

## INTRODUCTION

keep the literary scholars out and  
stick to the original writing  
—CHARLES SIMIC

This book commemorates the fortieth anniversary of the Pitt Poetry Series and the thirtieth year of my editorship of it. Over the years the series has become “a republic of many voices,” which reflects not only many of the forms and styles of American poetry, but the various backgrounds of American poets—in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, class—to a greater degree than any other publisher. It’s truly a cross-section of the best of contemporary American poetry.

It was clear to me early in the editing process for this book that if it were going to contain enough poems by each author to make a satisfying introduction to the poet’s work we couldn’t include selections from every book in print in the series—there are just too many, and I didn’t want to produce one of those forbidding anthologies as big and as expensive as a tombstone. I wanted a book easy to browse through and to put in a backpack, a book that would say “there’s some pleasure in this” rather than “you have a duty to read it even if it weighs ten pounds, but we are not responsible for eye or back strain or possible hernias.” So I made several difficult decisions. I did not include selections from some fine books that for various reasons are difficult to excerpt. I did not include selections from the many fine books we publish as the prizewinners from several competitions: our Starrett first book prize, the Donald Hall Prize of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, and the Cave Canem Prize—unless the authors had published at least one other book. The series has always supported the publication of first books, is proud of the authors who have come to us through these contests, and will publish many of the winners’ subsequent books. We urge you to check out the suggested reading list at the end of this volume, in which prizewinning books are noted.

This is, I hope, an anthology of delight, which will be enjoyed by all readers of poetry, the novice and the veteran alike. I have included here those poems that after long acquaintance interest me and move me. More important than my particular taste, though, is the fact that all of these poems have been tested on other readers and listeners and have met with joy and, in some cases, awe. I’ve used many of these poems with large success during most of a lifetime of teaching, and I hope that the variety represented here will be particularly useful as a text in poetry reading

and writing classes. I hope that it will be a portal for many into a literary genre that Dylan Thomas called the oldest and the greatest of the arts, one that is essential and life-giving. I hope that after using this book readers will not be content with anthologies alone, but will seek out whole books by individual authors. And I hope that readers will also become listeners by attending readings. In most ages of most cultures, poetry was an oral art, not first or merely a book art.

It is true that poetry in the twenty-first century in this country has an audience that is small in relation to the audiences for television or the movies, though it's not as small as many people believe. The audience for poetry has been growing for years, despite the fact that commercial ("trade") publishers are publishing less and less poetry, and the art is represented increasingly by university presses and small independent presses, the garage bands of the publishing industry. While poetry's readership in America is increasing, there are still many people who avoid it. There are many historical and cultural reasons for this. I went to a public high school in the city of New York, and remember that one of our old textbooks—and it was old, kept presumably to be used until it wore out—featured the poetry of Edmund Spenser, the elegant Elizabethan allegorist whose place in the English canon is secure, but who is the worst possible choice for kids who have read next to nothing. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser writes about the urgent issues of his day, which are no longer our issues, in a style and diction that are opaque to unsophisticated new readers. What has possessed (and still possesses) some makers of textbooks to do it all backward? Instead of starting with contemporary work and then moving back in time, they emphasize older writers whom students rightly consider dry, and then perhaps offer here and there a few contemporary plums. Yet for many years, I participated in our state's "poets-in-the-schools" program, and found that most students—at all levels of achievement—were interested and often wildly enthusiastic when presented with contemporary poems that spoke to their concerns in their own language.

It's important to emphasize that poetry does not have to be "difficult." This is the hangover from High Modernism. Yes, T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" is difficult, and requires and deserves study. Some poetry is difficult because some subjects and some personae are difficult. But most poems from most ages and most cultures have a surface texture, an approachability, that requires no more special reading skills or knowledge than reading a newspaper—and the profit is much greater. The Pitt Poetry Series publishes some poets who are legitimately difficult—Reginald Shepherd and Larry Levis, for example—but poets like Billy Collins, Ted Kooser, and Denise Duhamel exemplify accessibility. As I choose books for the series I try to avoid *manufactured* difficulty. My critical principle in such matters is that poetry should be as difficult as it needs to be, but not more so. It's a kind of Occam's razor for poetry

(Occam's razor is the principle in science that among competing hypotheses that explain sets of facts one should choose the simplest that does the job); of course, one needs to be a fairly experienced reader to judge what is "more difficult than it needs to be," but the principle is important. As one easily approachable (and wonderful) poet, Edward Field, says: "a lot [of poetry] seems irrelevant and boring, of interest only to scholars, and I don't see being a poet [as] a scholarly occupation" (*The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag*, 213). My emphasis on "ease of approach" may seem heretical or just plain anti-intellectual to some, but it reflects the nature of the art. Academic critics like difficult poets because their difficulty feeds the critical production essential to promotion. Don't be taken in. Randall Jarrell, one of the two best critics of poetry in the last century (the other was T. S. Eliot), wrote: "The habit of philosophizing in poetry—or of seeming to philosophize, of using a philosophical tone, images, constructions, of having quasi-philosophical daydreams—has been unfortunate. . . . Poetry is a bad medium for philosophy. Everything in the philosophical poem has to satisfy irreconcilable requirements: for instance, the last demand we should make of philosophy (that it be interesting) is the first we make of a poem" (*No Other Book*, 116). With any art, the more you learn about the craft, the greater your appreciation is likely to be, but you don't have to be a specialist to enjoy a good song, or a good movie, or a good poem.

Some readers avoid poetry in general because they want to read only the "great poems." To my mind, that's akin in its intelligence to such thoughts as: "I only eat great meals," "I only play great games of tennis," "I only go to great movies," and "I only have great sex." Translated, such a sentiment usually means: "I was forced to take a course in 'Great Poems of the English Language' once, and I didn't like it much, but in any event I've done it and haven't had to read a poem again in years." A related question is: "where are the great poets of today?" The proper answer is: "we don't know yet." Even Shakespeare was not the acknowledged master of English literature in his lifetime. Walt Whitman was much less famous during his life than Longfellow during his, but time has reversed that judgment. As Eric McHenry writes in *Poets & Writers* magazine (May/June 2003): "Who knows which of today's poets will be, in retrospect, our [Wallace] Stevens? How many Americans knew, in 1930, that Stevens was their Stevens?" Usually, many years pass before reputations are sorted out, and if there's one thing the novice poetry reader can immediately dismiss, it's a claim by a reviewer—or even a learned professor—that a contemporary's work will last forever. One of the pleasures of any art is discovering what matters to *you*. A guidebook may be useful, or a class, or a critical book, but because those things can't tell you what you love or hate or moves you in other ways, ultimately you have to trust yourself to browse among different poets. When you do, you'll discover

contemporary poems that will move you and that just possibly may change your life. Poetry is the most personal of the arts.

The word “great” has connotations of “monumental,” “philosophical,” “serious”—something like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. But as far as I’m concerned one of the “great” poems written in America during the last century is Robert Frost’s “The Silken Tent,” a sonnet of incomparable grace whose speaker is “merely” complimenting a particular woman. He proves the truth and sincerity of the emotion he’s claiming by the exactness and rightness of the extended metaphor. As for “serious”—there’s a snobbery that holds that the only serious poems are somber poems. Let me be quite emphatic here: “serious” does not mean “somber,” necessarily. Laughter is OK, and sometimes it’s the best way to approach a serious subject. Look, for example, at the poems of Daisy Fried or Christopher Bursk. Think of works of poetry—or any art—as being like radioactive isotopes. Like them, all poems have half-lives. Some half-lives are very long, some are very short. But even poems that may not endure for long may be perfect for their moment, and be enjoyable. Only very narrow and Puritanical casts of mind—like Shakespeare’s Malvolio—would banish innocent and ephemeral pleasures from their lives *because* they’re ephemeral. As Shakespeare asks: do you like cakes and ale or not?

Some people assume that as long as something rhymes, it is poetry, which simply isn’t true. Rhyme is just one of many tools that poets may use, but the first English poetry—Anglo-Saxon—didn’t rhyme. In the Western tradition, rhyme was used by illiterate medieval monks simply as a mnemonic device to help in memorizing their lessons. As a device in poetry, it has certainly over the centuries been trivialized by bad poets, in large part because English, unlike the Romance languages, is rhyme-poor. The mistaken notion that metrical regularity and heavy end-rhyme is “poetic” has led to an infinite number of bad poems. Shakespeare satirizes the tendency in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; Bottom mistakes noisiness and heavy end-rhyme for poetry:

The raging rocks  
And shivering shocks  
Shall break the locks  
Of prison gates,  
And Phibbus’ car  
Shall shine from far  
And make and mar  
The foolish Fates.

Not minding the fact that this makes very little sense indeed, Bottom, with great self-satisfaction, observes, “This was lofty.” Well, Bottom’s notion of what is “lofty” has never died, of course. We find it in innumerable greeting card verses, where the rhyme is everything, and where the aim is to say something very general, sentimental, “pretty”—and meaningless. It’s a kind of lying in verse, and is exactly the opposite of what most poets will tell you they’re trying to do. On the other hand, some poets, like Ronald Wallace, Paisley Rekdal, and Peter Meinke, have reclaimed—even reinvented—rhyme in ways and with structures that become an integral part of saying something very meaningful.

The option to reinvent the rules is a hallmark of free verse, which has dominated much poetry in English, particularly in America, since the beginning of the twentieth century. No effective poem is “free” in the sense that it’s without shape or organization, but the word in this context refers particularly to freedom from metrical restraints, such as iambic pentameter. There’s nothing particularly modern about this. In his later plays, such as *King Lear*, Shakespeare was no longer using a regular iambic beat, though he still employed a five-beat line. Later poets, such as William Blake and Heinrich Heine, abandoned conventional metrics well before the twentieth century, as did Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The basic unit of the poem became the line, and “the line comes from the breath” (Charles Olson, “Projective Verse”). That is to say, each phrase, bounded by the breath of the writer (just as we all normally take breaths as we speak), determines where the line ends. This facilitates the poet’s ability to emphasize important words and images within the text, and also provides the reader of the poem with a means to reproduce the “breath,” i.e., the pacing, of the poet. For an example, read these lines from Alicia Ostriker’s “The Dogs at Live Oak Beach, Santa Cruz”:

As if there could be a world  
Of absolute innocence  
In which we forget ourselves  
  
The owners throw sticks  
And half-bald tennis balls  
Toward the surf  
And the happy dogs leap after them  
As if catapulted

Note that the “breath phrase” of each line, with its momentary pause at the end, prevents the reader from reading it straight through, like prose, and that the line breaks may also take the place of conventional marks of punctuation, such as the comma.

Just as many poets have abandoned the use of conventional English metrics, they've sought new ways of organizing poems instead of, or in addition to, using conventional forms such as the sestina or the sonnet (though some contemporary poets, like Peter Meinke, continue to use traditional forms in particularly modern ways—see, for example, “Sonnet on the Death of the Man Who Invented Plastic Roses”). The words “form” and “style” are often used interchangeably. It's more useful, though, to think of form as the deep structure or organizing principle of the poem and style as referring to such surface matters as level of diction, figures of speech, sound effects (alliteration, consonance, etc.) and tone (attitude of the speaker). Poets writing in the early and mid-twentieth century observed that some subjects suggested within themselves the way the poem should be shaped. This idea is usually referred to as “organic form.” Denise Levertov wrote “form is never more than a revelation of content. . . . The sounds [of a poem] . . . are a kind of extended onomatopoeia—i.e., they imitate, not the sounds of an experience (which may well be soundless, or to which sounds contribute only incidentally) but the feeling of the experience, its emotional tone, its texture” (“Some Notes on Organic Form,” 1965). What she means is reflected in the following lines from Jan Beatty's “Machine Shop of Love.” Note how the line breaks and use of slashes determine the pace at which you read the words:

under the viaduct,  
under the old/railroad bridge of our ancestors/  
immigrant steelworkers/slaves of Carnegie/  
we rocked the back seat of a '69 Chevy/  
you pulled my chuck taylors/your jeans were long gone/  
goodbye to cotton/the rolling stones teeshirt/  
we're spinning in lust and oh  
steamy back windows and nothing  
can stop it/the rolling and tearing/  
machine shop of love, love—

Some contemporary poets are particularly interested in surrealism, that presentation of dream-like states or dream-like fantasies in which the usual principles of cause and effect may be noticeably absent. The impulse toward surrealism may have resulted from the great political, intellectual, and social dislocations that began early in the last century. It may have strengthened with the shocks of later American political life: President Nixon saying “I am not a crook” shortly before it became clear that he was a crook; President Clinton squandering his political authority in

a squalid and comic sexual affair with a young intern; President George W. Bush constantly shifting reasons for his preemptive war on Iraq and justifications for torturing captives. Whatever, surrealism is with us, not just in poetry but in other arts as well, as in popular music ever since early Bob Dylan and the Beatles. In the culture at large we've become used to it and, just as in Aesop's fables, that very early nonrealistic writing, the reason for the use of the surreal is often clear in the context of the individual poem. Sometimes, as in Russell Edson's or Dean Young's poetry, the fantastic says more about the "real" than the conventionally realistic can.

Many shorter poems, which is to say most poems, have a two-part structure. The second part, usually brief, alters our perception of the material in the first part. This alteration may occur through a comment of the speaker, an image, a change of tone, or any one of a number of other devices, but the effect is to give a sense of discovery, completeness, or heightened awareness. Here, for example, is Toi Derricotte's "In an Urban School":

The guard picks dead leaves from plants.  
The sign over the table reads:  
Do not take or *touch* anything on this table!  
In the lunchroom the cook picks up in her dishcloth  
what she refers to as "a little friend,"  
shakes it out,  
and puts the dishcloth back on the drain.  
The teacher says she needs stronger tranquilizers.  
Sweat rises on the bone of her nose,  
on the plates of her skull under unpressed hair.  
"First graders, put your heads down. I'm taking names  
so I can tell your parents  
which children do not obey their teacher."  
Raheim's father was stabbed last week.  
Germaine's mother, a junkie,  
was found dead in an empty lot.

The poem just presents a scene, and yet it improves—extends, intensifies—our understanding of the world and in that way, and perhaps in others, is moving. Note the power of juxtaposition: the first thirteen lines, by themselves, aren't a complete poem; the last three lines, by themselves, aren't a poem at all. But put them together and something electric happens. The two-part, or binary, poem is an ancient construction. The English sonnet is another example: three discrete bundles of informa-

tion (the three quatrains) with an ending (the final couplet) that “makes sense” of what went before. It’s one of many ways that poetry strives to say a lot in a small space in a striking and interesting way. Nor is this a form unique to poetry; most of us have told anecdotes or jokes that depend on a final, brief “punch line.”

Efficient use of language is one of the major hallmarks of poetry. For the poet, this means avoiding clumsy or pointless repetition by saying things forcefully and right the first time. It means avoiding abstractions and generalizations in favor of presenting the scene which generated the abstraction. It means that each gesture has its point and no moment of the poem is wasted. For many American poets, such as Charles Olson (“always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!”) and Frank O’Hara in much of his characteristic work, concision means *speed*, telling the poem rapidly, perhaps as a reflection of the hectic pace of American life. That sense of speed, of rush, is evident in Dorothy Barresi’s work: “Look, Body says, jumpshot, fadeaway, fakeout, doublepump / alley-oop—what did you expect, anyway?” O’Hara reinvented for American poetry “the present progressive” (the dramatic monologue), the poem in which the speaker progresses in actual time, from morning to evening for example. Such a stance makes possible a greater sense of immediacy, compared to a static one in which the speaker is delivering a settled, neatly formed view of a scene or event; it allows dramatic representation of the mind of the speaker in action. Condensed speech, however, doesn’t necessarily mean brief or telegraphic. Denise Duhamel, for example, has written some wonderfully chatty poems in which the talkative speaker in fact is one of the points of interest as a created character, and in which seemingly random details are juggled very skillfully in the pattern of the whole poem, so that there’s no random or functionless language, no mere gab.

Many contemporary poems have a first-person speaker in which the personality or psyche of the speaker is noticeably the subject or part of the subject of the poem. Why “I”? Among many possible reasons, perhaps the most important is that the first-person speaker can present the authority of personal experience without pontificating or claiming to state universal truths; the poem becomes a “test case” of what happens for a particular personality in a particular scene or set of circumstances. Paradoxically, what is most personal, most particular, may lead to the universal; in his essay “Poetry, Personality and Death,” Galway Kinnell talks about his wish to go so deeply into the personal in his poems that he discovers he is speaking for everyone. A caution, however: though all writing is autobiographical to some extent (the author has to experience in imagination whatever is written down) that doesn’t mean that the “I” of the poem is narrowly autobiographical. William Carlos Williams wrote an amusing poem about what it feels like to be a tree, but he was a medical doctor, not a sugar maple. As Lynn Emanuel puts it in “Homage to Sharon Stone,”



Or you could think of the black car as  
Lynn Emanuel, because, really, as an author,  
I have always wanted to be a car, even  
though most of the time I have to be  
the “I,” or the woman hanging wash;  
I am a woman, one minute, then I am a man,  
I am a carnival of Lynn Emanuels

Critics or ordinary readers often make the mistake of deciding that the poet should have written like somebody else, rather than considering *why* the poet has chosen a particular style or form. That’s as wrongheaded as telling Emily Dickinson to write like Walt Whitman. It’s as irritating as saying to a happy person, “why do you smile all the time?” or to a quiet person “why are you thinking all the time?” Give the poet a break! Just as one rule of reading in general is “you have to allow the author her subject” another is “you have to allow the poet his style.” Figure out *why* he or she is writing that way—what the function of the style is for delivering the content of the poem.

In some circles—and in many anthologies of contemporary poetry—you’ll find prejudices against the narrative or story poem and against the comic poem. That’s a pity, it seems to me, not only because narrative and comic poems are found at the heart of most poetic traditions, but because narrative and comic poems are very much in evidence these days. The pleasure of listening to a unique character tell his or her story is perhaps the oldest pleasure in literature. And as for the comic poem, I’ll let Gabriel Gudding, one of our Starrett Prize winners, comment: “It would be more than nice, for a change, to see anthologies not only recognizing and representing today’s great renaissance of comic poetry; it would be an absolute blessing if mainstream American poetry could recognize precisely what is not lofty in us” (*Poetry International* V, 151).

This anthology has many narrative and comic poems. It also represents, I hope, what is “lofty.” But any anthology of poetry is an adventure for editor and reader, and no finality is possible. Only a very foolish person would expect that one book could hold a wholly definitive representation of such a vast enterprise as contemporary American poetry. Anyone can argue that a given anthology is unrepresentative, guilty of omitting poet *x*, who, one could claim, is absolutely essential for the understanding of contemporary American poetry. Even critics who in other contexts will argue fiercely that the establishment of a canon—required reading lists!—is impossible or fraudulent, will take this gambit. If one takes it, however, no anthology is possible. If one takes it, one is probably arguing for the centrality of a particular group of poets or school of poetry (read: “poetry gang”), but there is no one center

of American poetry now, as New York or Boston or San Francisco used to be, when a handful of white, male, middle- or upper-class, Ivy-League-educated poets made up the canon. Not that they were evil. And in the interest of full disclosure I confess that I am white (more or less), male, middle-class, and Ivy-League educated, usually pretty happy with myself and, on some days, delighted. But there's not just one group or one place that matters exclusively anymore. The country is too big for that now. Poetry is too—in the radical sense of the word—popular.

So I'll come back to what I said at the beginning. I've included work here by a large number of poets I've published who've given me and many other people pleasure. They're not the only poets worth reading but they're a pretty good representation and cross-section of what's happening. I hope you enjoy it. Laugh. Cry your eyes out. Be human. Have fun.

—Ed Ochester