

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Poems in Conversation

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Hadara Bar-Nadav, *The Frame Called Ruin* (Kalamazoo: New Issues Poetry and Prose, 2012, 79 pp, \$15 paper)

Hadara Bar-Nadav, *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)* (Ardmore, PA: Saturnalia Books, 2013, 88 pp, \$15 paper, \$7.19 Kindle edition)

David Ferry, *Bewilderment: New Poems and Translations* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2012, 128 pp, \$18 paper, \$9.90 Kindle edition)

Paul Celan, concluding his acceptance speech upon receiving the literature prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, described poetry as essentially dialogue . . . a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are underway: they are making toward something. . . . standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality.

Those members of the German literary establishment in attendance who had not experienced anything comparable to Celan's violent uprooting from family, culture, and language in the Holocaust could hardly have comprehended the intensity of yearning contained in that bottle bobbing on the open sea. At stake for Celan in his vision of poetry as conversation was the possibility of survival only a language reconstructed from its basic elements might offer. Emily Dickinson may have felt a parallel urgency when she wrote of poetry "saying itself in new inflection."

Dialogic poetry takes many forms. As Eliot famously instructed, the history of literature is in itself a conversation in which "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone." In what follows, I'd like to draw attention to three recently published books that have moved me and emboldened me as a poet, in which poetry is explicitly in conversation with works of art as well as literary and other artists. All are extended elegies that move toward something "standing open, occupiable," spanning time and cultures in a spirit of reciprocity.



A poem makes a meeting place. In Hadara Bar-Nadav's *The Frame Called Ruin*, the poet converses with visual artists, including architects, speaking from inside their work. Her ekphrastics are less description than channeling, an attending so complete that words, like the artist's hand, begin to gesture on the page.

That gesture is inflected by Jewish grief, as is the work of the majority of artists she engages with. "I own my voids, deepest black," asserts the

speaker in “Night, White, and Gold (for Louise Nevelson),” a five-part sequence, each of whose sections responds to a different monumental Nevelson construction. The sequence concerns itself with transforming emptiness to habitable space through the artistic work itself: “white landscape where we forsake our names, undone by the love of making.” The materials are scraps, leavings; the constructions, giant letterpress trays turned on end and filled with keepsakes. They call to mind her father’s lumberyard in Rockland, Maine, but also the bombed-out cities of wartime Europe:

A wall full of stories. A wall like a letterpress, like letters being set. Leading like leather and setting. Kerning like kernel and keening. A wall to lean on, simple as hope. *Either you would stay there or cut your throat.* Such mercy inside shadow and form. Each box, a loving alphabet of its own. Each wall, an assembly of letters left behind. . . . a meal in pieces but a meal nevertheless.

The curious reader is invited to that meal as well, thanks to the World Wide Web. Type the titles of the Nevelson pieces into the query box and three of the four appear in seconds.

Likewise with the red paintings that inspired a poem we were delighted to publish in the Winter 2005/2006 issue of the *BPJ*. “Four Reds (for Rothko)” presents the artist late in his life, when a heart ailment precipitated his shift of medium from canvas to paper. Rothko saw his abstract explorations of color and form as gestural expressions of “tragedy, ecstasy and doom”; Bar-Nadav’s poem is a turbulence of emotion and color that moves through him as he’s painting. Reds are “cinnabar,” “vermilion,” fire, and blood, his own heart the agent of creation and destruction,

foaming at the wolf’s mouth. Sticky liver. Lover. Sliver. To eat a woman’s mouth, tie her lace and cotton bonnet underchin. My chin. Trick or treat. Or meat. My little inamorata, my lithe little pumping red. . . . Who eats, lives.

When the reader returns to the paintings after spending time with the poem, passions throb in the pigments. “Reds” and the other works of visual art that inspired the poems in *The Frame Called Ruin* are, like Celan’s vision of poetry, making toward something embraced by Bar-Nadav’s vision of their making.



Though the short prose poems that constitute the bulk of *Lullaby (with Exit Sign)* are not explicit responses to the Emily Dickinson poems that seeded them, this second recently published book by Bar-Nadav shares,

like the poet/visual artist conversations in *The Frame Called Ruin*, a quality of devotion, of being lifted out of silence through conversation:

I stopped writing for several months after my father's death. I then happened to start reading Dickinson's poetry and basically gave myself an exercise to try to jumpstart my writing. I would use one of her titles to start a poem. And when I got stuck a few lines later or lost faith in writing at all, I would insert another quote from her poetry. . . . Dickinson's lines served as both scaffolding and support—very kind and steady and necessary support.

The poet/supplicant prays for and to her father, whose corporeal self is "slipping into the deafening dirt," but who has assumed aspects of Dickinson's "Father," a recurring figure in the quoted passages.

Bar-Nadav is a skeptic; the poems, like many of Dickinson's, constitute the desire to believe. One memorable poem implores an unnamed god to curse the worms feasting on the father's body: "Let the salt know each of their names. Let their rigorous muscles rigorously unthread. Let each of their coils wring each of their necks. . . . Let their kingdom stop churning" (*Let Us Chant It Softly*).

The lullaby of the title arises, as do so many of Dickinson's poems, "broke of syntax." Dickinson's "Infection in the sentence breeds" provokes a poem that opens with the fragmented "Taste of tin and hiccup of blood." The spirit of Gertrude Stein then seems to enter, repeating, rhyming, and punning:

The mouth flaps open, floods—. A Rorschach of roses surprisingly red: reddest, full of throat. In this terrible sea wish for a boat. Slipperiness sets into stain, nibbles the sheets. . . . *A Word dropped*, choked. With commas come a promise, with dashes come piece—misshapen grammar writ in bone.

In an underworld of dreams where roots "tunnel and form . . . new houses," only a grammar "writ in bone" will do for conversation with the dead. When the poet asks, "Where is my home?" the dead one points to his mouth. The conversation is reciprocal, the dead and the living speaking through each other.

The penultimate poem in *Lullaby* is an erasure of Dickinson's three "Master Letters," correspondence addressed to a "Master" whose identity has never been established—mentor? lover? God? Unlike Janet Holmes's brilliant erasure of Dickinson's poems in *The MS of M Y Kin*, which reveals Dickinson's acute political prescience, "Master (Pieces)" is a prayer to the father/Father/Master from one small being in a world struck silent by violence and loss of faith:

If you saw a bullet
hit a
word—
would you believe
in
God

I didn't
I don't

And yet, in the devotion lies the possibility of renewal, that

I might
breathe where you breathed
and find
night
sorrow
frost
love

Blessed art *Thou*, we pray.



If Celan's, and Bar-Nadav's, poems set off from fracture and silencing, David Ferry's emerge from his sense of literary bequest. He describes his 2012 National Book Award-winning volume *Bewilderment* as "essentially about reading. . . . We read to find a place to dwell on, and even in, for a time." For a poem to be "underway [t]oward something standing open," the poet must be a reader and a listener:

It's as when following the others' lines,
Which are the tracks of somebody gone before,
Leaving me mischievous clues, telling me who

They were and who it was they weren't,
And who it is I am because of them,
Or, just for the moment, reading them, I am.

("Ancestral Lines")

Bewilderment comprises Ferry's own poems interleaved with his limp translations of Virgil, Horace, Catullus, the Anglo-Saxon Bible, and several twentieth-century poets as well. He makes little distinction between translation and "original work," observing in a recent interview

that “if every translation must become a poem, every poem has a central source it must be rendering.” Two earlier volumes, *Dwelling Places: Poems and Translations* and his collected poems, *Of No Country I Know*, are similarly structured.

Ferry’s voice, as poet and translator, is unadorned, unassuming, often bemused, disarming. He has shed certainty and is left with questions:

Where was I looking in the past?
It isn’t where I’ve looked, that’s no surprise.
I don’t know what or where it is or was.
But maybe it isn’t so much the where but the why.
Or maybe I haven’t found it because beware.

(“One Two Three Four Five”)

An alertness to death suffuses the poetry: the death of his wife and collaborator, Anne, and other family members (“How was it that I knew you?”); of leaves in October (“Now and again it happened that one of them touched / One or another leaf as yet not falling”); of the Trojan watchmen in his translation of a passage from the *Aeneid* (“[The Greeks] enter the city, / That slumbers submerged in wine and sleep; they surprise, / And quietly kill”). His rendering of “The Offering of Isaac” from the Anglo-Saxon *Genesis A* gave me an understanding of the Akedah myth I had not gleaned from the King James version or the translation of the Masoretic text I was raised with, conveying through repetition and rhythmic emphasis how costly it was for Abraham to obey God’s command:

Hand and foot he bound
His own, his only son,
Young half-grown Isaac,
And lifted his own child up
And laid him on the pyre

These five short lines contain all the reluctance and tenderness inherent in the sacrificial gesture. They extend compassion even to Abraham, whose heart “The Creator of Mankind / . . . so approved . . . / [he] gave him back his bairn.”

The sixth section of *Bewilderment* is an unfolding conversation among texts and genres, between dreaming and waking life, the living and dead, the contemporary and the ancient—a millennia-long regression of stories told, of memories and imaginings. It’s a brilliant example of how poems in conversation with other artists honor their subjects by passing on the gift, introducing their work to readers or shedding

new light on it. Five of the seven poems in the set begin with poems by Arthur Gold, a deceased friend, followed by Ferry's appreciative exegesis. The implication is that creative and critical faculties, too, might be in conversation. The dominant theme is "the tangle of family feeling, the cruelty // Inadvertent and loving, which . . . / Seems to be part of the natural scheme of things."

At the heart of the sequence is Ferry's translation from Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas, a war vet filled with pity for the dead, demands of Anchises in the Underworld, "O father, is it / Thinkable that any spirits want to go back / From this to the upper world and once again / Into the prisons of bodies?" In the poem that follows, "Reading Arthur Gold's Prose Poem 'Allegory,'" Ferry imagines his own children and grandchildren, returned from the Underworld,

bringing their DNA,
 Unknowingly in their little satchel bodies
 Like Aeneas bringing with him, in a satchel,
 Troy, and his household gods, and watching him,
 Wherever he was going, the terrible great
 Gods who might turn against him any time soon.

The last poem in the section, "Looking, Where Is the Mailbox?," is a short "original poem" in which Ferry looks to communicate with the dead "if only in poems / On scraps of yellowing letters // . . . all of us write home, / Every day of our lives." These letters bring me back to Celan's correspondence with Nellie Sachs, though it, unlike Ferry's work, emerged from an Eastern European Jewish history that had "pass[ed] through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech." Isolated and beleaguered by illness, the exiled poets continued to send out their messages in bottles, hoping to sustain each other. Reading *Bewilderment* wraps me in a like intimacy. In Ferry's poems, however, it's as if poet and reader had always lived in the heartland and had but to listen to hear each other. "Tell me your name," he writes. "How was it that I knew you?" Celan's final poem might offer an answer. Its refrain, in entirety: "You read."