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BOOKS IN BRIEF: Notes for a Postapocalyptic Vision

The Best American Poetry, 2010 (New York; Scribner Poetry, 2010, 253 pp, \$35 hardbound, \$16 paper, ebook edition available). Guest Editor **Amy Gerstler**, Series Editor **David Lehman**.

David Lehman again brings us “the best American poetry” from the past year, this time with the immediate curatorial aid of Amy Gerstler as guest editor. Gerstler is clear about her own predilections: humor, prose poems, a desire to retain the “capacity to be amazed,” what she brings from “ancient Mesopotamia” as “lamentation chatter,” and “compressed language bursts” that she identifies as emblematic of poetry past, present, and future.

Gerstler laces the volume with humor. James Richardson offers “Vectors 2.3: Fifty Aphorisms and Ten-Second Essays,” including a few dogs but many gems: “No one’s so entertaining as the one who thinks you are.” “Knowing how to be pleased with what’s there is a great secret of happy living, sensitive reading, and bad writing.” In “A Man with a Rooster in His Dream,” Maurice Manning tells a tale that doesn’t go beyond itself but manages to entertain with one whale of a good story. Terrance Hayes does even better. “I Just Want to Look” teases us with the persona’s attempt to catch a glimpse of the “topless woman picketing / outside the courthouse,” then runs us through a double case of (perhaps) mistaken identity, criticism for neglecting to celebrate Mother’s Day, and a concluding nonsequitur that refocuses the attention on himself. It’s a romp that tackles racism, sexism, ageism, sentimentalism, and first amendment rights without ever losing its light touch.

Gerstler’s sense of humor provides an antidote for the cynicism and pessimism concerning human endeavor that here sound another chord. In my review of last year’s entry in this distinguished series, I observed the elegiac tone of many poems, paralleled that tone to numerous recent submissions to the *BPJ*, and wondered what it meant for our nation. This year the funeral march continues. Fleda Brown asserts, “I’m here . . . thinking how best / to be dead.” Dean Young concludes, “Nothing can be fixed.” Rejecting Alexander Pope’s neoclassical assertion, “the proper study of mankind is man,” Sandra Beasley, her tongue healthily in cheek, points out that “anything can become a ‘unit of measure’” and in her poem by that title chooses the capybara, the world’s largest rodent, as her “standard,” implying that

human values have too long held sway. Language itself becomes suspect. Charles Simic wonders, “Ask yourself, if words are enough, / Or if you’d be better off / Flapping your wings from tree to tree / And carrying on like a crow.”

One response to pessimism and cynicism remains an apocalyptic vision, including for some the certainty of rapture. This version of *Best Poems* resonates with end time stories: In his notes Terence Winch asserts, “there are so many mini-apocalypses in life, all adumbrations of the big one down the road.” G. C. Waldrep, responding to the theory of apiary colony collapse disorder, applies an apocalyptic hypothesis to the bees, proposing that they “had been raptured, in the evangelical Christian sense of that word.” In “The Devil You Don’t” Mark Bibbins claims, “That which doesn’t kill us / is merely waiting; / it will. . . . // Hell is coming. *Hell is here.*” And J. Allyn Rosser asks, in “Children’s Children Speech,”

What would we want our luckless heirs to say,
Now that we too globally see it will end—
The bees, the buds, the mercurial sea, the air
All spoiled—that we made waste of miracles?

This “lamentation chatter,” this search for other standards, may well be productive, since it implies at least that other values exist. Gerstler suggests her own commitment; she hopes her selection of poems may “provide a shadowy likeness of its time” and lists social concerns that range from wars to condoms to standardized tests, ending with “the careless . . . way we have polluted and nearly destroyed the earth.” From my perspective, however, too many of the poems appear isolationist, remain more personal than national or global, are egocentric or self-referential rather than introspective. In last year’s review I remarked that few poems mentioned geography, other authors, or politics. Again this year I ran a quick check on external references within the poems themselves. Geographical diversity has increased. Notice of other writers remains either minimal or nonexistent: quick takes on Byron, Shakespeare, Nietzsche; more significant allusion to E. B. Browning and Proust. Political figures suffer similar benign neglect: Emmett Till and Nkrumah enter these pages, but few others. At least a few poems, including Michaela Kahn’s “If I ring my body like a bell of coins, will the shock waves of that sound cause oil rigs & volcanoes to erupt?” and Sharon

Olds's fascinating "Q," provide explicit treatment of what Gerstler identifies as "the 'wars' in Iraq and Afghanistan," as well as the related but more local oil spills that dominate the news at the end of this decade. To be sure, contexts sometimes stay implicit, identified only in the extensive, fascinating, and valuable section of author biographies and comments following the poems. Without them, for example, I wouldn't know that Adrian Matejka's "Seven Days of Falling" was "inspired by seeing the Esbjörn Svensson Trio."

If last year's volume included an abundance of elegiac poems describing humans as "voiceless," a number this year speak out, even if in subdued tones, for a sense of the "other," a broader sense of the globe, the creation of a postapocalyptic vision, for survival and acceptance of the human condition. Kimiko Hahn in "The Poetic Memoirs of Lady Daibu" uses her allusion to a "minor work of twelfth-century Japan" not only to increase our geographical and historical reach but also to expand our definition of love poems from "romance" to "love for family and friends" and "how we correspond with the past." The deprecatory humor of Barbara Hamby's "Lingo Sonnets" at times takes a positive and powerful turn: "Don't get me wrong. I'm / no miracle worker, but I know a thing or two about pulses, so / press the chest hard—the heart is buried deep." And Albert Goldbarth, whose waitress persona has commented, "we're left here / with the crusts, the rinds, the lees" and has asked, "But what *do* we want?" dramatizes an answer:

While her brain
revolves in blitzspace, one by one the plates
slip into the sudsy water, and out, and gleam
like the sign of a covenant, a functional peace,
that she's made with the one life she has.

Some of my favorite poems in the volume explore the simplest of themes with complex and rich "language bursts." In "Letter to the Past after Long Silence" Sarah Murphy says, "To be plain, / I miss you," but she says it so elegantly with echoes of the use by Hopkins and Thomas of Welsh *cynghanedd* that the simple statement achieves a tune bearing its own burden:

You know, it wasn't all hell, swelter,
swelling, trembling. . . .

Do I digress? I guess
I meant to say a blessing, pay a debt. . . .

In "Wildly Constant," Anne Carson echoes Murphy's simple elegance while praising, like Albert Goldbarth, "the one life she has." She weaves a narrative that remains mysterious, a detailed middle ground without much background: "Sky before dawn is blackish green." "The wind hits me / a punch in the face." "Ice on the sidewalk. / Nowhere to step." Where are we? Who is the "I"? A phrase repeats: "I should learn more about signs." Slowly both background and foreground become clear: the "I" is a woman who has honeymooned in Iceland and now lives there, in a place called Stykkishólmur, a name that does not resolve for this American reader any potential mysteries. The domestic narrative, however, eventually holds no major surprises, only quite ordinary marital tensions, including the "extreme monogamy" of "three months in one small room." The ordinariness, however, allows for Carson's fresh language to reveal the extraordinary within it:

Now it is dawn.
A golden eyelid opens
over the harbour.
. . . .
we rented a second place. . . .

Now we are happily
duogamous.
And to praise the quotidian:
To be having an adventure

is a sign of incompetence. . . .

I try to conjure in mind
something that is the opposite of incompetence.
For example the egg.

Finally we move with the narrator "to live in a library," but not one of books, for an artist has transformed the library in Stykkishólmur to contain instead pillars of glacier water, "another world," "An *other* competence, / wild and constant." From that wild constancy comes at times "a deeper gust of longing," a force that takes us, via Marcel Proust, back to the past, to overcoming

our sense that “*we no longer love our dead,*” to a moment when we can “*burst into tears.*” While remaining within the life of what Lucille Clifton would call “an ordinary woman,” Carson transports us, through Proust, through the Icelandic landscape, through the “perfect form” of breakfast eggs, to a remarkable moment “that comes up from the bottom / of the heart.”

More characteristic of Gerstler’s selection is the language of the prose poems that “have always intrigued” her. Some strike me as marvelous. Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s “Rome” begins, “I saw once, in a rose garden, a remarkable statue of the Roman she-wolf and her twins, a reproduction of an ancient statue.” By the middle of the poem Kelly is still writing prose, but the music and imagery have intensified: “Under her belly, stood the boys, under her black breasts, not babes, as one might expect, but two lean boys, cut from the same shadowed stone as the wolf, but disproportionately small, grown boys no bigger than starlings.” And by the end the prose has become poetry, the poet tightening the knot, bringing the work to a harsh, emotional, jarring, and effective end: “Beautiful, those boys among the roses. Beautiful, the black wolf. But it was the breasts that held the eye, a double row of four black breasts, eight smooth breasts, each narrowing to a strict point, piercing sharp, exactly the shape of the ivory tooth of the shark.” The ekphrastic mode remains intact, but the author has moved beyond observation to analysis, beyond analysis to critique, beyond critique to resonant commentary on not only Rome but also all empires, including our own.

Gerstler’s inclusion of numerous prose poems reflects our continuing search for appropriate poetic form. Following Whitman’s exploration of secular uses of biblical rhythms, poets at the beginning of the twentieth century were responding to four hundred years of increasing calcification of English metric: Pound investigating the concision of Chinese ideograms, Moore developing syllabics, Cummings utilizing typography, Williams attempting to capture ideas through things. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, formal experimentation seems to me more limited. Perhaps, as Frederick Jackson Turner asserted, the frontier closed. For the past sixty years poets have struggled to discover modes that either ideologically or musically meet their needs. In this volume such discoveries remain few. The past, however, has nearly disappeared. Where stanzas exist they

seem mostly artificial, created for visual effect rather than integral to the writing.

The fate of one form in this collection proves illustrative. The only immediately identifiable sonnets come from John Updike, whose commitment to metrical verse continued lifelong and is here reflected in three unrhymed tributes to acquaintances from his childhood. Barbara Hamby's cluster of "Lingo Sonnets," thirteen lines apiece, are part of a very ambitious formal project of twenty-six such poems, the sequence as a whole an abecedarian, with the lines of each poem forming another type of internal abecedarian, each line beginning with the letter following the last letter of the previous line and ending with the next letter in the sequence. The attitude toward form itself, however, emerges in her notes: "Although each poem has only thirteen lines, I decided to call them sonnets because in my heart of hearts I felt they were sonnets." Similarly, Dara Wier discusses her own creation of "sixty or so . . . sonnet-length poems," although the representative here shares little beyond its fourteen-line length with any traditional sonnet. The title seems a vade mecum for both the form and tradition in general: "Something for You Because You Have Been Gone."

One might ask what role form can play in our times. Amy Glynn Greacen, in her notes to "Namaskar," attempts an answer: "I've always found a natural *ars poetica* in the practice of yoga. In each, there's a common notion that formal contortions can be a path to insights you wouldn't reach in a more 'natural' posture. As hard as it can be to define art, most of us can probably agree that the heart of it is opportunity arising from constraint." Note that I am not making an argument for form. I do not "probably agree" with the argument Greacen proposes—essentially that restriction provides opportunity, that form helps create function and/or meaning. A connection *may* exist: Is it coincidence that of the handful of poems in this volume written in rhymed and metered stanzas a majority have as explicit topics traditional religious beliefs or practices? Yet one can argue the opposite. Unlike classical ballet, the art of modern dance as invented by Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham represents opportunity arising from liberation rather than from restraint.

To reject the argument of a connection between form and function

does not diminish the importance of craft. I personally grow tired of the equivalent of what Henry James, referring to late Victorian novels, called “loose and baggy monsters,” poems that because of their lack of craft go on too long with too little music. In this volume a third of the poems use loose verse paragraphs with no obvious formal structure and often without much to please or intrigue the ear. For me, the least effective of these is Eileen Myles’s “The Perfect Faceless Fish.” At *BPJ* editorial sessions we often note when we reject a submission that it contains a “suicide line,” one within the poem that describes its failings. Myles’s poem takes aim at its own foot:

[I] feel you have chosen
me for this conversation
before it’s cooked
before anything is prepared
anything at all

This unprepared fish is not sushi. It’s just raw fish.

Poets who claim form follows function may legitimately desire to reflect the structure of the universe through their formal choices, but in many cases the role of form remains the creation of music. And music can emerge from superficially loose forms. B. H. Fairchild, in his tribute to Marlon Brando and *On the Waterfront*, which he viewed first as a teenage movie theater usher, shows the great strength possible in what seems at first casual prose poetry:

Flashlight in hand, I stand just inside the door
in my starched white shirt, red jacket nailed shut
by six gold buttons, and a plastic black bow tie,
a sort of smaller movie screen reflecting back
the larger one.

The repetition of the short *a* in the first line, including the internal rhyme “hand” / “stand,” the string of *t* sounds in the second line (“shirt” / “white” / “shut”), and the return to *a* in the third with “plastic” / “black” all culminate in the “back” one line later that accentuates the “reflecting” that in itself identifies the poem’s theme: the retrospective glance. For the poet this glance provides the means for the “know thyself” that serves as both epigraph and conclusion. Near the poem’s end Fairchild, like Dickens in some of his most forceful prose, slips in *within* a longer line an iambic pentameter phrase that carries the music: “my botched translations of the Latin tongue.” He then exits with

further iambs in the key of long *i* and *e*: “and I have no idea what she means.” Fairchild’s *The Art of the Lathe* (Alice James, 1998) still strikes me as one of the strongest volumes of the past two decades, especially its long opening poem, “Beauty.” If “On the Waterfront” presents a smaller scale, a movement rather than a symphony, it still provides an opportunity to watch a skilled composer at work.

Composing in a different key, Thomas Sayers Ellis creates, in “Presidential Blackness,” one of the most powerful poems in the volume. It’s difficult even to call it a poem; Ellis originally submitted it to *Poetry* as a manifesto. Its virtues include “language bursts” more inventive than most poems in this volume contain: “as nuisance as nuance, sometimes some-timey and sometimes on-point,” “a new infinite alphabet pours from the pores of the poor.” The poem asserts its own music, “one that abolitions the flavor locked in foreign forms and second-hand technical devices.” Ellis remains aware of race without relying exclusively on race, desiring to “fragment the linearity of the contemporary literary, color line. A black body, trained-in-the-tradition, can express a complete thought in as many movements as it has limbs, broken and healed. . . . Our Negro Heroico is not one of Renaissance or Power or Cutting Edge or Hype or Post Anything. We did not arrive after us, not after Race not after Blackness.” And without any internal reference to Barack Obama, the poet suggests with his title the role the president of the United States plays in developing what Ellis calls “A Race Fearlessness Manifold Destiny.” The prose poem contains an implicit call to political action that includes but transcends race; Ellis makes that call explicit in his notes: “I also wanted to provide something of my own broken blueprint, a road map . . . of some of the repair-steps the aesthetic practice of Race Fearlessness might take. . . . We know it exists in ‘the streets’ (not Wall not Main) but it seems all too often . . . the craft of poetry . . . is taught in ways that hide or erase practices whose chief tool and line are not made in the mode of restraint. . . . Race Fearlessness is all about speaking when you write. Thinking is not enough for some of us. Some mouths must march.” Indeed we must. Ellis offers us a glimpse of one form that creates rich music while asking us to confront the urgencies of our time.