poets I think he should include (Willard, Schmitz, McPherson, St. John, Tate, Dubie, and Valentine, for starters); he also omits me. That I can still commend his editing and selecting is worth the little extra effort required. In fact, he’s good, and one should say so despite disagreements.

Anthologists have my sympathy, even my empathy, for work that is difficult, taken for granted when it isn’t being second-guessed (few anthologists get much fan mail) and less rewarded and rewarding than outsiders might think. It’s both accurate and charitable, I believe, to assume that anthologies are labors of love rather than signs of greed and stalking horses of ideology, but one still needs to keep a sharp eye on the issue, even while blessing the innocence and goodness of our literary florists.

A few years back, as permissions fees soared, along with book costs, I found myself wondering whether the poetry anthology, as a basic creature in the bookstore world, could survive much longer. Yet a number of new anthologies, of various kinds, have crossed my desk recently, allaying that fear and piquing curiosity about trends and principles. Are editors doing pretty much what they have always done by putting anthologies together, or have there been shifts in emphasis, preference, fundamental structure? I’m not sure I have an answer. This survey is eccentric, eclectic, and very personal. I mean to express my own degrees of pleasure and displeasure, as a prelude for letting other readers make their own discoveries and develop their own preferences.

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I will begin with two disappointments, then, to get them out of the way. When *Poetry for the Earth*, subtitled “A collection of poems from around the world that celebrates nature,” arrived on my doorstep a couple of years ago, I felt a tingle of anticipation. The cover, a Hudson River School sunrise with lots of pink clouds, sounded a note of warning, but the *idea* of the book, I must emphasize, delighted me. Lover of nature poems that I am, I had high hopes that I would find lots of interesting examples under one cover and perhaps have a hand in a book I could recommend to others who share my interest. In a certain sense, that proved true. There *are* many wonderful poems in this collection, and some of them I would probably not have known about otherwise. Would I have been likely to run into this charming lyric by W.H. Davies, for instance, under other circumstances? Probably not:

A BRIGHT DAY

My windows now are giant drops of dew
    The common stones are dancing in my eyes;
The light is winged, and panting, and the world
    Is fluttering with a little fall or rise.

See, while they shoot the sun with singing Larks,
    How those broad meadows sparkle and rejoice!
Where can the Cuckoo hide in all this light,
    And still remain unseen, and but a voice?

Shall I be mean, when all this light is mine?
    Is anything unworthy of its place?
Call for the rat, and let him share my joy,
    And sit beside me here, to wash his face.

The verse is traditional, I know, and even what some might call too "rollicking," but the sentiments of the last stanza are worthy of Issa and Hopkins. I am glad I have found this poem and to have made something of a motto from the first line of the final stanza.
This is what anthologies are all about, surely. Why, then, my disappointment with *Poetry of the Earth*? Not because of its organization into categories—the editors have made sections for Celebration (to which Davies' poem belongs), Loss, Anger, Consolation, Contemplation, Observation, and Disquiet,—a scheme which is reasonably interesting and viable. Not because it samples so widely. Not because it is so resolute about including so many women—the British edition, after all, was published by Virago, and the discovery of neglected women writers is one of the most exciting phenomena of our era. No, the problem is one of taste, and it applies to the women writers in a way that should concern any feminist because it is apt to reinforce misogyny instead of dissipating it. It grows more and more obvious, as one reads through this book, that many poems have been selected and included for one reason and one only: the author’s gender. Insofar as this tends to misrepresent good writing by women (of which there are many examples in the collection), it has precisely the opposite effect of the one intended.

Let me glance at a section of the "Observation" group to illustrate my point. What is a reader to think, having read Elizabeth Bishop’s wonderful poem "The Bight" on page 157, to turn to page 158 and find this:

**WHALE AT TWILIGHT**

The sea is enormous, but calm with evening and sunset, rearranging its islands for the night, changing its own blues, smoothing itself against the rocks, without playfulness, without thought.
No stars are out, only sea birds flying to distant reefs.
No vessels intrude, no lobstermen haul their pots.
Only somewhere out toward the horizon a thin column of water appears and disappears again, and then rises once more, tranquil as a fountain in a garden where no wind blows.

*Elizabeth Coatsworth*
How, you ask yourself, could the editorial taste that saw the worth of Bishop's poem have found this to be somehow equivalent (for that is the implicit claim anthologies make)? Does banality of language make no difference? Are tired and predictable adjectives just as good as fresh and unexpected ones? Bafflement drives the reader to one lamentable conclusion: Coatsworth and Bishop are together here only because they happen to share a gender, a choice that undermines the whole enterprise of an anthology that purports to collect excellent examples of nature poetry, in a section where “observation” is being stressed.

Perhaps, you think, this is a singular lapse in an otherwise unblemished bouquet? Alas, no. Go on from there. The next three poems, interesting for various reasons, are by men: R. S. Thomas, Pablo Neruda, and Tomas Tranströmer. Then we come upon a poem that begins this way:

WHAT FRANK, MARTHA AND I KNOW ABOUT THE DESERT

My mother
used to speak about Coyote.
She talked to praying Mantis—
asked him
when rain was coming.
She taught me, Frank and Martha
to look for sap
on the greasy bark
of the mesquite
(the sap has crunchy, crystallized edges, a smooth, wax-like center)
She told us how to eat mesquite beans.
‘gnaw on the ends, don’t eat the seeds’
(the fiber inside makes the pod sweet)

And so forth. This is the first third of a poem by Alice Sadongei, who, we learn from the notes in the back, is a member of the Kiowa/Papgo tribe. I know I will tread on certain sensibilities here when I suggest that the interest of this poem might have in some other context tends
to be obscured by the obvious politics of its inclusion here, among more accomplished work. Does it really do Alice Sadongei a service to expose her blurry sense of how to handle the poetic line and her lack of clarity about the differences, in diction and movement, between poetry and sliced-up prose, by inserting her into this context? My own answer, obviously, is no. The politics, which drives so much of the selection in this book, backfires and leaves me embarrassed: I wish to associate myself with a more vigorous interest in poetry by neglected groups, whether the neglect is based on gender or on cultural dominance of minority groups, but by the same token I do not wish to associate myself with inattentive editing. If the reader begins to feel that the editors cannot distinguish an interesting poem from a mediocre one, then the whole point of presenting overlooked writers is self-defeating. If such writers appear to have deserved their neglect, inclusion simply reinforces the original prejudices.

I hope it is clear I am not trying to give aid or comfort to the William Bennetts of this world. If we can’t criticize and discriminate among ourselves about these matters, we who care about both poetry and progressive politics, then we provide them grist for their mills and defeat our own purposes. I mention the matter emphatically because there is a great deal of this going on these days, and most of us are painfully aware of it. Silence is one response. Careful discrimination, along with willingness to criticize bad editing for what it is, is another.

The more one looks at *Poetry for the Earth*, moreover, the more one realizes that its editors, for whatever reason, are simply not well read. They omit poets like Vaughan, Traherne, and A. E. Housman. They seem to be unaware of Robert Frost, Robert Francis, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams. Contemporaries like Galway Kinnell, Charles Wright, and Sandra McPherson have somehow escaped their notice. They have Po Chu-I (sic) and Yuan Chieh (sic) in Waley’s translations (not, perhaps, the very freshest of available daisies) but not Wang Wei or Tu Fu or Li Po. It’s a very strange book, really, this *Poetry for the Earth*, and it does not begin to fill the need, in my view, to which it purports to respond.
A much more excruciating experience came my way when I tried to set myself the task of reading through Paul Hoover's Norton anthology, immodestly titled *Postmodern American Poetry*. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Here was a "school" I did not know nearly well enough, and an opportunity to inform myself about a lot of new writing. The excessive claim of the title could be overlooked—Hoover knows perfectly well that the rest of us are not "non-postmodernists," and wasn't I myself once included (I blush to recall it now) in something called *The Major Young Poets*? One could hope for a corrective to the kind of predictability and parochialism surrounding anthologies by the likes of Vendler and McClatchy. Besides, weren't there a number of writers I quite liked in the book, people as various as John Ashbery, Gary Snyder, Russell Edson, Ron Silliman, and Michael Palmer?

Alas, it is almost impossible to exaggerate the tedium and banality of this book. Hoover seems to have an unerring instinct for picking the worst, most logorrheic examples of his practitioners. He revives the whole idea of "the art of sinking in poesy" and makes one understand how someone like Pope could be driven to write *The Dunciad*. The sheer blather, the posturing, the self-regard, the solemn and windy tedium, not only of the "poems" but of the statements of "poetics" collected at the back! The book opens with some of the worst pontificatings of Charles Olsen and then sinks rapidly, like a huge lead monument, toward the present. Whatever good poems and interesting language are included are quite smothered and lost in the fog of self-importance and pseudo-experimentation. I know that these writers like to read each other (and only each other, one gathers, lest light burst in upon their Stygian gloom), and I can only conclude that they are masochists. It's impossible to imagine them actually *enjoying* each other's poems. Perhaps they only pretend to read or listen.

I know I sound unkind, sound biased, reveal my own frivolity and inadequately *postmodern* understanding, but I have to say it: if I thought this was what poetry really was like, I would never go near a poem or a poet again. Hoover's accomplishment here, a kind of negative reality, an anti-matter world of language gone thunderously prosaic, is really awesome to contemplate. Foolish of me to speak
so candidly, I suppose, but I really did try to read it and I think someone should bear witness to its astonishing awfulness.


Let me turn, with relief, to a more positive example of the anthology maker's craft. To prove that I am not simply some un-reconstructed traditionalist, let me admire an anthology that is really rather close, politically and aesthetically, to Hoover's circle of acquaintance and mutual admiration: Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris's huge, astute Poems for the Millennium. Like the Hoover book, this bears a blurb by Marjorie Perloff, but for once her praise is quite warranted. What the editors have accomplished here is a stunningly good survey of the experiments and innovations, the movements and the geniuses, that have characterized the poetry of the entire twentieth century. It takes them 800 pages, and they promise a second volume that will probably not live up to the accomplishment of the first (because it will gather too many flowers from Hoover's awful garden), but one cannot help admiring, even while disagreeing with some of the choices and assumptions, the fundamental clarity, lucidity, and intelligence behind this collection.

Jerome Rothenberg has done brilliant work in this line before—I'm a long-time admirer of Technicians of the Sacred—and no doubt this experience is part of the reason for this book's unusual excellence. At the same time, nothing he has done previously quite prepared me for the scope and command of this anthology. An immense amount of reading, of most of the poetry written in the twentieth century, representing most of the languages being used on the planet (in the original as well as in translations), has to lie behind the intelligent and lively selections and presentations one finds here.

I open this book at random: there is García Lorca, represented by two very different pieces, "Night Suite, for Piano & Poet's Voice," and "Ode for Walt Whitman," an excerpt from Poet in New York. The first is cleanly and imaginatively translated by Rothenberg himself, the second, ditto, by Jack Spicer. There follows a compact and thoughtful note on Lorca, emphasizing his roots, his concept of duende, his importance to the avant-garde then and now. The whole
Lorca section is perhaps eight pages, one percent of the book, so you sense the economy that is at work. It might be said that the editors reveal some of their biases and a slight touch of sentimentality in their characterization of Lorca as martyr of the avant-garde, but the point is that the presentation of this poet, by the choice of examples, by the quality of translations, by the lightly worn erudition and enthusiasm of the note, is clean, economical, exhilarating. It is also typical of this book. A book to own, carry around (gingerly, of course; it's very big), quarrel with, ponder, and cherish. Rothenberg is surely among our most gifted anthologists, and Joris, whose name was new to me, makes an impressive accomplice.

I say "quarrel with" because I think one of the ways we read anthologies profitably is by recognizing that we need to have a dialogue with them. When the editors are inept, as in the cases cited above, the dialogue becomes unprofitable. When they are shrewd, intelligent, and dedicated, as in the present case, they make exciting, if sometimes unsettling, companions. The difference is instructive; the point is not total agreement but mutual respect. Anthologists need to respect the intelligence, taste, and appetite of their readers. Readers need to feel that anthologists have done their work seriously, thoughtfully, and with a real commitment to values and to editorial rigor.

The ambition of Poems for the Millennium is to document "the Revolution of the Word," as Kenner puts it in a frontispiece blurb, all the way from forerunners like Blake and Dickinson and Hopkins, through various key movements (Futurism, Dada, etc.), along with "galleries" that feature individual poets whose accomplishments are both contiguous with, and independent from, the "isms" that surround them. Where it is necessary to go beyond the printed page (to illustrate handwriting, collaboration with visual arts, and various kinds of visual experimentation), that is done, and done handsomely.

The commentary, meanwhile, is in much smaller type, as if to suggest to the reader its optional status. You can simply move among these key texts on your own, or you can resort to the guidance and historical perspective provided by the comments. If the term "gallery" likens this enterprise to the museum, then the comments are like those optional aids—soundguides or extensive texts posted near the hung paintings—that we are used to seeing in museums,
using or ignoring them as our preference dictates. And the museum analogy is helpful in reminding us that the history of visual art in this century has been much more fully represented or documented than the history of literary art; the latter’s narrative has been fitful, partial, afflicted sometimes by the most petty kind of literary politics. The Rothenberg and Joris collection, by approaching the task with some of the ambition and gusto we associate with first-rate museums, is helping to rectify a wrong, to fill an often overlooked need.

I know some readers will think it is contradictory, even schizophrenic of me, to find so much to dislike in Hoover’s anthology and so much to admire in Rothenberg and Joris’s. I understand that reaction, but I would counter that the effect of knowing what Poems for the Millennium has uncovered and displayed from the past hundred years is to recognize, if one is honest, the repetitive and impoverished nature of the current state of the so-called avant-garde in this country. Again and again, you could stamp across page after page of Hoover’s collection the simple response: BEEN THERE/DONE THAT. And in most cases you could add, DONE THAT BETTER. After, say, Cesar Vallejo, Benjamin Péret, and Paul Celan, do you really want to bother with Clark Coolidge, Anne Waldman, or Leslie Scalapino? Are imitations of Gertrude Stein any less specious and derivative than imitations of T. S. Eliot? If postmodernism is merely going to be a tired, dogged, wheel-spinning repetition of the accomplishments of modernism, then who wants to explore it? You get the distinct feeling that the party’s over, the band has gone home, and certain people have simply failed to notice.

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High hopes, again, for Patricia Hampl’s Burning Bright: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry, were sharply qualified by the experience of reading through the collection. This seems like another good idea insufficiently backed up by wide reading, good editorial judgment, and a strong sense of how to get poems to inform and support one another in such a context. Hampl defines her subject widely and raids a number of literatures, in varyingly effective translations, to assemble her verse-bouquet, but she lacks that sense of unerring
rightness that the best anthologies exhibit. Impossible to say where that reflects her taste and where it is a feature of her simply not having read enough, pondered enough, lived with her choices sufficiently. Her three-part organization takes us through the day—Morning, Noon, and Night. Let me glance at the last of these by way of trying to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of her bouquet-making.

"Night" opens strongly with Stevens's "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," but it follows that immediately with a rather weak poem, Yehuda Amichai’s "The Course of a Life" (one good image—"everyone’s the muezzin / of his own life," the rest just too predictable), and the poems that follow, while varied, are mediocre enough, on the whole, to make you wonder why the editor chose them. There are more strong poems scattered along the way, including "The Tyger," "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Carrion Comfort," and Celan’s "Into the Foghorn," but they only serve to point up the inadequacy of most of the other choices, which include Kahlil Gibran, Rumi, and relatively weak examples of James Wright, Nelly Sachs, Kathleen Raine, and Gabriela Mistral. Where, for goodness sake, are the great night fugues of Henry Vaughan? Where is anything by William Stafford, among the great spiritual poets of the century? What about Ghalib? Don’t Dante and Milton belong here? And why so much dependence on monotheism where the "sacred" has such wider possibilities?

But wait. These are just the kind of unfair, easy questions that reviewers like to use to discredit anthologists, aren’t they? Haven’t I succumbed to a too-easy form of second-guessing? My rule of thumb is this: one ought not to go looking for omissions until one has taken the time to appreciate, and to reflect upon, inclusions. If, when that’s completed, the state of affairs still feels unsatisfactory, then it seems fair to open up the question of what the anthologist left out, and why.

I just wish Hampl had cast a wider and more judicious net for a book that has much promise and many disappointments. I like most of the authors she includes, but I don’t think she chooses well from their work. They deserve better, more thoughtful, representation. And their poems deserve to interact with the other selections more interestingly. The whole question of how to define and identify "sacred poetry" remains intriguing. Is not all poetry, in some sense or
other, concerned with the sacred? It’s like the term “language poetry”: one wonders about the fact that, technically, just about everyone’s included. Which means that another, less clearly stated, agenda is at work. But I am complaining about overall quality, not agenda.

An anthology which seems to me to exemplify the craft of bouquet-gathering at its best is Michael Harper and Anthony Walton’s *Every Shut Eye Ain’t Asleep*. Its subject is “poetry by African Americans since 1945,” and it does a superb job of selecting and presenting thirty-five poets, ordering them chronologically by their birthdates. Harper and Walton have been true to the spectrum in the African American writing community that runs from politicized anger to distinctive lyricism (there does seem to be something mutually exclusive about those two extremes, though they sometimes coexist within a single poem), while always going for the strongest examples, making no exceptions and, in effect, taking no prisoners. What needs leaving out because it is derivative or self-indulgent gets left out, so that what is genuine and moving may remain. The editors are quite willing to indicate their sense of relative importance by size of selection: the book opens with very generous representation of Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks (26 and 29 pages, respectively), but is not afraid to represent other writers by a single poem. And some names you might expect to find here are left out altogether.

In the minimally represented (one or two poems) cases, I am not familiar enough with the rest of the work to second-guess the editors. I was glad to see the work of Mari Evans, Raymond Patterson (a virtuoso piece called “Twenty-Six Ways of Looking at a Blackman”), Jayne Cortez, Nathaniel Mackey, and Clarence Major, who have very brief sections of one or two pieces, but I didn’t know them well enough to wish they could be more fully represented, especially in exchange for reducing larger selections. One other “single poem” selection, Sherley Anne Williams’ “Letters from a New England Negro,” runs over fourteen pages, and I admire the editors for making room for long piece of real distinction like this one and Jay Wright’s “An Invitation to Madison County.”
Like any anthology, this one may have some interesting politics behind it, but my emphasis is simply on the strength of choices, the unwillingness to settle for safe or mediocre poems, the wariness about sentimentality, and the crispness and sureness of the editing. Among their authors and choices, the editors no doubt have their own preferences and reservations, but their presentation of each writer is succinct, scrupulous, and fairminded. The result is an anthology you feel you can go back to and explore, having that kind of useful dialogue with the editors I mentioned above, and using discoveries as a springboard to wider and deeper reading. A book to own, lend, reread, and cherish!

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I’ve saved my very favorite anthology, A Year In Poetry, for last. I happen to be represented in this one but that fact is wholly incidental to my delight in it, which comes from the organization: the editors have actually found a poem to fit every single day of the year, creating thereby a calendar/anthology. This combines two interesting structures in a way that has great potential. But its success must still lie in the execution. Thomas Foster and Elizabeth Guthrie spent about seven years looking for their examples and putting the book together. How many other anthologies have been that patient and scrupulous? They’ve had lots of helpful suggestions along the way, they tell us, and the backing and enthusiasm of Richard Wilbur, who supplies a Foreword, but the credit for their success must go to them and their notable patience in following through on such an ambitious project. Foster tells us that the whole thing began when he read “Paul Revere’s Ride” to his children on April 18, 1988. He wondered about other poems tied to specific days, and the project was launched.

To show what this anthology is like, in texture and taste, let’s look at the month of April, up to the moment of its founding and Paul Revere’s ride:

April 1: Marianne Moore, “Tom Fool at Jamaica.” A racehorse, appropriately named, being exercised on April Fool’s Day. “Be infallible at your peril, for your system will fail,” says Moore. Good advice!
April 2: John Donne, “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.” (April second is when Good Friday fell on 1613.) A classic.


April 4: Tom Andrews, “Song of a Country Priest.” Epigraph from Bernanos. This begins, “April 4: Wind hums / in the fireweed, the dogwood / drops white skirts across // the lawn.”

April 5: John Betjeman, “The Arrest of Oscar Wilde at the Cogan Hotel.” So that’s when that was! Another classic set in 1895.

April 6: Francesco Petrarch, “The lover sheweth that he was striken by love on good Friday.” Yes, Petrarch met Laura April 6, 1327. The translation is by Anonymous and shows up in Totel’s Miscellany, a period bouquet. Petrarch says he was ”unwise, unweaponed and unaware.”

April 7: Dante Alighieri, “Dante finds himself in the Dark Wood,” i.e. the opening of The Inferno, which Dante set on Good Friday, April 7, 1300. The translation is Longfellow’s, which reads quite well.

April 8: Greg Pape, “This House.” The poem’s speaker says ”It’s the eighth of April / and this house is a stalled whale / under snow clouds.”

April 9: Paul Muldoon, “Good Friday, 1971, Driving Westward.” It’s not Donne, but it’s pretty good.

April 10: Robert Hayden, ”Middle Passage.” A searing, memorable poem, in which a quote from the ship’s log reads ”10 April 1800— / Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says / their moaning is a prayer for death, / ours and their own.”


April 12: Ogden Nash, “Lines in Praise of a Date Made Praiseworthy by Something Very Nice That Happened to It.” Funny variations on rhyming the word “April” e.g., ”Down in New Mexico the chaparral / Is doing nicely by the twelfth of Apparel.”

April 13: Horace, “Maecenas’ Birthday.” A terrific poem, inviting “Phillis” to a birthday bash, set on the Ides (which are the 13th in April instead of the 15th), translated here by Thomas Pestell in the manner of Ben Jonson and Robert Herrick.
April 14: Stephen Vincent Benet, "Abraham Lincoln's Last Day." That's right, Booth shot Lincoln on April 14, 1865.

April 15: Thomas Hardy, "The Convergence of the Twain." Yes, that's right too. The Titanic went down on April 15, 1912.

April 16: George Mackay Brown, "April the Sixteenth." A good poem by a good poet. April 16 is Magnus Martyr Day.

April 17: Geoffrey Chaucer, "Here bygynneth the Book of the Tales of Caunterbury." The Man of Law, telling his tale on the first day, remarks that it's the eighteenth. By inference, then, the pilgrims gathered to begin their journey to the evening of the seventeenth.

That brings us to Longfellow and Revere's very metered gallop, where Foster and Guthrie began, and where I must stop. I hope my sample has conveyed something of the variety and imagination of this collection, its way of bringing disparate years (1300, 1912, etc.) together, not to mention disparate poems and poets, through the joyous accident of days of the month.

The real point about the excellence of A Year in Poetry, however, is not the ingenuity of the idea or the feat of coming up with a poem for every day of the year. It is the high quality and deep interest of the individual examples, along with their subtle dialogue, the ways in which they do and don't fit together. You can dip into this book at any point and find something interesting, provoking, and, nine times out of ten, unfamiliar. I am currently reading in February, actually, where I have discovered Emily Dickinson’s hilarious Valentine (I thought I knew Dickinson well, but this is an early piece, often ignored) and Tristan Corbière’s "Letter from Mexico" and Thomas More’s "Rueful Lamentation on the Death of Queen Elizabeth" (Henry the Eighth’s mom). I put these poems next to ones I already did know, and I glow with pleasure at any enhanced sense of what’s out there, what’s available to the interested reader of poetry when editors cast a wide net and make a careful selection. My own delight in this book will surely be shared by others. Its price, $25, makes it a wonderful bargain, working out to something like 7 cents per poem. I will use it as a calendar, a bedside companion, a reference book, a gift idea, and a conversation piece. It shows that the fine old art of anthology-making is alive and well among us still, walking in the woods and the gardens, picking and choosing, arranging thoughtfully.

David Young
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