INTRODUCTION

I wrote this book almost without knowing it. Since 1988, when *The Best American Poetry* made its maiden voyage, I have written a foreword for each year's volume. The first year the task was relatively easy. I needed to announce our existence, to state the rationale for the book, to say a few words about the year's guest editor, and to summarize such rules as we provisionally adopted. While we had a two-year commitment from the publisher, no one expected the series to last. It took us all by surprise when it did. By the time Bill Clinton challenged George Bush for the presidency, we had become—as reviewers put it—an "institution," even an "annual rite of autumn." Poets and their readers awaited the book with enthusiasm or apprehension, with hands ready either to clap or to don boxing gloves.

It occurred to me then that if you set aside the important utilitarian functions that the foreword must continue to perform—introducing the year's guest editor, for example—this piece of writing might be as free in its movement and as capacious as a verse essay. And by trial and error, the annual foreword evolved into a form, harder to summarize than a sestina or villanelle with their strict rules but a form nevertheless. Gradually the pieces grew longer and more ambitious.

I have now written twenty-nine—one for each volume in the series plus pre-

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ambles to the two retrospective *Best of the Best* collections that have appeared, the hotly debated selection edited by Harold Bloom in 1998 and the twenty-fifth anniversary volume that Robert Pinsky assembled in 2013. I am not alone in believing that the forewords, gathered into a book of their own, might constitute something other, something more, than the chronicle of a single anthology series, however influential. Do they help annotate a history of American poetry in the last quarter of a century, as we went from a familiar reality (typewriters, the Cold War) to a brand-new set of coordinates (smart phones, global terrorism)? I would like to think that these annual reports reflect some of the changes as they registered on our poets—and some of the innovative strategies that poets and their advocates have developed. I would like to think that they collectively convey a multi-reel picture of American poetry—its practitioners, its audience, its place in our culture as a whole, the issues that confront us, the timeless questions, the surprises—as the old century expired and a new one speedily took its place.

When I wrote chapter one of this book, the president was Ronald Reagan and the Berlin Wall was still up. Not even Al Gore had heard of the Internet. The poetry slam was a new phenomenon. Poetry readings were taking place not only in the familiar venues but also in bars, breweries, and even hardware or other stores not customarily associated with verse. The beats were back, or had never left, and the doors of bohemia had swung open. We had, without knowing it, heard the first rap poems when Muhammad Ali, then still Cassius Clay, improvised his rhyming battle cries in the early 1960s, but the genre had yet to establish itself. The consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress had just been rechristened the poet laureate of the United States, and some who were tapped for the post made the most of the opportunity to celebrate modern poetry, combat illiteracy, promote the recital of favorite poems, and enlarge our audience. States, cities, boroughs, and even museums and TV networks got into the act, appointing their own poets laureate. In the universities, the poets of the language school, convinced of the impossibility of unmediated discourse, were in the process of supplanting an older generation of formalists who doubled as practitioners of the New Criticism. The New Criticism went old hat, and perhaps for the first time ever the poetry party that identified itself as avant-garde was embraced by an establishment that had once been allergic to radical change. The borders between academic poetry and popular poetry, which was suddenly not an oxymoron, dissolved somewhat in this period that suspended value judgments in concert with a Nietzschean imperative. Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.

That is one version, abbreviated and partial, of what has happened in (or

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to) poetry at a time of vast technological upheaval, a global reconfiguring of political actuality, and constant change. Some of the change is generational. We have lost the voices of many esteemed individuals: Ai, Ali, Ammons, Arnold, Baraka, Berg, Brodsky, Bukowski, Carruth, Cassity, Clampitt, Coleman, Creeley, Davison, Dickey, Digges, Disch, Edson, Emerson, Gilbert, Ginsberg, Grossman, Guest, Gunn, Heaney, Hecht, Henry, Hine, Hollander, Hull, Justice, Kenyon, Kinnell, Kizer, Knott, Koch, Kumin, Kunitz, Lamantia, Levertov, Levis, Merrill, Rector, Rich, Scalapino, Schuyler, Shapiro (Harvey), Shapiro (Karl), Shinder, Simpson, Snodgrass, Stafford, Starbuck, Stone, Strand, Swenson, Updike, Van Duyn, Vazirani, Violi, Wetzsteon, and I'm afraid this is an incomplete list. On the other hand, poets have appeared in *The Best American Poetry* who were infants when the series came into existence. Terrance Hayes, the guest editor of the 2014 edition, opens his introduction to the volume with the statement that the first book of poetry he ever purchased was the 1990 volume edited by Jorie Graham.

There are trends that are undeniable. Our demographics have changed. Many more women, persons of color, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and so forth, are engaged in writing and publishing poetry, and what they produce does not necessarily conform to the imperatives of identity politics. Poets are writing with candor about formerly taboo subjects; nothing is off limits, especially when the subject is the writer's personal, social, and sexual life. Experimentation with ad hoc forms continues apace, and the prose poem has achieved a level of acceptance that is unprecedented in American poetry. A poem posted on a blog or website may go viral, giving rise to thousands of tweets—a sentence that would have made no sense whatever to a reader back in 1988 when leveraged buyouts were the rage on Wall Street and the magic word was glasnost.

In my forewords, I was writing not for future readers but for an immediate audience of persons who were presumably engaged enough with American poetry to want to follow its progress—to read and judge for themselves a group of the year's poems that had earned the approbation of a distinguished practitioner of the art. I wrote about the way poetry figured in the culture at large—how it entered television shows and movies; where it had become newsworthy and why; how the very word was an honorific when applied to statesmen or rock stars if not to poets. I wrote about the series itself and its history after we had compiled a notable track record, but I was always more focused on the major transitions of our time, some of them gradual, some of them hitting with the force and horror of the atrocities of September 11, 2001. When, in W. H. Auden's words, the "unmentionable odor of death" spread itself across the city

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of New York, accompanied by anger, fear, and the expiration of "clever hopes," many of us turned instinctively to poems: Auden's "September 1, 1939," Marianne Moore's "What Are Years?"

Unsung heroes and lamented victims from around the world claimed my attention: the Afghani poet Nadia Anjuman, whose husband beat her to death because she not only wrote poetry but also joined an undercover group defying the Taliban's decrees prohibiting women from reading, writing, and engaging in studies; Gyorgy Faludy, the Hungarian poet who survived the punishments of the Stalinist concentration camp in Recsk; the Burmese poet Saw Wai, who was sent to prison for publishing a love poem said to bear a secret message critical of Burma's military dictator; the Vietnamese poet Nguyen Chi Thien, who survived torture and imprisonment and memorized the scores of poems he had composed despite his oppressors' refusal to let him have pen and paper. Each is a reminder of our own good fortune, which we sometimes take for granted. Each also dramatizes that much depends on our poems. They cannot do the living for us, but they can help us endure disappointments, hardships, and loss. They keep the chaos and madness at bay.

Inevitably I found myself tangling with the really big important questions that poets and their proponents have always confronted. What is a poet, and where does inspiration come from? If from within, is it something that one can generate or must it arise unbidden, as if the poet were himself or herself surprised? If from without, is it like a divine visitation, or is the stimulus something painful and even cruel, like the wound that accompanied the fabled archer's bow, which ended the Trojan War triumphantly for the Greeks? What makes a poem great? Are poems in dialogue with other poems, usually but not always by poets long since deceased? Can we understand parody as a species of literary criticism? If we adapted W. H. Auden's idea of a "daydream College for Bards" to the many undergraduate and graduate writing programs that have emerged in the last thirty years, what would the result look like? Can we balance the rival claims of populism and elitism in an anthology that calls itself "the best" and seeks a large audience? Was Tocqueville right when he predicted that in a democracy invariably "the number of works grows rapidly, while the merit of each diminishes"? Can poems be said to have a political dimension, by intention or in spite of it? Is the public value of the art measured more accurately in ceremonies and medals—an inaugural ode, a poem read before a joint session of Congress, an inspired public initiative—or, on the contrary, in acts of protest, resistance to the pressures of reality, writing that set its teeth on edge against the prevailing order, wars and government failures?

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Or would poets be wise to separate the aesthetic from the political? Is poetry an analog art in a digital age? What accounts for the mean-spiritedness of much poetry criticism? How has the widely discussed crisis in the humanities made itself felt in creative writing programs? Does the future of poetry depend on the health of such programs? Will the book exist or will computer screens consign the physical object to museums or reliquaries? How has the publishing industry adjusted to the new dispensation?

Reading through this volume, I encountered more off-the-cuff literary analysis than I expected. On three separate occasions I was moved to write a poem and embed it in the foreword. To make a point or to enter a contested space, I managed to quote and talk about Milton's "Lycidas," Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Shelley's "Mask of Anarchy," Dickinson's "There's a Certain Slant of Light," Arnold's "Dover Beach," Hart Crane's "Chaplinesque," Auden's "September 1, 1939." Certain novels—Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Nicholson Baker's *The Anthologist*—entered the discussion. I seem always to have kept an eye out for closet poets—such as J.Lo and Saddam Hussein, who may have had nothing else in common—and for unusual developments, including the day that *Haaretz*, the oldest Hebrew-language daily in Israel, had its entire newspaper, from headlines and news summary to sports and weather, written by poets.

When I recall working with the twenty-nine poets I've recruited as guest editors—Ashbery, Hall, Graham, Strand, Simic, Glück, Ammons, Howard, Rich, Tate, Bloom, Hollander, Bly, Dove, Hass, Creeley, Komunyakaa, Hejinian, Muldoon, Collins, McHugh, Wright, Wagoner, Gerstler, Young, Doty, Pinsky, Duhamel, and Hayes—I count myself as fortunate more than twice over. In writing this introduction, I thought of incorporating sentences culled not entirely at random from each of the introductory essays written by this distinguished roster. I will present them here in no particular order, and without a key. You may want to turn this list into a guessing game, but I would hope that you would also consider these remarks on their own terms, without reference to names and dates:

> "The alphabetical order of poets, a convention of this series, creates a structure of its own."
>
> "The present is notoriously blind to itself."
>
> "I am your untrustworthy guide."
>
> "In each generation, the practitioners for their own purposes revise that forever shape-shifting and evolving organism, the canon."

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"As the deadline approached, I changed the final lineup over a dozen times, just as I find myself repeatedly removing and reinserting lines when writing a poem."

"Too many poems seemed content to convey an experience followed by a reaction to it without factoring in the reader's presumed indifference to the inner lives of strangers."

"Genuine originality is born and works in private, and art of any kind is solitary, and often lonely, work."

"Do even poets read poetry?"

"It is ironical that, in this bad time, American poetry is of a higher quality than our criticism or teaching of poetry."

"It seems that poetry is more often than not *bad* news that stays news."

"Writing a poem is like traversing an obstacle course or negotiating a maze."

"We poets love to parade as victims; we love the romance of alienation and insult."

"When voices that were based on experience began to rise from the fringes of our society, the new avant-garde, armed with critical theory, began to make 'pre-emptive strikes' at those who saw content as a reflection of their lives and vision."

"The thing that got me was when the critics began to encourage the view of themselves as no longer subject to or dependent on poems but in a higher register of influx than poets or poems."

"The most frequent accusation leveled against contemporary poetry is its difficulty or inaccessibility."

"Poetry was not something my parents found themselves reading for pleasure. It was the enemy."

"The language of the chat rooms is empty."

"To engage with art as the artist has done is to take an active and activist role rather than a passive and consumerist one."

"Art is not a service."

"Poetry mustn't try to compete with the sound bites of politics or the vapidity of popular culture. Rather it should serve as an antidote for them."

"If some new manifestation of a literary dictator would appear on the scene, many of today's poets would be extremely grateful to him or her and would set about breaking the new strictures and decrees as soon and as thoroughly as possible."

"My lifelong romance with literary objects began not with the wish to say some*thing*, but with the hope to say some*how*."

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"I love the moment of 'not knowing' more than the moment of 'knowing' in a poem."

"Baudelaire, who coined the Tradition of the New, once said that if the greatest of all pleasures is to be surprised, the only other pleasure nearly as great is to *give* surprise."

"I went into poetry for the money."

"We need a kraken to rise up and scare the piss out of us into what's in our hearts and whatever Urge it is that constitutes the Soul."

"Where there are no words, poetry springs into being."

"I think of Robert Duncan's saying, 'I can't remember if I wrote it or if I read it!'"

"There's nothing more American and more hopeful than our poetry."

All of these sentences are, in some sense, valid. Do they, these five hundred and forty words, constitute a coherent statement? Perhaps, if "The Waste Land" is your model—though in that case we would need footnotes, whether capricious like Eliot's or punctilious, a task for another day. I present these quotations rather as one would present aphorisms on the last page of a literary journal—in the hope that they will trigger an association of thoughts that may prove useful, may awaken curiosity, may even stimulate the imagination.

A shibboleth that I set out annually to demolish is the assumption that no one reads a book's introduction, foreword, or preface. Denise Duhamel, a wonderful poet with whom I have collaborated on a variety of projects, has contributed a foreword here that strengthens my belief that it is an underrated form that can beautifully serve the aims of a writer of ingenuity and wit.

A second and more pernicious shibboleth is that poetry is dying or is already ripe for burial. Obituaries for poetry are perishable. So are many poems that will slide into oblivion without needing a push. But the activity of writing them redeems itself even if it is only a gesture toward what we continue to need from literature and the humanities: an experience of mind—mediated by memorable speech—that feeds and sustains the imagination and helps us make sense of our lives.

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