

The Chad Walsh Poetry Prize was established in 1993 by Alison Walsh Sackett and her husband Paul in honor of Ms. Sackett's father, Chad Walsh (1914-1991), a co-founder in 1950 of the *Beloit Poetry Journal*. An author and scholar, Walsh wrote several books on literary history, notably on C.S. Lewis, and published six volumes of poetry, including *The End of Nature* and *Hang Me Up My Begging Bowl*. He was professor and writer-in-residence at Beloit College in Wisconsin for thirty-two years, serving for many of those as chair of the English Department. He also taught as a Fulbright lecturer in Finland and Italy.

Editors' Note

When Alison Walsh Sackett, daughter of *BPJ* founding editor Chad Walsh, approached editor Marion Stocking in 1993 with an offer to fund an annual prize for a single outstanding poem from among all the poems published by the journal within the calendar year, Marion and the other members of the editorial board were initially somewhat skeptical. How were we to weigh the merits of a pitch-perfect lyric against those of a broad-ranging meditation or a searing narrative? Our impulses were inclusive and egalitarian; we saw all the poets we published as part of the *BPJ* family and their poems as in conversation with each other. Selecting a single poem for recognition, we objected, would put the poems we published implicitly in competition with each other. Might we at least divide the prize (which as proposed would carry the single largest cash award given for a single poem by any literary magazine) among several outstanding poets, or at least two?

Alison, however, was insistent and, it turned out, wise. She foresaw more clearly than we how in honoring her father, a scholar, poet, and beloved teacher at Beloit College, this major award would keep the *BPJ*'s contributions to shaping the course of English-language poetry before the eyes of the literary community and draw new poets and readers to the journal. It would provide an opportunity to recognize the accomplishments of established poets and affirm the aspirations of gifted young poets for whom the cash award might fund a semester's sabbatical from teaching or a trip to research a writing project.

We also failed to anticipate the pleasure the Walsh Prize would afford the journal's editors and editorial staff. An editor's job is to winnow so that readers have access to the best of what's being written. That work can be demoralizing. Saying no day after day to poems in which writers have invested the best of themselves may be necessary, but it is no fun. The Walsh Prize has given us the chance to step back and reflect on the memorable poems we have ushered into the world year after year and to celebrate one poet each year in a way that poets are too seldom celebrated.

The process for choosing the Walsh Prize recipient is much like the journal's regular selection process. Each editorial board member rereads the four most recently published issues and nominates one poem (or, on occasion, a group of poems by a

single poet) for the prize. The nominations have rarely been unanimous, as they inevitably reflect the aesthetic and other predilections of individual board members. Marion Stocking advised us regularly to “trust the collective wisdom,” and we continue to believe that our deliberative process results in better choices that any one of us would make alone. We read aloud all poems with significant support to listen for their music, feel their power. Over and over, we find ourselves spellbound by their formal invention, deftness of thought, and insight into the human condition. We discuss each poem and our response to it frankly and at length. Asked to defend our choice, we grope toward articulating what we find irreducibly valuable in the poem . . . and in poetry itself. Sometimes our arguments sway others. We work toward consensus, looking for the poem we will want to return to again and again.

This anthology, twenty-three years' worth of Walsh Prize poems, is the proof of the pudding. Reencountering them, we are struck by their vitality and the originality of their vision, undiminished by the years. We exult as Walt Whitman encounters Indian boys (“Every body is brown!”) on the basketball court in Sherman Alexie’s “Defending Walt Whitman,” enter the heart language of Margaret Aho’s “I dream I’m leaving,” “the sudden homing of one // mind humming // like a tran- // sept, like a wing- // span looking for a jagged // pulse.” We delight in the intersection of random numbers and an all-American road trip in Jessica Goodfellow’s “A Pilgrim’s Guide to Chaos in the Heartland” and dance with Jenny Johnson through her contemporary rendering of a crown of sonnets in “Aria.”

In the early years, the Walsh Prize poets were largely long-term contributors to the *BPJ*; some, like Sherman Alexie and Mary Leader, had been our “discoveries.” Though their publication history in the journal was not a factor in choosing their poems for the prize, we were and remain grateful for how their work in the aggregate has sustained the journal. More recently, to our delight, the prize has gone to poets at the threshold of their careers, an affirmation that the *BPJ*’s legacy as the first or early publisher of such poets as Charles Bukowski, Galway Kinnell, Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds, W.S. Merwin, Philip Levine, and many others persists in our continuing discovery of poets who

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speak tellingly to our times and will contribute to shaping our literary future.

This year's Walsh Prize recipient, Graham Barnhart, who is on deployment as a medic in Afghanistan as we write this, brings us news we need to hear from America's distant war zones. In his paired lyrics "Pissing in Irbil" and "Call to Prayer," an American soldier tracks the dissonance between his expectations and the alien culture he has been thrust into. Carefully observed and vividly rendered, the poems offer indelible moments of revelation. In "Call to Prayer," Barnhart writes:

I did not expect the song to be lamb smoke wandering
paper-thin between the furrows of sunset-hammered

rice and poppy—a drifting current of lemon through red wine,
a ribbon sometimes

touching the lips—obliging the lips to touch the hands,
the forehead the ground.

The distance between Barnhart's vision of a historically layered Iraqi culture and the bellicose stereotyping of Muslims and Middle Easterners that runs rampant in this season's political spectacle is one measure of our need for poetry, of words that hold the body in the grip of truth. We hope *This Barbed Heart* and the *Beloit Poetry Journal* offer many such essential words to you, now and in years to come.