

The Best American Poetry, 2011 (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2011, 237 pp, \$35 hardbound, \$16 paper, ebook edition available). Guest Editor **Kevin Young**, Series Editor **David Lehman**.

First, the bad news. Frankly, not much of the work in this year's *Best American Poetry* interests me greatly. When preparing to review a volume, I usually read it straight through, marking poems that attract me enough to want to write about them. This year the count remains quite low. I can't ignore the potential danger of entropy in such a series; some will inevitably see its continuation as a sign of conservatism and complacency. At times comments become vituperative. Writing in *The Huffington Post*, Anis Shivani remarked about last year's volume: "One cannot escape the feeling, twenty-plus years after the inception of the series, that it has absolutely run out of steam, having become a coterie affair where one goes not so much to seek the most exciting in poetry, but to admire, with horror, the quaint artifacts and robust machinations of the Old Masters. . . . This is gibberish pretending to be poetry. . . . The bulk of the academic poetry written today is from a stance of moderate, earnest, entirely boring emotion."

It's not surprising that in any selection of "best" poems a reader will find some disappointing; the percentage this year, however, seemed to me higher than usual. Even some work that intrigued me needed editing before appearing in public. Mary Jo Salter's "The Afterlife" sensitively and intelligently explores the ancient world in an ekphrastic poem describing the limestone statue of an Egyptian couple but provides too much detail and ends with a superfluous sketch of the viewer heading out into the Chicago cold. Jude Nutter's "Word" begins brilliantly with lines describing her ailing mother and concludes with a strong image of this "woman / who spent the last months of her life with nothing / but rain inside her." The previous two and a half stanzas, however, elevate the diction to a level that undermines the rest of the poem, moving from a "skylark's rising // smear of music" to a "sleek, white pony / in the wet, roped-off pasture . . . / navigating . . . through the high // surge of wild iris." Neither Salter nor Nutter is an Old Master. Neither of these poems, however, presents gibberish; both in their more successful moments move well beyond "moderate, earnest . . . boring emotion."

So there's good news as well. Although numerous poems do not excite me, the poems I like I like a great deal. Furthermore, I delight to see that the world of this year's *BAP* is larger than that of its two predecessors: more countries, more politics, more references to other poets/writers/musicians/artists. If the 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics went to three scientists for their discovery of the accelerating expansion of the universe, then Kevin Young, editor of this year's *BAP*, deserves an award for choosing poems that recognize the expanding universe beyond our borders. Perhaps as we were leaving the Bush era, experiencing the aftermath of the Great Recession and the election of the first African American president, poets again began to look outward. Barack Obama strides through these pages, from Elizabeth Alexander's sketch of the candidate in "Rally" to numerous comments in the fascinating, informative autobiographical and compositional notes at end of the book.

In reviewing the 2009 and 2010 *BAP* volumes, I struck mostly a thematic tone, remarking as suggested above the limited vision (geographic, literary, political, cultural) of much American poetry. I also observed the elegiac music that dominates the poems. Kevin Young plays the same notes: "Our age seems to be an elegiac one. . . . often not just for the dead . . . but for the living." Since we sound the same chord, I shouldn't spend time this year recreating the melody in a minor key. Let me instead move toward the tonic: In this year's *BAP* the elegy continues, but at least we sing in different languages and of different lands. And though the poems remain elegiac, they often become anti-elegies as well, as if even to express grief means to move beyond it.

It's easier to tear down than to build up. Rather than dwell on weaknesses let me praise strength. For starters I quote in its entirety Jane Hirschfield's "The Cloudy Vase," an elegiac anti-elegy that I admire for its concision, crisp image, and understated wisdom:

Past time, I threw the flowers out,
washed out the cloudy vase.
How easily the old clearness
leapt, like a practiced tiger, back inside it.

Robert Hass creates another anti-elegiac elegy in "August Notebook: A Death," reliving his grief at his brother's dying but

relieving that grief through his own exploration of language, deciphering the language of his grief, and discovering coincidentally an appropriate poetic form:

I woke up thinking about my brother's body. . . .

That was my first bit of early morning typing

So the first dignity, it turns out, is to get the spelling right.

Whether it arrives in the form of accurate typing, the music of Billie Holliday, "an order / of doing things and symbolic forms of courtesy / for the bereaved," "Mississippi John Hurt's / Great song about Louis Collins," the ability to argue with his brother about their mother's happiness, or the conclusion of the arguments through the death of the brother, evicted, disabled, broke—appropriate language enables the poet both to express his grief and to transcend it. In his note to the poem, Hass quotes Judith Moore: "Sometimes . . . a poet just wants to say *river, bicycle, peony*." Or sometimes, making no more sense, and no less, the singer wants, as Hass does in the middle of this elegy, simply to sing:

The ones who don't take the old white horse

Take the evening train.

What I respond to most in poetry is rhythm and image—musical, imaginative use of the language. Hass presents a fistful, a full feast.

Music plays an even larger role in Patricia Smith's "Motown Crown." Smith reigns as queen of slam poetry, winning the national competition four times, more than any other competitor. But "queen of slam poetry" doesn't quite cover the turf. The numerous performances of hers I've seen have relied not so much on the histrionic element of slam as on the oral tradition, on the compelling power of a tale recited without the intervention of writing and reading, as if straight from the mouth and heart. Like Carolyn Forché, Smith at her best convinces an audience that what she is speaking is fresh-cut at that very moment, even if it is a poem she has already published or performed numerous times. Her poems have seemed shaped by the narratives themselves rather than formal concerns. So it is fascinating to learn that she created the crown of sonnets that graces this year's *BAP* after she "fell in love with the possibilities of prosody and meter while pursuing an MFA." As she writes in her note,

I love the crown. I love its quirky math, its illuminating repetitions, its insistent song. . . . I wrote the crown in a

relentlessly driven stupor in about three and a half hours. . . .
In the months after its creation, I visited the crown often.
Revision was like walking into the house of an old friend,
each time rearranging the furniture a little.

On one level a tribute to Motown itself, the sonnets move one by one from the Temptations to Smokey Robinson to Stevie Wonder to Diana Ross to Mary Wells and onward, providing snapshots of the singers and their songs, their individual and shared sounds. As she describes the music, Smith also presents the artists behind the songs (“Mary Wells, so drained of self-esteem, / was a pudgy, barstool-ridin’ buck-toothed dream.” Most tellingly, she explores the effect the artists and their music had on her as a young impressionable black woman, from a fascination with Smokey Robinson that would lead her to “replace / our *daddies* with his fine and lanky frame” to eventual recognition of the limitations of such fascination:

So now, at fifty plus, I turn around
and see the glitter drifting in my wake
and mingling with the dirt. My dingy dreams
are shoved high on the shelf.

What these particular lines reveal is Smith’s ability to create iambic pentameter that feels like spoken American; what they don’t show is how skillfully she on occasion breaks the iambic pattern with an extra syllable, one that keeps the pentameter from becoming too regular, too monotonous. Note her deft handling of the final line of this passage:

One day she’ll own
that quiet heart that Motown taught to speak,
she’ll know that being the same makes her unique.

In the sonnet that completes the crown, Smith steals a jewel from each of the preceding fourteen poems, providing strong examples of gnomic or aphoristic verse:

Ask any colored girl, and she will moan,
remembering how love had lied so loud. . . .
Less than perfect love was not allowed
and every song they sang told me to wait.

Among my favored modes, gnomic poetry has a special place. In his introduction, series editor David Lehman comments on our love of memorable phrases, from Dickinson’s “transport / Of cordiality” to the opening line of Frost’s “Directive” and beyond.

Kevin Young seems to share that love for the pithy statement, not only as segments of long sequences such as the Motown set, but also in much shorter poems. Although I have no space to focus on other gnomic verse in the volume, let me pay brief tribute to a few poets who caught my ear.

Terrance Hayes:

Not what you see, but what you perceive,
that's poetry. Not the noise, but its rhythm; an arrangement
of derangements.

Alan Michael Parker:

My friend remembers all he reads—
so when does he finish a book?

Jude Nutter, whose poem I criticized earlier:

My mother's sentences become shorter. . . .
Stone bridge with a diminishing

span.

And finally James Richardson, who challenges the very notion of poetry by crafting poems that are only aphorisms or epigrams:

Too much apology doubles the offense.
The heart is a small, cracked cup, easy to fill, impossible to
keep full.
The reader lives faster than life, the writer lives slower.

One quality of gnomic poetry is its concision. Another is its pithy and explicit wisdom. On the surface, the haiku tradition as historically practiced in Japan works in quite an opposite direction; though concise, it often refuses to summarize, to state. One brilliant quality of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," stemming both from his discovery of classical Chinese and from his knowledge of the European tradition, consists in suggesting the asymmetric beauty of Asian watercolors, their "petals on a wet black bough," while echoing in its slant rhyme the symmetrical heroic couplets of Alexander Pope.

In this year's *BAP* the haiku cross-dresses in gnomic clothes. In "Time Pieces," Rachel Wetzsteon creates a string of haiku, each with its own title. Accentuating the haiku/couplet mismatch, the poems all rhyme. The verbal play throughout is as rich as the title of the sequence as a whole. Some nibble at cynicism, as in "Reunion time":

Days passed like drugged snails.
I met you at the station,
laughed at their faint trails.

“Retronym time” applies that vision to politics:

Cheering: it was done.
But soon the Great War would be
renamed World War One.

Some, like “Temp time,” depend on a single crisp image:

Will I be alive
when the twelve-headed jailer
announces it’s five?

It’s sadly ironic that Wetzsteon did not make it to five o’clock; she died in 2009.

Richard Wilbur, one of the Old Masters scoffed at by Shivani, contributes a slight but lovely elegiac anti-elegy made even more delightful, as Lehman points out, by its alphabetical juxtaposition with Wetzsteon’s work. Wilbur’s poem also consists of rhymed haiku, now cast as stanzas. In “Ecclesiastes II:I” he takes the “old metaphor” “We must *cast our bread / Upon the waters,*” links it to “rice farming on the / River’s flooded shore.” He then finds solace in the belief “That it’s no great sin to give, / Hoping to receive” and, as he throws “broken bread,” bets that “One more spring will come.” The poem reminds me twice of Wilbur’s mentor, Robert Frost, first for its resemblance to the tiny Frost poem “Dust of Snow” and second for the recognition that even Old Masters sometimes create small masterpieces, as if we might ask with Frost of old age itself “what to make of a diminished thing.”

Haiku figure as well in C. K. Williams’s “A Hundred Bones.” The title comes from a Bashō passage quoted as an epigraph: “In this mortal frame of mine . . . made of a hundred bones . . . there is something . . . called . . . a windswept spirit.” Although Williams quotes no haiku by the Japanese masters, they are present even in their absence. Like zen koans, gnomic without being aphoristic, wise but not witty, classical haiku often disappear like Bashō’s frog into the sound they make. In “A Hundred Bones” Williams leaps quietly between past and present. From the start, the language bears no resemblance to haiku: “And thus the hundred bones of my body plus various apertures plus that thing I don’t know yet / to call spirit.” We’re not in the

present but in the past, “all aquake with joyous awe” not at some Buddhist revelation but “at the shriek of the fighter planes” as they “swoop in their practice runs” near his New Jersey home during World War II. And he’s a boy and he and his buddy Arnold love the planes and know the need to bomb the “Nips, Krauts” and to torture their own “enemy-friends” who have thoughtlessly “gone off to a ball game without” them. He rejoices at the “victory,” the “clouds like giant ice creams over the evil Japanese empire.” In retrospect, Williams recognizes “Japanese poets come later. We don’t know we need them. . . . Especially Bashō: ah, that *windswept spirit*; ah, that hardly there frog,” that force that brings home to the two boys actual warfare and its manifesting of “our *flaw . . . our error*.”

I’ve never been a fan of James Merrill, so I was surprised to find myself admiring greatly the elegiac anti-elegy to him by Stephen Yenser that closes this year’s volume. I didn’t know Yenser’s work previously, but “Cycladic Idyll: An Apologia” possesses much that I admire in any poetry: gnomic moments, emotional commitment, skilled use of language (especially humorous word-play), compelling narrative that, again, looks beyond our national boundaries. The poem begins with no clear story, plunged in medias res, in essentially rhymed prose:

I come here for the views.

I come because there is no news.

Because things have been arranged. Because I have no other plans. Because there are no plans for me. Because I do not have to choose.

It quickly moves to literary allusion (Matthew Arnold), more wordplay, and slow development of the narrative:

I come to be alone. Because I am alone. Out of season. Like the few midges left. Adrift on a stony island no known poet hails from. Enisled. Outlandish as that term. (*Annihiled* is different but only by a smidge.)

Without abandoning the wordplay, Yenser’s first section ends like a symphonic movement with a subtle resolution of the melodic narrative line:

. . . here where it twists on itself
like the walkways to waylay laid-up freebooters like me
and my dead friend.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

The friend, identified only in the indispensable autobiographical notes, is James Merrill.

The wordplay becomes less thick as Yenser explores Greece and explores his exploration, then returns to his original method near the end of the six-part poem:

And I am in over my head again, where it all flows, beginning
with the simplest language, where once some tongue-slip
led to *slime* then slid along to *loam* and *lime* and then
oblivion,

While even stone is hardly faster, sea creatures secreting
shells whose limestone pressed to marble harbors
streaming linen.

I come back because I cannot stay away. Because I cannot
stay.

I come back to leave. Not to leave a mark, either. To take it,
rather. Like a vow. A vow of silence, say. . . .

To take it and to leave it, then. To leave my
take—as pirates and directors have it—and to take my
leave.

As these strong poems demonstrate, this volume brings good news as well as bad. But Shivani and other critics of the series raise important questions. Before I take my own leave I'd like to say that I intend in future issues of the *BPJ* to pursue those questions, to comment on the *Best American Poetry* series as a whole and on its role in determining what poetry we Americans get to read. As we approach the 2012 quarter-century celebration of this valued and still valuable series, I want to consider what David Lehman as series editor and his individual volume editors have accomplished, investigate how their work compares to that of other tastemakers in the world of American poetry, and place that comparison in the context of the general culture in which we live.