

Shorter Reviews

John Bradley. *You Don't Know What You Don't Know.*
Cleveland State UP, 2010.

Taking its who-would-have-thunk-it title from a statement made by notorious American diplomat John Negroponte, John Bradley's book of prose poems *You Don't Know What You Don't Know*, winner of Cleveland State University's Poetry Center 2010 Open Competition Award, revels in the absurd and the impossible, the unrighteous and the deliciously profane. Bradley's most immediate—and, on first read at least, obvious—antecedent is widely-acknowledged prose poem master Russell Edson; both writers are staunch aficionados of the block paragraph format and furthermore also often deal in ethereal, illusory subject matter and thematic material. Yet where Edson's poems are defiantly apolitical Bradley's are decidedly not. Famous and infamous historical figures such as Robert Oppenheimer, Benito Mussolini, John McCain, Adolf Hitler, Crazy Horse, Leni Riefenstahl, Dan Rather and Subway spokesman Jared Fogle make appearances in *You Don't Know What You Don't Know* and although the titles of his poems—"I Never Button the Top Button of My Shirt Because It Makes My Head Look Too Big"; "(Let Us All Reflect a Moment Upon) Dick's Hatband"—and their ensuing contents are often funny, Bradley's work contains a multitude of layers. An excerpt from the opening paragraph of "In the Shop of the Tin Noses": "I asked her what her hands did before the war: she held up a moth by its wings. The mask: galvanized copper the thickness of a visiting card. Sometimes I found him at the center of the headache. ([Click here](#) to watch injured World War I faces.) He said of the bullet that bloomed his skull: "A barrel of whitewash tipped over and it seemed that everything in the world turned white." Although irreverent, "In the Shop of the Tin Noses" here is simultaneously also tender, sad even, and it's this type of linguistic duplicity—both heartfelt and inane—that typifies the best of Bradley's work in the collection.

Furthermore, one of the most notable features of *You Don't Know What You Don't Know*, and one that recurs throughout the volume, is Bradley's use of the word "parable." Often first appearing in various titles in the book—"Parable of the Indeterminable Cave"; "Parable Embedded with Patience and Impatience"; "Parable of the Pony Syndrome"—and then asserting itself in different, twisted guises in each actual work, for Bradley parables are less concerned with giving moralistic advice and

more concerned with highlighting the absurd profundity of the human condition. The second paragraph of “Parable of the Permeable Wardrobe” asserts, “The telephone, in the shape of an eggplant, rings. It’s a private historian for the Carnegie Foundation. He says my fingerprints were found on an axe handle used to kill one of Andrew Carnegie’s Pinkerton agents at Homestead. “But I wasn’t even alive then,” I protest. “Ah, and if you were one of the strikers then, Mr. B.,” he asks, “tell me, just what would you have done?”

And in its entirety “Parable of the Pony Syndrome,” the last poem in “I Think I Hear Radioactive Angels Singing Doowop in the Crabapple Tree,” the collection’s first section, reads:

“Pony,” I say to my mother, and then stop, horrified. How could I call my own mother “Pony?” I can’t apologize, as I don’t want to draw attention to my faux pas.

“The sun is a byproduct of honey,” I tell her, “and thus you and I will get sticky if we stay in the sun too long.”

“Is something wrong, Pony?” she asks. “Tell your Pony.”

In each of these excerpts Bradley focuses in on that which is hyperbolic and fantastical, obviously, but he also gets subtly serious. “Parable of the Permeable Wardrobe” is almost faux-Orwellian in its insistence that—no matter whether the poem’s speaker was even alive when the brutal murder he is being accused of was committed—someone has to pay the price for said murder, and “Parable of the Pony Syndrome” reads strangely sexually insidious; one can’t help but think some potentially disconcerting innuendos are bubbling just below the strait-laced linguistic surface. The most successful of Bradley’s poems in *You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know* thus achieve this type of nuance. With a smirk they ostensibly say one thing while, with a leer, they are at the same time insisting on something else entirely.

Eminently readable, *You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know* deserves more readers, and one can’t help but hope that it gets them. Unlike Russell Edson or James Tate (another potential Bradley influence), John Bradley’s name is not exactly house-hold, yet many of the poems in his latest collection are as visionary and compelling as much of the work of those aforementioned writers. His is a voice of extraordinary scope and *You Don’t Know What You Don’t Know* displays that scope incessantly.

—Jeff Alessandrelli

Carrie Shipers. *Ordinary Mourning*. ABZ Poetry Press, 2010.

Until the 20th Century, custom in Europe and America dictated proper dress and behavior after a death in the family, and four stages of mourning were observed. During “ordinary mourning,” women could wear white with their usual black. These rituals provide a context for Carrie Shipers’ intriguing collection of poems, winner of the 2009 ABZ First Book Poetry Prize, but her focus is not so much on mourning as on the phenomenon of *haunting*. Shipers gives voice both to the haunted and to their haunting spirits, which range from ghosts who rattle windows and torment children to those we only think we may have seen or deeply wish we could. Her poems testify to a deep human need to maintain contact with the departed, who might include the dead, the absent living, and even ourselves.

The opening poem, “On the Nature of Belief,” establishes a skeptical but open context for the narrations that follow. “I know there’s more to the world than what / we see, especially in a world where no one / sees enough,” the speaker states, though she admits she’s “never seen a single ghost.” That failure does not lessen her somewhat frightened yearning after the mystical. “I want a ghost to call / my own, one willing to visit every night, / who looks enough like me I won’t be startled.” But even true believers can wait in vain for voices from beyond. In the enigmatic “Caretaker,” a cemetery worker explains that he (or she—gender is not always clear) likes it best when he is alone, with “no children / climbing the stones, no mourners marking loss / with tears or twisted wreaths.” “I can’t hear,” he explains, “till the chairs and tarps are folded.” What is he listening for? In language betraying both uncanny empathy and deep loneliness, the caretaker concludes:

I eat my lunch among wind-scoured stones,

inscriptions scraped clean, and sing old songs
I think they’ll know. When I stop I hear
the silence louder than before. The dead
have less to say than I thought they would.

The imagery, stark and simple, underscores the speaker’s stoic acceptance of the passing time. The language is rhythmic and spare, reminiscent of Robert Frost.

The debt this volume owes to Frost is directly suggested by an allusion to his poem, “The Witch of Coos,” in “After | Life.” Following a

shower, the speaker poses before a “steam-shot mirror / trying to remember what Frost said / about ghosts: if the dead are souls, / surely they don’t have them?” In Frost’s poem, an old woman is haunted by the ghostly skeleton of the lover she confesses that her husband “killed instead of me. / The least I could do was to help dig their grave.” Reading between the lines, we understand that guilt has led her to imagine “the bones” rising from their secret cellar grave and climbing to an attic, where she manages to trap them. Just as Frost’s poem is about his speaker’s grievous life and psychological projections—not the skeletal apparition—so soliloquies here mostly reveal the state of their human narrators. But Shipers mixes it up. “Graveyard Shift” addresses the problem of connection between the living and the dead *from the perspective of a ghost*, one doomed to haunt the cemetery in which he is buried. “I don’t remember my death,” he begins, “only my mind / snapping open when my casket touched earth.” Ensuing lines evoke the sensory pleasures death has taken from him. At his funeral, he recalls, his “wife’s hair shone in wheat-colored light. / She wore the navy blue dress. . . .” As the last person buried, he must stand guard “till the next one comes,” but the cemetery has been abandoned, and he is stuck. “There used to be more visitors—old ladies / with plastic flowers or trowels and real ones, / men who left their fields to cry tears / sharp as gravel.” To hang on to memories of what has been is hard, even for a ghost. The dead who can do so move on:

No one here is a ghost, exactly, or if they were
they’ve given up. It gets to be more trouble
than it’s worth, a woman told me. To make them
remember you, you have to remember them so hard
you can’t do anything else.

Like Frost’s witch, some speakers seem haunted by guilt. In “Home-stead,” we meet a sod farmer driven to distraction by work and the needs of his wife, to whom he had promised a house he finds impossible to build. In an instant of anger, he swings around the axe he happens to be sharpening and kills her, only partly by accident. In the years that follow, he is haunted by his dead wife’s “wheat-green” ghostly eyes, a marvelous image in a poem set on the Great Plains:

She sits
on the unmade bed or rocks in the willow chair
I made. Her wheat-green eyes see everything:
my work-clothes crusted in a corner, the black-

bottomed cornbread I eat at every meal.
Out here, we have to live with our mistakes.

There are also those guilty only of surviving tragedy. “Resurrection” gives voice to the lone survivor of the infamous Sago Mine disaster of 2006, who tell us, “I know folks wish I’d died” and concludes:

I didn’t ask to live any louder or harder

than the ones who walked that last tunnel
into light as clean as sunrise.

I figure they’ll forgive me when they can.

In “Reparation,” a mining inspector who failed to prevent the collapse speaks from beyond the grave, a suicide: “The paper will say I killed myself out of guilt / or fear, that I knew more about the explosion / than I let on.” He protests, saying he told all he knew but was haunted anyway:

I don’t have to go underground to see the men

who died. When I drive downtown, they stand
on the sidewalks and watch me pass. They crowd

the diner, the store, the line behind me at the bank.

Other spirits who speak to us directly include ghost prostitutes (in the cleverly named “Ghosting Around”), ghosts who wish grieving families would just let them go, and a ghost waitress who haunts a police dispatcher, repeatedly calling for protection against her enraged ex waiting outside a bar with a gun—twenty years after she was murdered.

From the haunted living, we hear more. In “Spirit Photography” (a poem that reads like a *Twilight Zone* episode), a 19th Century photographer who fakes pictures of ghosts for grieving relatives finds he has caught an image of his own dead wife in a self-portrait. In “Playing Dead,” a child explains how she stopped the spirit of her dead playmate from following her home by pouring salt in a ring around her gravestone.

Many poems make subtle use of word play. “After | Life,” for example, explores the meanings of the words *ordinary* and *mourning/morning*, as when the speaker wonders if she might be dead already:

The people I see in the grocery and the park
don't seem dead. I might be haunting them,
though they look frightened only by their lives'
ordinary burdens. I feel different than I did
last night—lonelier and less afraid.
If that was life, this morning must be after.

Since she knows “a dozen times” she might have died, she feels she may have crossed over unawares—but there’s a different way to read the lines. For people cowed by their “ordinary burdens,” life might be a kind of *death-in life*. On the other hand, feeling lonely (perhaps outside the comfort of religion) but intensely aware of life may bestow exaltation, an “after-life” to *ordinary* living.

Maybe life and death are both a kind of dream. At any rate, ghostliness interests us. In “Inventory,” the speaker (perhaps Shippers herself) explains that she has been collecting ghost stories for some time:

The dead I keep: a woman burned as a witch
in nineteenth-century Ireland; a miner carrying
lunch bucket and shovel; two country-western stars;
one toothpaste suicide; a racecar driver clutching
his helmet. . . .

I've traded dead I should've kept, hoarded those
for whom I have no use.

Shippers' collection of poems has both the virtues and the vices of any scrapbook in that a controlling point of view isn't clear. Nonetheless, a reader becomes engaged with this chorus of yearning souls. Their words suggest that life is short and precious, that the living and the dead are connected, and that the divide between us may be at once both wider and more narrow than we care to know.

—Carol Niederlander

Dilruba Ahmed. *Dhaka Dust*. Graywolf Press, 2011.

Dhaka Dust is a collection of poetry whose work is assured and lyrical. Ranging from Europe to America to Bangladesh the poems present us with a heartfelt speaker concerned with the search for homeland.

These poems are evocative of place and mood and amply catch the lyrical eye of the traveler who sees in quick flashes of insight. All of the senses are acutely on display.

In the title poem we are told that “you land in Dhaka, rickshaws / five or six abreast. They are all here: studded metal backboards ablaze with red flowers, / Heineken boxes, a Bangladeshi star with blue eyes, / peacocks, pink fans of filigree.” But here too is the sense of the global world as we find “A man / with a plaid scarf (surplus from The Gap) / slaps the rump of a passing gray car / as though it’s a horse or a dog.” We are told by the speaker that “Bits of children’s songs / snag in your windpipe. Other words surface: / *sweatshop* and *abject poverty* and you let them.” Ahmed’s is an intelligent discerning vision. Later in “Evening in Mendocino” the speaker tell us:

You’re blanketed in the
smell of sea kelp, plant
that moves like animal.

Who wouldn’t believe
in mermaids? The ocean
is lonely. Forget

long walks at sunset, etc.
Something here grows
ripe. Something grown

from salt...

And in a poem such as “In Brussels I Learn to Love,” Ahmed takes us through a series of scenes and sketches of the foreign locale. She tells us that in Brussels she comes to love “the rain, the way wet streets / grow dark and expectant, mercury / puddles looking back at me, / each silver building / shivering in its own height.” And ends the poem with: “On the indigo / road back to the countryside, / wildflowers unfold petals and / open their small dark throats.”

Underlying this book are many themes and subjects: family and finding one’s heritage, new motherhood, and finding grace under the demands of childrearing. In “Fugue of New Motherhood” we are told that “One body must / wane so another / may grow. / That body is mine.” In “Grace” “My baby’s cry is a siren’s / wail washing over the city. / Where’s the silence / that sleep brings?” The mother’s body, child at its breast extracting what is needed, has become a wild animal. There is also in

“Josiah” the allusion to the loss of a young child, heartfelt and touching as any in the collection.

We move from a childhood in Ohio to grandparents in Bangladesh. A poem such as “Small House” moves us back and forth in time. At the grave of her father’s mother and father in Bangladesh, the speaker tells us: “The green and yellow / patches roll into the distance, land / as flat as Ohio where I watched / rows of corn file past from the / backseat.” Or in “Southeastern Ohio” we have the mingling of the two cultures as the speaker with her sisters finds herself in “stuffy gyms that passed / for mosques, ...” These brown children of Bangladeshi descent encounter a taste of America’s racial divide in a poem such as “Mississippi Delta” where “The only Laundromat is on the white side / of town, so you wash your clothes / in the hotel sink.” This is a place where a cashier “won’t return your change / or smile.” And where strangers warn you “*don’t pull off the road.*”

In this post 9/11 America one does not tease: “*Mothers, do not name / your sons Mohammed.*” This is a time when American Muslims “do not joke anymore.” They do not joke about “anything.”

Ahmed has a talent for visual language, but several of the poems, such as “Clepsydra” and “Lightning,” which appear in the section devoted to Ohio and childhood, strike me as weaker than the rest. There is a fragmentation to the book which moves from contemplation of paintings by Picasso to the gardening of flowers to the more interesting exploration of her American and Bangladeshi identity. These disparate subjects did not quite make for a cohesive whole. While this might be reflective of the fragmented semblance of contemporary globalism, emotionally I felt the book needed more of a core. The formal skill though is without question very accomplished and in time I think Ahmed will find her own narrative focus.

—Walter R. Holland

Brian Barker. *The Black Ocean*. Southern Illinois UP, 2011.

Brian Barker’s *The Black Ocean* is dedicated to his wife, Nicky Beer, who, Barker writes, “sings to me in the dark.” Barker extends the favor, singing to his readers and fellow witnesses of the ends of worlds, while guiding us through darkness as vast and interconnected as our oceans. Not unlike Dante’s trip through *Inferno*, Barker’s tour covers a variety of

conceptions of suffering, but in Barker's work hell is on earth, dressed as intricately imagined apocalyptic eventualities. Like Dante, Barker writes toward redemption, but the morality Barker rows us toward is the ethics of looking closely at what we want most to ignore.

The unsettling effect of the book isn't chiefly due to the topics addressed: impending and poorly handled natural disasters, conflicts between American Indians and settlers of North America, displacement and disfigurement caused by the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster, drug abuse, torture, and racism. What is more unsettling is Barker's gift for presenting his wild imaginings such that they simultaneously astonish and resonate, such as "resurrection at the back of the throat like chocolate or motor oil," "as if a Ferris wheel churned / inside the cement wall," "your cries like feedback trapped inside a syringe, / buzzing through my disembodied voice," and "a whole century like a ship on fire." Barker's visions are conclusions arrived at by riding logic's back through the squirreliest passages. The way is gilded with our guilt, powered by our fear, and redeemed by the beauty beheld by holding our eyes open in what we might have taken to be absolute darkness.

The strongest piece in the collection is the last, "A Brief Oral Account of Torture Pulled Down Out of the Wind," comprised of six sections, each told in a different voice. By approaching the topic of torture from various perspectives that only he could devise, Barker allows us to touch and be touched by subject matter with cells not yet deadened or neutralized. For example, in "What the Prisoner Whispers into the Ears of the Sleepers," the reader is invited to suspend entanglement in the usual rational arguments about political loopholes, corrupt systems, blame, and scapegoats that often accompany our engagement with incidents surrounding Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. This poem will commandeer its readers' mental pathways, flood them with remembrance that each of us is a potential beacon, that others see our lights even when we don't mean to shine them:

once in the beginning I dreamt of you
surging over the hill singing your voices
welded the air together in the air

you were defiant and mysterious
you were a crush of candlelight at the gates.

Barker does his best to wake us up, but not with a slug or a splash of cold water. He offers lullabies to soothe us awake.

Some of *The Black Ocean's* most beautiful poems are the five members of the Last Night on Earth series that are interspersed throughout the book. Poems like "Lullaby for the Last Night on Earth" are as sweet and whimsical as they are sad and arresting and offer respite from some of the book's more alienating visions of ends. For example, in "Lullaby for the Last Night on Earth," we see a house "go down like a zeppelin of bricks," a displacement that sets a couple walking "the train tracks to the sea." While theirs is a futile walk, it isn't a lonely one. There is an end in good company, accompanied by the singing of "that song where a mountain falls / in love with an octopus." Though we can imagine the train tracks lead the couple into the black ocean, an undeniably uninhabitable place, we are comforted by the fact that it was the mountain's destruction that introduced it to love: an octopus at the end of its fall.

Barker has gotten quite a bit of attention for the inventiveness of his metaphors, and he deserves it—Ronald Reagan's tongue is "a pale sea cucumber asleep in a cave" as a way of expressing his silence about the AIDS epidemic, and history is "the gash the bootheel left, / the gash language leaked out of." Naturally, with inventiveness comes risk and with risk comes danger. The danger in this book is that some minds will not be able to venture everywhere the writer does. In rare instances I am not able to "see" what Barker must be seeing and that I hope other readers are also able to see. For example, I don't know have a clear image for a river turning to "a long, crazed chessboard of dust" or for "the light raked loose / like salted slugs." While moments like these catapulted me from the delightfully disturbing worlds Barker created, I suppose the worst result is a momentary feeling of exclusion. Soon the force of the poems sucks me back in, and during the lulls in my days I work to concoct frames that will fill the gaps in my personal screening of the book.

Poet Prageeta Sharma once said in an interview, "I think poets need to hijack more things. . . . Matthew Barney should hire a poet to work with. We bring a lot more imagination to pieces." I agree with Sharma. People like Barney who are in need of acute creativity should line up outside of Barker's door, hoping to hire him or at least to catch some of the fizz from his salted slugs. I'd love to see a post-apocalyptic film in which Barker had a hand, but truthfully I hope he says no to Barney. More than more post-apocalyptic films, what the world needs is to hear more of Barker in his most pure form. His poetry is a "voice like an oar into the darkness."

—*Shira Richman*

Tina Chang. *Of God & Strangers*. Four Way Books, 2011.

Tina Chang's second poetry collection, *Of Gods & Strangers*, comes seven years after her first, and it is a long, densely packed, energetic and lyrical meditation on the power of the imagination in response to violence. By turns beautiful and horrific, hopeful and dark, *Of Gods & Strangers* is occasionally verbose; yet it succeeds when it is less mediated by the poet.

The mysterious and imaginative nature of the collection is set up immediately by the first poem, "Unfinished Book of Mortals." The poem features a variety of seemingly unrelated lines between which the reader cannot help but want to find connection, such as "VIII. During the last summer the lungs of the priests and / politicians had blossomed into a thin blue flame," "III. The noises were not human," and "III. His tongue pushed into the plush of mine and its difficult / bedding." If we take the title of the poem at its word, we might see each numeral as representing some essential element of a single person's existence or experience, each one existing in a long and unending line of human beings. Or perhaps, given the sharp imagery and lyrical nature of many of the "entries," each one is a photo in an eternal book documenting human triumph and suffering. Regardless, the lovely confusion of each entry, a confusion that might push a reader away, belies an intimate tone that extends throughout the book and invites the reader into the confidence of many of the poems' speakers.

The first half of the collection exudes energy and speed, and it flies by quickly, with a number of poems utilizing a variety of line and stanza lengths. Chang also uses a combination of short and long sentences that consistently promote a quick reading speed and also suggest logic at the grammatical/sentence level that is at times in contrast to the surreal and shocking images of the poems. For example, in "Toward Divinity," we get the lines

I made this world for Myself so when
the waters came, I laid my face down
to the sand. Nights like this, diamonds
melt. Glaciers shift and sink.
I'm up all night pulling levers, filling
buckets and poking pinpricks in the sky
with scissors. Let the hail come.

As one reads the lines, the images pile upon each other and merge, yet the careful pacing of the lines and the sentence units allow each image to remain in the reader's mind for a moment before moving on, thus avoiding the problem of jumbled or forgotten images. Varied sentence lengths give the reader a sense of speech, and build credibility for her measured voice.

Yet Chang also knows when to abandon the "correct" construction of sentences and punctuation for dramatic effect, or to blend form and content. In "The Empress Dreams After a Poisoned Meal," it's the lack of punctuation that reinforces the dream-like qualities and movements of the poem:

A pomegranate ruptured in my sleep, stains
under my fingernails and on my ghost gown
when I rose my maid played the music of my tragic
birth I miss my husband's summoning harmony
swirling I am always alone Documents
confirm I had many different names and official
stamps that said I was born I exhale smoke
signals through a haze A throat raw from yawning
feet bruised from tripping through the green maze

Here the lack of punctuation serves a concrete purpose in that the confusion it creates in the poem mirrors the surreal nature of the Empress's dream world. The capital letters that we know denote a new sentence and a new thought are still there, yet the lack of punctuation causes the reader to read over the pauses, trip up as he reads, and attend more closely to the words. One supposes a lack of punctuation would invite a faster read, yet the extra spaces and capital letters thwart those attempts, slowing time down for the reader. The sentence, like the dream world, retains elements of order, yet other barriers are gone, allowing for new images, interpretations, and meanings to arise from the subtraction of these barriers.

But there are moments in the poems where certain word choices or devices show through and break the spell for the reader, taking them out of the poem with a clichéd image or flat language. In "Wild Invention," for example, we learn that "The sun / emerged over the mountain like a heart / flayed open with a light in the middle." Here the heart being flayed open, an admittedly intriguing and visceral image, is dulled by the bland image of the sun rising over a mountain on one side, and the expected image of the flayed heart containing a light on the other side. A different sort of imagistic/linguistic problem affects "Substantial," which begins

“If I try to tell the truth, parachutes the size of fists / rain down in a territory in which they are not welcome.” While the reader may value an unexpected metaphor, the comparison here between fists and parachutes seems too incongruous.

A good metaphor should intrigue the reader enough to remember it as they move through the poem, but not confuse them so much that they stop abruptly and try to picture the comparison being made, which is what happens here. Add to this problematic imagery the proper, dry language of the first two lines and the poem never really recovers or lifts off. These are small samples, and while there are a number of other instances where particular images and poems fall flat and undefined, much of the collection retains the evocative imagery and humming energy of the early poems. But when those less successful poems arrive they tend to stick out, and at 100 pages this reader was at times left wondering if the collection as a whole couldn't have been trimmed to focus that energy and avoid the bumps.

Nevertheless, the collection ends on a high note, with a poem vastly different in structure and physical space than what has come before, and perhaps points in the direction Chang's work is heading. This poem, “Strange God,” features copious line breaks, stanza breaks and caesura, all of which offer both the energetic image accrual of the earlier poems, while granting the reader a slightly more measured reading pace:

The crow flying over the green lawn is not an omen

but a force of opposites,

my longing moves

along in degrees.

Back in the city

when you touched me, water fell out of a faucet + filled

a glass that balanced under the opening.

Father + Strange God, over the rooftop the cardinals are dressed in fog.

The birds have been rummaging in my breastbone

hard at work, searching for meat.

After the previous 90 pages of mostly dense lines and stanzas, the space given to this poem feels truly fresh and original, and really allows the reader the chance to absorb the achingly beautiful images, which are quite successful at building emotion, tension and atmosphere. The looser lines and spacing seem to bring out a looseness of description in the poet as well, and the poem relies on the inherent power and resonance of the language and images to move the reader and make meaning, rather than an editorial voice. Ultimately, “Strange God” reveals Chang at her best in this mixed, interesting, and often exciting collection.

—Nick DePascal

W.S. Di Piero. *Nitro Nights*. Copper Canyon Press, 2011.

For the epigraph to his new book, W.S. Di Piero chose the final lines of a strange and passionate poem that William Carlos Williams wrote about the Sacco and Vanzetti case called “Impromptu: The Suckers.” Williams was clearly among those who thought that the two Italian anarchists were framed, punished for political reasons and not because they were guilty. His poem concludes: “No one / can understand what makes the present age / what it is. They are mystified by certain / insistences.” Di Piero grew up in an Italian immigrant family in Philadelphia, so the most famous American trial involving Italian immigrants strikes a chord with him, I imagine; but his choice of those lines brings them forcefully into the contemporary arena too, inasmuch as they stand on their own as a criticism of contemporary life. Those “insistences” are Di Piero’s primary subject, and their inexplicability is everywhere to be found in his work.

The poems in *Nitro Nights* take many forms, from the conventionality of sonnets at one extreme to the ragged vernacular of the prose poem at the other. Poetry, for him, means “to stay in motion” like a dancer. “Who wants poetry like freeze-dried coffee?” he asks in “Dancing in the Dark.” “Poets, keep it close, loose, sweaty,” he advises, like a sexy dance. The poems are keenly dependent on sense experience. At times they seem to race paratactically from one sense datum to the next, the visual being perhaps the primary focus, without any formal beginning or ending. The poem “*Nitro Night*” is the most extreme example of this way of writing, with its somewhat uncontrolled energy yielding one observation after another as the poet stands waiting in a bus station. He

worries in another poem that “we’re all dummies speaking an unconscious that owns us,” and more than one poem consists of a single sentence, as though pausing for breath or punctuation might bring the inspiration to an abrupt end. Di Piero alludes in the opening poem (“Only in Things”) to Williams’s famous dictum (“No ideas but in things”), and there is an endless barrage of things in his poetry:

Explosions, dust, families covering outside houses that look like broken crockery, men in streets with casual rifles at their sides looking over their shoulders at the camera...

Or again, from “Having My Cards Read”:

Hoboes wail a garbage can against
the cyclone links. The monkey puzzle tree
droops its scaly tails above our heads
as she sets up near the zoo’s bonobos,
humping happy in their cages close
to chimps ripping off each other’s ears.
And in the cloud reposing on the sky,
cut by an F-22’s long hookah puffs,
the cyan atmospheric rapture into
solarized platelets: her Ray-Bans foil
my own face back at me

If this sort of writing sometimes fails to be little more than description for its own sake, or perhaps more archly, description as a sort of offbeat Protestant theology (unmediated connection to the radiant particulars that form the world), Di Piero’s sense of line and music usually help to turn undifferentiated quotidian experience into poetry. The subject of “Only in Things” is not just the Williamsesque dictum, but the very issue of how we deal with the world’s cascading sensorium:

Some days, who can stare at swathes of sky,
leafage and bad-complected whale-gray streets,
tailpipes and smokestacks orating sepia exhaust,
or the smaller enthusiasms of pistil and mailbox key,
and not weep for the world’s darks on lights, lights on darks,
how its halftones stay unchanged in their changings,
or how turning wheels and wind-trash and revolving doors
weave us into wakefulness or dump us into distraction?
This constant stream of qualia we feel in our stomachs.

Di Piero goes on to suggest that the world and the person are in a deeply reciprocal relationship, and that reciprocity is expressed here in beautifully imagined language, full of the music of vowels and of alliterative connections.

Sometimes Di Piero tries to impose order on the particulars in a way that seems foreign to his usual relish for their frenzy, through rhyme and meter. “April” is such a poem, with its open admission that the senses can bring distress to the heart and that “leafy trees and wisteria” bespeak emptiness at times. “April” has the formal characteristics and the thematic contradictions of a madrigal, indulgent yet suspicious of indulgence, closely controlled formal qualities, demotic language working together with a more buttoned-up diction:

It isn't good to have too much.
Good lies, I tell myself, in having less.
The rain that cuts the sun's dense rays,
a look that feels too much like touch
in too many places, the heart's fine distress
that perfume brings, or sight, or taste.

I wake and have to check my haste
to suck her juices, his love, their faith,
taking what I know they won't offer,
the leafy trees and wisteria like wraiths...
Love and touch shouldn't take such effort
this season, when nothing goes to waste.

This is finely accomplished in its way, but the pun adumbrated in the second line (good lies he tells himself, in the other sense of the words) seems apposite: what is finely wrought feels somehow less authentic than when Di Piero willingly goes with the flow, what he refers to in a strange love poem called “New Endymion” as the “alarming manic frequency” of desire. In its openness to what happens, and how things connect, a poem entitled “Renovations,” for example, is more typical. Here Di Piero willingly adjusts to the varying impositions of events in the world and in his consciousness, from an aria in Act II of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (“The heart that is nourished by the hope of love / has no need of better food,” lines he does not actually quote), to the ugly face of a neighborhood dog, to the several house renovations taking place all around him. These things “keep us,” he says, that is, they are the things our lives depend on.

W.S. Di Piero won the Ruth Lilly Prize from The Poetry Foundation this year. It is one of the most prestigious (and richest, at \$100,000) prizes for a poet in the world. His depth of imagination and fine ear together mark him as a highly accomplished poet, and well deserving of such an honor.

—Bruce Whiteman

Elaine Equi. *Click and Clone*. Coffee House Press, 2011.

If, as Kenneth Koch has said, Wallace Stevens throws parties for philosophical ideas, then in her most recent collection, *Click and Clone*, Elaine Equi hosts a cocktail hour for them, inviting all the former badasses over for wine, cheese, and a nice chat about the latest *Huffington Post* articles. Having moved to New York from the Chicago poetry and punk rock scene in 1988, Equi lends an authentically tough and witty voice to her speakers. In this, her twelfth collection, Equi becomes a version of Wallace Stevens filtered through a New York minimalist lens. However, it is this lens that makes these poems infuriating, often delightfully so.

In a recent interview in *Guernica*, Equi says, “I never liked the philosophy that you can have everything and be everything and that something is wrong if you don’t want that.” Yet in this collection her poetics seem to be trying to have everything and be everything whether she wants them to or not. Equi’s work has always been full of witty, associative leaps of various levels of direct explication. However, it feels as if *Click and Clone* does a bit more handholding of the reader than previous collections. Although her 1994 book *Decoy*, also from Coffeehouse Press, includes poems such as “Dear Michael” which forcefully guide the reader’s eye with the directness of lines such as “The real / is looser / than the hyper-real” and “Domesticity, / that’s what my dream / was about,” *Click and Clone* takes it up a notch. The best example is the ending of the short poem “Bacchus”:

Later, I’m trying to sleep (in the dream!)
and a guy with grapes on his head keeps
jumping on the bed. I start to snarl at him,
but then I’m like “Oh, I get it—you’re Bacchus.”

The way this poem incorporates verbal gamboling and colloquial diction

with historical and popular figures would verge on being called ultra-talk if not for her minimalist impulses keeping the poem to a sparse seven lines.

Another example is the longer prose poem “Transport” in which the speaker observes, about Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, “He is the next step in the disappearing spiral staircase of the novel’s evolution” and “When we die, it’s not our family that waits to greet us, but our favorite songs.” While I find these poems interesting and engaging, they lack the breathtaking imagism which distinguishes some of the strongest poems in the collection.

In the thirty-four part poem “A Bowl of Snow,” Equi leads the reader in a paper schottische of imagistic glides and hops. We move with her from “zombies out on a cakewalk” to “midnight in the church of face-to-face” without losing a step and delight in the shift from “There is a door in this wine that leads straight to summer” to “A premonition of peach.” Because of these moments, we are allowed to experience the more direct statements, such as “Magic makes visible what’s already there” and “Pictures can cure us of words,” in a way that “Bacchus” and “Transport” do not allow. Our hearts come along with our minds.

Sometimes the poems in *Click and Clone* get the blending of image and explication so right that I, as a woman living in the postmodern fragmented landscape Equi so skillfully describes, can’t help but use them as my Facebook status updates and try to start a revolution of wit and acumen from my desktop. One such moment comes near the beginning of “A Guide to the Cinema Tarot,” a poem which responds to stills from different mid-20th Century films in each of its thirty-two sections of mystichat lines (a voice which is part mystical insight and part pop culture gossip rag). The section entitled “#4 The Girl Can’t Help It” is, for me, the most powerful one since it allows Equi’s oft-noted sense of humor to shine:

Marilyn Monroe wasn’t Jean Harlow.
Jayne Mansfield wasn’t Marilyn Monroe.
Anna Nicole Smith wasn’t Jayne Mansfield.
Thankfully, there is only one Britney Spears.

As in much of the collection, “#4 The Girl Can’t Help It” explores and challenges the feelings of alienation and disposability that have become synonymous with life in the digital age, ending on the tongue-in-check call to action of “within you there does reside an unhappy blonde / archetype with enormous breasts. / It is her you need to contact.”

While this collection does not add much new to the philosophical discussions on post-modernity, it doesn't need to since, as poet and critic Randall Jarrell says in his "Reflections on Wallace Stevens," "the last demand that we make of philosophy (that it be interesting), is the first we make of poetry." In this aspect, *Click and Clone* certainly delivers. Equi's wry, witty voice steals the show and I would go to any party she throws, even if an over-abundance of direct explication and simplification within the poems makes my flyover soul feel a little condescended to.

—Jennifer Schomburg Kanke

Gerry LaFemina. *Vanishing Horizon*. Anhinga Press, 2011.

In poems that reference works as diverse as *Moby Dick* and The Clash's *London Calling*, Gerry LaFemina's *Vanishing Horizon* records one man's life of restless wandering. This is no heroic *Odyssey*, however, and there's no Penelope waiting. Favorite haunts include both urban landscapes in New York City and lush beaches in the Caribbean islands. Gritty images abound, but interspersed among LaFemina's narratives of disconnect are lyric odes to an assortment of succulent fruits: papaya, pineapple, mango—and one quite different, the manchineel apple, said to blister and burn the skin. "Yes, it's paradise," the one-toothed tour guide says of beautiful St. John Island, "but what fruit was it in Eden? That's simple. Was death apple. Death apple."

And there's the rub. There is sweetness in life, but it's bound up in something bitter: change, loss, and the death of every living thing in its turn. The opening poem, "Returning Home in the MG Before Dawn," recalls a friend who stares at an old saxophone, imagining "the reedy echo of song / lodged in its long esophagus." The beauty of a saxophone and the soothing calm of conscious breathing are images repeated throughout this volume, but they are juxtaposed with stark realities:

Imagine that song is a hymn.

Imagine it is sung by a famished cat on the front porch. . . .

How soon I return to the rind of this world—

Dark cats, spiders, bats, and crows thread through this volume. The lived reality seems to be that neither love nor remembered music brings a lost soul home.

LaFemina's perspectives may emerge from his unique background. A prolific writer, he's a lapsed Catholic, a man inclined to look for signs and meaning. He was also for years a singer in punk and ska bands, groups whose aesthetic combines the energy of pared-down rock with an utter rejection of sentiment and sometimes a strident nihilism—even if only a pose meant to wake up conformist cultures. LaFemina may now be exploring a Buddhist approach, but it's tricky, as "Zen Relativity" attests. The speaker lists objects before him, which he wants to see in their simple, everyday reality:

my cat asleep on the softest spot she could find—
a basket of clean laundry, jeans & shirts stacked high;
mint tea in its Japanese pot, steeping

two cups patient . . . Lester Young's saxophone unraveling
in another room. Voltaire's collected letters dog-eared to

"On Infinity & Chronology."

That random glance brings intruding thought: "What is time," he wonders, losing track of the tea and cat, "if not a way to create some hierarchy / of trespasses & forgiveness?" The language is telling. In the world of these poems, *sin* is a given. God makes appearances, but without capitalization:

For some, god's a pillar of cloud in the desert; for some,
god's the mystery of relativity,
that equation where time slows nearer the speed of light

I pour the tea. In its dissipating steam,
the sublime or something like it.

"Something like it," but never quite. Two cups of steaming, *almost breathing*, tea—suggests the presence of a lover. Perhaps that's as good as it gets.

LaFemina's protagonist is a doubter, but he is not judgmental about our human urge to uncover meaning. "Although I've Stopped Believing in Miracles" includes a sympathetic treatment of Brooklyn crowds who gather "at an underpass . . . where a water stain is said to resemble the Virgin Mary." In "No Omen," however, the narrator lectures himself

about his urge to interpret when he finds a crow accidentally trapped in his office:

There was that time
I locked myself in three cord punk rock
the singers angry & angrier—

How they cawed & cawed.

That long late August my heart was a crow. No:
those weeks my heart felt like it had been pecked out.
There was a girl,
of course, & music . . .

Humility replaces righteous anger, and “this crow is just a crow: I won’t pretend it showed up here / to teach me something, won’t look for meaning / in all its magnificent fury, / for how can I understand the wisdom of crows?” He releases the bird, recalling photos of his “old self, hair dyed jet, gelled back, my arm / around the waist of a young woman who already looks away.”

Why she, like others, always leaves is something of a mystery, and that no explanation emerges is perhaps a flaw in these subtly crafted poems. In one, we learn a girl the narrator “loved then committed suicide & another / was born again”—and presumably left. Such departures seem predictable for a conflicted figure who “says *I love you*,” to his current companion “& hopes he means it,” who “is like any of us in the face of that overwhelming.” A failure of belief in the possibility of love (human or divine) may be exactly the “sin” repeatedly referenced.

“Cooking Italian” takes us back to the sensory realm, to cooking veggies “hot / with olive oil infused with garlic.” The meal is prepared during “Frances’s service . . . nearly 700 miles from where her remains were scattered.” We don’t know why the speaker is not attending, but we learn about Frances and what this meal means:

Eating should be like being in love, she advised
There was wine & water, surely, on the table
though the house was empty of even a chance
of transubstantiation.

I thought of those monks
in scarlet garb stepping on hot coals
& of the woman I believed I loved,

then forked more of that spicy pulp into my mouth.

We're left with the speaker's decision to taste and enjoy—but, ironically, it's in toast to a dead woman, possibly even a suicide.

"Lullaby for My Mother" may provide some clarification. As a boy, the speaker is caught raiding the ice box because of "the hunger that always haunted me / the way she was haunted by her anger." Even after the King and Kennedy assassinations, "my mother held hope, but then my father left & and loneliness / became a horizon—long & impossible to get beyond." Three children sit at dinner with the abandoned woman, the "chicken slightly burnt & dry with Shake-N-Bake" that "they all agreed—what else could we say—tasted delicious." No luscious fruit, no spicy vegetables at that sad table.

"Poem Composed in the Alphabet of Bats" contains a riveting confession. Unable to sleep, the speaker detects the sound of bats: "Come sun up // they'll have merged with whatever darkness they can find // the way I once hoped to vanish / into music: in power chords from a pawn-shop Telecaster or into the full exhalation of a tenor saxophone." Beside him, a woman sleeps soundly:

I want to walk into rain & be gone. I want
to hide in the crevice of her sleep breath
& doze there, but the sun will expose me either way

the way childhood's books revealed
the secrets of sleight-of-hand.

Despite myself, I swallow when the swords are thrust through.

To actually *swallow*—that is, to "fall for" the possibility of love instead of holding back the impulse—results in nothing but injury and pain. Likewise, to insist on meaning seems to invite disaster. In "Perspective, St. Thomas, USVI," the speaker's identification with Melville's doomed captain is clear. Reading on the beach, he sees "my woman, an infrequent iguana, Ahab / pacing the Pequod's deck: the great whale unreach- / able always, like the sublime in the end, no matter/how many prayers, no matter the hours meditating."

Yet even doomed souls manage moments of transcendence. One is suggested in the lovely "Poem Found Among Scraps in a Lower East Side

Gutter.” The speaker recalls the music of Tito Puente, played by a radio station for 24 hours after his death:

Few people listened, though
it’s easy to imagine some lovers tuned in,
fucking with each song until, at the moment
when both of them seem to levitate,

they called each other’s name & called to god &
so attested to the divinity of that moment.

And just outside the window, a homeless man dances down the street, headphones clamped over his ears, a cord dangling, listening to who knows what. It’s a uniquely contemporary image but calls to mind Keats’ famous lines: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter.” LaFemina adds, “Whatever beat // he hears, he moves as if through water, but gracefully—even the drivers who pass him hesitantly turn / their heads for one last look.” Later, some will swear they know him: “a high school chum, perhaps, / or one cousin’s distant gaze / as in a family photo from when we were children.” The vagrant, part holy fool, is recognized, most likely as an aspect of our deepest selves, each lost, each listening to his own imagined music.

The final poems are especially beautiful. In “The Silence That Follows,” a man recalls a former love as he “eats Michigan cherries from a brown paper bag” (the image seems borrowed from W. C. Williams). Suddenly he hears an ambulance and behind it “a car full of prayers.” A fellow spirit is about to depart this world:

In the silence that follows
I might hear the river only a block away:
a quick splash of something crossing over to the near shore.

In “Train Whistle Far from Town, Approaching,” the speaker wanders a stretch of track and spies the neck of a bottle, “deep green and brilliant,” jagged, but shining as if lit from within. Down the line, boxcars carry hobos “who have forsaken jobs cashiering gas stations, / & heartache . . . traded them for metronomic / rail wheels.” The rhythmic sounds, like lyric poems, bring comfort, and the narrator imagines the riders:

[They’re] carousing while they warm their hands
in the glow of green glass, & beneath that joy

the undeniable silence

that marks despair. In spite of myself
I want to call to them
believing, finally, I have found my people.

Anyone who reads this book will realize they also have found a friend in Gerry LaFemina. He's gentle but unsentimental, musical but edgy as a piece of broken glass. He's a poet of and for the world today.

—Carol Niederlander

Steve Fellner. *The Weary World Rejoices*. Marsh Hawk Press, 2011.

“To the gay men who spend their Friday nights lurking in the cyber chatroom”—so begins Steve Fellner’s poem “I am Known as Walt Whitman” that sets the tone of this collection. Fellner speaks to the chatroom generation of gay youth. He covers topics from crystal meth, clouds, psych wards, Miss Piggy, to the gay bashing of Matthew Shepard. His speech is sly and facetious. He takes on the political ineptitude of an American president at a summit with a Chinese President by producing a poem that is both ironic and banal. The banality of this American president’s comment “Russia is big and so is China” becomes the witty title of the poem and Fellner begins listing a series of non sequiturs that capture the vapid display of political discourse:

Monopoly is fun and so is strip poker,
The weather is nice and so is this iced tea.
Porcupine quills are sharp and so is that pair of scissors. Be careful, OK?
The baby across the aisle from you is loud and so is some rap music.

In another condescendingly witty poem, “Ode to My Friend who Recently Won a Prestigious Poetry Book Contest” Fellner captures perfectly the jealous tones of competitive writers:

Now you have a book. You will win even more
prizes and readings and the love of men
who bore you. Bookless, hopeless,
I will sit at home with my beloved, thinking of you

reading your poems
to the hum of your air conditioner, waiting
for the phone to ring, It will be
me congratulating you, secretly wanting

to tell you your life is now worth living
only as material for my poems.

Catching the exact sardonic tones and surrealism of Frank O'Hara, this voice moves with disarming humor. In a long prose poem written in collaboration with Phil E. Young called "Doctor's Note" a man is told that he is allergic to music and tries to struggle with the diagnosis. The doctor suggests substitutions for music in the same way synthetic rose in aerosol form is substituted for those who cannot tolerate the smell of flowers. The doctor recommends fabrications, which are "safe, fake, and nothing like the real thing." The doctor tells his patient:

... 'You will find enough to / pretend. Songs without music, stories without cadence, poems without / rhythm, beat, or open throat. Great humanitarian committees are / working in droves to produce such fabrications as we speak. In blue / ribbon batches, with only a minimal application fee. I understand there's / a whole cottage industry...'

There is a sly allusion here to the entire poetry industry and its blue ribbon panels with contests requiring only a minimal application fee as well as the current state of a world where "reality TV" stands in for real life experience.

The gay speaker of these poems establishes a gay identity from the beginning of this collection. "Globalization" covers the vicissitudes of growing up gay. The speaker quips in sixth grade of being a "Typical homosexual: / depressed, / no good at sports." He also tells us he was a straight A student, a "Gay overachiever." But rather than devolve into a typical confessional poem, the speaker speaks of his fascination with globes, starting his own collection of different sizes and colors and his mother's fascination with doll houses. At the end of the poem a goodbye gift of a snowglobe is shaken so hard by the speaker that the snow "no longer churned. / All I had were the chips, a trick / gone wrong, a hoop with no hole."

Indeed the poems in this collection are somewhat like tricks gone wrong. There is a hollowness and a distrust of the beautiful or the metaphorical. A poem such as "Seven Seconds" ends with:

“I don’t believe in God
or metaphor,”
my mother says, sick, feeble.
“A splotch
is a splotch is a splotch.”

Body image becomes a realistic penchant of these poems as it is in gay culture. Again In “Seven Seconds” the speaker tells us:

Dozen years later, I am all
special effect
from bad horror film: blood-
shot eyes from drinking, ghost
white skin from hiding
from sunlight, stitches
in forehead from banging head
against walls
of holding rooms in psych ERs.

In “Ode to Promiscuity” the speaker tells us, in regards to a beautiful man who is pursuing him:

I had no idea why
he would spend time in the aisles
of a library following homely men
like myself.

Or the caustic lines in “Ode to the Gay Man who Claimed in his On-Line Personal that He wasn’t ‘into Mind Games’” in which the speaker takes on the identity of his dead lover to lure tricks on the internet. The speaker says of his dead lover: “He had the body other men would die for. That’s what he said in his personal. / Here’s another truth: Men die of disappointment when they see / my body. Once a man visited me thinking I was my boyfriend. And alive.”

Continuing with: “When he knocked on the door, I answered and then he stared at me / like I should have been someone else. He looked so disappointed. / ‘Don’t be a baby,’ I wanted to say. ‘I go through that every day.’”

“And later when the trick says ‘Not what I expected. / But good enough.’”

This sense of disappointment underscores the bulk of these poems which serve up pop culture and personal anecdote and follow the every-

day life dramas of a gay man who has lost a lover, is an insecure teacher, and struggles with the pursuit of his desires and body image.

In the most powerful poem of the collection, “Upon Imagining the Field where Matthew Shepard was Murdered,” the speaker takes us beyond the field where Shepard lay dead to a range of gay experiences where the hard work of reconciliation has already begun.

...Beyond the field

is a student disowned
by his family and deluded.

As I once was. He wants
and wants. For the words

to bring
what he never had

back. He does not need to know
yet

that the world shares his wish. Why
be cruel and tell him

he's nothing
special? Beyond the field is field.

Fellner's is an original voice, contemporary, pithy, and capable of both vulnerability as well as a heartless playful effrontery. His poems are conversational and have the offhanded style of Ginsberg and the playful veneer of O'Hara.

—Walter R. Holland

Lynnell Edwards. *Covet: Poems*. Red Hen Press, 2011.

Covet is Lynnell Edwards' third collection. Her predominantly domestic poems rely on the challenges and impingements of everyday life for their force, and that somewhat circumscribed world is limited formally by a circumspect sense of poetry's music. Certainly there are signals that

a larger and more challenging moral universe is out there somewhere beyond the poems. The turkey vultures that wheel over the mountains in the final poem in the book, for example, have access to “grace” and the “fall from” grace, and she summons up the Yeatsian word “gyres” to describe their high circling, as well as describing them as “angels.” Angels do not feed on carrion (as vultures do), so perhaps the poem is finally about the chain of being more than it is a metaphysical speculation. It focuses on description, as much of Edwards’ work does, and only hints at metaphor. Descriptive poetry demands that the poet be ever-present, and at the end of this poem, the implication is that it is only Edwards’ presence that focuses the suggestiveness of the flying birds: she verbalizes “what / they would sing to us / if they could.” That’s what poetry does, one might say, while wishing for a deeper apprehension of the totemic reality of the natural world.

Covet begins with a kind of prefatory poem, an unrhymed sonnet, placed before the epigraph (from Rilke), that establishes the central theme of desire. The poet sneaks a leaf from a public garden by placing it between the leaves of a book, and later wonders about its qualities (“what bitter tincture, healing poultice / from its crush and burn”). She seems to say that her covetousness is itself the cause of the leaf’s death, a truism whose greater implications one might be inclined to resist. (Wilde’s line “Each man kills the thing he loves” is evoked by her concluding words, “the now dead thing that I did covet”). Her choice of the word “confess” in the twelfth line (“know I must confess”) inevitably makes one think of the tenth commandment, and an earlier phrase, “fabled wound,” with its suggestive pointing at the Parsifal story and Amfortas’ wound, enriches this religious context. Poems in the book with titles such as “Advent Story,” “Easter Monday,” and “Prodigal,” acknowledge a Christian presence without overemphasizing it. A poem about a visit to Bermuda that Thomas Merton made as a boy, long before he became a priest, flirts with a spiritual vocabulary (sacrifice, vocation, holy, eternal, grace) but is mainly about the high spirits of a young man. The Rilke quotation used as an epigraph characterizes the passage of a year as having “fear and prayer and shape,” so perhaps this coalescent rather than coherent Christian backdrop constitutes prayer’s presence in the poems.

Certainly fear is a presence too. In a piece entitled “Severe Warning,” the poet walks outside into a beautiful late afternoon, having just heard “severe weather / threats” on the radio or television. She stands there “waiting for the sirens” (presumably tornado warnings rather than any Homeric presence) in a kind of symbolic portrait moment. More than

one poem embodies fear for her children, a fear which can easily transform itself into nightmare:

The five-day forecast
is for flood, earthquake, cataclysm
of locust, reptile, salt, apocalypse
of end time, and you wearing only
your favorite t-shirt and sandals,
flying low, just ahead of the avalanche.

Edwards' fear includes the unpredictable, something unforeseen like the erratic behavior of a bird getting into her attic writing room. She likens its flutterings to jazz, which she then acknowledges she hates. Its "chromatic finish...abandons me," she writes in "Bird," "chirping on the sill," and although she manages to free the bird, she is left with her fear and her "reluctance to face the music." In the first of a suite of poems that with "Cantharis Aura," the turkey vulture poem, conclude the book ("Suite for Red River Gorge"), she contemplates a lovers' leap and admits that nothing could incline her even to come close to its edge, much less to "pitch" herself "to mismatched bliss."

I breathe in, check my step,
make a mute and final pledge:
The rush and skip of my erratic heart?
This swan dive of desire?
I will take it to the grave.

Taking a death wish to the grave is a curiously ironic determination indeed, but Edwards acknowledges in the second poem of her "Suite" that there is "no good way out." She means literally out of "Hell's Kitchen" on the Red River Gorge in Kentucky (her home state), but the metaphorical inference is patent:

There is no good way out—
deep water ahead, a sheer sandstone face
insisting on either side, only the same
stony road of good intentions.

Perhaps invoking a bromide is not the best way to end a poem, but in fact "good intentions" might be read as a central phrase in *Covet*. Good intentions help to address the fears of everyday life, like it or not.

The last of Rilke's triad of attributes, shape, plays a crucial role in Edwards' poems as well. She has a good ear, and although she never strives for a highly individual voice or verbal fireworks, her poems do have a discernible music of their own, and her dependence on conventional poetic techniques rarely seems old-fashioned. One admires the music of lines like "of two pitched to misplaced bliss," "mark its slow decline behind / treeline," "at dawn like early frost on dark hills," or "track the tilt and stutter of its head." These examples may constitute "old time music" (to borrow part of the title of one of her poems), but their beauty is crucial to the way that she quietly addresses her world, a world on which nothing political or social ever seems to impinge, but which seems usefully representative of the life of quiet inspiration the expression of which is one of poetry's strengths. Edwards uses the sonnet (twice) and the villanelle (once), but largely eschews rhyme in favor of a close attention to the music of vowels and harder sounds:

Bad
signage, a backtracked trail, then
bushwacking down a steep pitch,
pine-needle slick, to frenzied shallows
where sandstone shoulders hunch
above a boggy shore.

Not all of the poems in this book reach that height of attention, but it is clear from such examples that Lynnell Edwards is a poet of substantial gifts.

—Bruce Whiteman

Alice Friman. *Vinculum*. Louisiana State UP, 2011.

In the title poem of Alice Friman's recent volume, she provides one version of the significance of "vinculum": a mother, addressing her adult son, commands "Do not look at me again like that":

The look, umbilical—that cord I thought discarded
in some hospital bin some fifty years ago come November,

and she goes on to explore the ineradicable, ineluctable emotional ties that remain, all too much like the "rope that seethed / from me to you

and back again.” Umbilical cord, mother-son bonds, shared consciousness, the ties that bind, the eternal link that adult consciousness and reticence cannot obliterate nor forget. Among the many things celebrated in Friman’s poetry, love as connection, love as agent of continuation, persistence, ennoblement of desire—love is the primary vinculum and possibly the only survivor in the contest with death.

It’s fair to say that nearly every poem in this substantial collection relates in some way to one or another version of “vinculum”—as a connecting line, as a protective link, as a restraining ligament, as a lifeline, as bodies bonded in sexual ecstasy. And beyond, as a poet confronting aging—the loss of parents, of a spouse, of friends—the constant question of whether those bonds may continue in the senses, in consciousness. A wife speaks of her deceased husband:

This poem is about a bed and a chair, about a pair of shoes, and a body
I knew better than my own, the husband’s
body my body has forgot.

[...]

This is about

what happens to what you can’t remember
because the mind’s job is to save your life—
cauterizing, cutting it out.

Love, aging, death and loss, are vincula among us all, and Friman finds ways of thinking about them all in her walks in the woods, in visits to Holocaust sites in Europe, in memories of her early explorations of her sexuality. So many of these poems take place in the woods—specifically in Bernheim Forest, an arboretum in Kentucky, as well as locations in Indiana and Massachusetts—that the colors of leaves and plants recur—green in spring and summer, supplanted by oranges, reds, and browns as the seasons progress through autumn, spurring consciousness of age and decay, though not often depression nor resignation. In “*Arx Poetica In Green*,” the green place in a green time offers opportunities for wit and humor as well as contemplation of the power of sex and its association with leafy tunnels:

I walk a woods deep as Dante’s Error.

A path, abandoned by sun, green as toad
in the shade of the mandrake. A tunnel
of green time. I, the only traveler.

Both solemn and jokey, this trip through “Woo room, green vagina, / tube of love” provides an encounter with copulating beetles, unmoving and oblivious to the poet’s presence, “two mere bugs can provide / all brightness necessary,” and as is characteristic of Friman’s associative humor, the beetles, “screwed to the sticking place,” evoke allusively “Masaccio’s Peter / standing still as paint on a wall,” and their stasis reminds of:

a whole world’s weight or wish hammered into
gesture like Keats’s marathon of swains
hot-footing it around an urn, playing
puckerlips, forever stiff in Wedgwood.

Friman celebrates desire—no cold pastoral for her—and takes the trouble in “Leonardo’s Roses” to correct da Vinci’s misconceived notion that “sperm comes down from the brain / through a channel in the spine,” asserting that

sperm, like any seed, travels up,
makes an explosion in the brain
leaving a scent of crushed flowers
in the memory. On such a trellis
true love might climb.

Never sentimental, though often deeply emotional, Friman uses her wit and her facility for striking metaphor to fend off all easy tears. If tears come, they are hard-earned and weighty. But the easy flow of her lines, her familiar music—conversational and lyrical by turns—guides the reader through deft and clever variations on the small set of themes she explores in these poems. The boundaries are unlimited, in that we know the former—“I love and have loved, I desire, I have been young but now I grow old, time passes, life decays and is renewed, we humans are bound together by vincula we may not even notice.” They are also boring in the abstract, but linked with the sight and sound of leaves, green and rustling, brown and scraping or falling, linked with memories of mischief and discovery, of sexual exploration and experiment, fulfillment and loss. Indeed, they become vibrantly personal and paradoxically more universal, not limited to the abstract mind. In Friman’s poetic universe, limits inspire defi-

ance, just as loss inspires remembrance and recovery; “Waiting” begins with “Life isn’t long enough / to learn the patience necessary,” and concludes with:

Listen, the heart
wants what it wants. There’s no telling it
different. Look out the window.
The curtain rises, and stage left—see!
Spring enters singing forsythia, that aria
of yellow, that operatic bush.

And in “Design,” where she asserts “all my ghosts / are present and accounted for / and, it appears, happy” she concludes with a triumphant song:

Oh House of Shining Windows that is the sky,
of course they are happy. The stuff
that was Mama, soldier of scour and rag,

made queen in the royal army of clean-up.
While the pitbull that was my father
runs, vindicated at last, snarling,

nipping at the heels of thunder, pulling down rain.

With sexy jokes and joking allusions, Friman’s poems remind us of all that threatens us in life and of how important it is to brush aside the threats—not mindlessly or carelessly, but with the courage and confidence that life still offers rewards and solace—and using some of her favorite personification, her final lines in this volume suggest that even in a dreary November, “when light’s / absence squeezes the day from both ends”:

those leaves will look back, not on their spring
but on their final frippery, and what smug
joy it was. That defiance. That withering *Ha!*

—Thomas F. Dillingham

Carmen Giménez Smith. *The City She Was*. Center for Literary Publishing, 2011.

Perhaps there's no better synecdoche for bohemia—urban, twenty-something, poor, unsettled and uncertain—than the Laundromat. In “Pageant of Scrutiny,” from Carmen Giménez Smith's second full-length collection of poems, *The City She Was*, the speaker is watched by and then remembers watching others in such a place. If we consider the freedom associated with a such a temporary and transient community, on the one hand, and the anonymous, judgmental stares of other customers—I assume the speaker is a woman, the others older women—as well as the public display of soiled women's undergarments, we have the bulls-eye of the poem's moment: in a coin operated washer/dryer establishment, an empty space (the owners always absent) in the middle of the workday reserved for starving artists and the domestic working class alike:

...I'm the one who used to look in the windows and say, she
just does it to herself because she's a sucker and the void has such a
 sexy pitch in his
voice. I used to wash my clothes in that place, took it wrapped in a
 sheet like a
corpse of want and discharge and worry. To alleviate ourselves of
 filth we moved
around the small hall of machines, banged at the change machine
 when the
monotony rage came on.

The use of the word “discharge” is particularly resonant here, with its various meanings—panty stains from bodily fluids, possibly sexually related; a marginalized, outcast person; there's even the possibility of recent institutional release. In any case, the speaker is rendered all the more vulnerable to judgment—or at least, which is worse, the sense that others are judging her. To be shiftless and unsettled—unmarried, that is—still registers differently for the sexes. For the speaker, there's a great sense of guilt and shame associated with this life-in-transition, a kind of monotonous “filth” she and the others must distract themselves from.

Although it makes no direct reference to the poem, *The City She Was* rings with this final line from James Tate's “Stella Maris”: “and only now do I look back on my darkest hour with nostalgia.” In Giménez Smith's collection, a recurring speaker (in my mind, a woman no longer in her twenties) recalls her former life—as a young artist drifting and lost in a

west coast city, San Francisco or thereabouts—from the vantage point of an older, probably wiser perspective, looking back on those dark and penniless days, only romantic from a safe distance, of poverty-stricken, directionless bohemia. (It's also in hindsight that one sees the real terror and confusion one faced back then.) Again and again, a city of pollution, labyrinths and blinded back streets meshes with, forms, and reflects a speaker's former inner self: where does the one end and the other begin? These are the first few lines from "Stockholm Syndrome":

The city's banishment is the hand where I sleep like a foundling.
Yellow streetlights bristle against the grid, and I quiver like an
obedient child.

I covet the stink of weed and funk in the hours before dawn—the
worst time
since it's cool and barbaric. Then it's that morning of brackish soup
of which I would eat gallons....

Here we see precisely that point where a lust for experience collides with the overwhelming and dangerous consequences of such an attraction in an embrace as alluring and potentially violent as sex. Later, in the same poem, the speaker notes, "Launched / into this world poor and blind, I got hooked on turmoil and it's been costly."

This last poem, like so many of the others, is also an intense exploration not only of gender, specifically female, but of the damaging effects of such a restricted and obsessive identity as it is constructed in this country. These issues arise in *Odalisque in Pieces*, Giménez Smith's first full-length collection. *The City She Was* continues this obsession—the possibility of selfhood beyond the brutally circumscribed and pre-constructed identities for women—and in fact wagers that there is no way outside of it: to be a woman writer in the US is still necessarily to write about (and only ever about) "Woman," an identity almost absolutely determined by the limited and popular (i.e. white, heteronormative, middle class) social constructions of the term. This is the merciless bind her poetry fearlessly confronts and adumbrates. In "Beauty Regimen," the speaker begins by stating, "[t]he bottles and tubes on my vanity / make my room a factory with no union. / I'm the scab, eager for a few nickels. / I build piecework in and around hangers" (20). There is no escape, no recourse from this "Regimen"—the title's wonderfully ambivalent term. Another charged word appears in the third verse: "Before bed I look at women's magazines / for myself, an old familiar *slice*" (my emphasis). Here the term brings to mind the still current and callous euphemism for sex

with a woman, a variation on “piece”—as in “He got himself a piece of ass”: “He got a slice.” But it’s also impossible not to hear the self-mutilating quality of the term—a young woman looking at these magazines, painfully reminded of her physical inadequacies, the pathological “ordinariness” of such self-torture, the “old” and “familiar slice.” And of course, “slice” also unsettles for its echo of a loaded term used in the first stanza: “I’m the *scab*...” Here the word turns away from its earlier context—a worker ignoring union strikes—and towards its excruciating and physical origin, the old wound this speaker obsessively picks.

A related poem, “Sometimes There’s a Virgin,” places the speaker among other non-virgins at a party at which the poem’s subject arrives: “Sometimes there’s a virgin in the room. / You make way for her light; she is / fountainhead... / When the virgin is in the room, our skirts / feel tarty...” After the virgin leaves the party she “...leaves her vibe behind, so we wait / for it to dissipate. Then we get nasty and high since / the virgin made us feel bad because we gave it up in high school. That’s just her course. It’s not our fault.” The last two sentences emanate confusion: “that’s just her course” sounds almost like, “that’s just her nature,” from which we would expect the next sentence to read, “It’s not *her* fault.” The effect is disorienting, this pronoun switch. But we remember that in previous lines, the speaker admits that she and her fellow non-virgins are badmouthing this (presumably) young woman, so perhaps the speaker here is trying to rid herself of the responsibility for her petty gossiping and backstabbing. But, finally, all the terms in the poem point back to the only and undying patriarchal origin of the word’s significance—virgin: untouched and, therefore, undamaged property, something for men to keep. It really *isn’t* the fault of the speaker and her friends. But for these non-virgins, there is no relief whatsoever in knowing they are not “at fault” here.

The City She Was also addresses another contemporary dilemma: many of the poems present a speaker who offers precise and accurate catalogues of an ever-allusive/-illusive material and electronic Popular Culture—with its self-referential and irony-thick mazes, its infinite hyper-links—that ultimately depletes the world of its meaning: as in a fountain where significance flashes briefly and immediately recedes. Or, as Nick Caraway says, imaging (The Great) Gatsby’s loss of his Dream, he now faced, “a new world, *material without being real*, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about” (my emphasis). Here are lines from “For About Five Minutes in the Aughts,” the opening poem of Giménez Smith’s book: “Drinking beer gave me panic, so whiskey. /

Divorce ephemera, safe doors and pre-midlife. I collected fancy pens / and *yeah, I'm working on an article about animé and Marxism.*" It might be tempting to dismiss these lines for their apparent subscription to that world of skeptical and clever twenty-something hipsters—all too prevalent in poetry today. Here, however, the speaker delivers these lines with bitter and caustic self-recrimination. This is an empty, ultimately terrifying space, one without intimacy, and peopled by defensively ungenerous young adults adrift and uncommitted—one tentative foot in academia, the other, outside in a world no less surreal—all of these people swirled in tides of glinting, insubstantial *Pop Culture*. The pasteboard props continuously crack open to expose the real void beneath. As the speaker says in "The Grand Tour":

The headboard's made of driftwood
and Xmas lights, and I just want to kiss
and smoke clove cigarettes like we used to.
Give me the hasty shower and the smell of Dr. Bronner's.

I want to be the thinking I invented last night,
But I've already run out of disguise.
Instead it's some amour, plush velvet,
some pretending to read Proust. We're propping
up the corpse of romantic love.

The speaker is thinking back to a place and time in which even this former self longed for a prior place and time: experience as an infinite backward and yearning glance, the present moment felt as empty in the hungover clarity of morning. But perhaps these lines also give us a better sense of Tate's lines, quoted earlier. The nostalgia for such a difficult time comes from the sense that one could at least invite and temporarily embrace the raw though tinsel-laden blank of experience—even as such an embrace sent the speaker reeling.

Like so many first-generation poets, poets whose parents are immigrants, Carmen Giménez Smith has an ear for the US-American idiom, what William Carlos Williams—another child of immigrants—implies in part by his title, *In the American Grain*. In her "Museum of Lost Acquaintance," the speaker says, "We'll wear matching Izods to Sadie's dance and French by the trophy case." Here is a poet who, in this case particularly, pays close attention to life in white, middle class suburbia, specifically to the words used so unconsciously by its denizens, and then gives a new and clarified shape to that life, a seamless face to those aspects of exis-

tence that were hitherto murky, inscrutable. Her work reminds us that no one seems to know and name the realm of centrality like those on the margins (of which there are, of course, many), that only someone used to being both inside *and* outside of that life develops ears and eyes sensitive enough to experience and then convey it—in all its frightening, dazzling clarity.

—Peter Ramos

Landon Godfrey. *Second-Skin Rhinestone-Spangled Nude Soufflé Chiffon Gown*. Cider Press Review, 2011.

Landon Godfrey's debut collection of poems, *Second-Skin Rhinestone-Spangled Nude Soufflé Chiffon Gown*, selected by David St. John as the winner of the Cider Press Review Book Award, is both decadent and austere, playful and grave. The book simultaneously embodies a bejeweled gown and the bare skin beneath it, as Godfrey contemplates the feeling of the body and its mortality from the first line to the last.

The collection opens with the title poem, which begins, "Tonight I will be sewn into it." With this line, Godfrey likens the gown of the title to both skin and the body itself. Images decorating this body include a "blonde bouffant," a "mink wrap," and a "left-cheek mole," bringing to light the many adornments making up our lives. Even more elemental images begin to seem like ornamentation, as in "Still Life with Red Silk Shoes and Perfume":

I wanted to own all of it, from the king's mink coat
to satiny heirloom roses decorating public gardens,
happy with the perfume crushed
on my fingertips.
Once in a while I told someone I was lonely
so I could practice dying.
And in the moment those lips touched my cheek
I felt like the earth kissed by a homesick traveler—
splendid in my borrowed costume of dirt and air.

The image of the speaker wearing a costume of dirt and air is both silly and unsettlingly morbid, bringing to mind, all at once, dress-up games, burial, and emptiness. This tension between the playful and the profound teases

readers' expectations, as we are disarmed by Godfrey's gracefully shifting moods.

Many of Godfrey's poems shift into the erotic, as in "Vole," a poem full of longing that closes with the lines "The monosyllabic body trembling, eager / to open the body of another," and the spare but deeply affecting poem "Interview: Antique Iron Bed," which ends, "And when I'm empty / I'm waiting," as if love were another adornment, put on to distract from loneliness or debilitation.

While *Second-Skin* confronts the inevitability of death, the collection is rich with vitality, savoring moments of happiness, however artificial or fleeting they may be. In the poem "Gins and Tonics, News and Yorks," a group of friends laughs and drinks, "glowing / in quick conversation that glistens / and weaves among eight or ten people." Godfrey's description of the conversation reminds us of the beautiful garments she stitches, and we know this feeling of belonging will not last, just as we know the gown will eventually fall away, leaving the speaker with her fears.

The feeling of isolation in the face of a crowd continues in "A Single Clap of Thunder Can Quite Literally Frighten a Shrew to Death," where a party screams "like china / smashing on terrazzo" and the speaker, who wears a black evening gown and sometimes refers to herself as "the girl," has a near panic attack. Godfrey writes:

Covering the girl's body with fancies
of any sort—clothes, details

[...]

can't protect it from conclusions:
glamour, corruption,

death.

Throughout this collection, the speaker both protests and admits attraction to the glammers that encumber the female gender. The poem closes with the perversely consoling image of "a ruined red sequin." The speaker says, "if I batted my eyes / fast enough, / it seemed to live," pointing out that falseness can be both the cause of and an antidote for pain.

What makes artifice worthwhile? What transcends it into art? Godfrey grapples with these questions in her numerous ekphrastic poems,

most compellingly in the series on the artist Eva Hesse. Up to this point, Godfrey’s forms have remained familiar—couplets, tercets, quatrains, and long stanzas, with occasional indented lines. But in the four-poem Hesse series, Godfrey explores grid structures and justified boxes of text. The grid form, with its insistent white space, creates a staccato effect, as if the words were uttered by a machine. Take these lines from “Drawing 4”:

A	vacant,	absent	feeling.	A	void	to
be	filled.	In	either	case	it	is
loneliness	and	emptiness	which	I	constantly	feel.
[...]						
		Our	struggle	is	very	difficult.
But	light	does	beautiful	things	to	it.

Godfrey does not attempt to please the ear in this poem. Instead, she employs this structure to reflect Hesse’s use of industrial, unconventional materials in her sculptures, such as mesh, cord, latex, and fiberglass. In an artist statement that seems to anticipate *Second-Skin*, Hesse wrote, “The making of a ‘pretty dress’ successful party pretty picture does not satisfy us. We want to achieve something meaningful and feel our involvements make of us valuable thinking persons.” Perhaps, in “Drawing 4,” Godfrey wished to pay homage to Hesse by striving more to challenge than to please. Drawing from Hesse, Godfrey’s critique of and investigation into the conventionally “pretty dress” is one of the main driving forces of this remarkably cohesive collection.

It’s clear that Hesse’s biography also informs Godfrey’s poems. Hesse, whose family fled Nazi-Germany when she was a child, died of a brain tumor when she was only 34, and her untimely death resonates with Godfrey’s focus on mortality throughout the book. The final poem, “Still Life with Fruit Remnants and Flowers,” ends:

Only now that the sweet peaches
are gone do we remember
how long it takes to acquire them.

Only now does their absence ask,
Were we beautiful because we did not last?

There may be no assurances of immortality in *Second-Skin Rhinestone-Spangled Nude Soufflé Chiffon Gown*, but this moving, exquisitely crafted work both unsettles and delights the reader, leaving an everlasting impression.

—Lauren Moseley

Rae Gouirand. *Open Winter*. Bellday Books, 2011.

Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffrey C. Robinson have noted that one of the roles of poetry is “to renew [language]...by repeated & precise acts of defamiliarization.” W.B. Yeats refigured language through an idiosyncratic poetic lexicon, one absolutely wedded to his own spiritual and cosmological schema. Subsequently, often knowledge of his entire canon is necessary to unpack a single line. *Open Winter*, Rae Gouirand’s debut collection, offers another approach to linguistic renewal. Gouirand’s book contains narrative poems along with more fragmented pieces, yet both approaches converge to refresh her particular subjects.

“Translation” begins with an apt metaphor for how language is distilled through poetry: the refraction of “light caught” in a window. José Ortega y Gasset had a similar metaphorical conception of words as windows, an idea engaged by William Gass in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. Ortega y Gasset’s analogy hinges upon a paradox of looking at a garden through glass: “the clearer the glass is, the less (of the glass) we will see. But then making an effort we may withdraw attention from the garden... and we will see instead only some confused masses of color which seem to stick to the glass. Consequently to see the garden and to see the glass in the window-pane are two incompatible operations.” Such is the conundrum of poetry: words as windows, or words as window-dressing.

Gouirand’s engagement of the metaphor is a bit different. Her narrator wonders “how a circle can go in a circle without hurting / to be a circle and can show its own / shape in shaping.” Such language appears to be nearly an admission about the imperfection of poetry, “imploding / and integrating what a question / always does.” To return to Gass, his conception of the essential difference between prose and poetry was the sentence. Gass acknowledged that sentences could “fall” across lines of

poetry, but he saw the unit of the sentence as “fundamental” to prose, but not poetry. Gouirand treats the line as a malleable unit: part pun, part theme extending beyond its typical structural connotation in poetry. Within *Open Winter*, a line is a means of separation and a way to trace movement. In “Susurrus,” the narrator explains “how to / make a line toward something.” “The Sands” offers a question as a statement: “what letter / can attach to a moving / line.” Even the collection’s first poem, “By Infinity,” queries this subject: “If the horizon—if the line— / pulls at the eye—pulls a thread / between presence and absence.”

For Gouirand, a line also implicitly exists as separation between poetic styles. *Open Winter* is an atypical collection, split between poems delivered in fragments and narratives that elucidate content. Episodic and imagistic poems, such as “Night in Breath Marks,” are reminiscent of the early pastoral work of Irene McKinney. Here Gouirand opts for the declarative, and her metaphors stand firm: “Night is a horse at night. Memory / & empathy a silver / streak between.”

It is not clear which poetic style—the lean or the full—works best for Gouirand, but her more narrative poems certainly occupy more emotional space, and thus form a useful architecture for the book. Gouirand is at her best in this collection when she unfolds such narratives: the resulting poems make it possible for the reader to become completely, and happily, lost in a specific world. “Mira” shows the discovery of previous marginal notes, that past reader “ringing nouns / with a thin grey line.” The narrator documents “graphite scratch / of swift planets, bodies without / address or rest,” before conversing with the found pages:

I lean in to the varying star, her red rise
blurred by pages’ faces, and darken
dim Mira, the asterisk he uses to push.

A very different narrative poem, “You Form” contains some of Gouirand’s most carefully lathed lines:

Along my kneecap, ankle,
hipbone her lips suggest the asymmetrical semi-round,
the irregularly shaped droplet, the gorgeously deformed

baroque, the ridged cerclée.

Although Gouirand has the skill to make her aureate descriptions clear, she commands even more attention when description is absolutely in service

of content. One paradox of poetry is the near-mystical ability of well-structured words to renew even the most plain or habitual of actions, and “To Scale” might best represent Gouirand’s approach. The poem’s basic content is the making of quilts, but the attention to atmosphere is deliberate:

Across your four pairs of knees the quilt is rotated
ninety degrees. Husbands, eyes closed in their rocking
chairs, consider only the moral industry of your sex,
your quickness with those sharp wands

This main narrative arrives in similar blocks of tuned description, yet Gouirand also intersperses indented, parenthetical riffs. Acoustically constructed, these additions sound like whispers among these “summer evenings spent on the porch”: “(buttonhole stitch square knot slip stitch / running stitch xxxxx).”

Another instance of creating a poetic calm is “Ritual Sum,” a poem that recalls the narrator’s old Michigan neighborhood. The narrator remembers “treading down home the quieter streets,” the sights of “living room lamplights of those who had settled / their things past & their August plans.” She stops at the “last house,” where a man

shared the Latin names from
his chair there under the radio, a tinny box pointed out

to the kitchen window. In dead of winter, that radio fuzzed
to ice as I continued to walk past, hands knotted inside
pockets, thinking of what lay waiting under the snow.

Such specificity of moment allows the narrator to return back to the present, where these memories are framed, ending with “I’ll linger there tonight with eyes closed.”

“Ritual Sum” leads into a consideration of the book’s relation to its title, connected through a central poem bearing the same name. The first stanza of “Open Winter” feels applicable to the collection as a whole: “Light has risen & spread itself thin. / The hour between here & dreaming.” Gouirand is able to capture that particular hesitancy of cold: we might obsess over weather predictions, watch snow fall outside our windows, but that first step is never predictable. Cold tends to even freeze the moment of observation: “Grass guards silence / on its tips, offers frost to space.”

This theme of winter reaches its apex in “Verjuice,” which begins with place: “This vineyard in winter: fruit formed & brown, / baring the branch as it bares its last.” Though not the final poem in the collection, it is the most summative, and lines such as “There is too much light / to see some questions by” feel absolutely appropriate to the blinding sun on snow during a winter’s day. Yet this poem is truly concerned with a winter’s night:

At the end
of the walk, the bottom of the vineyard,
a line traces a line in dark: dark

enough to call out all our empty answers:
lines sisters & wishes, twin firsts

The next poem, “Ice Plant,” allows the strands of the collection to further coalesce: “but become the frost / become the lines we become.” Poetry is not bound to a particular season, but if it was, winter now feels an appropriate choice.

—Nick Ripatrazone

Michael Heffernan. *At the Bureau of Divine Music*. Wayne State UP, 2011.

Once accustomed to the complexity of his traveler-turned-restless-muse personae, I found Michael Heffernan’s collection of poems, *At the Bureau of Divine Music*, a book to keep on my shelf forever and share with other poetry lovers. The hawks rising out of bodies, guns, beer guts, and indiscriminate screwing of the first dozen poems or so had me reeling a bit, but soon enough a kind of upbeat, yet esoteric and worldly verbosity counteracted with a trustworthy, existential, Francophile cynicism to leave me aptly prepared for the sad deliciousness of poems to come. In “A Sudden Shower,” the speaker considers his cat’s (plus who else’s?) impending death by opening with “A restorative walk in the garden, a rock in the shoe,” and ending with “scraps of you twisting in the rain.” And, as walks go, the rather short “An Evening Walk,” colored by “a yellow pasture with a few cows,” a “tower / blue gone to slate,” “a blend of sweet basil and fresh-rubbed thyme,” and “a lemony finish” is unequaled

in its ability to capture an alluring, living beauty that you don't have to go to Somerset to understand.

Heffernan's ear for syllables and sound help lead his reader past what some have viewed as pretention (the kind reserved for septuagenarian, nine full-length book publishing, sonnet-penning capital "p" Poets) toward true appreciation of very funny and genuine wisdom. Even the most casual reader will likely, if he gives it a chance, find Heffernan's obvious love of lofty language inviting. When Heffernan pairs "redoubtable abstractions" with "sons of bitches (who) chop you up," as he does in "Hermitage," it's like he's added a personal, witty touch to the gilded invitation that one consult supplementary materials like dictionaries and encyclopedias when reading.

Heffernan puts his practiced pen to use describing both sophisticated literary allusions and accessibly ordinary observations of life. He peoples his poems with the jet-setting lifestyles of DaVinci, Warhol, the Virgin, the neighborhood Gauguin, the town poet, and Dante as easily as he includes the Rosenbergs, his ex-boxer grandfather, and his "old friend Ray" who understands that the mental picture of a time and place is the one to savor most.

In *At the Bureau of Divine Music* we bumblebee around locales of personhood in a non-self-conscious, if mostly Euro-masculine, manner. A discerning female reader such as me will likely nod affirmingly at the seamless way Heffernan briefly pollinates the possibility of homoerotic love. And no reader can be alienated for long when she can share in the quotidian joys of such varied locales of place. Heffernan daydreams about Calypso's Maltese island, the Dodecanese in June, the middle of the Second Century in Rome, and the kind of ecstasy Giverny has bestowed on Monet.

We visit the historic Detroit he knew as a boy, and travel easily from a night in Shreveport to a night on the Île Saint Louis; as Heffernan triangulates Saint-Malo with Omaha Beach and a cathedral in Le Havre, his characters fly effortlessly from Paris to the Urals to England during the Blitz. Bouncing from Piraeus to the intersection of Yeats and John Kennedy is easy with Heffernan at the helm. Like poetry's Dr. Who, he grants temporary membership to a meditative, veering toward merry troop of travelers, lovers, writers, artists, and dreamers.

But just as rousing as we traverse time and space do we touch down for intimate, quiet, and almost-recovered-from-lonely moments with mortality. In "Awake," which leads to his final poem (and a clever fourteenner) "Purple," Heffernan describes a moment when he fears his death while

sleeping beside his wife. She gets up “as she does, with the light, / to start another day in her own life,/while mine was over.” As quickly as the small chest pain woke him, it is crafted into a resolution:

As I was worrying,
I went to sleep and woke in four hours
to use the bathroom. Birds had begun to sing.
Two dogs were barking. Nothing perilous
had come to find us. What was ours was ours.

By this time, I've been delighted enough by Heffernan's enduring voice to decide I too want to “join / the ministries of sense.” He's dealt in salty, elegant, and thoughtful ways with infidelity and other kinds of loss and redemption. He's shared his “liveliest ideas,” and the ways that he survives them. Few moments in his poetry are as serious, but many are just as breathtaking as his final poem of the collection, when he considers whether, at his death “there had been a sliver of sun / on the purple wall. And I take a breath.” At the Bureau of Divine Music succeeds at convincing readers that its composer knows just how a being “could fall and keep aloft in the one air.”

—*Julie Ann Brandt*

Laurynas Katkus. *Bootleg Copy: Selected Poems*. Translated by Kerry Shawn Keys. Visual Artists Collective, 2011.

A quick survey of the titles of Laurynas Katkus's new selected poems will give the reader an impression of the breadth and depth of the poetic imagination of one of the most exciting young poets currently working in Lithuania, in terrific American translations by the poet Kerry Shawn Keys. It may also reveal wider implications about what the poets in Vilnius are doing these days: “The Young Address Their Fate,” “Raising of Spirits,” “A Student in the Free University,” “October Holidays,” “Money,” “Ode to a Jellyfish,” “Inflation in March,” “A Motif from Rembrandt,” and so on, reflect not only the skill, ambition and scope of this particular poet, but a sampling of the potential concerns of an entire generation of Lithuanian poets who came of age during the transition from Soviet occupation to democracy and capitalism. One can get an idea of the chaotic and interesting state of Lithuanian poetry simply by sampling

some lines almost at random from the ambivalently named title poem:

He sleeps under the threadbare snowflakes of the nappy blankets
which once snowed on the seaside dunes.

The shelves of the cupboard are weighted down with monitors,
processors, floppies, and hard discs

The long lines of this poem contain more than the usual fascinating blend of folk urges and political surrealism American readers have come to expect in a general way from Soviet Bloc writers, and in specific, from Lithuanian ones, several generations of whom developed a distinct and unique coded imagistic patois in order to write around the censors. Of course, these lines carry more than a whiff of all that, but what fascinates me is, as always, a matter of the variation of the influence: the title, the long lines, the surface subject matter. It's a world that also consists of a number of Western influences, ranging from Whitman's long lines that hang in the balance between the Bible and the journalistic "leaves of grass," or misprinted newspaper pages from the contemporary nineteenth-century print shops, to name a couple. The poem's texture and subject matter, however, indicate a rowdy, contemporary setting all its own, a world likeable and no less dark than the generation of Katkus's parents, imbued with the quirky atmosphere of Frank O'Hara's *Personism* to the kind of imagery you might find in *The Matrix*, or for that matter in any young person's studio today, be it in Manhattan or Shanghai: databases, motherboards, algorithms, and chips exists in this world simultaneously with the particular hauntings of a small and lovely country that has been occupied since it was an Empire itself, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea:

His body is lead-like, behind the eyelids only an occasional swish
of turbid eyeballs.

Rows of numbers, flashes, multiple and commanding movements:
these are the chips whispering in the dark.

Overloaded, discordant, infected with viruses, they suffer a cruel
slavery.

Every second in this city they are touched by the hands of
barbarians.

Only you can save us, Vygis, says the Mother Board, cut a window
to freedom.

“Come to us, and you will be the most pliant, most perfect algorithm!” Such lines strike me as totally new but redolent and haunted by a past that I’ve come to know from visiting Vilnius several times—the stories about the tanks on the perimeter of the city, of aggressively ideological native editors doing the bidding of their Soviet overseers. After having been born into such a world, how exceptional it must have been to watch it change so brutally quickly, before the tanks even had time to fire on the city!

This and other poems reflect an obsession with that most difficult of blessings and obligations: freedom, at least as it might be defined and implemented in a capitalistic system. One sees this, ironically enough, in such poems as “October Holidays,” with its obvious historical reference, when Katkus opens with the image of eerily silent pianos and closed textbooks that culminates in what he calls “our ageing, October-born State,” a poem that would have been impossible for obvious reasons decades before. What’s new is the directness, but the poems can’t avoid the influence of the poets who managed to stand up to the censors in oblique and clever ways, paced to the survival pulse, like Vytautas Bložė and Sigitas Geda. Other noticeable influences are Joseph Brodsky and Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, who both left their native lands, and also, in a conceptual way, Walter Benjamin, for whom Katkus is the translator into Lithuanian.

What strikes me about this poetry is how well-disguised the strangeness is and how direct a poet like Katkus can now afford to be; the mother calling her son home at the end of it could be happening in Des Moines, or Richmond, for that matter, but the subtext fairly brims over with a subverted, buried energy that Katkus makes familiar for non-Lithuanian readers: “tomorrow to awaken to the rumble of tanks and brass bands./So it goes, such are the holidays, in our ageing,/October-born state.” What astonishes me about these lines is that they catch the weariness of such an event in the years just before the system was to fall apart forever, so that the reader hears the surface tone of those holidays in a way that’s unpredictably colored by what was about to happen to that political system, almost as if the poet and not the boy can hear that the destruction of that system is part of its historical inevitability. In the poem addressed to Fate, perhaps Katkus comes closest to directly naming

the oddly blessed—and difficult—historical reality of his lifetime: “And the further it goes, the worse, Fate: people/already are walking through us.” I can’t imagine a more robust evocation of the voice of Lithuania, a country poised on a scales between the past and where the present moment shrinks and expands into what’s to come.

Or consider a poem so concretely and yet ironically titled, “Хлеб, 1972,” in which the poet considers a government bread truck from the speaker’s childhood. Midway through this short lyric, in a stunning apostrophe, the speaker actually addresses the bread itself in a way that speaks subtle volumes. “Black, blind bricks,” the poem says, “don’t give away /when the blockade will be over— /abruptly, like an odor.” One need see only as far as the title, in Russian, to encounter the complexity of being a poet today in Lithuania. But the subtleties reach far past that in a multi-voiced series of poems that appeals to more than a complex historical intelligence, but also in strophes that are delicately balanced on the scales, here classical and direct, here obliquely mythic, saturated with folklore and the kind of dark surrealism that, unlike in America, carries an urgency born of the obvious political realities.

Laurynas Katkus belongs to a new generation of Lithuanian poets, the ones who bridge the gap between Lithuania as it is today—with its former Jewish ghetto renovated with international UNESCO money and all the social problems of a new democracy—and the Lithuania that was a Soviet satellite state, with its bread trucks, October Holidays, state-controlled libraries and tanks. The poems in *Bootleg Copy* are not historical records of either time, but the vibrancy of this stream of image and lyric is a music of two worlds colliding in a such a way that makes the reader a witness to it.

This is no longer a Lithuania in which the state told you how to write—and live—like the editor from the Sixties who once screamed at the poet Kornelius Platelis—when he dared to write a poem that was not ideologically and historically sound—“We all have to walk through the shit; only you insist on wearing white silk stockings!” That world is the one that Laurynas Katkus and his peers remember being children in, reaching adolescence, and becoming adults; now, the reality is far different. A few years ago, I might have begun this review by pointing out that we in the West can hardly be expected to understand an entire system of government that came crashing down in a matter of days—for when the Wall fell in Berlin, Soviet troops were out of Lithuania in a matter of months. The truth is, after the financial collapse of 2008 and the near destruction of our banking system, not to mention the ecological shocks

that are bound to change our entire way of life, we might take more than a simple literary interest in the work of this generation. Now we can see shades of ourselves in this work, in a way, or at least we should be able to recognize at least some of the radical, chaotic energy that suffuses and washes through these poems.

One window-light melts slowly into the air,
Like a sweet bonbon disappearing in the mouth.
Almost like sitting and waiting for the war to begin.
On the screen in the movie house.

The absurdist coding of Lithuanian history must have taught Katkus as a young man that the war can't be won. Even as a not-so-distant memory, Soviet ideology—along with the current ideology of money from the West—what a duet!—must insist that it's always won. On a thread in the balance, these poems hang like the Sword of Damocles.

—*Sam Witt*

**Jules Laforgue. *Last Verses*. Translated by Donald Revell.
Omnidawn Publishing, 2011.**

Laforgue was born in Montevideo and so was Ducasse, who is better known under his pen-name, the Comte de Lautréamont. Both wound up in France as young men. Isadore Ducasse starved to death in Paris during the Siege in 1870 and left just two books behind him, *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Poésies*. He was twenty-four. Jules Laforgue at least managed to have something of a career before dying at twenty-seven of tuberculosis in 1887. Laforgue was born in Montevideo while Ducasse, better known under his pen-name of the Comte de Lautréamont, was taken there as a child by his parents. Both wound up in France as young men. Ducasse's influence on the Surrealists is well documented, as is Laforgue's on Anglo-American Modernism. Eliot and Pound both found much more to admire in Laforgue's work than his contemporary French readers did. Any poet who would use a word like "irréconciliablement" in a poem was destined to raise the ire of the average French reader and poetry lover of the era.

Laforgue's *Derniers vers* was published posthumously in 1890 and is recognized as among the first important collections of free verse. It is free only in a certain limited sense, as the poet uses rhyme a great deal,

and perhaps flexible rather than free is a good way to characterize its formal qualities. Readers without French can get an intimate experience of one aspect of Laforgue's style from parts of Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" or from any of Eliot's poems in quatrains from the 1920s. A stanza from "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" is representative:

The sable presbyters approach
The avenue of penitence;
The young are red and pustular
Clutching piaculative pence.

This does not approach the freer form that Laforgue reached in his final poems, but it does accurately imitate his ironic stance and his breadth of vocabulary. It is a brittle style with a curled lip often in evidence, a certain *du haut en bas* attitude that was typically decadent but also appealing to the early modernists who were avidly seeking an alternative language to that of Browning and Swinburne. Laforgue willingly turned himself into a sort of anti-Victor Hugo. He ransacked the language of science, unleashed a rainstorm of exclamation marks over his poems, and could be almost simultaneously cold-heartedly dismissive and heartrendingly emotional.

Derniers vers consists of just a dozen longish poems and was pulled together by the poet's friends and executors Édouard Dujardin (the literary journalist and novelist) and Félix Fénéon (the art critic). Donald Revell, in the Afterword to his new translation of the poems, makes huge claims for them by suggesting that they more or less invented both Dadaism and Postmodernism while "obviating all precedents" in the literary expression of pain. "Everything human, everything gendered, everything natural, is immediately unrecognizable afterwards and evermore," he proposes, overstating the achievement of the poems, it seems to me, in trying to capture what was evidently an all-consuming experience for him. Laforgue seems to do this to poets. Pound called him "an exquisite poet, a deliverer of the nations, a Numa Pompilius, a father of light," as well as "the most sophisticated of all the French poets."

Revell is a well-known poet with translations of Rimbaud and Apollinaire to his credit. He has approached Laforgue with a certain degree of abandon ("I slowly learned to be careless, as careless as Laforgue himself," he admits), a dangerous tendency in a translator, one would think, when inspiration and devotion to the text seem required in equal degree. "Not knowing, one is free to hear" strikes me as an unnecessarily risky

contention, since after all one can know and hear too. If Revell actually means that listening to the text is more important than knowing its literal meaning, a critic might find in this approach the explanation for some basic mistakes that mar this version of the *Last Poems*. The “bel” in the expression “bel et bien,” for example, has nothing to do with beauty. Revell’s translation of a line from “Légende” that runs “Mais les yeux d’une âme qui s’est bel et bien cloîtrée” is seriously misconstrued. “And still her eyes remain the perfect flowers of a beautiful cloister” both takes liberties and embodies errors. The line literally means “But the eyes of a soul who gave herself up entirely to the cloister.” Similar mis-hearings include somehow finding “piss” in the French word for a last resort (pis-aller) in “Sur une défunte,” and inserting a “petticoat” in a line where Laforgue intended us to see a gallant dance (a “bourrée”), so that “Tous les paniers Watteau des bourrées sous les marronniers” in “L’Hiver qui vient” becomes not “All the Watteau baskets of bourrées danced beneath the chestnut trees” but rather “And Watteau petticoats tossed under chestnut trees.” In other cases, Revell sometimes takes liberties with the French text that help to bring it alive, but these cited examples demonstrate not so much liberties as misunderstandings.

Despite the odd failure of inspiration, as for example in his unappealing “Drown / My burning heart, dowse my so very interesting skin!” as a version of Laforgue’s “Oh! arrose, arrose / Mon cœur si brûlant, ma chair si intéressante!” Revell is often capable of finding good English poetry for the French poet’s words, especially when the French veers more towards the vernacular than the elevated:

In the meantime, stay straight,
Stick to your knitting, and pray.
And as for you, last of the poets,
Get out a little. You look terrible.
It’s a nice enough day. People are out and about.
Take a walk to the drug store.
Fix yourself up.

In another poem, Revell captures a different Laforgue mood and diction:

O bouquets of orange blossom armored in satin,
The stained-glass Virgin
Fades, she fades away
At the sight of your sex-weddings served up wholesale

And insane waltzes towards a common grave!
Pathetic species!

There is no equivalent for the word “insane” in the French original of these lines (Laforgue says she “runs at a waltz”), but otherwise the English is loyal and fresh. Sometimes Revell edits too keenly (a stanza in “Simple agonie” consisting of twenty-four words in French uses only seven in English), and he makes no attempt (wisely, I would suggest) to find equivalents for Laforgue’s extensive use of end-rhyme. He does not try to master puns either, leaving “pensées” in “Pétition” as “flowers,” without trying to find a way to bring out the double meaning of the French (thoughts and pansies). Despite a broad compass of tone and diction, Laforgue never employs obscenities, but Revell pushes his English over that line a few times, perhaps on the assumption that Laforgue would have if he could have. (I am puzzled, however, about how he got “She can’t sing, / But she can suck” out of “Et quoique morte aux chansons, / Après encore à la curée.” In “la curée,” Laforgue is referring to the violent moment when a pack of dogs is let loose on the carcass of a killed stag.) And his vernacular English sometimes seems a bit too jazzy, as for example when “Oh! soigne-toi je t’en conjure” (“Take care of yourself, I beg you”) becomes “Honey, take care of yourself, I’m begging you.”

No translation of poetry is perfect, and Donald Revell’s shortcomings are not outweighed by the good qualities of his version of these difficult poems. With the French poems printed en face, readers with some French can follow along, and they will see the frequent good fortune Jules Laforgue has had in this particular translation of his greatest book.

—Bruce Whiteman

Amy Newman. *Dear Editor*. Persea Books, 2011.

Any poet who has labored to craft a cover letter knows the conventions of the genre. Begin by listing the contents of the submission. Next, briefly address professional accomplishments such as publications, prizes, or tenure-track positions. End with a few sentences that express gratitude for the editor’s time and attention. At the risk of appearing silly or pretentious, the poet must resist explication (as in, “these poems are about. . .”). The cover letter’s task is to convey information without strong-arming the reader toward some interpretation of the enclosed poems. Indeed,

the memorable cover letter is often seen as memorable for all the wrong reasons. It is disdained as the work of the hobbyist, the high schooler, or the prison inmate. A memorable cover letter may be pinned to a bulletin board in an editor's office: now made model of "what not to do."

Amy Newman's *Dear Editor*, a series of epistolary prose poems, reads like the dispatches of one who understands the PoBiz but who has decided she no longer cares to adhere to its strictures. Her cover letters include references to the obligatory SASE and convey an appropriate degree of thanks for the editor's consideration, while engaging in a sustained, obsessive attempt to summarize and to evoke through self-described lyrical language a manuscript entitled *X = Pawn Capture*. *Dear Editor* is wish fulfillment. It asks, what if we could write impassioned, imagistic cover letters like these without the danger of being tossed into the rejection pile? What if we didn't have to be so circumspect in the ways that we present our work to others?

Many readers will experience a *frisson* that comes from recognizing themselves in these alternately sad, hopeful, and desperate letters. *Dear Editor* captures the humor and pathos of the submission process; these cover letters succeed as uneasy mirrors because they are accurate, not only about the large terrors associated with the writing life but also about the small idiosyncrasies of the profession. For example, Newman divides the collection into three parts: fall, winter, and spring. Why no summer? Any poet pursuing publication could answer the question. Many literary journals connected to universities close to submissions from June through August, when their unpaid staffs of grad students leave campus in search of part-time jobs. And for writers waiting to hear about unanswered submissions, the summer months often resemble Pascale's *les espaces infinis*, a terrifying silence of seemingly infinite spaces filled only with doubt. It's this attention to the emotional experience of writers that marks *Dear Editor* not only as a clever read but also as an insightful one.

But Newman does more than offer a witty, insider's look at the PoBiz. Her collection captures the problem of summary. Because we never see the actual poems in *X = Pawn Capture*, but only read about the manuscript-in-progress (as described by a speaker named "Amy Newman"), we are forced to create a composite picture of the book project. Each cover letter offers a different overview of the manuscript. *X = Pawn Capture* is "a lyrical study of a particular kind of chess game played within" the speaker's family: "the first rule has to be made by someone who doesn't understand the basic rules." Or *X = Pawn Capture* is "a manuscript about how chess may be a metaphor." Or it is "a lyrical study of

my grandfather's version of chess as a way to get back at God." Or, finally, it is a "lyrical exploration that tries to be about everything and to contain everything, but fails like the periodic table of the elements, or the categories of physics." Each summary acts as a different gambit. Each cover letter is a new game of chess, the opening move always sacrificing some nuance of the manuscript in order to endorse some other element of the book. The structure and patterning of *Dear Editor* illustrate how difficult it is to summarize complex works of art, how often such synopses fail to do more than provide plot points, a list of characters.

In fact, failure is one of the central themes of the book: the speaker's failure to communicate with an invisible editor; the speaker's failure to grasp the intricacies of her family (particularly the nasty match of her grandparents' marriage); the grandfather's failure to respond to his wife's religious passions; the grandmother's failure to recognize her husband's limitations of imagination and feeling; and the general failure of a language in "which every single adjective fails, fails, fails." Against this concern with failure, Newman presents readers with a succession of intersecting motifs such as chess and chess pieces, the lives of the saints, ash, berries and other fruits, the many meanings of the verb "to render," the dictionary itself, the dictums of the creative writing classroom, and the representational precision of photography as embodied by various kinds of photographic equipment.

Initially, this wide array of objects and topics unsettles in the way that the moves of a brilliant chess player might unsettle a room of observers. Toward what end are all of these pieces moving? But as *Dear Editor* progresses, it becomes clear that each motif works in service of the book's mission: to explore the poetic process. While the grandfather's love of chess illuminates the more rational side of poem-making, the grandmother's religious passion represents a belief in the unknown, which is essential to the writing process. The speaker herself (who sometimes shifts from uncertain child, to sexed-up teenager, to journeyman poet, to introspective adult) attempts to determine her place in this dialectic. If her grandparents represent thesis and antithesis in an argument about art, then the speaker must decide how her work may function as synthesis. The world of chess, which is the grandfather's domain, reflects the silence and rationality of the man. But, the chess pieces are also natural symbols, succumbing to metaphor even as the grandfather resists such modes of intellection. The grandfather despises the bishops on the chess board, declaring them "unfit for the game," wishing to banish them in the same way he wants to evict the bleeding symbols of religion from his house-

hold. The speaker becomes a pawn in her grandparents' marriage. And the rooks are high towers from which a modern-day Rapunzel—another version of the speaker—dreams of being rescued by a knight.

The world of saints belongs to the grandmother, a world often reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop's glorious "Sestina," with its repeating figures of the house, the child, the stove, the almanac, and the tears which are spilled over some mysterious sadness. Throughout *Dear Editor*, the speaker aligns herself with her grandmother's domestic sphere. She responds to the metaphors implicit in the culinary acts of "coming to a boil" or reducing "to a kind of delicious syrup." This is what poetry does; it bubbles with heat or it condenses. Yet even as the speaker responds to the sensuality of her grandmother's kitchen, she is drawn back to the chessboard again and again, its black and white grid compelling and ordered as words on the page.

Eventually, the character of "Amy Newman" must make a decision about *X = Pawn Capture*, turning away from the binaries that are her grandparents toward a third perspective: her own. In one of the collection's most moving moments, the speaker offers a summary of *X = Pawn Capture* that reads like a portrait of the artist as a young girl.

[W]hen a family prays together with bowed heads, there might be a granddaughter noticing how the dust motes in the afternoon sun rays drift in a kind of suspension through the stained yellow windows, hover weightless, like the little bronze flecks of proteins and irons that float on the surface of the pond water until she waggles a blade of grass and they float down in the most pacific of increments, as the muscular orange fish below, having waited in swim-still forms, behave in a patience which can't be measured outside of the waters, scissor here and there and break the surface only to be satisfied by the bit on the tongue as a sign, and then swim back down again, satisfied amongst the rushes.

The syntax here is complex, hypotactic in a manner that echoes the grandfather's chess-like mind. But the image of the orange fish—creatures searching for signs, letting specks of dust dissolve in their mouths like Communion—evokes the grandmother's vision of things. The speaker has become a poet precisely because her grandparents divide the world into the intelligible and the not. As we learn in the book's last cover letter, it is the poet's job to make others see "images, ideas, doves, blessings, bits whirling, char, fibers, patterns, visions among the broken tree limbs... clouds, dirt, rain, air, fire: the ends and beginnings of thought."

Many of the poems in *Dear Editor* were originally published in literary journals such as *Colorado Review*, *The Georgia Review*, and *West Branch*. While in the book, all the poems are addressed to an anonymous editor, when the poems originally appeared in print and online journals, they were directed to the actual editors of these very real publications. So, for instance, the poems published in *DIAGRAM* begin with this address:

DIAGRAM c/o Ander Monson
Dept of English, PO Box 210067
University of Arizona
Tucson, AZ 85721-0067

Part of the pleasure of *Dear Editor* is to imagine the way these texts must have been received when they were initially submitted to journals. Did Newman include a cover letter with her cover letters, creating a literary hall of mirrors? Or did her submissions simply contain the epistolary prose poems, each one addressed to editors like Simon DeDeo and Elisa Gabbert? And how did editors react to finding themselves inside the poems, suddenly made a part of the narrative and the music?

This more intimate interaction between poet and editor is lost in the collection itself, where specific editors are now replaced with the unknown, monolithic figure of “the Editor.” But, what we gain are the twinned responses of hopelessness and ecstasy, which so many of us have experienced as working writers. We send out poems, engaging in a one-sided conversation between the poem and nobody, between the poet and different varieties of rejection slips: the best-of-luck-placing-your-work-elsewhere rejection, the this-isn’t-quite-right-for-us rejection, and the hope-to-see-more-soon rejection.

But that poets continue to submit poems to journals—despite so much blank silence in return—is a testament to the same faith explored by *Dear Editor*. With humor and imagination, Newman demonstrates that a poetry submission is spiritual submission. It is an act of humility or, as the *OED* tells us, a form of deference to “a higher authority.” Like the speaker’s pious grandmother, who spends her days recounting the stories of Saint Theresa and Saint Fedelema, the poet’s devotion to the invisible Editor must be daily and sustained. It is the discrete miracle of folding another packet of poems into a #10 business envelope or of uploading another Word document to the Submissions Manager, despite all the signs that might tell us: *stop submitting, stop writing, just stop*.

—Jehanne Dubrow

Collier Nogues. *On the Other Side, Blue*. Four Way Books, 2011.

“Can you cease to be an exile by ceasing to remember / the country you’ve been exiled from?” So asks the speaker in Collier Nogues’ poem “Long Weekend,” taken from *On the Other Side, Blue*, her debut collection of poetry. The precise nature of exile, loss and grief is one Nogues as a writer seems to understand all too well; much of the material in *On the Other Side, Blue* focuses on the death of the author’s mother, while other poems in the collection elucidate how a relationship—sexual, familial, neighborly—can succeed or fail based on the way “[t]he privilege of privacy” (“Winter White”) is negotiated by both parties.

For Nogues, grief is less an emotional state than a cognitive mental consideration. “Portrait of Your Grandmother with Alzheimer’s” opens with the lines, “Eternity is calculable. It has to do with restoration, / reparation... There’s little time for bitterness unless you succumb to it / altogether, in which case you’re lost to time. / That’s one way to eternity.” To give into grief completely, without at least some reservation, is to become irreparably “lost to time” and such an act is both voluntary and senseless. Self-exile is something to be perpetually wary of and, in the poet’s words, “[s]ome selfishness is self-preservation” (“The Steamboat *Natchez*”). One can choose to *grieve* and one can choose to grieve and the two states are not at all the same; the former condition allows for selfhood to (however precariously) remain in place, whereas the latter condition roundly does not. Simply based on titles alone—“Late-Stage Progression,” “After I Auctioned Her Teaching Materials,” “At the Viewing,” the aforementioned “Portrait of Your Grandmother with Alzheimer’s”—the poetry contained in *On the Other Side, Blue* might seem to be largely elegiac in nature. And it is. But what makes Nogues’ collection stand out from so many other similar-minded volumes is her ability as a writer to distill the nebulous general—the loss of a loved one is sad, feels bad; every relationship is apt to fall apart; managing one’s love life is hard work—into the individualized, idiosyncratic particular. The way Nogues subtly ends many of her poems is extraordinarily poignant: “Your cotton blanket looks like my cotton blanket except yours is electric” (“Long Weekend II”); “The bridge speaks up: being an edifice is a lonely office” (“Judging One’s Own Family Is Like”); “I liked being up with you at the hour but I didn’t like why” (“Chicken-Sitting”). There is a heavy-handed refusal here *to simply give in*, an unwillingness to painstakingly mull on the “eternity” already “lost to time.” Instead, Nogues finishes each work with a taut, observational line

that forgoes the easy closures, certainties and realizations another less skilled poet might feel apt to make. In the throes of grief, that which is seemingly mundane and ephemeral is—in the moment at least—more important than everything else. We understand death and loss incrementally and the first step in undertaking such an understanding lies in the belief that “Your cotton blanket looks like my cotton blanket except yours is electric.”

To wit, the speaker of the Nogues poems detailing her mother’s death—they are interspersed throughout each of the volume’s 5 sections and make up a substantial portion of the text—is neither sentimental in her reminiscences nor cold, aloof. Instead, she is defiant and disbelieving, often achieving both conditions simultaneously. Midway through “Hydrangea, Best Blue Flower,” contained in the book’s first section, the assertion is made that, “there is no proper name / for the daughter left without a mother. / What if I want to follow?” If the speaker cannot name herself accurately she has no bearing on the world and no place in it; better to follow the mother-figure, the woman that first gave her life and identity. The following stanzas of the poem refuse this conclusion:

I whispered to her
for hours what I thought she’d like to hear,

and by the time she went
I believed myself:

there was a door, and it was painted white,
and on the other side was blue.

The speaker of “Hydrangea, Best Blue Flower” here ends up believing not what her mother would like to hear, but what she herself would. “[T]here was a door, and it was painted white, / and on the other side was blue.” Regardless of her name or potential lack thereof, following her mother through the door will solve nothing for the speaker; she herself is well aware of this fact. And the phrase from which Nogues takes the title of her collection presents the reader with the duality the color blue is capable of representing. If one is down, saddened, one is “feeling blue.” Yet blue is also universally recognized as a color of serenity and calmness, of placidity. The morning sky is blue. The ocean water is blue. It is easy to have two minds about something; the desire to love someone so much that suicide seems like the only option and the desire to let go,

to somehow accept what yet seems impossible. To sincerely hope for a better tomorrow, no matter how callous such a hope might initially seem to be. Nogues crafts her poetry to exacerbate the tension between spontaneous feeling and calculated thought. This is tenuous ground to tread and she negotiates it masterfully throughout *On the Other Side, Blue*.

By its conclusion, the speaker of *On the Other Side, Blue* is in love—"The Afterlife Is Where My Mom Hears of My Engagement"—and a threshold has been crossed. It is spring once again; "[t]he news is fitting" ("The Afterlife Is Where My Mom Hears of My Engagement"). The past lies in the past and although closure's certitude is still unavailable to her, *On the Other Side, Blue's* speaker is no longer an exile from herself, no longer helplessly calling out to a mother unable to call back. Nogues' debut collection of poetry is not a *happy* one. Nor is it frivolous, forgettable. Instead, it is a *necessary* book, one verily worthy of its placement in the world. And regardless of the individual reader's personal relationship with grief and grieving, it is a book that will undoubtedly ring true; one need not have endured the same experiences that *On the Other Side, Blue's* speaker has in order to ascertain the volume's credence. Simply put, Nogues is a poet that deserves to be more widely-read. She is unique to the world of contemporary letters.

—Jeff Alessandrelli

Linda Pastan. *Traveling Light*. W. W. Norton & Co, 2011.

Linda Pastan's newest collection of poetry, *Traveling Light* (W.W. Norton and Co. 2011), picks up almost directly where her last book, *Queen of a Rainy Country* (W.W. Norton and Co. 2006) left off. Both collections explore themes of the consistent speaker's family life. These explorations spill over from the actual family to the surroundings both indoors and out that many times act of metaphors for the characters described. While *Queen of a Rainy Country* began to softly tread towards the question of "what comes next?" this new book pushes the reader too see the inner reflections of a poet looking backwards on her accomplishments both professionally and personally. The surprise in this reflection is the often lack of contentedness the poet feels. She juxtaposes personal images with historical, and often biblical, references in order to illustrate her obsession with mortality and aging. Mostly unadorned language and a mastery of form are traits of her poetry that continue to offer wonder and delights to her readers.

Pastan organized this book to thoughtfully illustrate the cyclical themes of life, hearth, community, and death. Each individual poem encompasses multiple layers (like all great poetry) especially when placed within the greater context of the book's major themes—that life is continually revolving. These permeating themes float back and forth between shallow waters of Pastan's own experiences and deeper waters of women's gains and setbacks. The narrative sequence based upon the eponymous Eve and the gardens she tended creates a sense of mystery. The gardens are an example of a metaphor that describes both the characters' environment as well as the offspring that the character must nurture to completion. In a meta sense, this could also be a description of the poet growing and shaping her life's work of poetry. The poem "In Eve's Life *after Amichai*" exemplifies these themes with its final tercet "In Eve's life / she mourned the freedoms of the garden. / Later, she mourned the children." The poem allows Pastan to illuminate the tribulations of womanhood from the original woman as well as elevate one's artistic endeavors to the status of life's work (much the way that child-rearing was thought to be a woman's life's work). Within the poem, the speaker evokes the motif of loneliness one succumbs to upon reflection of one's life; this motif weaves itself through many of the poems. The poem, and many others that are also based around the story of Eve, are situated in the first section of the book where they journey forward in time, and its many derivations, in other poems such as "Clock," "April," and "After a Month of Rain."

A signature trait of Pastan is her penchant for strict rhythm and meter even within her free verse poetry—a notable contradiction. The poet is constantly attempting to play with the freedom of having no confines, yet constantly finds herself building, and beautifully sustaining, her own rules in order to emphasize both the musicality and deeper meaning of her poems. Her tightly bound meters, slant rhymes, and images aid her decisive diction. However, Pastan's choice to employ a specific, traditional form lends purpose to those few poems. One such example is "In the Har-Poen Tea Garden" where the speaker visits a tea garden in Japan. The poem is written in many stanzas of haiku honoring the Japanese traditional poem, yet the speaker declares "I long for free verse, / explosions of syllables, / but this is Japan. The simplicity and control of Japanese poems saturates this collection, though she is poking fun at, if not struggling with, these influences. The result is an interesting juxtaposition between formal and free-verse. This meta-poem plays on one of the poetic debates of the 21st century—form versus

free verse. Pastan is easily able to insert herself with the traditional poetic forms, yet asserts independence that is acknowledgeable only through her understanding and playful usage of form—the perfect balancing act.

Traveling Light is a successful journey into the end of a poet's life. Continually searching her past choices for answers, she also looks forward when depicting fear for her unknown death “with its switchblades / of wind and ice, / our lives have minds / of their own.” The book begins with the biblical beginning as a means of illustrating how many lives—and burdens—one takes on. These lives are never completely shed from a person, but rather are held onto tightly, and carried into the new seasons (in both senses of the word) of one's time here on earth. The book logically concludes in the silence that keeps the old company as they cannot stop wondering what is next for them—and their loved ones.

—Chelsie Meredith

Larissa Szporluk. *Traffic with Macbeth*. Tupelo Press, 2011.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the word *traffic* puts language into the service of death-dealing, as in the witch Hecate's speech:

[H]ow did you dare
To trade and traffic with Macbeth
In riddles and affairs of death,
And I, the mistress of your charms,
The close contriver of all harms,
Was never call'd to bear my part,
Or show the glory of our art?—
And, which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you.

Hecate lays bare the curious link between “the glory of our art” and Macbeth's trafficking—the gnarled poetry of the play and the blood that generates more and more blood (Macbeth: “It will have blood, they say. Blood will have blood”). The etymological traffic-jam of making, contriving, riddling, charming, trading, and profiting encourages some rub-

bernecking; Andrew Welsh's origins of poetry in "riddle" and "charm" are found at the origins of political transactions with glory and death. Here, as in Larissa Szporluk's *Traffic with Macbeth*, the roots of the lyric are pulled up and on the move to Dunsinane.

"Trafficking with Macbeth" could be the name for a certain spectrum of lyric: one pole brightens to charm (from *carmen*, "song"), the other darkens into solipsism, insanity, death. The radical of death, in Szporluk's collection, seems to be riddle. So "Sunflower," the first poem in the book, lets its anapests summon up the music of a riddling collective voice, only to admonish us for being taken in:

You keep calling me in
to fill up your head,

but the mutinous dust
of the dead yellow field
says better not listen
to a thing with a stem.

As Szporluk's poems reflect on the process of their own creation—in "Rainmaker," for instance—they acquire impersonality and inevitability:

Words come down from wordless places,
rain from rainless air,

mirage from solid paradise,
my salary for failure.

And as blood will have blood, so will Szporluk's words have words. When Szporluk does not make negation the condition of poetic making, she elaborates and riffs upon material that already exists in the poem. The opening lines of "Cold Buffet" provide a particularly good example of the kind of rainmaking on display in the book:

The new dew
on the nude
child welled in
her wide navel.

Here, “new” and “dew” trade letters to become “nude”; “child” and “welled” produce “wide.” “Ceremony Turtle” works in a similar way: “we are born in the bed of the body” sets up a transaction between “born” and “bed” to make the “b” and “d” of “body.” The commerce of sounds between words produces a third word: the linguist Roman Jakobson famously identifies this process as constitutive of poetry, taking as his example “I Like Ike.” Jakobson calls this linguistic commerce “the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination,” and it is the clue to the queasy sense of being followed, haunted, or surveilled that Szporluk’s poems give off. The trade between syllables produces half-seen presences, flitting ghosts of chance meetings between words, a lingering sense of etymological paranoia.

In other poems, it is the trade between the literal and figural senses of words that produces unnatural correspondences. In “Nocturnal Council,” clock and face seem to grow into each other: “You look at your watch and cry. // You were right to doubt the sunrise. / Night is the face that counts.” A similar phenomenon occurs in “Sea Lettuce,” which ends with a “nodding franchise // of ears”: the “head” of lettuce is carefully tucked into its action (“nodding”) and displaced onto a synecdoche (“ears”). One way of explaining the charm of these lines might be to say: the effect of concentrating on a common expression—a head of lettuce, the face of a watch—is to defamiliarize the metaphor by allowing it to traffic with the other words around it.

Much of the action of the book takes place as this kind of accelerated median-strip hopping—between word and word, or between tenor and vehicle. The lanes of comprehension suddenly reverse; we find ourselves reading against the traffic of sense and expectation, eagerly awaiting the next collision. When we crash onto “Jupiter’s Doorstep,” it is with a rather classical sense of *furor poeticus*:

Cucumbers, dreamers,

waking in soaks,
this is where muses

smear us with presents
no head can hold.

These lines bring implications for the “I” who appears throughout these poems. The abundance of the lyric gift from the muses exceeds the speaker’s capacities of self-expression; we hear bits of language speaking

through the subject (even here, in the comedy of “soaks”). Throughout *Traffic with Macbeth*, the shading of lyric ecstasy into murderous insanity gives the poems an exuberance that belies the *contemptus mundi* of their speakers. No accident, perhaps, that the “late breeze” and poisoned son in “Vanished Harvest,” the final poem in the collection, recall the flying leaves and heavy daughter of Dreamsong #385. Trafficking with the muses, as Berryman does with Shakespeare’s Henry, and Szporluk with his Macbeth, incurs gifts of charm greater than a single head—or lyric “T”—can hold.

—Walt Hunter

Philip Terman. *The Torah Garden*. Autumn House Press, 2011.

An extraordinary moment occurs in “Speaking to the Woman With My Brother’s Heart.” The woman is the driver who has accidentally killed the poet’s brother. The poem is from a series of poems grouped together as “To A Scientist Dying Young” from Philip Terman’s fifth book. After lamenting his brother’s death and ruing the remorse of the woman, Terman imagines his dead brother’s heart, and everyone’s heart, as “a transferable thing” capable of moving from “body to body,” if we believe, as we are told his brother did, “in the mind’s miracles.” Then returning to his conversation with the woman, he wonders:

Will she allow me to place
my hand on her chest so that

I can feel your familiar pulsing?
And, further, will she consent
to my request to rest my ear

against her breast so that I can close
my eyes and imagine the way
I’d hear your steady rhythm.

This is a moment which bravely risks embarrassing both reader and writer. Terman knows the mawkish risk involved so he grounds his sorrow’s imagination in a memory of hearing his brother’s heart beat as the two of them as boys “lay beside each other/another life ago.” The poem is a deliberately awkward confession and it is convincing.

Terman exhibits another kind of courage in “At Auschwitz-Birkenau.” The familiar reaction of what else can be possibly said about the death camps is acknowledged by the poem’s epigram, Adorno’s “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Yet this terrific poem not only makes a new poem out of the horrors of the death camps, but in doing so challenges a shibboleth commonly and gravely agreed upon. The poetic strategy, if it is appropriate to speak of strategy given the subject matter, is first to acknowledge Adorno, and Terman does so for two pages, methodically using the anaphora “No poetry in” while he observes the details of the camp—the railroad tracks, barbed wire, red-brick stacks, the only remaining wooden barrack. Next, as if to completely amplify Adorno, he finds “No Poetry in” (and there should not be) the monument to the victims. The poem turns though, and in of all places, where the crematorium used to be. Here Terman notices a frog. Startled, he remembers a tender moment with his daughter delighting in a frog in a pond at home. The last three lines are like a Basho haiku—a sudden and life-affirming moment:

It leaps.

No—it splashes among the blessed shards—
poetry.

The Torah Garden eventually becomes a book of affirmation. The concluding long title poem, arranged in sections, mixes celebrations of the natural world and the small pleasure of daily life—in a suburban country setting—growing a garden, preparing and eating meals, savoring the seasons and enjoying family—with corresponding passages from the Torah. Before he reaches this place of contentment, however, Terman depicts the struggles, drudgery and defeats of the working life, making his ending of renewal feel earned and profound. In poems grim and elegiac, and not dissimilar to Philip Levin’s distinctive oeuvre, Terman writes with depressing irony about the rust and bust belts of the Midwest and Pennsylvania in a style as moribund as the deadened factory workers littered like discarded scrap metal across a “bled” landscape. “Furnace and Shine” portrays a dying mining town, its central image of a megalithic furnace, consciously or not, presaging “At Auschwitz-Birkenau.” “A History of America” and “Old City Serenade” are particularly numbing. Terman sounds like a soured Whitman singing “the laid-off song” and “the welfare romp” for a lost “Oil City,” now the dilapidated site of dollar stores and people lining up to buy lottery tickets, while an aging TV extra (his uncle, in fact) watching reruns of his death in a Western shoot-out serves as the leading protagonist of a sad American history.

Finally, it's back to the garden, small, post-industrial, fragile, all we have but satisfying:

And the Chinese willows we cultivate
for our daughters' arrivals
spin out their twisted yellow branches
towards the water that nourishes them.

The garden is not an innocent place, and it takes hard work to cultivate joy:

You do not count on this abundance,
but all winter long you consulted the texts,
ordered the seeds,
dusted the grow lights, began again the plotting of what goes
where—
every year you hold true to your imagined Eden.

The garden is, like all gardens done without show, a respite from economic, political and social contentiousness, from the “consuming issues” and “spin doctors” so quick to intrude on “tending” and “carrying forth” a “suspended time” that is both timeless and time running down. That is why the poem ends when fall arrives. It is time for apple-picking. “Not like Frost, overtired,” but just as pensive, Terman is

stepping out onto the thinnest branches for the difficult ones,
the obscure ones, the ones concealing themselves in their
dark cluster of leaves—
forgetting the height, how close my death—their devotion
to blossom and therefore fall and be part of the larger earth.

In the end, the central passage from the *Torah* here, *fashion a kingdom*, repeated so often and variously in so many literatures, religions and cultures, refreshes its meaning. Terman exhorts:

Open yourselves up to the only moment there is—
this stillness,
this garden hanging like the last blast of its bellowing breath.

—*Marcus Smith*

Nathalie Handal. *Poet in Andalucía*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

Margo Berdeshevsky. *Between Soul and Stone*. Sheep Meadow Press, 2011.

Like Rick Blaine, Nathalie Handal is a citizen of the world. Yet, unlike Blaine, Handal is a brilliant, poetic chronicler of the human condition and a philosopher of the most lyrical reaches. Known as a poet on the move, Handal writes in Arabic, Spanish, Ladino Catalan, and woven fragments of other languages essential to her heritage and travels. In *Poet in Andalucía*, we see Handal, a current New York resident, as stationary as she may ever get as she sojourns in southern Spain and northern Morocco to recreate Federico García Lorca's Poeta en Nueva York in reverse, in the process interweaving, channeling, conversing with, and honoring Lorca's poetic vision. In some ways, *Poet in Andalucía* is an answer to *Poeta en Nueva York*, as Handal extends a hand through time to wrench Lorca's exploration of otherness from the bleak jaws of pessimism and propel it towards "the possibility of coexistence." For, while both poets navigate the dark terrain of otherness, Handal proceeds with a hopeful spirit and an eye towards harmony, and for all of *Poet in Andalucía's* attention to somber matters, the collection is, in the end, full of the kind of sublime beauty and music that can only arise from the persistent will to transcend.

It is a transcendence achieved through the grace of personal suffering and poetic witness, and we see that as far back as she can remember, Handal was determined to hold home in her heart, even in the most dire moments of exile:

But I couldn't
change that day in Murcia,
when water brought light
to the door:
I am seven
it is the day before our departure,
the day my father
gives me a notebook,
and I tell him,
this is where I'll keep my country.

Yet, even with a country in her notebook, Handal takes nothing for granted. Days, moments, and connections among people are all cherished,

tended to, and transformed into song. The past, both personal and historical, hangs heavy in the air, palpable and thick, refusing to be neglected—demanding respect. It is a poetry of longing and loss, of bodies and maps, of love and the shadows of death. Through it, we see that migration is a process that takes place not just across lands, but over time, through relationships, and through people’s hearts and minds. Trains, ferries, and feet are vehicles of our migration, but, so, too, is language, as it carries ideas from one land to another, one person to another, one time to another, fostering the sort of understanding and intermingling that can build compassion over time.

The concepts are complex, and the language is sophisticated, but Handal provides the reader with every opportunity to understand her poems. First is the incentive—a beauty of language and image that unwaveringly commands attention (It’s not possible to flee / the past or the thunderstorm / death or the heart) while meditating deeply on vital themes (“The Wounded Horse and a Tree in an Old Night” 6). Second is the structure of the book itself, which includes comprehensive notes, a travelogue, and a preface that serves as a clear statement of intent. As well, the collection is divided into ten well-arranged parts, some of which introduce new forms to the English-speaking reader.

One such form is the *Qit’a*, which translates as “fragment” for American and Western readers. It’s a brief poem in the Arabic tradition—up to ten or twenty lines in English—and it typically focuses on a single subject or theme. The idea is that it has “broken off” from a longer poetic form, which is known as the *Qasida*. Handal includes ten *Qit’as*, each of which is titled with an Arabic word that is defined beneath the poem. A couple of examples are as follows:

Zaga

Don’t be distracted
by the young boy
you once were—
look,
something is moving
in the opposite direction.

zaga: rear, from Arabic *saqah*.

~

*Aduar**

**aduar*: Bedouin or Gypsy settlement, from Bedouin Arabic *dummar*.

If shadows crowd
only one side of the road,
they say, the street is broken
and death
can't cross
a broken street.

As well, Handal shares Arabic *ghazals*, which differ from the Persian *ghazal* most American readers and writers of poetry are familiar with. The difference, as stated by Handal in “Poetic Journeys: A Conversation with Nathalie Handal,” an interview with Kaitlin Bankston for *World Literature Today*, is that while the Persian form focuses more on both technical and thematic consistencies, “in Arabic, *ghazal* refers to a poem dealing with the theme of love, whether long, medium, short, verse, prose, and so on.”

It is in this same interview that Handal so beautifully conveys what *Poet in Andalucía* is all about: “At the heart of this book is what Lorca said, ‘Lo que más me importa, es vivir.’ As I wrote in this collection: *On this journey, I discovered peace is there if we want to find it, because as was true for Lorca, what people want most is to live.*”

Another poet of supreme grace and similar thematic content is Margo Berdeshevsky, author of the collection *Between Soul and Stone*. Like Handal’s work, Berdeshevsky’s exhibits consistent, magical, transformative lyricism both of image and sound. Both poets work with fragmentation and enjambment, and additionally, Berdeshevsky employs a primal, cognitively raw form of syntactical intonation. Take, for example, the first lines from the opening poem, “My Long Drum”:

But I Stopped the prayer.

When the stair broke under the weight of wanting You.
Closed the now-I-lay-me-eyes. Fists in them like guns.

While temple candles spit light at You who made it.
Light. (Not a plastic red lamp above an ark.)

Light. While You who made it, was that
You crying? Begging for water in the dark, You, God?

With Berdeshevsky, as with Handal, we are in the naked heart, the unprotected vulnerability of thought. With Berdeshevsky, one is reminded, for instance, of *Company*, by Samuel Beckett. One is in the presence of

an intellectuality that is distinctly the combination of an English and a French-speaking mind, a mind that has acquired the spaciousness granted by living sometimes in dark rooms of thought, alone.

Here too, is a thematic similarity between Handal and Berdeshevsky—the dual exploration of what it means to find home and homeland, how they differ, and what it means to be both alone with strength and together with grace—these are themes deeply present in the works of both poets—themes that are addressed not just as solipsistic exercises, but for everyone, for humanity. The difference is that, while both collections are supremely crafted, Handal’s tendency seems to be to radiate outward stylistically from the points she wishes to make, while Berdeshevsky circles around and around her themes like a bird of prey. As well, in keeping with this difference is another: that Handal’s lines are often short and punchy while Berdeshevsky’s are consistently long and revolving. Both styles are beautiful, powerful, and equally compelling.

Motifs are another revolving aspect of both poets’ work, as symbols and images recur and weave in and out of the foreground and background. Berdeshevsky additionally works with sound as motif in a way that surpasses anaphora or traditional repetition to assert meaning from the sounds themselves. Sound, in *Between Soul and Stone*, carries its own logic and contains as much meaning as does our understanding of the definition of a word. We begin to recognize and even anticipate certain repetitions, and those repetitions prime us for what is being said, so that as Berdeshevsky circles around and around her point, the sound carries the reader the rest of the way in.

Another thing I appreciate about the way Berdeshevsky handles sound is that she creates sound chains, in which certain sounds are repeated across a line or group of lines almost like pebbles skipping across a pond. Take the following lines from “Blooding the Body in the Southwest,” for instance: “Night-beaks match cicada solos. All night: night before its silver heat, its final moon in full / eclipse—will there be others, or any more summers as we knew them, or any more.” Although there is much that could be said about what’s going on here, I’ll just say that what particularly thrills me is the way the words do not merely repeat the same sound in the same way, as in internal rhyme, alliteration, and so forth, but they transform even as they connect. For instance, “final moon in full / eclipse” supports the skipping of Ls across the line—sometimes as the initial sound, sometimes at the end, and sometimes buried (as in eclipse). And “moon,” while containing no L, is part of the party through its delicious romance with the vowel sound in “full.”

I would be remiss if I did not also mention that there is a certain, indefinable dramatic quality to Berdeshevsky's poems. They are not traditionally narrative, and they don't exactly contain dialogue, but there is something of her years on the stage as an actress that comes across in these poems—perhaps it is that sense of dramatic timing, coupled with a way of knowing human nature that is particularly thespian.

Reader, here are two important, beautiful contemporary collections that, in unique ways, deal with themes that should concern us all.

—Melissa Studdard

Bohince, Paula. *The Children*. Sarabande Books, 2012.

Almost halfway through her second collection of poetry *The Children* Paula Bohince writes in “Gypsy Moths, or Beloved” of how the moths are “unafraid / of the coming dark.” This observation might well be the signature mood of the collection, which is previewed in “Pinot Noir” from the book's first section. The speaker sits on her glider in the evening, “waiting for blackness / to overtake romance completely,” and throughout, we see the speaker or any of the book's other personas anticipating or holding fast in coming darkness.

This is not an easy position to occupy in the lyric poem. Technically, it requires a careful finessing of liminal imagery that might otherwise lapse into ruinous cliché; emotionally, it should be a point of resistance, even fear or flight, though instead the poems demand quiet steadfastness. Given the challenge of this premise, the collection is neither readily accessed nor comfortably inhabited. As with her first collection *Incident at Bayonet Woods*, the truths of the collection and its elusive structure do not reveal themselves immediately. But the unexpected bravery of the book in its seeing of the world and our small place in it, and the breathtaking beauty of images in poem after poem suggests, after all, we do not need to fear the dark and its pain.

The Children again considers Bohince's home landscape of rural, western Pennsylvania, though a specific narrative scaffolding, as in the case of *Incident*, is not present. Instead, three sections braid significant motifs: bees or hornets and children (often linked in poems to suggest a preternatural relationship between the two), bridal white, animals of the American woodlands, and the occasional artifact, like a bracelet, or a bowl.

Though her mode is not ekphrastic, the primary gesture of the poems suggests still life painting, particularly in section one. “The Ani-

mals”; “The Children”; “The Peacock”; “The Hive”; “Mechanical Horse with Girl and Bees”—all life studies in a narrative mode that are painterly in their attention to color and texture: the day’s “Brueghel moment— / wine and sapphire and verdigris. / His black hair / with sunlight on it.” (“The Peacock”). Their mood depends on the liminal as well as the homely image, recalling how beautiful “the sewer was / in summer. Little childhood river.” (“The Peacock”); or “the condom listing against milk- / weed” (“The Children”); the “scrim of garbage / skidding against the electric doors” (“Mechanical Horse with Girl and Bees”) at a local five and dime; the summer grass that still holds the “essence of pig fat” (“Pinot Noir”).

The coming darkness is palpable in poems about the poet’s own experience of aloneness that dominate section two, as in the meditation “Everywhere I Went That Spring, I Was Alone,” where the speaker recounts how she was

Alone

when it began to hail one afternoon. A miracle
suspending the cottage in darkness. Alone
taking a photograph

A poem in the voice of Herman Melville, narrates a dark night of the soul as he gazes on Mt. Greylock from his study at Arrowhead farm; Emily Dickinson, or the image of her, is presented in unforgiving isolation:

White dress
at the head of the staircase, Breath-
taking replica. Glass-
boxed, as in the hive preserved. Bee-
drained chapel. (“Evergreen”)

The darkest moment in section two comes with “Green River Fugue”—a short sequence in four parts, each consisting of three, three-line stanzas that meditate specifically on the serial murders that took place in the 1980s and 1990s along the Green River in Washington State, and particularly on the scene of the crime:

And nothing or no one between
but the lunar drag of female bodes, those stars

blood-heavy, patient

This dark and terrible pastoral contrasts the beautiful indifference of nature—"of elk and black bear, blue heron"—with "a torture and a terror / beyond comprehension," and in its method looks back toward *Incident at Bayonet Woods* with its narrative impressions.

The remarkable movement of section two concludes with "Owl in Retrograde," a poem that, like others in the collection, projects the imagined aloneness of the speaker onto a familiar in the natural world. Here, an owl rustles outside the bedroom window where husband and wife listen during "a few luscious moments / in a lifetime" and the speaker realizes,

Though the owl is homeless, forever,
isn't she also moonstruck? And glad, I hope,
to return, flaring like a match
in all this sadness.

It is a marvelous transition into section three which is tethered to the domestic with studies of the husband, "Man / like a cameo, a pretty profile." (The Imaginary Husband); the child, "O the coop of you, pretty / chicken" ("Baby Hazel"); and traditionally female spaces, like the bedroom, "Sheets boiled with lavender, the hard bed." ("The Bedroom") and the kitchen, or in a poem about her mother, laundry as metaphor:

Though I slogged inside the machine
of her body, as our whites swam in a soft boil,
were wrung, hung,
then flew, ("Clothesline")

In another poem, an abandoned hornets' hive is defined by its domestic qualities: "but it was their home—durable and chambered / and stolen." ("Hornets' Nest") And even poems taking their cue from literary history, "Wildwood Diptych" after Rilke, or "Entering the Ouse" that considers Virginia Woolf's suicide drowning, hinge on the perceived imbalances in the parent-child equation, either literally or metaphorically.

The final poem of the book, "Spring", is a risk—who titles a poem "Spring" and then dares to place it at the end of a book like a happy ending? But Bohinc recognizes the arbitrariness of the cycle: "Spring's raffle: who will live, who'll become distressed / and wish for a place to climb in" and still acknowledges a renewal even as she points to the proximity of life and death: "I'm watching the air fill with the born-again, resting

on the corpse / of the rotted oak” which she will chain-saw and drag into the woods. With a clear-eyed prescience, then, the truth about the world and the key to the book’s title emerge:

No tragedy to watch it go.
The insects have broken from that burrow into warm air.
Snow has melted from bark and pooled. With nowhere to turn,
making this place so fertile.

What a gift. And after such trial, such beautiful pain.

—Lynnell Edwards

Joseph Campana. *Natural Selections*. University of Iowa Press, 2012.

In *Natural Selections*, winner of the 2011 Iowa Poetry Prize, Joseph Campana adeptly situates Ohio’s landscapes within a gothic literary tradition. Filled with “darkness,” “brutal streets,” and the occasional “beacon,” the ghostly pastorals found within this collection are haunted by literary figures associated with the region’s artistic past. As the book unfolds, Campana pays homage to the work of James Wright, Sherwood Anderson, and Hart Crane, presenting the reader with a graceful matching of style and content all the while. Just as the topography of the land, and the memories that inhabit it, remain in flux, the poems themselves appear in an array of literary forms, the end result being a collection as finely crafted as it is unpredictable.

Campana’s transitions from one poetic form to the next are both surprising and fitting. In “Kokosing,” for example, Campana writes that the “river gave up no tokens of certainty.” Shortly after, he shifts to an extended sequence of prose blocks. Just the speaker senses the instability of the terrain he inhabits, the topography of the book changes before the reader, allowing the poet to both illuminate and further complicate the pieces that came before. Campana writes in “Creek,” the extended prose sequence,

I’ve seen in you that awful need to tell: the way water slicked you
back, all surfaces now beyond resemblance.

*

To say a thing was frozen in the tree or that it hauled its dying bulk up the slickened bark counter to sensible recourse, for there was nothing there: no leaf, no star.

Here Campana's transition from lyric verse to discrete prose blocks suggests the difficulty of imposing a unifying narrative onto the memories associated with the landscape he describes. Indeed, Campana eschews his earlier attempts to impose continuity onto the past, embracing instead the beauty and possibility inherent in fragmentation. Much like the terrain that the speaker of the poem inhabits, the topography of memory proves both dangerous and difficult to map. *Natural Selections* is filled with finely crafted poems like these, in which form both illuminates and complicates the text itself.

Campana's formal diversity also speaks to the myriad artistic histories that haunt Ohio, hinting at the lack of a cohesive identity associated with the region's artistic history. In many ways, Campana's book embraces the heterogeneous nature of this literary heritage, adeptly mirroring it through the style of the work itself. Through such skillful formal decisions, Campana simultaneously critiques and situates himself within Ohio's artistic landscape. Indeed, the Ohio that Campana describes is a place that inspires pride, self-effacement, and numerous other contradictions with respect to one's literary identity. He writes in "Ohio 229,"

How potent the longing,
how potent the fear.
The two as one, the two
as hawk and shadow
comb a lifeless road.
Doesn't empty mean
safe? Another snap,
another twig, another
instinct ended...

Here Campana suggests that Ohio's literary landscape proves desolate but in no way "safe." As with the land itself, the speaker of the poem can point to no single defining feature that constitutes a regional identity, the end result being a series of conflicts within oneself. By pairing this lyric piece with couplets and prose poetry, Campana subtly identifies himself with this problematic terrain, in the end embracing the beauty and possibility found in this indeterminate state.

Campana's stylistic decisions certainly complement the literary histories being described, also suggesting that homage, appropriation, and revision can exist in the same narrative space. Campana skillfully reinscribes the boundaries of the tradition he has inherited, suggesting that the Modernist aesthetic of Hart Crane resonates with both the rise of urban modernity and contemporary Midwestern suburbia, with its empty warehouses and darkened stores. He writes in "Crane,"

...Every town you
know is like every word known:
souring open in Cleveland, in
Cleveland in the mansions of
luxury, which really is a kind of
lust as is the will to be ill on the
edge of a lake of liquid fire when
the sun burns across every wish
you ever had, and they are ripping
up the sky each morning, in the
awful morning...

Here Campana imitates Crane's lyricism, as well as his ambiguity with respect to the object of the speaker's intense emotion. Yet the piece imposes these qualities onto a contemporary landscape. Moreover, "Crane" proves significantly different from earlier poems like "Chaplinesque," "By Nylus Once," and "Postscript" in that Campana exhibits a distinctly post-modern interest in fragmentation. Many of the lines are broken in the middle of a clause, creating a sense of incompleteness with respect to each line. By using enjambment in such a way, Campana updates and modernizes the tradition he has inherited, offering readers a skillful matching of style and subject matter all the while. Indeed, *Natural Selections* is truly remarkable collection, and a worthy addition to any reader's library.

—Kristina Marie Darling

Hayden Carruth. *Last Poems*. Copper Canyon Press, 2012.

For readers seeking the final works of Hayden Carruth, who died in 2008 at the age of 87, Copper Canyon's recently published *Last Poems* is initially misleading. *Last Poems* contains nearly three dozen poems from Carruth's waning years, but its pages provide an even greater bounty, as

it also anthologizes the poems that close each of Carruth's preceding twenty-six volumes. Introduced by intimate essays by two of Carruth's closest friends, Brooks Haxton and Stephen Dobyns, *Last Poems* makes for an imaginative, if thematically somber, retrospective for a poet who was as prolific as he was prodigious. While this underlying premise can render it a choppy read at times, *Last Poems* nevertheless succeeds as an expansive and engrossing collection that captures the ultimate scope of Carruth's oeuvre, and is an impressive testament to the great bard's range, prosody, and heart.

The most striking thing about Carruth's volume-ending poems is that after over two dozen books spanning six decades, he resisted the urge to plod toward some ultimate style. "The Birth of Venus" is a taut mythical lyric that closes Carruth's first book *The Crow and the Heart* (1959); while it remains a compelling *ars poetica*, its rigid formalism and calculated emotional distance are quite reminiscent of Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle*, doing little to foreshadow the jazzy alliterative runs that mark Carruth's later work. While Carruth never abandons this attentiveness to form and meter in later decades, we see him trek and chart a wide aesthetic range, whether it be the clipped imagery of "R.M.D." (from *The Norfolk Poems*, 1962), the hallucinatory long-lined narrative of "Afterward: What the Poet Had Written" (from *North Winter*, 1964), or the syncopated liturgy of "The Wheel of Being II" (from *Contra Mortem*, 1967), which is worth excerpting here in its entirety:

Such figures if they succeed are beautiful
because for a moment we brighten in a blaze of rhymes
and yet they always fail and must fail
and give way to other poems
in the endless approximations of what we feel
Hopeless it is hopeless Only the wheel
endures It spins and spins winding
the was the is the will be out of nothing
and thus we are Thus on the wheel we touch
each to each a part
of the great determining reality How much
we give to one another Perhaps our art
succeeds after all our small song done in faith
of lovers who endlessly change heart for heart
as the gift of being Come let us sing against death.

Other standout poems include “My Father’s Face,” a lengthy blues elegy from *For You* (1970); the sublime midnight ode “Moon” from *From Snow and Rock, from Chaos* (1973); the voluminous 28-part sequence “Paragraphs” that concludes one of Carruth’s most widely read collections, *Brothers, I Loved You All* (1978); and the painterly “Song: So Why Does This Dead Carnation” from *The Oldest Killed Lake in North America* (1985). For those who have yet to encounter the raw guttural music of “Mother,” Carruth’s sweeping 17-page sequence from *Tell Me Again How the White Heron Rises and Flies Across the Nacreous River at Twilight in the Distant Islands* (1989), it alone is worth the price of admission, for it must be one of the most ambitious American elegies written in the past half-century.

The truly final poems of Carruth’s life were written during the poet’s last two years of fading health, but the zest, wit, and fire in them is undeniable, even though they display less attention to craft. At times chatty and discursive, at times morose with the specter of death, the most compelling among these—such as the playful “See You Tomorrow,” the snarky “Financial Effrontery,” and the grim jeremiad “A Vision of Now”—are dominated by two potent themes: Carruth’s gratitude for friendship, family, and verse, juxtaposed with his fiery condemnation of globalization’s steady encroachment upon art and nature. “Poem Maybe,” a brief impressionistic lyric, may very well be the best among them:

On Margate sands I connect nothing with nothing
As our old pal Tom once remarked. These sands
Are damp and littered, not at all appealing,
Not like the soft sands of Manfredonia where the
Italian boys grew onions and garlic for their
Lunch. Can you imagine how much I wish I were
There? No, you cannot, my dears. Especially not
In the little time we have left to us.

Last Poems, like any retrospective, is far from comprehensive, and readers new to Carruth’s work may find *The Selected Poetry of Hayden Carruth* (Collier Books/Macmillan, 1985) or *Toward the Distant Islands: New and Selected Poems* (Copper Canyon, 2006) better ports of entry. Additionally, time has done little to redeem the weaker poems that were excluded from one or both of the aforementioned volumes, but were necessary to include simply because they concluded one of his earlier books. “Ignus,” the sweeping 8-page poem excerpted from Carruth’s 1961 collection *Journey to a Known Place*—a book unrepresented in his 1985 *Selected*—teeters between romanticism and romantic drivel, as we see in lines such as this:

“The sunlight fell like diamonds / But did not slacken / Remembrance’s forewarning / Of cold and dark to come, / The journey retaken / Without end, / Without end.” Additionally, editor Michael Wieggers’ own preface to *Last Poems* concedes that several of Carruth’s last writings were more drafts than completed compositions, which is certainly the case with the barely-there “Fragment” and the toss-offed “Hey, Spike, Wait Up, Willya?,” an homage to director Spike Lee, both of which would have been better left unpublished.

The cannon of American verse from the latter 20th century remains uncertain and plastic, as it should, since it is an impossible task to track the trajectory of style or taste, let alone presume which voices from any given literary moment will endure. (One need only consider the bickering and vitriol that resulted from Rita Dove’s recent *Penguin Anthology of 20th Century Poetry* to see how subjective we truly are.) Presently, it is doubtful that Carruth will find legions of new readers among those obsessed with hybridizing genres, nor will he find likely admirers among those younger poets who look to Ashbery or Spicer for models. Nevertheless, reading *Last Poems* is an awe-inspiring undertaking that captures the astonishing breadth and caliber of one man’s verses, and one can hope that future generations will affirm these proud lines from “Michigan Water: A Few Riffs Before Dawn”: “True enough, / I’ll gleam forever. Wait and see.”

—Adam Tavel

Martha Collins. *White Papers*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

Martha Collins’ *White Papers* opens with a call to action that’s also a confession: “Because a few years after Brown / v. Board of Education I wrote a paper / that took the position *Yes but not yet*.” It’s a startling admission, and it fuels what follows: a long poem, in numbered parts, about the ongoing creation of whiteness as a category, a seat of privilege, and a position of power. But Collins’s confession also frames *White Papers* as a personal project. She wants you to know, right off that bat, that she’s white, and that she’s implicated in the histories she explores. In the book’s concluding stanza, she circles back to her opening to assert that she’s still “un/learning” her prejudices, trying to rewrite that “*Yes but*,” when she argued for deferring integration, as simply “yes.”

In her acknowledgments, Collins explains, “the writing of *White Papers* included a process of self-education that often became its own end.”

To do so, she follows the lead of a number of scholars—including David Roediger, Toni Morrison, Theodore W. Allen, Noel Ignatiev, and Eric Lott, all of whom she cites—who've explored the construction of the white race. Too often, whiteness looks like absence—the blank page, the clean sheet—in part because it's generally defined in relation to what it's not: “white- / not-native,” or “white-not-[black]-slave,” as Collins puts it. “Like children playing at being / something,” she writes, “we made, we keep / making our whiteness up.” But it's not just a game of make-believe, or a matter of classification on the page: “we are still drawing / lines and calling them borders / and coloring in and naming / people who shall not must/not cross.” These divisions have both led to and depended upon events as gruesome as the genocide of Native Americans, the transatlantic slave trade, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, all of which Collins explores.

The problem, Collins reminds us again and again, is global. “Not mine: mine come late,” reads the refrain of one section, in which one set of voices insists that its predecessors immigrated to America well after slavery. But another voice, in insistent italics, keeps correcting it. England? It “*supplied more slave/ ships sold more slaves than all / the colonies and states combined.*” Wales? It “*produced copper for shackles / and ships.*” Later, Collins explains that the keys of her grandmother's piano in Illinois probably came from ivory that African slaves died collecting.

White Papers is a kind of sequel to *Blue Front*, Collins's 2006 book-length poem about a 1909 lynching in the town of Cairo, Illinois, which her father—then a nine-year-old boy—witnessed. Racial violence was the dark heart of *Blue Front*, something the poems variously circled around, sidled up uncomfortably next to, and confronted head on. The specificity of the events, refracted through old newspaper headlines, commemorative postcards, and personal recollections, gave the kind of story we think we know—white violence against black Americans—particular and emotionally wrenching resonance. It made us look, and it explored what that looking meant.

With *White Papers*, Collins has broadened her scope. Instead of focusing on a specific historical event, or series of events, she investigates the very creation of racial hierarchy. That breadth is tricky. For many of today's liberal arts graduates, Collins may seem to be cycling through fairly familiar histories. And with the exception of some details from her own life, it's not clear that she's contributed anything new to the material in the books she cites.

Or at least, it would feel that way, if Collins hadn't worked the language. But she has, and it means that the poems often do something big-

ger than summarizing. *White Papers* works best when it simultaneously reacquaints and estranges us from the histories we think we know, as when Collins writes, “could get a credit card loan car/come and go without a never had/to think about a school work job / to open doors to buy a rent a nice.” The chopped up phrases creates a matrix of privileges that white Americans of means tend to take for granted. Reading, we reconstruct the fragments, and confront the facts of privilege head on.

In the last few pages of the book, Collins inserts a page that says, solely, “November 4, 2008,” followed by a poem about the election of Barack Obama. It’s a risky move, because—especially after the past horrors she’s chronicled—it can seem overly victorious. Look how far we’ve come, Collins seems to say, even as she acknowledges the ugliness of “radio websites new militias hate / groups raging”(64). But those are easy, visible targets, and you can’t help wishing Collins had tackled the ongoing structural problems of racism in contemporary America—problems that individual “un/learning” or symbolic victories alone can’t fix.

Then again, “un-learning” is Collins’s stated goal: she’s doing battle for hearts and minds. And this, too, helps us see how Collins’s project is different from the scholars she cites. Instead of reciting history, *White Pages* is a ritual retelling. Let’s go through this again, Collins seems to say. That you think you know these stories is part of the point. The poems help you know them all over, somewhere deeper than you knew them before.

—Megan Pugh

Brooklyn Copeland. *Siphon, Harbor*. Shearsman Books, 2012.

Brooklyn Copeland’s first book, *Siphon, Harbor*, is a remarkably mature collection of poems that deals with the incursion of modernity on the speaker’s untouched rural landscape, both literally and through the metaphor of childhood and the loss of innocence. Copeland approaches her environment through the eyes of one who has grown up but is revisiting the remnants of childhood illusions by closely inspecting “bursts in the very moment of bursting”—that is to say “image.”

Siphon, Harbor is aptly titled in that it explores the space where two segregated spheres—the natural and the industrial—intersect. Copeland’s exceptional and unexpected imagery lend a weight and charge to the sparse language in this understated collection, evoking the reader’s imag-

ination and associative sensibility. The title is apropos because we associate the word “siphon” with the removal of fuel from a vehicle or receptacle, and harbor, of course, for the launching of maritime vessels, but also its other association, that of what’s become a vacation spot in an often secluded area.

Beginning with “Marina,” Copeland introduces the theme of man-made intrusions on the natural world; the lines “bits of boat, / bits of dock / mark the spot” where “Morse Lake forms.” It is the confluence of two creeks that creates the lake, but it is telling that the speaker instantly recognizes the spot by its discarded scraps of human presence. This evokes adulthood; the scraps of memory—the past “bursting” in an otherwise placid environ. Though the predominant theme centers on the interactions of man and nature, this idea of the man-made sign-post exists when Copeland tackles other concepts, as in “Symbol” where “Rings possess fingers.”

Copeland tends to favor exceedingly short lines, often only one or two words, and her poems have the tonal quality as well as the appearance of haiku. Her meditations on nature add to this effect, but it is her sly subversion and departures from the expected where *Siphon, Harbor* shines brightest. Where nature’s course is concerned: “unelaborated runtbud / muscling through / woodwork.” When man’s hand is shown via fingerprints on nature we get “diseased ducks” and hammers destroying landscape. Copeland inverts the harm man’s caused to nature with hammers also breaking, recalling the bud pushing through the wood that would confine it to shadow and death. It is a picture of modern reality at the side of a lake that has become home to the summer people, where a black bird and a “frog’s guttural wooing” bracket “: the sudden manmade scent—/ pink cross between / amoxicillin and a gas leak” (“Tiered objects of her talking”).

In “Ritual,” Copeland demonstrates her emphasis on remembrance: Errant strands of hair are strands of memory come loose and held up to the light for inspection. She discusses domestic life from one side of the window pane, all the while looking out into the natural world at its rituals and finding meaning there. This poem most readily encapsulates the multiple readings present throughout *Siphon, Harbor*: “Two leaps / to depth— / day prey / into water— / fat birds fed / by hand.” Water reflects and refracts, but it is also capable of distorting that which might seem to be obvious or apparent. Our memories have this same fallibility, and no matter how clearly they may emerge, there is always a distortion in effect. Water, a recurring image in the text, does a substantial amount of work

for Copeland, encompassing her compromised idyllic natural world while simultaneously enriching her poems with these interpretations.

In her surroundings Copeland sees what could be the autobiographical seeds and nascent slivers of past romances, or at least intimate friendships, framed by the environment, such as sitting by a lake and drinking beer, or observing nature from a boat. The quiet, soft-spoken manner in which both the language and the subject matter are approached brings to mind a less mystically inclined Louise Gluck.

Siphon, Harbor offers a glimpse of a tremendous young talent: one who manipulates the haiku and stretches the bones of her bare form vertically on the page to produce an illuminating and consistently engaging book with irony and introspection. *Siphon, Harbor* has enough warmth and music in its short lines to bring back the fractured past.

—Jacob Oliver

Andrew Feld. *Raptor*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

I read parts of *Raptor*, Andrew Feld's second book of poems, in city parks around Ann Arbor, Michigan. Ann Arbor is a town that works hard at making domesticated nature look closer to wild—where in other Midwestern towns you might encounter the same version of the toothless, clawless metro-park, complete with rentable pavilion and gamey Canada geese, in Ann Arbor the parks are the no-man's lands between rivers and railroad tracks, little pockets of unfenced spring bloom beneath Route 23. Once, walking in my neighborhood, I followed a twenty-foot long trail that began at the edge of a small park until I found myself in someone's backyard. Nestled in the stand of young trees, whose trunks hid me completely from kids playing soccer below, was a homemade chicken coop. A few feet away stood an expertly constructed shelter, complete with strips of bark for a floor. The chickens clucked at me in low voices. I tried to squeeze into the A-frame, then followed a superfluous "trail-head" sign back into the park.

In a city, or even a small town, we are simultaneously far from wildness and susceptible to encountering it. We sometimes crave these encounters—why else allow human access to a nature preserve or a state park—but what do we get out of them? And what does the twin impulse to possess the wild and set free the domesticated say about the conflict these meetings may engender? Feld's book asks these essential, contem-

porary questions in a wide range of formal poems and syllabic free verse. Many of the poems in *Raptor* reflect on his experience as a volunteer at the Cascade Raptor Center in Oregon, an institution that rehabilitates injured birds of prey. In scenes from this center, we get a sense of the confusing, almost guilty nature of a human encounter with wildness, and particularly with raptorial birds, who have, Feld tells us, an “abhorrence of the human face.” “What I wanted was a goshawk on my wrist, / A docile bit of wildness in my care...At the Center I fed her as you hold this / Poem—at a reading distance,” writes Feld, and with that illustrative caesura, a skilled drama of distance and nearness, foresight and immediacy, intention and need begins.

Some of the book’s poems are deceptively narrative, describing the complicated relationship between a boy and his father who have brought a red-tailed hawk the boy “hadn’t meant to shoot” to the Center; a tour given at the Center; a long drive in which a motorcycle club rides by and the speaker sees an eagle devouring an antelope on the highway. Narrative, like Feld’s intricate but vernacular formalism, gives the poems distance from the subject, which is just what he seems to want to imply is the important factor in our fascination with hawks or other wild animals. Describing an injured, captive bird that responds to a mate’s call from the woods at dusk, he writes:

*We like to think they call each other out
of love, which we find sweet; what weirds us out
is not the great horned male moving inside
the light-excluding heights just outside our
borders [...] but how they start calling
too late, too late to each other before
it’s registered on us as dark...*

We impose on these birds (and on ourselves), Feld reminds us, a narrative, a connection to our own consciousness, and even love, while they remain quite indifferent, a mystery to us. “I felt again the shame / of an instinctive reaction to the power-/lessness of love rebounding on its object.” Again and again Feld sets up the tension between the apparently selfless desire to help, to save what is wild, and the self-interest of wanting to master the wild through knowledge of it.

Lest we think that to know something is harmless, as an example of the potential destructiveness of finding things out Feld presents Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, falconer and medieval Holy Roman emperor. “The

Art of Falconry,” Feld’s diptych on Frederick II, wherein as a boy the emperor knows to “keep your head bowed before your elders // and count slowly to sixty, before signing / the death sentence, as if still burdened / by responsibilities already mastered in / the royal schoolhouse of the womb” and in which he is remembered by history and by Dante as one “who makes the soul die with the body” is to me the hinge of the collection. Frederick, Feld tells us, conducted all sorts of inhumane experiments in the name of curiosity, such as making one man exercise and another rest after eating, then cutting them both open to see who had digested better. Curiosity, this list of anecdotes suggests, can be disguised in the disinterested tones of experimentation, but such disaffectedness often shields a desperate attempt to know and to possess. In Frederick’s court, Feld reminds us, “was founded Italian lyric poetry, limited entirely to the subject of love, and generally expressed in gentle, unexaggerated tones.”

On that note, Feld implicates himself, the poet, in the game of desperate curiosity disguised by protocol, formalism, and experimentation. We wish to know, we *need* to know, but we don’t want to sacrifice the appearance of rationality that humanizes us. In poems where the speaker has an encounter with the wild (which includes, comic-tragically, his overhearing a member of the motorcycle club soothing her left-behind child over the phone in “There”), rationality is temporarily lifted and we feel the immediacy of lives we can’t completely understand:

[The antelope’s] animal athleticism, so freshly killed,
Gave to the strip of dirt where its guts spilled
A still-vibrant significance which far
Exceeded the lane of fast-food wrappers...we’ve left
Allotted to its kind. I felt the death
Blow on my neck, transfixed into the here
And now by what possessively returned my stare.

But such moments are fleeting, and in poem after poem the immediacy of the wild or the mortal is snatched away from the observer. “(I had to move)” Feld writes, as the highway takes him away from the eyes of the preying bird and toward a lover.

For the most part, Feld pays careful, almost psychoanalytic attention to the way his enthusiasm for the animals, through words and gaze, betrays the complexity of his desire (at one point, he calls having a bird on one’s arm “fucking awesome”). A few small holes in the fabric of this awareness seem interested in loftily justifying the awe the speaker has for a moment, or a series of prosaic details. But even these are perhaps nec-

essary to make room for the soaring moments Feld excuses in one poem as “nostalgia”—“the elegant, elongated neck / gripped in the yellow talons flinty hooks / receding before me silver piece of the past.” Even in his “Brief Lexicon” of the raptor at the collection’s end, Feld balances such intense, imagistic awe with the orderliness—by the collection’s end viewed distrustfully—of a catalogue of knowledge. As in a city park, Feld’s clearly marked trails give way to unlikely ecosystems about which we must admit we still know practically nothing.

—Leab Falk

Robert Gibb. *Sheet Music: Poems*. Autumn House Press, 2012.

In his newest poetry collection, *Sheet Music*, Robert Gibb explores the musical influences that shape important moments in our lives. The poems provide a soundtrack, at turns lyrical and bluesy, to an imagined life that passes from youth to maturity. *Sheet Music* is finely tuned, with scarcely a misplaced word or line. The collection’s polish is undoubtedly a credit to Gibb, and indeed should be expected of a poet of his caliber. Nevertheless, the painstaking care behind the creation of each poem means that the collection as a whole lacks the raw energy of Gibb’s previous collections such as *The Origins of Evening* (W. W. Norton, 1998). Still, one cannot fault a poet for being too good, and beneath the collection’s glossy veneer, the subject matter is messy, complicated, and provocative.

The collection’s overarching metaphor is that sheet music, as a written and recorded version of ephemeral aural communication, serves as merely the base upon which musicians build and cannot be considered complete in and of itself. Because it is written, sheet music provides a record of what the composer imagines the music to be. Yet much like poetic language, a musical score is open to interpretation. The gap between musical notation and sound is as wide as that between sign and signifier. This space promotes opportunities for innovation and improvisation, much like a page of sheet music operates as a musician’s guide rather than a literal transcription of sound. Gibb is at his most playful when he attends to this capacity for improvisation. “Praising the Bass Clarinet” is the best example of his jazzy sensibility:

Breathy, chthonic, a didgeridoo
Made to blossom in flowering roots,

Or in the right hands rumble
With the most wistful-sounding thunder.

The musicality of the words echoes the longing for something more than what is recorded on the page. The bass clarinet's reedy notes amplify the page's promise of deep sound, but, as the speaker qualifies, only in the "right hands." The poem promises the resonances of "wistful-sounding thunder," but instead delivers strained prose ("breathy, chthonic"). Poems including "Spirit in the Dark," "Ginkgos," and "Windfalls" are taut with barely-contained energy; the rigidity of the prose restrains the freedom promised by "our twisting roads / [which] seemed to promise something more / Than the same play of landscape" ("Windfalls").

This is not to say there are no lively moments in *Sheet Music*. Take "Beakman's Bacteria Farm," for instance. This poem explores the other half of creation, that is to say, decomposition and decay. The speaker likens the bacteria cultures growing on a Petri dish to a miniature world, a world in which the speaker imagines his family living "immersed / In the stippled blooming of a world / That's magical as pollination's." The poem reveals the hidden intricacies of bodies that are both ours and not ours. We travel from inner to outer, to things that can only be revealed once they have been multiplied exponentially. The poem further gestures toward the immensity of the world in which we live, and slyly likens the ignorance of 17th century scientists who knew nothing of "ground glass and optics," and who "thought of cells as compartments, / Small rooms latticed as combs," to our own limited view of the world: "We're offered the barest glimpse of, / The known world there in miniature." Here, as in other poems in *Sheet Music*, the things that we cannot sense are as important (or even more so) than the things we can.

The poems challenge our existing conception of nothingness. Much like sound waves are invisible but nevertheless have a tangible presence, so too can we find the vibrations of emotions spilling onto the page out of empty space. As the speaker in "Walnut: Four Sketches," writes:

The summer that I tried to draw *nothing*,
The shapes between the leaves,
My page filled with its tree as though by default,
Like a poem emerging line by line
From nothing, syntax, the tree inside the air.

In this sketch, a "tree inside the air," emerges from the pages, like a poem sculpted from blank leaves of paper. The speaker emphasizes the pro-

duction of language over the emergence of nature, though the two are linked thematically through an uncanny attention to the “shapes between the leaves.” If in “Walnut: Four Sketches,” language emerges out of nothing, in others language retreats to its origin. Lingering at the edges of both poetic and musical composition is the threat of decay. “Straight, No Chaser,” a poem within the sequence titled “A Late Elegy for Thelonius Monk,” notes the transformation of a spinning dervish on stage from a “waltz through the crowded room,” to a “loss of balance,”

Turning among scattered notes
And dancing shifts of rhythm, this
Collapsing into silence
And the coma’s final eclipse.

If music must end in silence, as life ends in death, then what is the significance of “the coma’s final eclipse”? Gibb’s beautiful collection ponders this aesthetic dilemma, but ultimately the poems fail to pose a satisfactory answer. In the final poem, “Ghost Sonata,” the speaker writes that “Whole hours passed as we peered into shadows / For whatever might be next.” *Sheet Music* reminds us of the mystery that lies between sound and silence, composition and decay, but leaves the reader without a resolution.

—Anna Saikin

Albert Goldbarth. *Everyday People*. Graywolf Press, 2012.

Goldbarth is not easy to categorize as a poet, but his work always makes compulsive reading. The poems concern everyday people and the concerns of everyday people; the poems touch upon religion, literary history, and invention in a fascinating and accessible style. All of Goldbarth’s poems take a narrative approach, and without grandeur of expression. Although lines and phrases will lodge firmly in the memory, the language is plain; this is poetry that speaks the language of the “everyday people” it describes.

Reading his work from the UK, I am reminded of Coleridge, who wrote a series of poems named “the conversation poems.” The most famous of these, “Frost at Midnight,” is written in solitude as the poet watches his infant son sleeping:

The inmates of my cottage, all at rest
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.

In spite of the two-hundred-year gap between Coleridge and Goldbarth, there is a similarity of tone between the two. Goldbarth, like Coleridge, addresses the reader in a familiar and intimate way in the style of two friends chatting. These are conversations between the poet and the reader that are at once illuminating and thought provoking. Goldbarth debunks the grandiose as he embraces the everyday. He teaches us to think, to look, and to discover ourselves through the people we meet every day: people like us.

The first poem, “Most of Us,” explains clearly just what Goldbarth means by “Everyday People” and is worthy of inclusion here :

The starlet and her “intimate device.” The aging
Oscar winner at his “house of pain”

—We need our weekly dose of celebrity scandal,
we whose insides are immeasurably larger

than our skins. We need a second place
to hold the extra “us” of us.

A god can provide it, a mythic hero suffices.
And yet, effective enough for most of us, is

the story of someone else, of *anybody* else, if necessary
of even the neighbors across the street:

Because they’re *like* you but are *not* you, they’re
an isotope of you. The truly interesting halves

of Hercules and Jesus are everyday people.

This poem heralds the personal tone that runs through the collection as speaker and reader join in conversation: the everyday dialogue of everyday people. Goldbarth’s voice is confessional and informative, telling stories in an avuncular style while covering a wide range of subjects and time-lines.

An archaeological dig has uncovered a needle from aeons ago. The word “svelte” describes the needle but also the image of a slim and beautiful girl who might have used it. Goldbarth personalizes the discovery by inviting the reader to imagine the people who lived all those years ago. He ponders their hopes and fears, their passion and lust, as he says:

We lust to thumb the nub
Of *their* lust’s version of pillow talk
And its politics...

Again the reader is involved as the subject of the poem is brought to life.

In an untitled reflective poem, the speaker finds it difficult to believe when wedding guests constantly tell him he looks like his father and yet:

Today I look in the bathroom mirror:
time, it turned out, is a kind of agreement.
There he is, inside my bones, and working his way
from the marrow to the surface. My mother
as usual, beside him. [...] if ghosts are what remain
of a person’s essence after the person is gone,
then children *are* ghosts.

Goldbarth constantly probes the depths of his everyday subjects, looking for answers to his apparently light-hearted questions. He is a serious poet concerned with the everyday moment and its connection to the vastness of human history and civilization. To approach Goldbarth for the first time is a rare experience: the reader sits at his knee absorbing, through poetry, a lifetime of experience and thoughtful analysis.

—Mardi Stewart

Christopher Howell. *Gaze: Poems*. Milkweed Editions, 2012.

Christopher Howell’s *Gaze* is a compelling addition to the poet’s oeuvre. The reader is instantly aware of Howell’s special poetic voice: the evocative title, the artist gazing at the muse and the range of that gaze as it sweeps through the poems. *Gaze* is about looking and recollecting, about thinking and feeling. The collection is divided into three sections, “The View from the Afterlife,” “The Other Life,” and “The Inner Life,” each looking at human life from childhood through adolescence, and

through adulthood to death, and beyond. Memory, nostalgia, happiness, and sadness interweave throughout the pages.

Howell's poetry stands out for its imagery, depth of language, and unforgettable phrases such as, "The smokeless burn of happiness ignites me," or "Swallows dip by the blue of a nameless / window," which stay with the reader not for majesty of expression so much as for depth of feeling. In "The View from the Afterlife," the first poem is set in the afterlife with the speaker imagining a return home. What will people he once knew think of him as he arrives, "(M)ud and birdsong /buttering my blamelessly cloud-like steed, saddlebags / weeping with souvenirs from 'Beyond the World,' surely"? In this poem there is satisfaction that he has survived the after-life, but also hope and excitement at the thought of a return. This section mingles new thoughts and memory as it flits from one subject to another. In "First Touch" he remembers first love and the first "real kiss" which transformed a youthful relationship:

We had been kissing for months.
This kiss was not that
country, this one
had nothing to do with gratitude
or the sort of evening we had had
or expectation
or revenge against parents and the church
or even curiosity.
It was the exclusivity of desire, the dizzy
mutually sudden force of our young neurons
driving us onto a single unrepeatable moment.

This is sexual awakening, the massive impact of which is brought back to reality as he delivers his lover back home where:

Her father standing like Stonehenge
against the living room light, allowed her in
then shut the whole house, hard, the lion-headed
brass knocker banging like a gunshot.

Here, the contrast between the father—strong, timeless, and solid—against the lightness the speaker feels that night sets up impossible and frightening barriers for the newly ignited love endorsed by the door knocker's sharp and final sound like gunshot.

The whole of this section centres on a return to life in some form or other and the speaker gathers his memories to prepare for the return. "Reach me a hand or silver rope / for my return," he pleads.

The section titled "The Other Life" is a thoughtful collection of past experiences, memories and ideas like "Being Read," which begins, "And then the pale book opens / just as a man turns / his own page," and the speaker's actions are cleverly mirrored in the turning pages of a book. "The Day the Field Burst into Flame: Another View" recalls a field fire which raged through, "weeds and scotch broom" only to be extinguished by a heavy fall of rain. This poem like many others turns to God for answers. God is with the onlookers as they watch the fire and "Mrs Johanssen throwing both shopping bags / over her head and sprinting like a supersonic gnome." Meanwhile God surveys the rain and as the fire dies down looks around and says. "See?" Faith, fear and humour mingle together in Howell's special voice. Humour and religion meet again in "Checkers" which describes a game of checkers between Jesus and Buddha. This imaginary game has no end as they move their pieces while, "pearls fall from the nacreous clouds," - another memorable phrase. Heaven and earth are shared between the cloud image and the advertising on the wall, a parking meter and notices asking "Why pay more" a question which moves between the players, "like a shuttle on a loom." The crux of this, Howell's homage to Christianity, is in the responses of the players: Buddha says, "Why pay at all?" and Jesus replies, "Everybody pays." This short poem is particularly powerful.

The final section, "The Inner Life (with crows)" is prefaced by a telling quotation from Charles Wright on the ability of any one life and its limits:

There is no secret contingency.
There is only the rearrangement, the redescription
Of little and mortal things
There's only this single body, this tiny garment
Gathering the past against itself.

The crows in this section represent the fear and superstition which exists in all cultures. Crows are traditionally associated with danger and fear. They are menacing and clever and have instilled fear in people for generations. Menace is shown in "A Crow's Elegy for a Farmer's Daughter," as the crows watch the cortege:

We did not care for you
Though we saw the cortege winding past the arbor.

The crows mock the mourners' "deeply foolish love" in their knowledge that, "We [They] were gods and you were not / ever coming home." The inherent superiority of the crows gives this last section a rather depressing feel. There is a sense of failure, deep loss and inevitability about life, death and the afterlife not present in the first two sections.

However, depression lifts with "Elinor" which celebrates the passing of a long and beautiful life:

The tall trees tip their hats
as she is passing [...]
They bend, but what is wind
worth now
that she is passing? [...]
Someone beautiful is passing.

"Elinor" is, perhaps, the most conventional poem in the book but it is one of the most beautiful.

Overall, *Gaze* leaves a lasting impression on the reader and a wish to read more of this fine poet's work.

—Mardi Stewart

Wayne Koestenbaum. *Blue Stranger with Mosaic Background*. Turtle Point Press, 2012.

While reading Wayne Koestenbaum's *Blue Stranger with Mosaic Background* I thought of Richard Meltzer's observation that Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" "represents an attempt to free man by rescuing him from meaning, rather than free man through meaning." Dylan had the empty sign of sound to accompany his lyrics and to combat linguistic drive toward sense and paralyzing signification. Books of poems are, of course, nude words, the sonic component of which plays second fiddle to denotation's lead, and Koestenbaum laments linguistic failings. "Words: collapse, incompetent, / non-coping," he writes in "Estate Sale," compelling solutions, however partial, for verbal ineptitude, the most potent of which might be linguistic play. For on the other side of meaning is play, in particular that of Kant's "rapid and transient play of imagination" for in the third *Critique*. "Only when the imagination in its freedom stirs the understanding, and the understanding apart from concepts sets the imagination into regular play, does the representation

communicate itself not as thought, but as an internal feeling of a purposive state of the mind.” Kant, of course, begets Barthes, and Barthes, along with Benjamin (who makes an appearance in “Walter Benjamin’s Dad”), gives birth to the poetics of Koestenbaum, who has nabbed free-roving play from all three.

Koestenbaum’s sixth book of poems is an enactment of Kantian mental play by way of Barthes’ punctum and drift, two strategies deployed to prick the *Daxa* of public opinion and shoot a hole through the numerical averaging of majority thinking. Poems such as the opening “Investigation” roam freely, image to image, linguistic sound to sound: “My girlfriend had a much-touted abortion. / I’m not emotionally expressive. // Adorno: ‘He who offers for sale / something unique that no one wants to buy / / represents, even against his will, / freedom from exchange.’ // I sucked off two bastards.” Via a mosaic of arbitrary linguistic events stitched together without connectives, the linear, train wreck of meaning in the guise of principled self-control and socio-political responsibility are torn asunder, leaving us with mental hijinx, hurly-burley of mixed perceptions. “The urinal leans to the right,” he posits in “Urinals, “like a druid from *The Seventh Seal*. / / It’s fur cap / is a Goldie Hawn of immanence.” Just how many times have you considered a Bergman masterpiece beside a piss-pot dominated by a preposterous golden girl? The imagination goes positively mental with orgiastic possibilities.

As one would expect from the author of *Ode to Anna Moffo and Other Poems* (1991), *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993) and *Jackie Under My Skin: Interpreting an Icon* (1995), orgiastic endearment to women—golden and otherwise—abounds in *Blue Stranger*. Susan Hayward is a “Vista of evisceration” found “near a fine flamenco college” (“Saturnalia”), and Koestenbaum’s beloved Jackie O “volunteers as docent, / a decrepit museum- / New Orleans? I line up” (“Grooming in America”). Carol Channing, Vera Miles, and Ginger Rogers are among the dozens of artists who appear in “The Ice Cream Man,” and the third of this six-section volume contains a series of homages to Yvonne de Carlo, Connie Francis, Anna Moffo, Renata Tebaldi, and Barbra Streisand. Plenty of drift and play to go around here as the speaker of “Streisand Sings Stravinsky” indicates that he “spit blood under her disapproving aegis / and to steal hegemony said [he] envied / dead Guy Hocquenghem’s Elliott Gould curls” as Streisand quips “you can catch chronic fatigue syndrome / from pressure cookers and Crock-Pots” before she lipsynchs “a samizdat *Streisand Sings Schiele*.” To one who has had at least a dozen Streisand-infested dreams, my temptation to swoon is blocked by not only the spitting blood, but also

the sublime disjunction produced by a description of Streisand “posed in Cindy / Sherman guise —jaw segments / replaced by rubber and cardboard.” Streisand as Cubist mosaic, all hinged mouth and elbows and knees! So much for divas infesting my reveries.

In a stroke of postmodern emotional distancing, Koestenbaum writes in “The Tidbit School of Adult Entertainment,” “Expressivity is dead,” an instantiation of Kant’s disinterestedness and Barthes’ drift, further noted in the line “We stop being interested” from “The Ass Festival.” To puncture the apathy and prejudice of public opinion is the effect of these poems, as noted by “Each time I use the word *poignant* / I discover it contains puncture” (“Faust’s Dog”). The French and Latin prick (*poindre* and *pungere*, respectively) punctures not only the integument of our integrated Self each time we are aroused by a pungent emotion, but also deflates the seemingly omnipotence of *Daxa* by rendering our experience subjective, transformative, contrary to the mean of public opinion.

Speaking of mean(ing): in case the mind asserts its penchant for such low-bottom trolling, Koestenbaum provides us with just enough slobber for its slaking: “Let’s blow up our idiosyncracies!” has the ring of slavish ideology penetrating the bubble of imagination’s free glide, and “In modern art we need more gelding, more fringe” and “We live in a totalitarian society” are downright argumentative. Meaning that we can’t escape the onslaught of meaning, however hard we try. Miss Lonely still has a diamond ring to pawn, the mystery tramp still has vacuum eyes, and Koestenbaum is avoiding if-then clauses as “the ice cream man cometh in my mouth,” a meaningful act if ever there was one.

—Richard Tayson

Campbell McGrath. *In the Kingdom of the Sea Monkeys*. Ecco, 2012.

Campbell McGrath’s ninth and newest book, *In the Kingdom of the Sea Monkeys*, is a departure from his previous two. *Shannon* (2009) is a book-length poem regarding the adventures of one George Shannon, a young man who was lost from the Lewis and Clark expeditions twice on its exploration of the continent. Prior to that, his seventh book, cleverly titled *Seven Notebooks* (2008) is a year-long journey from the third entry/poem dated/titled “January 8 (Blueberries)” to the final entry/poem on the two hundred and twenty-first page titled “January 30 (The World).” In short,

his last two books have been large ventures, encompassing time and space, history and the personal. *In the Kingdom of the Sea Monkeys*, however, feels more like a return to his middle books—*Pax Atomica*, *Road Atlas*, and *Florida Poems*—in which the collections are less conceptual and more like a pulling together of the poems on which he'd been working.

Dedicated collectively to his teachers, this new book reads like a veiled thank you note to those who taught him; perhaps it is his intention for young writers to pay attention to what they are learning as they acquire their craft. At a reading in early May at DePaul University in Chicago, McGrath told his audience that he doesn't think creative writers read enough, and that, while they gain a lot of experience in workshopping, he worries that if they do not read, they do not nourish their writing. As I was reading the poems in *In the Kingdom of the Sea Monkeys*, it seemed that this collection of poems might suggest to young writers to read widely, absorb, attempt many styles and genres in which to explore the craft. Given the range of styles and sub-genres in this book, and the writers who are subjects of many of the poems, it is easy to see that McGrath is one who has done, and still does, just that: reads and learns.

Somewhere at the core of this book is Campbell McGrath's own sense of childhood play. Sea monkeys were popularized in children's comics in the 1950's—it is hardly accidental that the cover of the book looks like a final page from a vintage comic with its joy buzzer, voice-thriller, smoke bombs, and X-Ray Specs, the latter patented by Harold von Braunhut, a mail-order entrepreneur who also marketed hermit crabs, invisible goldfish, and, of course, sea monkeys, a cleverly-marketed brine shrimp that, when their tide pools dry up, go into cryptobiosis, but "hatch" when water is added. The Amazing Sea Monkeys were such a hit that they spawned their own comic book. So, what is Campbell McGrath offering us—some metaphor for poetry, the poetic tradition, the relationship between reader and writer? Or a comment on the transformational nature of poetry?

The title prose poem opens, "When I close my eyes the movie starts, the poem rises, the plot begins," and McGrath locates us in the liminal space between waking reality and dreamscapes or imagination, a place as transformative as a theatrical stage. As the poem develops, he tells us that "our lives resemble dreams, luminous tapestries woven by a mechanism like the star machine at the planetarium, realms of fantastic desire and possibility...."; the long-awaited arrival of the sea monkeys themselves, just "wriggling microscopic larvae," really, are not what we imagined in our wildest dreams, leaving us with something approximating "old movies

projected like messages in bottles within the green-glass lyceums of our skulls.” So much for youthful idealism, the loss of Blake’s lambs, leaving us with tigers of the real world in which we live as adults. Yet we are not broken by this revelation, for, as McGrath claims, “*Awakening*, yes, as if startled from a dream.” If, as John Gardner used to say, that every story was a dream, then so to with poems, any dream-space we enter when a work of art engages us, until the poem ends or we turn from the installation, startled from a dream.

Among the many terrific poems in this collection, some of them will be stand-outs for writer/readers. “Emily and Walt,” who McGrath has referred to as poets’ metaphorical parents, are presented just that way, as “enablers, / [who] taught by example, reading for hours...” This is the pre-MFA model, the one through which Emily and Walt acquired their craft, and McGrath boldly asserts, “now the house is ours,” for today’s poets inherit their tradition, yet

we could never hope to fill it all [the house].
Our voices are too small

for its silences, too thin to spawn an echo.

We are reminded in these lines of the children of famous people, struggling to live in the long-cast shadows of their parents’ successes. McGrath’s conclusion both acknowledges that, yet deftly turns toward an unexpected and tender moment:

Sometimes, even now, when the night-wind blows

into the chimney flue
I start from my bed, calling out—“Hello,

Mom and Dad, is that you?”

Here again is the reality beyond the imaginative dream, and the homage to his literary teachers, and ours.

But Emily and Walt are not alone. McGrath includes homages to other teachers as well: Lowell, Sandburg, O’Hara, Ginsberg and Bishop. In “Allen Ginsberg,” he praises the poet who “never sold out the night or the life or the art that counted him as a bead on its prayer-string.” “Elizabeth Bishop: Departure from Santos” is an abecedarius that echoes Bishop’s “Arrival at Santos” with biographical tidbits that make the puzzle

of the form into a riddle about Bishop. There are also “Two Poems for Frank O’Hara” and four Carl “Sandburg Variations,” including the fine prose poem “*iii. Aubade*” which, in a piece reminiscent of McGrath’s work in his second book, *American Noise*, evokes the effect of city sounds, in this case, Chicago:

Who among us has never heard the sound of traffic taking wing,
shades and
variations of a logarithmic chord, song of the city like a message from
within? . . . Song of the city like a terrible job, nail-gunning sheetrock in a
West Loop heat wave, late shift with a push broom in a clockless terminal. . .

The song motif is refrained in “*in. For Those Begging Spare Change Outside the Chicago Board of Trade*” as he realizes that the song of the ghosts of Chicago “is not the wind but an insistent click of longing / I’ve heard all day, every block of the city, every footfall,” a dream, an imagined moment perhaps; the clicking sound, he reveals, is an American flag lapel pin stuck to the bottom of his boot, a visual image with a sweep and scale that Sandburg himself would have appreciated.

The range of genres in this collection is as magical as sea monkeys: essays on knowledge and novels; notes on compression, process, the poem, and on language and meaning; considerations of poetry and fiction as well as poetry and the world; an aubade, abecedarius, sonnet, ghazal, villanelle, pontoum, sestina, and a love song. If “Books,” as McGrath tells us in the opening poem of that same title, “live in the mind like honey inside a beehive,” then *In the Kingdom of the Sea Monkeys* will leave readers—and writers—buzzing inside their heads.

—Robert Miltner

Michael O’Brien. *Avenue*. Flood Editions, 2012.

Michael O’Brien’s poetry is small, delicate, sensitive. It is governed by a desire to register fleeting moments and impressions—not so as to preserve them in literature’s embalming fluid, for O’Brien’s miniatures seem somehow to partake of the ephemerality of the scenes they depict, but rather to allow them to exist, for a brief additional moment, in a shared consciousness that is itself both evanescent and, at times, luminously effervescent. For all its modesty—O’Brien is among the most self-

effacing of poets, not given to grand gestures or cosmic pronouncements—*Avenue* makes for deeply pleasurable, rewarding reading.

Avenue is unsectioned, and the poems it contains are without exception very short, untitled fragments. One doubts somehow that O'Brien, or for that matter his ideal reader, would find the question of whether this is a single book-length poem or a collection of distinct pieces to be of much interest. The title suggests an urban landscape, and the speaker does frequently seem to be taking a walk through city streets, observing, noticing, remarking. Just as frequently he retires to his apartment, where he sleeps, and dreams. Sometimes he dreams of walking. Sometimes he dreams of poems, or of sounds, or, while continuing to sleep, dreams that he wakes up. The border between sleeping and consciousness seems as unstable and permeable here as it was in O'Brien's previous volume, which was in fact titled *Sleeping and Waking*—or perhaps it's just that this particular border is not one that greatly interests O'Brien. What dreaming and being awake have in common, after all, might be more interesting than what keeps them separate.

The perception depicted in these poems is characteristically metaphorical, though one of O'Brien's techniques is to be a bit coy and vague about his metaphors: it isn't always clear, that is, what the literal reading of a particular image might be. When he writes

The news
pours

from its broken
pipe.

one can't really be sure what the news is and what the pipe is. Perhaps 'news' is meant literally, and the 'broken pipe' is a newspaper, a television, or the media in general? A nice thought. But it's equally plausible that it is 'broken pipe' that ought to be taken literally here—sometimes, you know, a pipe is just a pipe—and the 'news' is the water that is pouring from it. Or perhaps the news is gossip, or everyday conversation, and the broken pipe is the throat, or the windpipe, of the person giving it voice. Who is to say? O'Brien's images tend to appear as isolated perceptual fragments, entirely divorced from context, which prevents us from laying interpretations on top of them or fitting them into a broader narrative.

In a movie
rain on a

window means grief

he writes; but in *Avenue*, rain on a window is just rain on a window—which is to say, it isn't *just* anything at all, but is, or is connected with, or leads to, everything:

Given sunlight
everything follows:
strip of
copper flashing
above rooftop snow
across the way
on 22nd St.

O'Brien, then, will neither deny the connections that underlie individual perceptual experience, nor spell them out for us; either of those strategies would risk violating the purity of the sensing agent's relation to the world. (Just what does that colon after "follows" mean, anyway?) In the hands of another writer this could be frustrating, but this poet has the good taste and good sense to know when a larger context is not necessary, when filling it in would only deaden the perception or dilute the experience. As another fragment has it,

It is not the
business of
silence to
give answers.

That passage sounds like something Heraclitus might have said, and indeed O'Brien's work sometimes reads like the transcriptions of a recently unearthed, partially decomposed scroll left over from an ancient era. At other times—particularly during those moments when the speaker seems to draw back within himself, to retreat into the constant, sometimes desperate inner wish for peace—the poems verge on haiku:

Deafening spring, the
body can hardly
hear itself think.

In some pieces the world's details are presented objectively, neutrally. In others, though, O'Brien allows his comparing, evaluating, hypothesiz-

ing consciousness to slip into the scene. Indeed, the repeated interplay of object and consciousness—the way, for instance, a nearly journalistic description of a scene can transform without warning into an act of contemplation, as happens more than once—is what gives *Avenue* its modest, gentle dramatic power. In the above passage the statement beginning with “the body” expresses a fact, but also, implicitly, a judgment. (The line break after “the”—O’Brien’s line breaks, it should be said, are masterly—prevents the judgment from becoming too forceful, by interrupting the syntactic momentum.) A different, more positive judgment is allowed to enter by the appearance of the word “love” in a later piece:

Love the stone
that for a moment
breaks the water’s
unruffled flow.

Once again, the minimalism allows a pleasing, provocative ambiguity. Is this a description of the speaker’s emotions (that is, is this a statement with a suppressed subject), or are we readers being instructed on how to feel about this stone? Or is this, in effect, a combination of the two—a statement of feeling that also serves as an invitation to feel *with*?

Avenue has the kind of quiet, unassuming voice that might easily be overwhelmed by the unremitting hyperbabble into which today’s poetry books are born—the deluge of news, if you will, that pours ceaselessly from the broken pipe of our cultural marketplace. But it would be a shame to allow this small treasure to slip into undeserved obscurity. Everything about *Avenue*—its modest size, its minimalist cover design, the copious white space on its pages, and most importantly, of course, the precision and beauty of its contents—gives this reader pleasure. And in the midst of all the noise that surrounds us, the softness and contemplativeness of O’Brien’s work may well strike us not only as agreeable, but in a way deeply radical.

—Troy Jollimore

James Pollock. *Sailing to Babylon*. Able Muse Press, 2012.

“careful attention”—“plain language”

Speaking of the explorer David Thompson (1770-1857), in a poem called “Map of the Interior,” James Pollock evokes Thompson’s encounters with native peoples and tells us

For what he really knew he learned from them:
to give careful attention to all things

the smallest stone, the bent or broken twig,
learned it from Native hunters in the field

for whom all such things spoke plain language.

My use of those simple phrases as an epigraph may signal my sense that what a reader experiences in passage through Pollock’s debut volume may be characterized by the qualities associated with “careful” and “plain,” in the best possible senses of those words. His poems are about art, history, myth, his parents, travel, his wife, his son, daily life in the neighborhood, and all benefit from the clarity and simplicity of his carefully calibrated, though seemingly artless, sentences that embody this poet’s commitment to plain language—the language of a man speaking to men and women in a plain style.

This reference to plainness, to the poet’s commitment to a traditional plain style, must not suggest that Pollock’s poems are pejoratively simple; they are most certainly not simplistic, but they engage the reader openly, generously, inviting us to notice how the details observed, the emotions evoked, the subtle (or noisy) repetitions of words and phrases, the precisely constructed lines and stanzas, the sophisticated prosody, work together with a rich and complex array of subjects and allusions to provide both pleasure and challenge.

One part of the challenge comes from a poet unafraid of prompting comparisons of his work with some of his great predecessors, with his own transformative take. As an example, the volume’s first poem, “Northwest Passage: *after Cavafy: The Franklin Expedition 1845-48*,” clearly signals a debt in its subtitle, and compounds the debt with its opening line: “When you set out to find your Northwest Passage / and cross to an empty region of the map.” Most readers of Cavafy will immediately hear

the echo of “Ithaka” (in Alik Barnstone’s version, “As you set out on the journey to Ithaka, / wish that the way be long”), but we quickly find that Pollock’s traveler heads into a very different journey, with an entirely different fate. Cavafy assures his Odysseus that if he travels with exalted expectations, not assuming he will encounter the monsters of imagination, but rather the glories of human civilization, then his journey will bring him back to Ithaka, enriched by his encounters on the way. In Pollock’s poem, the explorer encounters not monsters of myth, but the destructive forces of the natural world—cold, ice, predators, and the irony that “the way” is surely long, but not in the beneficent manner of Cavafy’s imagined journey. For Franklin, the wished for encounter would be with “some band of Inuit / hauling their catch of seal across the ice,” whose lesson for the explorer would be one of survival through understanding the land, not a pursuit with force. (This theme of living with a cooperative understanding of the environment, rather than through conquering it, pervades Pollock’s book and is reminiscent of Wendell Berry’s view of the proper role of the human animal in the balance of nature.)

The effect of evoking and then radically re-conceiving a famous poem is not unique to Pollock, of course, but in his hands the strategy offers the reader the double pleasure of thinking through again the Cavafy poem, in this case, and the very different narrative / symbolic structure of the Franklin expedition. Two other poems offer rather different cases of such revision. The title “The Poet at Seven” instantly recalls one of Arthur Rimbaud’s most unforgettable poems, its acid rejection of bourgeois comforts and rebellion against the cocoon of family assumptions; reading, in Rimbaud’s poem, is associated first with his mother’s pious intoning of passages from the Bible; writing and reading for himself emerge from his hatred of his situation, and form the ground of his rebellion. In Pollock’s much briefer poem (only 13 lines) he evokes an idyllic childhood memory, listening to the voice of a beloved teacher reading from the *Odyssey*, and “he lets the story sing / into his heart.” Again, the contrast between the ancestral poem and Pollock’s creates an ironic rejection of Rimbaud’s bitterness—not a negation, but, perhaps, a contrary, in Blake’s sense of those terms.

In another poem, it is not the title, “*Ex Patria*,” but the situation described that recalls another: “Some nights I stand before my bookcase, / touching the spines. The household gods / are murmuring in their sleep.” As the poet descends through association with the text he chooses to read, “to the half-remembered / country I have left,” we find ourselves in the company of Coleridge and “Frost at Midnight,” a world of lone-

liness and connections, relationships and hope for a future free of the sense of loss that might continue to haunt it.

Among the pleasures awaiting the reader are Pollock's prosodic skills. Two sonnets ("Prow" and "House") feature slant rhymes (or off rhymes) that effectively cement the formal qualities of the poems without being merely conventional. The title poem, "Sailing to Babylon," seems a fascinating hybrid—a 14-line poem, and so a sonnet, but written in octosyllabic lines, and so a variant sonnet, but with a pattern of repetition—the first two lines are repeated as lines 7/8 and again as lines 13/14—and so, one of those odd fixed forms, perhaps a triolet, perhaps a rondel, with an intricate rhyme scheme reinforced by the repeated end words. The repeated lines—"I sailed my boat to Babylon/ and rowed back lonely in the rain"—play off against Yeats, of course, but with a seeming nod to Apollinaire, and the whole of the poem charms with its wit and pensiveness.

A danger of the plain style, especially in poems written in more standard lines, iambics, pentameters, is the sudden descent into flat expository, prosaic language: a fine poem like the dramatic monologue, "Glenn Gould on the Telephone," can survive the presence of a line such as "And yet the fact remains that these no doubt" when that is the only such example, but at several points in the book, similar bathetic lines occur, to our surprise. The plain style can sustain and lift a lot of expository prose, however, as the marvelous long poem that concludes this volume demonstrates.

"Quarry Park" is another example of Pollock's asking the reader to carry along memories of another great poet—in this case, Dante. For this fortieth birthday journey with "my son into the April wood," we travel via terza rima through a park in Madison, Wisconsin, rescued and restored to natural beauty from its earlier history as a stone quarry. The narrator follows not Virgil, but his two-and-a-half-year-old son, who romps, climbs, explores, and discovers wonders throughout the trip into and back from the welcoming paths and memories of the past—the deep past before European ownership and digging, memories of native peoples evoked by archaeological discoveries of their homes and tools, their burial sites:

They understood the insistence of things

buried with the bodies of the lone
dead, that sad, beautiful meanings belong
to them not because of what they are alone,

but because of where they are, and whose; what song
the makers sang in making them, and why;
when they were made; from what; and how strong

the spirit was that taught the maker's eye
and guided the maker's hand to hammer, twist,
and polish the godsend metal.

The park itself is a kind of palimpsest, with layers of history and memory underlying the resurgence of native flora and fauna. Meditating on his young son and memories of past peoples, the narrator recognizes “this debt / we owe the giant past for making us / ourselves,” and moves us forward—the descent having become an ascent and the conclusion “cast out into sunshine in the street.” This poem echoes without repeating many writers—Thoreau, Wallace Stevens, Dante, of course—but even with the occasional drop into the prosy, the ebullience of young Felix and the thoughtful observation (and protection) of the narrator carry us through it with consistent pleasure and satisfaction.

James Pollock's poems are artful, and they are often about art. Even the poems of personal memory—his father listening to baseball on the radio, the texture and scent of his grandmother's Bible, the emotional ups and downs of a weekend in Prague—are about memory and its relation to poetry. But always, these poems are about human relationships and communication, and though they are persistently affirmative, they never evade nor ignore the dangers and failures inherent in daily life. This is a book which rewards repeated reading, and stimulates the wish that there will be more volumes in the future.

—Thomas F. Dillingham

John Rybicki. *When All the World Is Old*. Lookout Books, 2012.

In his new book of poems, *When All the World Is Old*, John Rybicki has given us a love letter, a threnody, a mourning manual, an ode to love and true connection, an elegy, and a celebration of life itself, all within the space of 100 pages. Rybicki's collection centers on the death, after many years of their coping with her cancer, of his wife, the poet Julie Moulds. Rybicki's intimate, wistful, sometimes funny, often startling voice moves us through his memories—large and small—of their time to-

gether. This is a lovely book that takes heartbreak, grief, and devastation and somehow manages to honor and celebrate it all.

We as readers of this collection are aware of our place as readers; we are even called upon explicitly as readers in some of the poems. Metaphors of reading and writing abound in these poems of grief and loss. In “April 8, 2008” we read,

Her breath kept pouring out against my neck.
I could not make it stop. Her breath kept pouring out,
I tell you. Yet her pink face beamed swollen with hope
as we ushered in the next and next and next sentence.

We were looping the loops of our stories into a rope
made of tawny light spawning deeper and deeper
into the mystery of two are better than one
until I became the only thread matriculating forward into the dirty sky

like some lost dolphin swimming in that cosmic sea without her.

Here, and often in this collection, we read of loops, threads, and woven or knitted stories. As his wife dies, they “ushered in the next and next and next sentence.” Rybicki’s mourning is explicitly textualized, highlighting the vexed nature of expressions of mourning. In poem after poem, we read of him trying to loop his arms around his wife, as well as of both of them trying to loop, or knit, their sentences, their stories, together. Rybicki’s images of writers and readers remind us that this grief is indeed translated to text, asking us to consider how we might write or read love, and how we can write or read death.

In putting his grief to words, Rybicki’s verse asks us to imagine how we explain or contain both connection and its loss. These poems imagine mourning as an act of reading or writing, foregrounding the problem of writing death, and of writing connection, as well as the complicated ways these experiences are mingled and represented. His poems join images of text, writing, and reading with powerful images of grief and loss. We read in “Why Everything Is a Poem,”

I sing her dripping just out of the bathtub,
her finger squeaking against the steam
on the bathroom window where she’s scrawling
her last love note to my own son and me. She’s singing
the words over and over as she writes, *I love my boys*,

leaning hard on the *o* in *love*.
She leaves a heart and words that reappear
when we place our mouths close to the glass.
My son and I fog it with our breath
after she is gone.

This poem is about writing and reading grief and loss. It is also about letters from the grave, in effect, as the words left on the window by the now-dead woman reappear and are read and reread by those she has left behind. Rybicki here, as elsewhere, joins grief, loss, mourning, and text in powerful and unexpected ways. The very title of this poem tells us something about the ways these poems mingle life, death, and text: “Why Everything Is a Poem.”

We are urged in Rybicki’s poems to think through what words can do, and how they can hold experience. The poems, taken together, challenge us to ask how we can retell or represent true connection, how we can describe and retell a love, as well as a love gone, or at least transfigured.

Rybicki’s poems detailing grief and love are woven in with some of his late wife’s journal entries, in effect creating a conversation between the living and the dead. This dialogue between poems and notes, between the poet and his wife, gestures at a connection across the fixed boundary of death. We read, between poems, “Dude, if you’re reading this and I’m gone, you are my world.” The overheard intimacy of the prose journal entries resting calming between the grief-filled verse marks the connections Rybicki’s work seems to make between reading, writing, mourning, and memory.

It is worth remembering that the verb *to mourn* is etymologically derived from the noun *memory*. Mourning is memory, is remembering—to mourn is to remember, and to remember is to mourn—as Rybicki’s poems remind us again and again. In mourning his wife, Rybicki remembers her in complex and moving ways. We as readers of these intimate poems are invited to contemplate true love (Rybicki describes how he and his wife were “...gazing across this bridge of light / we make every time we look at each other.”), to consider what true connection can be (the poet and his wife share “One body, really, like you dream about.”), and how we might celebrate it even as it passes. What happens to love when one person dies while the other is “still marooned / in this world”? Rybicki writes, “She has hollered, ‘I love you, Dude’ from our porch / as

I fling one arm out the window and drive away. / That wind still travels the earth.” Those left behind are still in the midst of what was.

Rybicki’s poems, though intensely personal and filled with quotidian scenes of a shared love and life, encourage us to reconsider what connection means in a context of loss. His poignant images and startling turns of phrase compel us to consider how we mourn, and what memory means after loss. These poems grapple urgently with the problem of how to write death, how to tell loss. We read in “Julie the Valiant,”

What was looming, forever looming, has come to pass.

You died, my sweet Curd. The winter wind chimes crash
against our house, and the light of love
is on, and you’re never coming home ever again.

Rybicki’s poems also recall a love, a connection, and in recalling he both remembers and calls back. In “On a Piece of Paper You Were About to Burn,” we read:

How do you hold the dead
when they’re hammered into a room
so flat you can pick your teeth

with one corner of the picture? When you were the one
at that moment aiming the cheap camera
wanting to fold her light

into a square locket of time.

The poems question not only how he can cope with loss, but, in a larger sense, how we can write death at all. How can we adequately retell a love, and then how do we mourn the loss of that connection? Mourning is in fact an articulation of love, an element of connection. Rybicki’s poems force us to grapple with the problem of writing loss and death. His lines gesture at the seeming impossibility of containing or explaining profound connection as well as profound loss.

In marking mourning, we mark the impossible distinction between space and connection, between ourselves and others. Rybicki tells a story of intense connection that is now severed by death. He writes of “the mystery of two are better than one,” yet he describes how this connection is now broken, how these two were joined and are now impossibly apart.

We go into this collection wondering how one can represent love and loss, how one can adequately convey the seemingly unconveyable. Yet Rybicki does just that, and beautifully. We read in the last poem in the collection, “I’m Only Sleeping,”

Let go now, Johnny.
The moon is writing

sweeter sentences on the water
than you anyway.
Pull the earth over you now and sleep.

Again we see the intermingling of text and mourning, of writing and loss. These lines are a mournful, wistful ending to a deeply moving collection of verse—a collection that is both love letter and elegy. The poems are a beautiful, moving testament to connection as well as loss. Throughout, Rybicki’s voice is longing, devastated, and in love. In his spare and often startling verse, he shepherds his readers through his experience of deep love and profound loss, all the while making the impossible (accurately writing love, adequately writing loss) appear perfectly possible.

—Maggie Trapp

David St. John. *The Auroras*. HarperCollins, 2012.

In settings that range from his native California to ultramodern urban Europe, David St. John’s signature style—deeply lyric with a compelling cinematic structure—vividly captures the verities of a contemporary world shadowed by grief, one where “alpha waves of desire light up the horizon,” and lovers quest passionately for illumination. Yet the poet’s vision does not rely on the revelatory power of *eros* alone, as *The Auroras*, his first collection since 2004’s vividly compelling verse novella, *The Face*, demonstrates.

St. John’s verse is deeply spiritual, though not conventionally religious. In “The Lake,” the new book’s opening poem, a speaker surveys the lakeside scene where “the raw decorum of the night” gives way to “a slow extravagance the petal-felled touch / Of skin & mist allowed by this // First undressing of the day.” Against the backdrop of dawn’s promise, the poem’s speaker voices his musings on beauty’s transient manifesta-

tions, noting that “what’s given to us / however dulled & undeserving we remain // Is beyond our reckoning / though we gaze expectantly into the sky / Entitled to nothing & yet demanding all.” With lush precision, the poet captures the existential crises of a soul shadowed by memory, longing, and fear, still capable of seeing the potential for beauty in the natural order as evidenced in the poem’s closing image, the poppies “at the end of each sudden summer’s//Rain.” With its sparse couplets, uncanny realism, and photographic imagery, “In the Mojave,” pays tribute to the life and legacy of Thom Gunn. A seemingly dispassionate speaker reflects on the instantaneous eruption of a knife fight between bikers. As “a quick / Steel flash & a breathless / Grunt made it clear / He’d taken the brunt / Of a blade in his gut,” there’s “a low quiver then / A scream stalled on the lips / Of a girl about sixteen sitting at their table.” The “whole place,” the speaker reports, “exploded—Bottles smashing, shots....” The scene ends with a close-up of the dead biker sprawled at the speaker’s feet: “blood barely seeping / From the black leather / Of this shadow twin my / Once now fallen brother.”

The Auroras provides the poet a broad canvas with which to explore compelling aesthetic questions, bringing irony and wit to the dilemmas of life and art. In “The Aurora of the New Mind,” a speaker confronts a lover’s departure. As his counterpart recites “that litany of automatic miseries,” the speaker considers his role in the unfolding drama. Though he understands the workings of his own “grieving summer mind,” he is forced to admit that he appears “a lot like Scott Fitzgerald tonight,” bracing himself with a “tall / Tumbler of meander & bourbon” as he clacks “ice / To the noise of the streetcar ratcheting up some surprise.” In spite of (because of?) his psychic pain, the speaker is not immune to the rekindling of desire and the renewal of inspiration, those “*melodies* & the music” of his own mind. In St. John’s poetic world, art’s seductive power frequently finds expression in the figure of a musician. In “Gypsy Davy’s Flute of Rain,” we meet a familiar subject of folk songs, the itinerant singer who appears mysteriously and who, through his strange, sweet songs, charms a lady, luring her from land and master. St. John’s Gypsy Davy, well acquainted with human frailties in matters of the heart, has learned his job is “to play just a little tune // On a flute of jade and rain / To sing a simple song about the end of pain.” Such music gives “new life to any / Woman or man who’d follow a song beyond the beds/Of the forgotten” and leads them “into lavish fields of blue light // Only the luckiest of lovers may claim.” Elsewhere, we meet a disappointed musician whose “favorite Appalachian dulcimer” has “suddenly left ‘on hol-

iday.” He sets off on a journey, like “Ulysses but better dressed / Against the call of all the blue sirens lighting up Desire,” seeking the wisdom of an “ancient blues legend.” Armed with nothing more than his “Hawaiian guitar / & the faith the songs that I knew were there awaiting” him are the “lessons I could paste like armor // Along the ragged seams of my soul those soul patches / For those soul scars.” Answering the speaker’s knock, the legendary bluesman appears, casually dressed and smiling “the way the moon smiles down on Lake Pontchartrain.” In this moment the speaker envisions a new beginning—the “true education & the resurrection of my good name.”

Because *The Auroras* features St. John’s exquisite renderings of natural and urban settings against which psychically troubling encounters unfold, it is easy to overlook the social conscience that underscores the collection’s most powerful and technically challenging poems. But St. John explores far grittier subjects. While “Creque Alley” provides a stark look at San Francisco’s Caribbean and African clubs and strip bars through the eyes of woman ravaged by life in the sex trade, “Quicksilver Girl” and “Paisley” offer a retrospective on the Summer of Love, in particular the losses endured by its female casualties. In “Human Fields” the exotic tableau observed by a hiker moving through “a glorious trail coiling // Through the jungle beneath / The terraces & pancake layers // Of viridian leaves” is juxtaposed against her knowledge of a darker history. The land she walks is one where “hundreds of bodies / Had been shoved into shelves // Of earth & sockets of rock.”

Embedded in the narrative of a speaker devoted to fickle Selene, the book’s closing (a sequence of “Auroras”) offers an extended series of meditations on a lifetime’s search for answers to eternal questions “What will stay, & what will hold its grace & lasting ease?” David St. John has long been admired for the rich body of work that brings to light the heart’s ravaging, ruinous, and redemptive terrain. *The Auroras* is the work of a poet whose masterful command continues to unleash surprising new pleasures.

—Jane Satterfield

Ryan Teitman. *Litany for the City*. BOA Editions, 2012.

In her forward to *Litany for the City*, winner of the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize, judge Jane Hirshfield calls Ryan Teitman's collection a "first book muscular with transformation." We need only look as far as his "Ode to a Hawk with Wings Burning" to see that this is true: bees drop dead around the stem of a "black flower," a girl "kisses the glass container / goodnight," in which she carries a halved pear (but claims it is her "dead puppy's ear"). Perhaps the most substantial of these images is the title's hawk, which, drenched in gasoline and set aflame, floats "like a lost paper lantern" into a tree's burning branches. Not all of these transformations are violent and surreal, nor do they suggest the phoenix-like rebirth one might read in the hawk. Teitman's attempts to forestall aging and decay present a significant contrast to the stranger and more resplendent depictions that appear elsewhere in this collection. Indeed, the tragedy of these poems is that, despite the speaker's efforts to prevent decay, such change is inevitable. A few missteps aside, *Litany for the City* is a commanding first work. In poems frightening and alluring, familiar and strange, Teitman presents the struggle between the mind's creative abilities and the world disintegrating around it. In doing so, he uncovers an anodyne to the grotesque and secularized scenes that pervade these poems, challenging and engaging readers along the way.

From one piece to the next, Teitman's speakers seek the liminal space between reality and imagination—that place where mere perception ceases, and the mind's creative powers kick in. Teitman writes, "I want to find the line // where the city becomes the city, / where invention becomes instrument" ("Dear Doctor Franklin"). Certainly the imagination affects our perception of objective reality, but why seek this "line" between? Why not simply explore that territory in which the mind takes over completely, and gives way to pure invention? To subjectivity? The answer, I believe, is process. To locate this process is to define it, capture it, and freeze it; to identify it is to keep it from taking place. This is the case in "Ars Poetica," whose opening lines read, "Everything pains to linger / beyond its stay: // the moon begging its way / into the morning sky // like a child pounding at the embassy gate." These lines are, reformed, Frost's "Nothing gold can stay," but the shifting nature of Teitman's metaphors—from moon, to child, to breath—allows the poet to avoid cliché. These changes illustrate not only the instability of material objects, but the changing nature of perception. By casting these objects in writing, Teitman lends stability to these otherwise ephemeral entities.

However, if we assume from the title that the poet means to be didactic, his instruction is somewhat unclear. Implicitly, Teitman might urge the writer to depict the world in poetry to halt decay; and yet, for this to be true, readers must presume that artistic creation, through the production of a new material object, lends permanence to transient beings. I do not see this argument being developed in the poem, at least not explicitly, and thus am left wondering why this piece is titled as it is.

Another major concern in *Litany* is the tension between a secularized place (the city) and the individual's yearning for spirituality, explored at length in the sequential poem, "Metropolitan Suite." In the first installment, the speaker details some of the benefits of city life. He writes, "*Sing!* the men chant from the square. A woman sits on the statue of Lenin and strums a silver mandolin." The city is vibrant, musical, alive. Moreover, simply by population density, the city offers certain social safety nets unavailable to residents in a more rural setting. Teitman observes, "If ever you need an umbrella, just go to the lost and found and say, I lost my black umbrella." Surely you will find one there. As he presents the interconnection of cities around the globe, Teitman rather cleverly illustrates the hegemony of big city culture. He writes: "The seven hills, the seven sisters, the streets named after enough trees to make an orchard at the edge of San Francisco. I could touch the *Pietà*, if I wanted. I could touch Monet's *Water Lilies*." What city doesn't have an Oak Street? A Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard? A Main Street, and a First? Moreover, since Teitman's city goes unnamed, his metropolis could be New York, Philadelphia, Paris, Rome, or anything in between. The fact that this speaker can just as easily "touch" Michelangelo's *Pietà* as Monet's *Water Lilies*—the former housed in Vatican City, and pieces from the latter in galleries around the globe—strips identity from that place.

Perhaps Teitman's greatest talent is his gift for simile, which often allows him to shift seamlessly from one image to another otherwise abrupt one. Rarely have I seen such comparisons simultaneously rendered so precise and yet so disorienting. The images are almost surreal, but as mere comparisons, they rarely depart entirely from the reader's reality. In "The Cabinet of Things Swallowed," he writes, "we fourth-graders crowded around the oddities: the tiny, jarred fetus turning [...] like the rotation of an infant moon." Teitman compares the fetus—small and dead, once possessing so much potential—to an "infant moon," which rests on the horizon in early evening, only to grow fuller and brighter in the hours that follow. Not only is the simile an apt comparison, it augments the tragedy inherent in the fetus image: the moon's yet realized potential recalls that

of the unborn child, which never will be fulfilled. While many of Teitman's similes function just as successfully as the one discussed, the frequency with which they are employed detracts from their efficacy, both within this particular poem and throughout the collection as a whole. "Cabinet," a page-long prose piece in six relatively short stanzas, uses five such similes. They appear once or twice in almost every poem, rarely varying from the formula exhibited above (subject verbs object "like" stranger subject verbs more alluring object). The overuse of this rhetorical strategy over-saturates the reader's attention, and the similes become a mechanical device meant to wow the reader, rather than an organic movement contributing to the poem's overall meaning or emotion.

That said, *Litany for the City* is a powerful book. Teitman has a good ear, and an even better eye. His images are tangible and evocative, and his metaphors are sound. His poems strike the careful balance between disorientation and familiarity so prevalent in the current generation of young poets, many of whom think themselves surrealists (but have clearly never read Breton). If there are hiccups along the way—and they are few—I chalk them up to the usual awkwardness of a first book. More importantly, Teitman never attempts to deflect genuine emotion by introducing humor. What's here is substantial; it means, and it moves us. Teitman's sincerity presents a much-needed foil to the irony presented by today's "do it yourself" poets. If the better poems in *Litany* at all showcase what is to come from this poet, I can't wait to see his next book.

—John James

Reginald Gibbons. *Slow Trains Overhead: Chicago Poems and Stories*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Chicago has never been subject to the excessive literary self-congratulation of other global cities. Since you've been reading this, another volume has appeared on Literary London or Lyrical Paris, on The Writers' Gotham or some other "New York, the capital of letters" anthology. Don't misunderstand, Chicago can certainly boast of a few titles of this sort. Check out John Miller's anthology *Chicago Stories: Tales of the City*, or *Smokestacks & Skyscrapers: An Anthology of Chicago Writing*, edited by David Starkey and Richard Guzman, Ryan Van Cleave's edited volume, *City of the Big Shoulders: An Anthology of Chicago Poetry*, or Granta's recent issue dedicated to the city's literary scene. My point here is mainly this: that

Slow Trains Overhead—a collection of Reginald Gibbons’ Chicago poems and stories from across his various collections—is not, as it might have in another city, destined to become lost in the latest season’s Second City anthologies. Lovers of Chicago, and of literary evocations of the city that they love, for a long time will turn to this volume by Gibbons, a professor at Northwestern for nearly three decades and once a nominee for the National Book Award. And, in a more timely spirit, the book may attract some fresh attention as well, following the media glare on a year in which Chicago hosted the NATO summit and related protests, and, more recently, President Obama’s reelection-night speech. The many lenses will not capture the same place that Gibbons does. By collecting his disparate street-side writings and profiles of citizens, ones often encountered on the street or in diners or offices, he has provided a lively, appealing record of Chicago’s urban life and character.

Some of Gibbons’ poems featured here seem determined to catch a moment in a particular place. They are street-corner poems, fittingly named, for example, “Adams & Wabash,” which first appeared as “Train Above Pedestrians” in the 2008 collection *Creatures of a Day*. The poem’s lineation also fits its topic, capturing well Chicago’s speed and hum:

Where moon light angles
 through the east-west streets,
 down among the old-
 for-America
 tall buildings that changed
 the streets of other
 cities, circulate
 elevated trains
 overhead, shrieking
 and drumming, lit by
 explosions of sparks
 that harm no one, and
 [...]]

The short, see-sawing lines create a frenetic impression, which the line breaks (“shrieking/ lit by”) heighten, as does the grammatical suspense of the delayed main clause, with its reversed verb-subject syntax (“circulate / elevated trains”). Soon that wit of “old-for-America” tall buildings gives way to something deeper, and the moment captured here by the passing train expands into a historical consciousness: “Working for others / with hands, backs, machines, / men built hard towers / that part the

high air.” That focus on the hands that have built and maintained the city recurs throughout Gibbons’s Chicago writings, and the volume’s epigraph, a single sentence by President Obama, captures it, too: “Men and women obscure in their labor.” Likewise, a series of prose portraits display highway workers who turn off their “monstrous machines” and then turn on their pick-up trucks, or late-night workers who restock shelves, cook hamburgers, or “strain motionlessly over the report that is due”—Gibbons’ city of workers acknowledges the various socio-economic strata, the types of work and their specific pressures.

Several poems reveal Gibbons to be a great listener, or overhearer, in various locales. He describes in one passage a businessman on the phone in a hotel lobby, his voice tender and “also full of resignation” as he speaks to his child and apologizes for not being home. The family, we infer, is troubled, the wife and mother in particular. Elsewhere he renders a conversation between manager-father and almost teen-aged son, funnily filled in turn with repetitions and non-sequiturs. He also has a terrific eye for detail. As the narrator follows that boy out of the office, he takes note of a secretary “sitting at a desk that is too small,” tapping her calculator as she balances her checkbook cradled stealthily in her lap. Writing on Gibbons in *The Writer’s Chronicle* a few years ago, Beverly Bie Brahic spoke of her subject as “a close observer of other human beings and their urban, suburban, and pastoral settings,” all the while interrogating the language that relays the scenes experienced.

Human observations are at the heart of *Slow Trains Overhead*, and are at their best when they place the witnessing speaker in direct encounter with fellow citizens. One interaction in the subway station at Chicago and State becomes a sweet, if simple, *ars poetica*. A “young man with very bad teeth” shows off to passersby a number of scenes he has drawn on poster boards. “Nice work, isn’t it!” One woman gives the man thumbs up, and soon the speaker is before him. “I do nice work!” the artist says, and the speaker agrees, with sweet awkwardness—“It’s beautiful!”—before entering his train and rolling away. I think of this passage, this moment honored there, when considering Brahic’s claim that Gibbons is interested in relationships—with lover, friend, or family, but also with “the many others who constitute a society with aspirations toward some sort of human justice, love.” The tiny moments of communion turn Chicago into an idealized, collective hive, where “from all our wandering at this same / hour come shared underthoughts we can hear,” as one brief poem after the Chinese poet Wang Wei puts it. Gibbons doesn’t flinch from the city’s more difficult realities, such as an old hotel that “now houses human dam-

age,” or a Blues-inspired poem that lists classified ads, some heartbreaking. Some descriptions of neighborhoods will bring on in readers a somber melancholy—we see the forlorn “self-/adhesive souvenirs of stadium concerts” aslant on windows, or hear of “brief / illusions of good luck on such old, young, / different, same, frail creatures of a day,” that last phrase shifting Keats’s “fair creature of an hour” into a minor key. That said, more frequently Gibbons’s speakers strive for harmony, and show a warmth toward fellow Chicagoans, wherever they can. “Celebration,” set in a “noisy bar-and- / cheap-seafood-joint,” features a speaker writing at the counter, with an old, blind man speaking into a small Dictaphone. The write imagines a communicative channel between them, whereby the words in his notebook are the same as those spoken by the old man:

Our hunger feeds on witness
wants to sit down with
friends and allies.

In effect, the older man stands in as Gibbons’s shabby but loveable muse, and the poet seems to record the very city’s secrets and stories in the imagined speaking-and-writing relationship between these two restaurant-goers.

Gibbons’s shifts in scale repeatedly create a powerful effect of comprehension (in both senses of the word) of this peculiar, precious area upon the earth. The impression of scope and intensity in Gibbons’s observations seems to be acknowledged in that passage above, set in the hotel lobby: “Everything else is like in slow motion for me, everything but me: I’m in real time and everybody else is going really, really slow.” In “Wonder,” individual, contained encounters with nature—seeing a “brazen raccoon” on a neighborhood sidewalk that gives him a “sudden chill of adrenaline” or noticing a rare warbler at Montrose Point—soon give way to something almost cosmic in viewing Canada geese “so far up, flying southwest, V and V and V branching again and again from each other, thousands and thousands of geese, honking en masse to make their continuous goose music, and entirely, amazingly, across the whole sky[.]” . . . The expanse of the image is supported verbally by the passage’s repetitions, its repeated “and”’s specifically, and the draping effect of the multiple clauses and phrases. The book’s last descriptive passage features a similar uplift, beginning in a “small city backyard” with its “little row of life.” Outside, the speaker hears his wife and daughter “laughing in

the bathtub together, their laughter not meant for me but brought out to me like a gift.” The detail of a glass of wine nearby, and a feeling of rejoicing, concludes this volume on an almost religious note; the speaker feels himself an acolyte of the urban secular-sacred.

Finally, *Slow Trains Overhead* serves as a reminder to publishers and readers alike about how a significant new volume can sometimes arise when an author or editors take the trouble to collect like-minded writing. In this age of online journals, ebooks, and Kindles and Nooks, there is still something powerful about the peculiar cohesion provided by a bound book, by diverse writings becoming newly proximate. (For a different example of this time-spanning effect, see Ann Beattie’s recently released *The New Yorker Stories*.) Of course this effect of compilation can transform not only the work but the author as well. In this case Gibbons claims for himself something in addition to his already strong reputations as poet, translator, and storyteller—he comes off as a highly observant, extremely fluent, and most of all, deeply humane, walker of the city.

—Brett Foster

Vasily Grossman. *The Road: Stories, Journalism and Essays*. Edited by Robert Chandler. New York Review Books, 2010.

When Vasily Grossman died in his small apartment in Moscow in 1964, he died designated a “non-person” by the Soviet authorities. His greatest work, *Life and Fate*, an epic novel centring on the Battle of Stalingrad, had been “arrested” by the KGB in 1961—copies of the manuscript, even the type-writer ribbons, were confiscated, and the authorities advised him that the book could not be published for two hundred years. *Everything Flows*, another novel, was unfinished; its depictions of Stalin’s terror famine of the thirties ensured that it too could never be printed. Grossman died knowing there was virtually no prospect of his work ever appearing. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, though, his books began to be published, including in Russia. Following a new translation of *Everything Flows* now comes *The Road*, a selection of Grossman’s stories, journalism and other prose pieces, brilliantly edited by Robert Chandler. It is a superb introduction to this very great writer and confirms his position as (to use Martin Amis’s term) “the Tolstoy of the USSR.”

The centrepiece of *The Road* is “The Hell of Treblinka,” reproduced in full in English here for the first time. Grossman was attached to the

Red Army unit that came upon the abandoned death-camp in August 1944 and his account was one of the first to appear and was used in testimony against the Nazis during the Nuremberg Trials. While the piece contains a number of factual errors and utilises occasionally the conventions of Soviet propaganda, “The Hell of Treblinka” has overwhelming power and transcends its origins as a hastily written newspaper article. In the piece, Grossman the journalist describes in harrowing detail the progress of victims from the trains on which they had been transported (“why was there such an odd smile on the face of the new guards as they looked at the men adjusting their ties?”) through the square where they were robbed of their belongings, along an alley (referred to by the Nazis as “The Road of No Return”) to the gas chambers and the pits where their bodies were burned. But Grossman the poet leavens these descriptions with telling images that deepen the resonance of the piece and render it unforgettable. “Rich and swollen as if saturated with flax oil, the earth sways beneath our feet,” he writes, walking into the camps. “Thousands of little forest flies are crawling about” on the half-buried debris and then he comes across “thick, wavy hair, gleaming like a burnished copper, the delicate lovely hair of a young woman.” “This wilderness behind a barbed-wire fence,” he concludes, “has swallowed more human lives than all the earth’s oceans and seas have swallowed since the birth of mankind.” The ashes of the murdered were spread on the road and, when Grossman is driven from the camp he hears “a sad whisper from beneath the wheels, like a timid complaint.”

In his papers after Grossman died were found two photographs, evidence perhaps of his preoccupations. One, taken by him from the body of an SS officer, showed the corpses of women and children in a giant pit. The other was a photograph of Grossman with his mother when he was a child. She was murdered by the Nazis in a massacre of 12,000 Jews outside the town of Berdichev in 1941. He wrote letters to her throughout his life, expressions of grief and guilt at her death (he believed he could have warned and saved her). Some of those letters—almost unbearable to read—are reproduced here. He comes back to the figure of the mother and the theme of motherhood in several stories, most notably in “Mama,” a wonderful late story never published in Grossman’s lifetime—an unsurprising fact, given that the story concerns events in the life of the notorious Yezhov, head of the NKVD from 1936-38 and responsible it is reckoned for over 600,000 deaths. Yezhov adopted a girl from an orphanage and brought her up as his daughter. Grossman imagines the girl’s life, including an encounter with Stalin who arrives as a guest

at the house: “this guest walked more silently than any person could walk”; his eyes looked “slowly and without curiosity” and were “entirely calm.” In the end, Yezhov’s reign ends, and the little girl is taken away. “Where’s my Mama?” she asks the guards, “but no one answered her.” She is consigned to orphanages in out-of-the way places. Years later she dreams of “the gleaming black car, the luxuriant flower beds at the dacha, her walks through the Kremlin [...] the voices and laughter of Father’s guests.”

“Mama” is one of many fine stories collected here—there are selections from across Grossman’s career, each masterly and surprising. “The Elk,” a late story, has a man slowly dying under the “compassionate maternal eyes” (the mother again) of the stuffed head of an elk he killed years before. Mid-way through the story, the man’s wife disappears and leaves him alone. She is not accounted for; like many in Soviet Russia, she has been spirited away to who knows where. How Grossman himself survived that fate is something of a miracle. It was not that he did not draw attention to himself—he wrote directly to senior figures pleading his own and others’ cases. His letters were generally ignored but Grossman was not imprisoned for his attempted interventions. Perhaps it was that the authorities decided that silencing him caused him greater pain. Thanks to the work of friends who preserved his manuscripts his works survived. The stories, journalism and letters appear here with detailed and fascinating notes by Robert Chandler who has also done a great service in bringing the work of this humane man to a wide readership.

—Richard Hayes

Matthew Salesses. *The Last Repatriate*. Nouvela, 2011.

The literature of war has a number of familiar patterns: the romantic vision of war as an arena for valor, the brutality and carnage of war which calls this vision into question, the ambiguities, the absurdity, and the psychological effects of war on the individual soldier. Unlike many war novels, *The Last Repatriate* doesn’t deal with war itself. It deals with a POW camp experience during the Korean War and its effects on Theodore Dickerson—or Teddy, as he’s known back in Cracker’s Neck, Virginia. If this novella doesn’t deal with the carnage of war, it nonetheless exposes the folly of Teddy’s romantic conception of the war upon his enlistment. But on the whole, as a war novel, it’s more in the vein of Tim O’Brien’s

works, dealing with certain bottom-line psychological and moral questions—questions with no easy answers.

The novella opens with Teddy's reading his fiancée Beth's Dear John letter. In the midst of digesting this, he is suddenly rifle butted in the neck, and we next see him in a POW camp. The Chinese soon arrive to run it. Penalties for infractions of any kind are severe: beatings and time in the Hole, a cramped space stinking of feces and vomit. Teddy and a few others attempt an escape from the camp but are soon caught. As punishment, Teddy is forced to watch another prisoner beaten, is thrown in the Hole for three days, then beaten himself. When the Chinese institute a communist indoctrination program, Teddy fully participates and sacrifices others to stay alive himself. Twenty-three POWs intend not repatriate to the U.S., Teddy being one of them. But, after more reflection, he changes his mind. Though he returns home a celebrated hero, his crimes are not yet brought to light. Inwardly, he carries with him some serious moral baggage, evidenced by his psychological deterioration in the long, intense, beautifully wrought second part of the novella. He also brings emotional pain, perhaps evidenced by his rushing Kate, a replacement for Beth, into marriage before his three-month furlough runs out.

Mostly, he carries the moral baggage. As Teddy freely tells investigators in Japan: "I done some things I'm not proud of." At another point he tells them: "I tell you I did anything to survive, worse than you'd reckon possible." But to what extent is Teddy culpable for these actions, whether morally or legally? To what extent was he a free moral agent?

The novella poses this question and more: As prisoners of war, can we excuse behaviors under duress—beatings, the fear or threat of beatings, torture? Do we deserve condemnation if we cave in, if we don't resist? Perhaps a more universal question is suggested by this work: What are our bottom-line obligations to others and to ourselves? Are these absolute or relative?

If Teddy himself is not able to articulate the questions in this way, he is certainly grappling with them. For Teddy, it's important that he retain his personal dignity. For this reason, he won't agree to a legal defense as a victim of torture: "He doesn't want to say the Reds could make him do anything they wanted. He doesn't want to explain why others resisted when he did not. O'Neil—he can't explain this." Instead, Teddy maintains that the Reds "changed," or brainwashed, him. If he can construct it this way, then it wasn't *he*, Theodore Dickerson, who caved in but instead a separate, brainwashed self—an alien otherness. In seeing it this way, Teddy retains a belief in the integrity of his *real* self. "I wasn't myself

when I done them things,” he tells his wife, Kate. “It means they changed who I was.”

The novella thus raises important identity questions as well as moral ones.

One might impose, from the outside, the Kantian categorical imperative which would require, regardless of the consequences to oneself, that one is duty bound to follow that which can be universalized, without contradiction, for all mankind. Can one save oneself if it means harming others? No. Kant requires that we must never use another person as merely a means to an end. But perhaps virtue ethics offers a more compelling account of the protagonist’s choices. The emphasis in virtue ethics is on character—the effect of action on character. One *becomes* what one does. Teddy’s splitting himself into two identities—the *real* Teddy, the one who would not have sold out, and the “changed” or brainwashed Teddy—seems to be his way of rationalizing what he has done to his self, or character. But what if Teddy *was* in fact brainwashed and was *not* accountable for his actions? Yet, if that’s the case, why didn’t brainwashing take with O’Neil, the prisoner who resisted?

A third account could be offered—an existential one. But this one puts Teddy in a seriously bad light. If Teddy doesn’t take responsibility for his actions, he is acting in bad faith. He has blamed the “Reds” for changing him, but according to Sartre we are unconditionally free, and we cannot shift this blame to others, however serious a threat they might pose. For Sartre, *we* create our self—we have no self to start with—by our actions. Teddy created the self he is now refusing to accept.

None of these accounts is embedded within the novella itself. But certainly the work raises questions which these ethical theories address. The novella itself leaves us with Teddy facing a ten-year prison sentence, exercising noncooperation with legal defense. Only *he*, we take it, can decide the moral and identity questions he’s been grappling with. His sense of self, his personal sense of dignity, is at stake. And he also believes that if his lawyer gets him off on the victim-of-torture defense, he will lose Kate—perhaps because she will see him as a moral coward. Outside help is of no use.

Stylistically, the novella is innovative, and appreciates the difference between external and internal viewpoints. Writing in third person omniscient, the author often addresses readers as a collective camera-eye standing at some remove from Teddy and other characters. In the beginning of the novella, speaking of Teddy’s sweetheart, Beth, the narrator asks: “Can you form a picture of their relationship, young love, the expectation

of marriage, the idealistic kid Theodore Dickerson must have been to march off to war and leave his fiancée behind?” As to the POW camp where Teddy ends up: “Imagine winter at the doorstep to Manchuria, Teddy with a black eye, bones like poles in a kite of skin.” When Teddy and a few others attempt the escape: “Now we see five shapes running over the hills beyond the camp in the rain, sparse trees, miles of bush and land and no real destination . . .” With author and reader joined in this collective lens to view the protagonist, there is an interesting distance created, but then this distance dissolves as the narrator moves us into Teddy’s point of view. It’s this continual readjustment of focus that suggests an important difference between external and internal—between public and private. What can “we” readers—observing from an external vantage point—really know about Teddy, about his deep, innermost experiences as a human being? We must move to the inside, to Teddy’s consciousness, to *know* anything at all. What gives this novella great force is the delineation of Teddy’s own struggle, *alone*, with his crisis of conscience and identity.

As compelling literary fiction, this novella leaves us with more questions than answers. We can decide that Teddy was a coward for not resisting. We can judge him morally wrong (Kant), corrupted (virtue ethics), or inauthentic (Sartre). We can judge him mentally disturbed in compartmentalizing his identity. We can find him lacking in sound judgment in not pursuing the torture defense option. But all of these are external perspectives, judgments made outside the protagonist’s own subjective consciousness and needs. The novella ends with no moral judgment, only Teddy’s dire psychological need to be alone with his thoughts, lying hidden under his bed. “His concentration is not on his physical actions, not on his body. He is reaching into darkness.” He is envisioning Kate, whom he feels he’s lost. “But she could bring him back, put her hands on him and bring back that piece of him she thought he was.” He is no longer interested in “what is real and unreal”; now he’s focusing on “what is alterable.” Perhaps he will regain the real Teddy, the one who would never sacrifice another’s life to save his own. If we understand Teddy’s need to regain his real self, we are still left with the deeds themselves. Who *did* them? Who *is to blame*? *What, if anything, allows us to escape moral blame*? The novella leaves us with these striking moral questions and quandaries.

—Jack Smith

Carlos Gamerro. *An Open Secret*. Translated by Ian Barnett. Pushkin Press, 2012.

After a twenty-year absence, Fefe returns to Malihuel, a small “two-bit town” in his native Argentina. His plan is to write a crime novel set in a place where “everyone knows everyone else” and, by extension, “Everyone suspects everyone else.” His novel could even be “a conspiracy the whole town’s in on.”

So runs the premise of Carlos Gamerro’s *An Open Secret*, originally published in Spanish in 2002 as *El Secreto y las voces*. Gamerro is one of Argentina’s predominant contemporary writers, with five novels and numerous works of literary criticism under his belt, and with luck *An Open Secret* will pave the way for future translations into English. Fefe’s preliminary probing into past crimes committed in Malihuel makes for captivating reading, but Gamerro snares the reader when Fefe begins to home in on one particular crime, the disappearance and suspected murder of Darío Ezcurra. His amateur sleuthing entails a wholesale digging up of the past, his questions resulting in unwelcome truths and recollections that haunt the town’s populace all over again. Gamerro unpeels layer after layer, little by little, and both protagonist and reader sift letters, reports, and newspaper articles and pan the locals’ shiftily conflicting testimonies for nuggets of fact.

It doesn’t help that many of those testimonies are cryptic and confused and so play out like a series of Chinese whispers. Most are warped by the passage of time, or else are delivered as drunken confessions, hysterical rants or gabbled pleas fuelled by guilty consciences. In addition, we must decide if certain witnesses have truly forgotten key incidents or whether a convenient amnesia has taken hold. Gamerro muddies the water further by presenting Ezcurra as an unpopular resident who had amassed many enemies. His journalism acerbated his feud with Don Manuel Rosas Paz, with Ezcurra savaging him in print as an exploitative oligarch, a “hypertrophied Orion,” a “cereal Cicero,” and a “pampas plutocrat, whose legendary family fortune has been built on the blood of Indians and Christians and the tears of orphans and widows.” Ezcurra also incurred the wrath of Superintendent Neri, who made no bones about wanting him dead, and “who belonged to the old school of concealment—covering your tracks, cooking the files, striking pacts with judges and coming to arrangements with lawyers.” One man says that Malihuel’s main square could have been filled with Ezcurra’s creditors. Ezcurra was also the town playboy, a regular at the tawdry love hotel (its

expertly described rooms containing “lacquered bedheads and plastic-lined mattresses” and “the posters of naked silhouettes against orange-crush sunsets”), and after neat explorations of the woman-scorned rage of the jealous and the jilted, former lovers are added to the list as viable suspects.

Gamerro changes tack and ups the pace when Fefe discloses that his interest in Ezcurra may in fact be personal, based on a family connection. Suddenly more is at stake and his hunt for answers becomes more frenzied. Gamerro tones down Fefe’s nostalgia trips (“mulling over football matches in the church field, summers at the lagoon, games of hide-and-seek at siesta time”) and brings the murder mystery into sharper relief. The memory of that lagoon from Fefe’s youth is sullied when he stumbles upon crucial evidence, and in a flash it goes from happy playground for children to possible dumping-ground for a corpse. Fefe finds it increasingly difficult to know who to trust. At one juncture he is even warned off: “You know what the difference between the milicos and the police is? Us policemen fish with a hook, the milicos use a net.” Will the truth about Ezcurra ever come to light or was he yet another *desaparecido*, one of the country’s many lost, never intended to be found? A daunted Fefe realizes he may have to work on a far larger scale: “what happened in Malihuel happened throughout Argentina...if we’re going to judge Malihuel, we have to judge the country as a whole.”

An Open Secret works on two clever levels, being both a murder mystery and an analysis of collective guilt. For some characters there is no guilt. Fefe learns that many did what they did as a means of self-preservation, be it actively participating or looking the other way. There is a sobering account of a priest who, aware he was being watched by the police, tailored his sermon to tow the party-line and justify their brutal actions. The sermon

was along the lines of the body as a model of the ideal community. In a community of men the rulers are like the head, the police the watchful eyes, the Church the soul, the workers the hands, the women the heart, the poor the arsehole—no actually that’s my contribution—and if part of the body is damaged or suffers an incurable disease that threatens the health of the whole, it’s better to cut it off.

Of course this image of the body-politic is not new (it crops up in *Coriolanus*, for one) but by incorporating it in a sermon—one designed to

brainwash a congregation and save the speaker's own skin—Gamerro succeeds in rendering it fresh and powerful.

His own imagery is at times wacky but effective. Someone emerges “looking more lost than a dog in a bowling alley.” Another was “tripping and falling over all the chairs like a possum in a henhouse.” But the rich descriptions often find themselves side by side with more prosaic language. On one page we are told Ezcurra is dragged out of his house “kicking and screaming,” that Don Manuel “wanted to have his cake and eat it,” that a policeman “ended up sticking his oar in” and that “the whole town would be down on him like a ton of bricks.” “Between a rock and a hard place” says a character, capping a page of platitudes. On another page Ezcurra's fate is “signed and sealed,” defending him would amount to being “tared with the same brush,” Neri, the corrupt cop, wanted “to kill two birds with one stone” and yet “he wasn't pulling the wool over my eyes.” It isn't clear who is to blame here: Gamerro for saturating otherwise energetic prose with a raft of clichés, or his translator Ian Barnett, who elsewhere rises more than ably to the challenge. Fortunately there is very little of this, certainly not enough to mar the novel, but when it does appear it is often in a glut, and we look forward to it fading to a trickle and then turning itself off altogether.

The end of Gamerro's novel is the end of Fefe's paper-chase/guessing-game, and the conclusion is both bleak and surprising. A closed-door crime in a provincial town that thrives on tittle-tattle is the stuff of genre fiction, but *An Open Secret* is infused with the political turmoil and terror that engulfed Argentina in the last century and so there are tougher moral implications and more complex repercussions for its cast of characters. To get to the truth, Gamerro has Fefe expose and scrutinize fear and guilt, and learn the hard way that turning a blind eye, or even a deaf ear, does not bestow blamelessness. Gossip reveals and speaks volumes but “silence also travels by word of mouth.” This and other observations make *An Open Secret* a searing study of human nature.

—Malcolm Forbes