

THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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Cover: Eric Gill, *Adam and Eve*, woodcut from the Beloit College Permanent Collection, Theodore Lyman Wright Fine Arts Center.

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MYSELF AS NUDE

I fall asleep a stone fist,
a stone among other stones
in the high Smokies, where
the woman from Oregon breaks
a heel and has to limp
two-heighted to her car.
I wake in water, to froth
surging between my breasts.
My foggy hair spreads
darkening, to wash ashore
in Japan where a kimonoed
woman stoops, filling her
basket with such weed,
sweet as her breath and
a little salty, sea stuff
steaming from the sun.

Lola Haskins

POETS IN SPRING

In spring, when the metaphors run upstream to spawn,
 poets camp by the waterside,
 hooks sharpened, nets mended, trap weirs set
 and prepare to feast.

*They come leaping, sliding, singing the music
 of the Spheres,
 their smooth muscular bodies slippery with
 magic
 rooted in proteinaceous delight.*

And the poets move.

The poets wade. They grab them, hook them, net them, trap them,
 haul them, hoist them, fling them
 on the shores of the rippling roaring river
 and then they feed.

And they split them, gut them, hang them, stake them, smoke them,
 stack them like red resinous shingles
 and then they leave the river, swaying,
 obese with metaphors,
 staggering under their bales of dry metaphors,
 ready for the lean times when the hovels creak with the weight of
 the cold
 and the Hunger Moon begs for a metaphor in the dark.

*Every year, some survive,
 find at last the bars of clean sand,
 mate, sink to the bottom of the quickly running
 waters and die
 among their eggs.*

*Every year, a myriad of tiny metaphors
 wriggle into life, look up
 at the flowing world through enormous eyes,
 turn downstream,
 start swimming.*

ARCH

Every day she walked to school through
the wet grass and along the confusion
of steel, rising to be the new field house.
Every day she walked home, stopping to watch
the huge arches flash with welders,
and men yell instructions across the beams.

“It was an ordinary Wednesday afternoon,”
she would say after that, although
it became ordinary only when something happened
to measure it by.

She had crossed the field to Terry Village
where her mother was hanging diapers
on the line and her brother was throwing toys
off his blue quilt. She was standing
on the porch eating a fig newton
when she happened to look up and see
the great arch lean and the tiny body drop,
in slow-motion, like all catastrophe.

She remembered the little arms waving,
the tremor when the steel struck,
and the dust rising like smoke.
She imagined the body, final
as a bag of sand. She thought of the workman
that morning, buttoning a khaki shirt,
leaving for work, lighting a Lucky Strike
on his way out the door, telling someone goodbye.
She thought of the omens in a regular day,
the arch she walked under ten minutes ago.
She felt like an angel, transcending events.
She thought which muscles she might have tried
if she had been the workman, suddenly needing to fly.

DEATH BY DISORDER

$S = k \ln W$ (The disorder in a system is proportional to the number of ways of achieving a given configuration.)

The universe has been paying for you
from the first time you filled the brown sacks
of your newborn lungs with air and screamed,
and made a billion random tumbling air
molecules shoot out straight from your mouth
in an angry fan of sound.

It's become worse since then.

You learned that a tall pyramid of blocks
is better than blocks scattered around
like seashells, that ducks never fly south
alone and when they want to
but migration aims them, black darts,
at a warmer land.

You will pay with your bones.

For every button you've pushed
between the starched lips of its buttonhole,
for the time when a summer storm
blew down the electrical lines and you remembered
where the candle stubs were
and found them with your fingers
in the dark, for that yellow light
fluttering over the kitchen
you will pay. You should have been afraid,
once or twice, should have known without counting
that there are more atoms in your body
than there are minnows or stars,
that when you stop pulling them in
they will seek a more even distribution,

(Stanza continued)

the earth will dilute you, all those pieces
will rise and spread like fog.
If you let them, your bones will burst,
pale tracts of wildflowers will open
along all the paths home.

Sara Olason

BROOD SLAVE

for the one bred

1. Visitor to the Plantation

She crept out to me late one night
weeping, said she'd been forced
to couple with a buck
she barely knew, a huge man,
her first, summoned to come
to her bed.

 Mine host, I told her,
wished to gain a breed of slaves.
She must submit to his will
because the curse of Cham
was upon her. This she took
with high disdain beyond her grief.

2. Master Maverick

John, I stood there in the shack
when the breedin took place
and I can testify you no
damage come to that Aphrodite.
I woulden of allowed it, she's worth
eight hunderd dollar.

Why you want
to stand up for a slattern wench
for anyhow? Way she raised howl
when I went to brand her ham
you'd of thought she was
Queen of Bathsheba her damn self.

3. Aphrodite

I can't say plain who I be
but I know right well who I was.
My mother's throne would now be mine
but she died when I'm twelve a'fightin the men
who caught and bound and brought
me here.

How can I tell it
so you will know? To be mounted
and have your master stare, to birth
up babes and suckle them on pain.
To love, to love . . . who? I will frock
my belly, hat my head. No man see.

Paul Lindholdt

THE LOST DIGITS OF MY ANCESTORS

(For Ed Ochester)

I

Uncle Tony P. was brave
Around the cans of anchovies—
What the hell?
He had nothing to lose,
Having already lost most
His fingers a digit at a time
Down at Imperial Wire.

His bowling ball looked
Out at me from the closet
With a crooked grin of holes.

Aunt Mayme
Shouted at him,
But it was useless
Because he was half-deaf.
She'd yell the syllables:
Pa eee no! Pa eee no!
And say the salty, rich food
Would surely make me sick.
But he'd hum his tune,
Chomp the White Owl,
And mix the anchovies,
Capers, salami, peppers,
And black olives together.
I would sit and smile
And feel whole in the small kitchen
All yellow and a pink flamingo out back.

(Stanza continued)

And I'd copy him,
Reaching as he reached,
Dipping the bread as he did:
And our bellies bulged
As he clawed out
The oily, sweet seconds.

II
Cousin Monk
Pulled Billy McGuire
Out of the Presser
Down at Whitlock Shadecloth.

Pulled him
Right out of his clothes—
Set him bare-assed
On the concrete floor.

Monk said
Billy wept
And bled
And swore
All shaky
That he saw Jesus
Sittin' on the bolts
Of new cloth.

Monk lost three
Joints on two
Fingers of his left hand
And lost the tip
Of his right
Forefinger.

He said they popped
Off like corks.

He'd lift us up high
Off the ground

But then leave the room
On Thanksgiving
When Uncle Angelo
Opened the burgundy.

People looked and looked
But not even Maintenance
Found those pieces.

III

Aunt Yolanda was tipsy
At the family reunion.
We were steaming clams
And cooking sweet sausage.

She was a live-wire.

Uncle Willy bossed her around.
She stood up in the shady yard,
Told him to eat shit,
Said she'd been his cookin' slave
So long that she could do
A damn travelin' magic show.

I laughed so hard
That my salad fell
Into my lap
And oil and vinegar and piss
Ran down my leg
And over my sneaks.

But he took her up on it,
Bet her twenty bucks
She couldn't chop a lemon
Into two perfect halves.

Like some crazy pirate lady,
She raised that blade,
And before I knew it

(Stanza continued)

They were all off
And yellin' their way
Down the hill
To the hospital.

But with her waving anger
And spitting Italian,
The half-thumb flew out the window—
And they were all on their knees
By Dinkie's Arco,
In front,
In the weeds,
Searching.

IV
My father moved slowly
Over the fresh saw dust.
His fingers were red,
Always red: he'd been
Boning-out pork all night.

I soaked the salty ropes
Of hog casings in water.
I threw a little worm of it
To the purring cat.

Soon the sausage
Came to life
In his hand,
Curling in the pan.

But some woman
With a raised skirt
Understood the lump
In my throat—
And she was down
In that basement
With breasts like melons

(Stanza continued)

And eyes like chestnuts.
The happy grinding behind me,
I creaked down the stairs.

The magazines
And women
All opening
And God:
Just Imagine
That the world
Is so damn big
That this is going on somewhere.

Through the smile
Of my girl
Offering a light
For a candy smoke,

There was the cry—
High-pitched like brakes.

They had to put him out
And amputate,
Cutting the digits
Clean at the joints.

V

Tonight talk is
Some school kid
Down on Atwood
Found a hand
In the snow.

I don't know why,
But it seems like
I've grabbed my bourbon before
And followed the same crowd.

The cops send us home.

And everyone's wondering
Where on earth
The lost hand came from.

Someone says *mafia*.
Someone says *maniac*.

I chug my booze
And cling to the air.
I tell Mrs. Pasqualle
That from my hometown,
Down through the old wires overhead
And the buried weeds
And the sausage
And shades
Of all the houses
In Pittsburgh,
The lost digits
Of my ancestors
Have come together
As a hand that reaches
Out for me, reaches.

My wife makes my apologies
And Mrs. Pasqualle
Simply says sometimes
The little things in life
Upset some of us.

*You're getting too old
For that kind of shit!*
My wife's breath clouds, fades.

I sit on the porch,
Watch the snow fall,
Drink the warm bourbon,
And feel myself
Turning forty.

But they are all dead,
Those leaving unwhole,
And their digits
Have been relegated
To the place of the lost,
The scattered,
The wandering,
Endless shards of the world
Crowded, weeded, and snowed-over,
Whisky breath
And memory
And oil cans
In the lots
And alleys
Where one hand
Holds another
On a Tuesday night
And no one else
In Pittsburgh
Is praying.

Stephen Murabito

SWEETHEART I WANT YOU TO KNOW

We were going to leave no dream unturned, weren't we?

I think of the kite we made but never flew;

the apricot tree that is fruitless.

You defeated our destiny.

No small matter.

And I think of the friend I valued

most the friend I valued the very most

I hated you briefly for that trespass some say too

briefly for the length of a poem and then the hatred

was gone. Understand you were the first person

who was not an abstraction to me and that is why.

I am tired so tired.

I've learned that a heavy heart can also be empty.

It is time to step back from all of this.

Our glass has run.

Yes I loved you desperately:

a pacifist, I loved you more than peace on Earth.

I once told you that I could build things,

but forever at my own speed. Afternoons

now I hammer slowly on our house, and on

my yellow paper. Yesterday I heard a noise and

turned my head hoping it would be you but it was

only the incoming tide, full of clocks on this cove.

There are long nights when I wish life

was not so very long. There is a darkness

when I could rip my throat like an old

board. It may have the best of me yet.

But I want you to know this:

there are still mornings, mornings full

of birds, mornings so goddamned creamy

that I wish I could somehow harness time,

or make it halt because life is too pure.

Sweetheart even without you there are mornings

when I wish I could nail the waves to the sea.

TWO POEMS

For Gregory Moore

On a flight from Tucson to Cincinnati, we landed
in St. Louis, where
I pulled the news, free this time, from a cage
with broken springs:
Seconds Before Suicide the photograph's caption.
Looking out,
Gregory Moore, the long fingers of his left hand
pulling the door
of the tavern open, his right fist extended
by the gray
.45 he stuck under his jaw. Light glinted from
the three glass diamonds
cut in the door. Later, a hostage would say
Moore told him he'd
shoot them all if any policemen came in; later,
a woman who'd sprained
her ankle when Moore waved them down to the carpet
said he told her
there were too many cases already against him,
that he would be
"a black angel" before he'd be closed in by steel.
Now, standing
in front of me, wearing a striped polo shirt
and floppy hat,
his body was half in the shadow of the cigarette
machine. His eyes
glistened like slick lumps of coal. Moore
cautiously opened
the door and propped his head against the sweating
gun, and thinking
myself there I imagined just the right words
would have made him
unlock the dark chambers of the gun, bullets

(Stanza continued)

tumbling to stillness
on the gold carpet, all of us walking out alive.

Easy to say, as we taxied over asphalt cracks,
the stewardess
smiling as she clicked my seatbelt shut, rivulets
of water gusting
from the window, my suitpockets full of my useless
hands . . . A flashbulb popped;
he fired. Light flowed through the portholes
in the jet's
metal casing as the pilot let go of the earth
and we climbed.

Spoons

Since they had decided,
the adults, on a new campaign
called "family closeness,"
every fourth Sunday of that

interminable summer I'd sit
at the mahogany diningroom
table, polishing
my mother's souvenir spoons.

It was my job to make them
shine. I'd lay them
on the Sunday funnies side
by side like unearthed bones,

squirt a clean cloth with
Wright's, and begin.
I burnished the scowling
face of Sitting Bull,

felt the weight of the West
settle into my palm, Bill
Cody bagging the last buffalo.
I rubbed the Kansas City

stockyards clean, smoothed
the rag across letters
that rose from the bowl
of the spoon to build

Bridgeport, CONN, curlicues
rising and falling like
thin whips up the shaft
to the chisled face

of P.T. Barnum. I waxed
Ike's head, buffed
thick stalks of wheat
on the decorative handle

of "The Reaper" walking
toward sunset with his
wife and his sickle. I
scoured the luxuriant

tarnished beard of Whitman,
scrubbed in the cradle
of a spoon my own
too-serious face.

My mercurial hands made spoons
glint and glimmer,
shimmering in the light
like billboards in Kansas heat:

Prudential.

Jell-O.

Knox's Sparkling Gelatin.

Pillsbury's BEST.

And, finally, the inglorious
cartoon pig smiling
in the hollow of a spoon.
I reached up and set each

in its niche in the long
wooden rack. Then,
dressed in their best,
hungry and full of bad jokes,

the relatives would arrive—
Cousin Karen, who clicked out
a whole row of teeth because
she knew it made my stomach

jump, Uncle Jack
with the jitters, Wilda
hefting her weight through
the doorframe. Violet

with the wild blue hair,
and Aunt Kay, pulling
Uncle Matt behind her
like a wagonload of dread.

And from the street
the slamming of car doors—
Goddamn democrats,
goddamn democrats,

Dean's Sunday litany
rolling toward us
and over the small talk
like a runaway boulder,

Ruth, Phil, and the rest,
the whole genepool swirling
like a microcosmos
in the livingroom.

Then they'd file by
Peg's spoons, admiring
the two new ones, each face
in each tiny concavity
a dark inverted moon.
Then we sat.
Uncle Paul, his fingernails
polished mirrors, offered
a prayer, one brief silence
before the clatter
of silverware, the passing
and tearing of bread and meat.
And we'd eat, all
in our proper places.
The constellation of spoons
above us ordered and shining.

Jeff Worley

EXILE

It is the time of the great
book burnings under the tyrant
Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, 213 B.C.
A scholar has been exiled to a
distant part of the kingdom.

Perhaps tomorrow the executioner will ride
on a horse rough-haired with its
winter coat, and behead us
for our pages of philosophy
inked years ago, when we were in love.

We revise the speeches we will give
from the scaffold. They are excellent.
They forgive, they deplore. We wake,
and tie the gradually more worn
linen around us, and sip the tea
they bring us in a pot the color of bone.
The pier is empty. The wind is cold.
Surely tomorrow there will be news of life
or death. But tomorrow
we are taken on horseback
to the middle of a field allowed
to grow only grass this season, grass and
flowers random as moths, and thistles
like bursts of glass. We understand

this is supposed to be a gift like the crate
of scrolls that arrived one night, foxed
paper with a sour smell.
We smile our thanks.
The horses nuzzle clods as
the guard squints at the sky.

Perhaps it is kindness. Perhaps
he wants us to try to flee.
Gulls claw the wind. The scrolls,
too, may be a trap. We resolve
to read nothing and grow empty
and complete, like the sky.

One night we cannot wait. We touch
the dying lamp to a new wick
white as a feather. We turn
to the scrolls. We pray
they are treasures, tales
beyond dreams.

But they are nothing: lives.
Autobiographies of scholars long
finished, the lives of shipwrights,
the letters of historians
recovering from injury, or the first
stroke that merely paralyzes
the smile. Nothing. We read them
anyway, the scrolls smelling

of a dark spring, the memoirs of
third-ranked generals, the confessions
of courtesans touched
with the skeletons of stars.

Michael Cadnum

BALANCING

(for Hugh)

There wasn't much time, I was leaving soon,
so when she came back late from the airport
(she works there as a Balancer,
figuring how much fuel
will carry how much weight how far),

I was anxious to get things going.
She knocked my hands away
and screamed at me when I tried again.
I got a little exercised,
one thing led to another,

and this morning I'm on my own—
at the airport myself, another of her numbers,
so much weight to balance with so much fuel.

Then I see.

I may be the last in Rome to know.
The arrival and departure screens are riddled,
and where I wait to be called
glass crackles underfoot.
A spray of blood designs the wall.

At X-ray and customs
the carabinieri have tommy guns.
No one is talking.
On board, we frisk each other secretly.

I read there were four of them
back to back in a circle. Grenades, 47's...
They weren't particular about their targets.

I turn the page and stare
at Mohammed Sharam, the youngest of the four.
He has a surprisingly gentle face,

says they dragged his father from a loom in Gaza,
cut off both hands,
and while his sister knelt, head down
as if to Mecca, raped her.

Something slams into the belly
of the plane. The wheels, I suppose.

We rise above the city, it simplifies, is lost.
Slowly the world turns white
then levels out, silver, pale blue, reminding me
of the ice on Pemadumcook
to which I will retreat. Little cabin, nice fire,
no one for miles around,

just ice. Cold nights the ice explodes,
but it has no national cause,
it shines,
it shows what's above
and below, and if a block of ice is scraped by
a block of ice, it sounds like cellos.

I'd say Let's go ahead, explode our little suns—
let's shroud ourselves with their debris
and turn to ice.

Except.

I'm thinking of the girl I silenced last night,
the one who must have meant
to whisper *No*,
Oh God no!

From where she works she'd have seen it all

and tried... I remember the pains
she took to splint the wings of a pigeon,
and when it quietly stopped
breathing, the way she eased her hand beneath it.
Her breath ruffled the pink and copper feathers.

Balancing between the worlds, I make my turn,
begin the long approach
to hers.

BACKING UP TO CHECK THE GATE

He blinks three times
and the road disappears.
Grasshoppers scatter, and
he's in the ditch again.
Dust settles on the pickup hood.
His head hurts,
he wishes for a cold beer,
he wishes the cows would die.

He remembers
the lady from New York City
with the fancy cameras
who spent all one morning
trying to photograph
his golden rooster.
He wonders if she ever
developed the pictures,
if she got all the chicken shit
out of her shirt.

Last week he got drunk
and left the gate open
and tried to rope the postman's car.
The stupid cows managed
to eat all the sweet corn,
and his ropeburned palms
wept clear water
for a day and a half.

Don T. Williamson

REBECCA'S LIFE

Warren County, Pennsylvania 1854-1880

The Singing School

We will try number fifty-four,
Bird of the Greenwood, the Master says.
The corners of that page are soft,
being much-turned, and I am a little
girl again in the front row,
between Jess and wiggly Elizabeth.
The Master strikes his tuning fork
for us, and begins a scale
in which I'm lost for thinking
of the lovely narrow metal
that sings, to anyone's touch,
the same note every time.
Outside the snow fills up our
tracks as though we hadn't come,
but were born here, woodsmoke
in our hair, in this bare room
lifting our voices to the Master's
hand, finishing silent, pinched
between his finger and thumb.

Owls

From the deep hemlock
out of reach of Papa's bobbing candle
comes a low sobbing.
Once I woke suddenly in the dark.
It was the first time I knew
I'd die.

I stop a moment,
to juggle Jody, who's half asleep,
a little higher on my hip. Mama
and Elizabeth pause, a step
behind.

(Stanza continued)

If I could be a bird,
I could fly over these woods
and see all the families coming,
all the little lights
like strings of stars, winking
out one by one as the orange glow
from Shaw's window stares them
down. Jody unwraps his legs
and scuttles towards the house.
Unbidden, my arms lift
their white sleeves in the moon.

At the Paring

New Orleans molasses chuckles darkly
on the stove. Jody stays close,
hoping, though it's hours yet.
The rest of us peel red and green
spirals, core, quarter, toss, and
reach. Grandma Jonah works alone.
She's giving the oil lamps
a wide berth. I'll grant you
they're more light, she says.
But I'll take candles. They
don't explode.

At first the apples
gleam from the knife. But soon, they
brown in their tubs, like women
suddenly old. I toss a wet handful
in. Robert pushes fresh bellflowers
and spies towards my skirt, but
his broom catches and an errant
russet rolls. He stoops to pick
it up. The triangle of skin
at his throat shivers with yellow
hair. His farm's thirty miles
from ours, over Baldwin's knob
where Silas Jewett stepped out
one April blizzard, pork gravy

(Stanza continued)

still stuck in his beard,
wouldn't say where he was going,
was never found.

Pigeons

Jody's up on the rise, knocking
pigeons down. The sun's been
blackened this hour, and still
they thunder on.

When we're done,
and the slippery breasts
hung in necklaces together,
I go out, and climb the knob
where Jody was. He's left
his pole, and a scatter of
snipped heads.

Mama says
she does not hear them,
tapping on the blind glass
of our dark windows, their
wings shivering like wind
through trees, wanting in.

An Early Winter

Snowflakes enter Blue Eye
white a moment, then gone.
Half formed ears of corn
shrivel in their shucks.
Times I wish I was home
again, though the pig
that bubbles on the stove
says, This Is Your Home,
and here comes Robert,
stamping on the porch.
He thinks I will fold
myself like a message
into his arms. Once
Mama showed me how

(Stanza continued)

to write with lemon juice,
so the page seemed blank
unless you held a candle
just close enough. That
was the trick. To catch
the forming words, before
they darkened too far
and fluttered into flame.

An Accident

You had a good axe
but the tree wouldn't give.
It teased you, creaked and swayed,
waved green feathers.
I've seen it in you before,
your jaw tight with hunger
for something not quite yours.
You wanted it down. It crushed
your arm to pulp and splinters.
They brought you back drunk.
Now they stack the wood,
John Prather with his red shirt,
Ed Blodgett from Brokenstraw.
No doctor yet, and the moon
rises, large and beautiful.
I stand watching on the porch.
The woodpile grows, the round
raw ends, the darknesses between.

Fox

I stitched your sleeve shut
to keep your forearm warm
where it puckers and stops.
Sometimes while you sleep
I trace the stump, reaching
through the absent bone.
Once you said you could
will those fingers open
and closed. I believed you.

(Stanza continued)

And now you tell me
you can will us a son,
though night after night
shines uselessly by.
One midnight, leaning on
the windowsill, I saw
a small bloom of blood
on the snow, and a thin
red line, where the fox
had dragged her burden
into the trees.

Snow

Standing by your bed I feel the heat,
how you fight the snow outside,
blossoming out of season. And now,
Aunt Nancy shuts the Book on its
frayed tongue, and looks at me.
And I don't think her bitter teas
can save you, nor even the flesh
that hangs heavy on her arms,
your heaven is not here. Nor
had we any son. I think you felt
you needed two hands, and you
forgot how to use the one, you
stopped those fingers, and
let them lie still, somewhere
in your heart.

You are flowering so hard now,
you are so busy opening,
that the effort soaks your sheets.
And I want so much to tell you
It didn't matter, but you wouldn't
hear. One breath, and you will
burst, in a blaze of yellow hair.
None of us speaks. The snow
climbs silently up the door.

THE GRAND HOTEL "MAGIE DE LA LUNE"

The yellow, cratered road beside the lagoon
and vastly turquoise, tin-roofed huts
that set it off
from equally sallow beach.
Yellowed eyes glaring
through gap-toothed louvers
of murky cantines.
The pink hotel drive;
the lustrous dada
of seagrapes under the seawall,
studded with billions
of vermilion orangina cans,
party-colored condoms, rum bottles . . .

Like a benevolent giant,
dusk lifts the whole scene,
examines it briefly in kinder lights
then flicks it tiredly away.
As the tour agents did long ago.

What is left now
is you and I, alone and fantastical
under blue-pomaded dreams of palms,
slow-dancing out of time and vogue
by the diamond, illimitable sea.

Frederick Lowe

The Art of the Anthology

A half century ago my parents bought me Louis Untermeyer's combined *Modern American Poetry* and *Modern British Poetry* — 1250 pages for \$5. I read it through from one pale blue beveled cover to the other the summer before college, and it has been a sturdy companion ever since. Modern poetry in 1936 began with Whitman and Dickinson and went up to 23-year-old Nathalia Crane. (The British ran from Christina Rossetti to Spender, but in this review I am going to stick to the Americans.) Untermeyer, though far from infallible, was magisterial: modern poetry was what he said it was.

A decade later, Oscar Williams entered the market with *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, half the size and half the length of Untermeyer, with a dust jacket proclaiming: "The Best Poems of the 20th Century" — Dickinson to Berryman and Elizabeth Bishop. The contrast was significant: Untermeyer anthologized *poets*, Williams put the emphasis on the best *poems*, deemphasizing the poets by organizing the book under such rubrics as "Age" and "Class Struggle" and dispensing with Untermeyer's biographical-critical essays.

The "poetry wars" of the 1950's and 60's produced two mutually exclusive collections, drawing the battle lines between the academics and the wild men, the "raw" and the "cooked" poets of the next generation. In 1957, academics Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson edited *The New Poets of England and America*, with Robert Lowell (b. 1917) as the oldest poet and Robert Mezey (b. 1935) as the youngest. Then in 1960 came Donald M. Allen's *The New American Poetry*, beginning with Olson (b. 1910) and introducing the Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, Beat Generation, and New York poets.

Since these four landmark anthologies, the explosion of contemporary poetry in the university and college writing curricula has encouraged an avalanche of competing collections, most of them self-evidently for classroom use. Now that anthologies are big business, not even the professor, wooed by the eager publishers' representatives, can keep up. We editors advise would-be contributors to read widely in the poetry of their day, but advising them where to find a broad representation is not so easy.

So, for teachers faced with text selection, for friends and relations looking for graduation presents, for poets seeking to expand their horizons, and for all readers who want to explore the whole field of modern and contemporary poetry, I am undertaking to examine some

of the current anthologies, to describe them, to suggest some criteria for evaluating them, and to touch on some of the issues they raise.

In describing the eight anthologies I have selected, I will take them in the order of publication and answer these questions: How many American poets? How long a time period covered? What sorts of editorial apparatus? What editorial principles? What conspicuous omissions, given the editors' definitions of their scope?

These lead to more difficult questions: Are there any universally-acknowledged major poets in our day? And if so, who? How important are the anthologists in establishing the canon? What other forces participate in the establishment of the canon? Are there clearly-defined schools of poets persisting or emerging today? Is there a magisterial anthology? And if not, what would the ideal anthology be like? I do not expect to cope with all these questions, but I will address most and indicate some places to look for further discussion.

The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair (N.Y.: Norton, 1973), 1456 + xlvi pp., \$24.95 paper, \$35. hardbound, comes closest to filling the Untermeyer niche. It includes 98 American poets, from Whitman to James Tate (b. 1943), and includes substantial descriptive and biographical introductions, plus explanatory footnotes and thorough bibliographies. The principles are historic and comprehensive. The conspicuous omission is Galway Kinnell.

The American Poetry Anthology, edited by Daniel Halpern (N.Y.: Avon/Equinox, 1980), 506 + xxxiii pp., \$9.95 paper, includes 76 poets, all born after 1934, from Russell Edson (b. 1935) to Carolyn Forché (b. 1952), and appends short bio-bibliographical notes. Halpern selected the poems in consultation with the poets, to represent the energy and heterogeneity of the work of the young poets of that period. Of the seven poets of those years included in the Norton, he selects only four, illustrating what other anthologies will confirm — the huge pool of young poets from whom an anthologist must pick, and the large role of personal taste in the selection. Some of Halpern's conspicuous omissions: Pinsky, Goldbarth, Blumenthal, Graham.

*The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised**, edited by Donald Allen and George F. Butterick (N.Y.: Grove Press, 1982), 436 pp., \$17.50 paper, has 38 poets — from Olson to Anne Waldman (b. 1945) — including 29 of the 34 in the 1960 edition, plus nine additions. It has biographical and bibliographical notes but lacks the essays on poetics of the earlier volume, since those are now separately available. Rejecting the former categories ("Beat," "New York School," etc.) this

edition parades the poets chronologically. The editors aim not at comprehensiveness, but at displaying the poets whose preference is "formal freedom or openness as opposed to academic, formalistic, strictly rhymed or metered verse," and who often embrace "the primal energies of a tribal or communal spirit," while maintaining "the most stubborn sort of American individualism." Sixteen of the 38 are also in Norton. Conspicuous omissions are John Cage, Lorine Niedecker, and Cid Corman. (I have not seen the 1984 revision.)

The Longman Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry: 1950-1980, edited by Stuart Friebert and David Young (N.Y.: Longman, 1983), 592 + xxxii pp., \$17.95 paper, presents 48 poets, from Stevens and Williams to David St. John (b. 1949). Chosen in consultation with the poets, the poems bring together what the editors consider "the best poetry of the past three decades." Of particular value in this generally academic anthology (prepared by Oberlin professors with the classroom in mind) are the introductions to the individual poets: each a compact critical essay, explaining the "formal and thematic tendencies in the poet's work," setting them in their geographical, literary, and intellectual milieus, and discussing why the editors chose the poems they did and what the reader should be looking for. There are a few explanatory notes and a photograph and bibliography for each poet. The editors make room for several moderately long poems, and they include several important poets, such as Shirley Kaufman, neglected by the other anthologists. This thoughtfully conceived and attractive volume could give any careful reader the equivalent of a college course in contemporary poetry. But it is academic; only four of the poets from Allen and Butterick make it here—Levertov, Creeley, Snyder, and Ashbery. And there are some astonishing omissions: Warren, Merrill, Olson, and Ammons!

* I find no consensus on the definition of *modern* and *post-modern*. Lewis Turco writes: "poetry 'of the mind' — classical poetry has traditionally been defined as 'masculine' poetry; poetry in balance of mind and emotion — that is, formalist poetry — Emerson saw as essentially European, concerned with matters of conscious craft, artfulness. It was against this latter kind of poetry, practiced by the post-Modernists, that the Beats rebelled in the 1950's." Turco's post-Moderns are academics, "campus-oriented and workshop nourished" ("The Matriarchy of American Poetry," in his *Visions and Revisions of American Poetry*, Arkansas, 1986, pp. 137, 21). Joseph Parisi, the editor of *Poetry*, is quoted as saying that "'sloggy, loose, amateurish, self-indulgent work is passe'; post-modernism appears to have run its course" (quoted by Jean M. Fredette in Judson Jerome's *Poet's Market*, Writer's Digest Books, 1986, p. 199). I tend to go along with Butterick and Allen, who claim that "modernism came to an end with the detonation of the Bomb in 1945." Charles Olson was the first to use *postmodern* in its current significance (p. 10), and I take it to cover those poets following his essay "Projective Verse."

New American Poets of the 80's, edited by Jack Myers and Roger Weingarten (Green Harbor, MA: Wampeter Press, 1984), 434 + xv pp., \$12.95 paper, with 65 poets, covers the same period as the Halpern volume (beginning with Edson) but goes on to include five poets younger than Forché. It has brief "bio/bibliographies." The editors' aim is to introduce promising new poets, to "showcase" good poets not previously anthologized, and to update the work of those previously anthologized "who have gone on to establish their reputations." The introduction shows signs of haste and carelessness: "And that while we hope to have made our selections with an objective eye toward an eclecticism regarding styles, concerns, and forms; inevitably, given equal levels of skill and achievement, the matter will reduce itself to editorial preference." *Sic*. Of the 85 poets born between 1935 and 1950 (the overlap with the Halpern volume) there are only 19 who appealed to the "editorial preference" of both. Here we see the enormous problem facing the compiler (not to mention the purchaser) of an anthology of the strictly contemporary.

This problem becomes even more dramatic when we turn to *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets*, edited by Dave Smith and David Bottoms (N.Y.: Morrow/Quill, 1985), 784 pp., \$17.95 paper. Here are 104 poets, from Paul Mariani (b. 1940) to Cathy Song (b. 1955). They thus begin five years later than Halpern and the Wampeter editors, and run two years later than the Wampeter — a significant overlap, allowing some comparison. To stick with numbers for a while, there are 136 poets in the overlapping parts of these three anthologies, of whom only 14 appear in all three. The Morrow anthology provides photographs and short biographical introductions for each poet. Smith and Bottoms discuss the problems of selection in a gracefully-written but disturbing introduction. They acknowledge that their primary aim is to share the poems they like best: personal taste is paramount. It is perhaps not surprising then that they feel the necessity of developing a profile of the composite "younger poet": about 37 years old, "a child of suburban parents, television, and the nuclear nightmare," with one or more "graduate degrees in literature or writing" and teaching both in a college. He or she is married with children, "has been or is an editor of a literary magazine," has published widely, translated poetry from other cultures, and has had N.E.A. or Guggenheim grants or both. This poet "tends to be himself, an invented version of himself" in the poems, and though increasingly interested in traditional forms, yet "tends to be discontinuous and irregular in his formal practices, manifesting the style of open, personal, and sometimes garrulous poetry that his senior contemporaries evolved in the seventies." Not surprisingly, it is numbingly difficult to distinguish the work of one

poet from another as one plows dutifully through the hundreds and hundreds of pages in this and the Wampeter anthology. In his Introduction, Anthony Hecht comments that most of the young poets are "shockingly well educated" and "all seriously in the business of writing poems." Odd word, *shockingly*. Depressing word, *seriously*. Sad word, *business*. I am not certain that the homogeneity acknowledged by both Hecht and the editors is not an artifact of the editorial taste, since even poets with a powerfully strong voice and vision, such as Albert Goldbarth, are represented by less than their strongest work, and so share the impression of homogeneity. I recalled Henry James' phrase: "the deluge of cultivated mediocrity." All the same, there are wonderful rewards here: powerful distinctive voices by poets who are not completely self-absorbed — such poets as Rita Dove and Carolyn Forché and Norman Dubie and Rodney Jones.

The Breadloaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry, edited by Robert Pack, Sydney Lea, and Jay Parini (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1985), 348 + xviii pp., \$25. cloth, \$14.95 paper, is in a class by itself, offering new work (written in the 80's and previously unpublished) by 72 mature poets (having "a well-developed voice"). These poets sent their own selections from which the editors have chosen from one to five poems. The volume is a "birthday present" to the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, but appears to have no other formal connection to it. The editors hope that this volume will initiate a series, to appear every five years, providing an ongoing record of successive "moments" in American poetry. I wish them all success in realizing this end. The poets range from Eberhart (b. 1904) to Jim Simmerman (b. 1952), and there is a short bibliography of recent work by each. The quality throughout is very high indeed, although there is nothing from Snyder, Rich, Ginsberg, Merwin, or James Wright.

Finally we come to *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by Helen Vendler (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard, 1985), 440 pp., \$20. hardbound. Only 35 poets, from Stevens (b. 1879) to Rita Dove (b. 1952), with short biographical sketches. By now enough has been said by other reviewers about the quirkiness of the selections (Stevens and Langston Hughes, then skip to Roethke and Elizabeth Bishop!), the stereotyping and pontificating in the introduction ("the map of North America, once so empty of poetry except in the East, begins to be filled in," whereas fifty years ago "the map would have been largely blank"). Her selection of poets born in the 20's and 30's is fairly standard (with the extraordinary omission of Kinnell), but poets born since Plath (b. 1932) get a scant quarter of the book's pages. Allan Ginsberg has more pages than Gluck, Goldbarth, Blumenthal, Jorie

Graham, and Rita Dove (the five youngest poets) combined. (Incidentally, all 24 of Vendler's older poets are in the Norton anthology, but not one of her eleven youngest, just to demonstrate again how large the field of younger poets is and how various the tastes of the editors.)

In the eight anthologies I am comparing, there is a total of 309 individual poets (compared to 107 in Untermeyer). Having done all this arithmetic and come up with some pretty interesting charts, I am now in a position to address the question of who the acknowledged "major poets" of our day might be, if indeed we have any. With a warning that I am suspicious of this sort of tabulation, I can tell you at least who makes it most regularly into these volumes. There is only one poet who is in every collection for which he is eligible: John Ashbery, in five. One other poet is in five (though not in the Longmans anthology): Rita Dove, one of the youngest (b. 1952). Eight are in four of the eight anthologies: Wilbur, Merwin, Snyder, Pinsky, Dubie, Levis, St. John, and Jorie Graham. Dear reader, if your favorites are not listed, be not dismayed. Burt Hatlen cites Creeley and Duncan as "the two finest poets writing today," but Duncan is in only two, Creeley in three. William Harmon calls Laura Riding "the best living American poet," but she is in only one — Norton. Among the poets not included in any of the eight are John Cage, David Ignatow, Lorine Niedecker, Mona Van Duyn, W.D. Snodgrass, May Swenson, and two of the poets who have received MacArthur awards — Joseph Brodsky and Jay Wright. Also missing are poems by William Carpenter, Lola Haskins, Bruce Cutler, Mary Oliver, Karen Snow, Gjertrud Schackenberg, and Tom Frosch — all poets with firm original voices and at least two books.

Obviously none of the available anthologies will give the reader the whole range of modern or contemporary poetry. There does not yet appear to be a settled canon of our poets, though one can see some names beginning to emerge. Helen Vendler wisely acknowledges (citing Hugh Kenner's view that it is the poets, not the anthologists or professors, who decide who will be read in future generations) that it is too early to tell which poets will belong, "hundreds of years from now, to the common music of our century and which ones will survive as major figures." Amen to that.

Let us look quickly at another approach to a canon. Just before John Ciardi's death, he and Judson Jerome dreamed up a plan to discover which poets were judged most important by their peers. Jerome polled over 6,000 poets and solicited responses from readers of his poetry column in *Writer's Digest* to list "the ten major living American poets." He received more than 4,000 nominations, from which I assume over 400 responses. In the November 1986 issue of *Writer's Digest* he

releases the results. If this sort of thing interests you, you will want to look up that issue and December's, in which he discusses anthologies. In his poll, nearly a third of all respondents (let's say 130 out of 400) named the three who came out on top. Are you ready? William Stafford, first, and then Denise Levertov, followed by Allen Ginsberg. The next four: Galway Kinnell, Robert Bly, Adrienne Rich, and Richard Wilbur. Robert Penn Warren, Gary Snyder, and W.S. Merwin round off the top ten. All those who received two or more nominations totaled 236. More than 400 more were named only once. Let that sink in: between six and seven hundred living American poets were nominated as a major American poet. We are living in an era of extraordinary wealth and diversity.

Meanwhile, which of the available anthologies should one order (and one will probably have to order, if the bookstores and libraries I've checked are any indication)? I'd say that to get the richest and most varied view of the poetry of our era, get *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* — a superb buy. For a narrower but more thoughtful and instructive overview, get the Longman. For fresh strong work by recognized living poets, get the Breadloaf, and buy subsequent volumes as they appear. If your taste runs to the Olson/Duncan/Ginsberg pole, get *The Postmoderns*. For the younger generation, the Morrow and Wampeter are unfortunately very similar in tone, but actually there isn't a great deal of overlap in poems. The Morrow is a better produced volume, visually attractive (the pages are already coming out of my copy of the Wampeter), but there are some strong poems in both. Judson Jerome thinks the best is *Contemporary American Poetry*, edited by A. Poulin Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 4th edition), 736 pp., \$20.95, paper, text edition, but I have not seen a copy since the second edition, which has Ignatow but not Ammons, Snodgrass but not Bishop.

I would like to see all the volumes I have reviewed in all public libraries, and you would serve the cause of poetry well if you asked your librarian to order the lot.

Still, there is a need for more anthologies. There is nothing now in print as lively and inspiring as Richard Kostelanetz's *Possibilities of Poetry* (N.Y.: Delta, 1970), which unlike the nine collections I've mentioned was a selection of *poems* rather than of *poets*, so that one found Zukofsky's "The" next to Cage's "Diary," and S. Foster Damon's sonnets leading into Armand Schwerner's "Tablets." Perhaps Kostelanetz could be induced to update this volume. Judson Jerome is undertaking to prepare an anthology based on his survey, and that should be interesting, though again it would be of poets, not poems.

Perhaps he should do a follow-up survey of the *poems* his respondents could not live (or teach) without. I realize there are severe problems with permission fees (Chad Walsh declared after the permissions hassles over *Today's Poets* he would never again attempt an anthology). But the market is huge, and a major publisher, such as Norton, ought to try it.

This brings us down to the problem of texts for the classroom—really big business. Poet-teacher Gregory Orr, quoted in “Poetry Anthologies: Boon or Bane?” in *The Writing Business* (N.Y.: Poets & Writers Press, 1985), argues that poetry anthologies ought not be allowed in college-level classrooms. High reprint fees keep seminal works out of the anthologies; major coherent works like Kinnell’s *Book of Nightmares* get excerpted or omitted; students get a smattering of a poet; and a teacher has no incentive to prepare a poet’s oeuvre thoroughly. Although I am devoted to my own favorite anthologies and deeply indebted to them from Untermeyer on, as a teacher I am inclined to agree with Orr. Unless I am teaching something like close analysis in an introductory course, where I am grateful for the catholicity, the quality of book production, and the reasonable price of the Norton anthologies, I have always chosen to require complete books by individual poets. The students and I have become much more deeply involved in the poetry with this kind of concentration, and the advantages of this engagement have far outweighed the disadvantage of introducing only eight or ten poets. Students can fill in the gaps, once they have come to care about contemporary poetry, by reading something like the Longman anthology on their own. We should have the full range of anthologies available in the bookstores. All the collections I have reviewed here deserve to be easily available to their potential readers.

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Here is a handful of specialized anthologies deserving of attention.

Strong Measures: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms, edited by Philip Dacey and David Jauss (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1986), 492 pp., \$18.95 hardbound. A thoughtfully conceived and extremely useful anthology, with 188 poets who have written in “meter and stanza and the like.” The variety in content as well as form is dazzling, and the book is a joy to read. For the academically minded there is a fascinating analytical introduction, discussing nine ways that contemporary poets develop or subvert traditional prosody. There is a crisp appendix on “Meter and Scansion,” another defining the forms and citing the examples in the text, and another indexing the

poems and their forms by author. Dacey and Jauss also provide a bibliography of books and articles about traditional forms and prosody, so that this anthology serves as an invaluable reference work. Still, its primary appeal is in its collection of wildly various, deliciously crafted, and altogether splendid poems.

The Norton Book of Light Verse, edited by Russell Baker (N.Y.: Norton, 1986), 448 pp., \$17.95. Here are all the old familiar faces, Belloc and Bishop (Morris, this time), Hoffenstein, Coward, Don Marquis and Phyllis McGinley. E.B. White and Ogden Nash, Roethke and Wilbur. Lots of Anonymous. A pleasant reunion, but I was surprised to discover how many I had known by the time I was fifteen. Very few surprises here, at least for this reader.

Talking to the Sun: An Illustrated Anthology of Poems for Young People, selected and introduced by Kenneth Koch and Kate Farrell (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 112 pp., \$18.95 hardbound. This large enchanting volume (8½" x 8½") is richly illustrated in color with paintings and objects from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Both poems and art represent a global range of cultures. The editors have done a remarkable job of correlating the poems with the illustrations. On one page is Monet's wet-looking "Poplars," with its four strong vertical trunks, next to Apollinaire's "It's Raining," slanting in four parallel streams down the length of the page. Like all the best books for young people, this appeals equally to all ages. It seems a pity that the editors allowed the inclusion (even in the subtlest of grey ink) of the kinds of explanatory notes that disfigure so many text books.

Songs From This Earth On Turtle's Back: Contemporary American Indian Poetry, edited by Joseph Bruchac (Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1983), 310 pp., \$9.95 paper. This is an introduction to 52 poets from more than 35 different Native American Nations. Vivid, concrete, musical poems, without a dull or flabby line in the lot. Also an imaginatively constructed book, with pictures of each poet and a statement, sometimes quite substantial, often quite moving, by each, about her or his own life and work.

"Language" Poetries: An Anthology, edited by Douglas Messerli, (N.Y.: New Directions, 1987), 160 pp., \$21.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper. The only thing that looks like an avant garde in the present horizon, the "Language" poets, 20 of whom are presented here, consider language as "perception, thought itself," and as Craig Watson puts it, conceive writing as "a performance in which the reader is both audience and

performer." The best audience/performer for this school has been Marjorie Perloff, whose sensitive and painstaking essay in the May/June 1984 *APR*, "The Word As Such: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties," is a much more valuable introduction than Messerli's, which remains centered in the theory. It may be, however, that only a reader spell-bound by the theory will have the patience to participate in these difficult verbal constructions in the way the writers desire.

M.K.S.

For further discussion of some of the issues raised in this review:

Hatlen, Burton. "Carroll Terrell and the Great Poetry Wars." *Explorations: A Journal of Research at the University of Maine at Orono* 2 (April 1986): 3-15.

Jerome, Judson. "Heavy Hitters." *Writer's Digest* (November 1986): 14, 18-19.

_____. "The Last Roundup." *Writer's Digest* (December 1986): 10-13, 54.

Lazar, Hank. "Criticism and the Crisis in American Poetry." *The Missouri Review* 9 (1985/86): 201-232.

Mayer, Debbie. "Poetry Anthologies: Boon or Bane?" *The Writing Business: A Poets & Writers Handbook*. New York: Poets & Writers, 1985, 208-215.

Santos, Sherod. "Notes toward a Defense of Contemporary Poetry." *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1986): 284-296.