BOOKS IN BRIEF: A WHIRLING OUTSIDE MY WINDOW

John Rosenwald

The Best American Poetry, 2012 (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2012, 234 pp, $35 hardbound, $16 paper, eBook edition available), Guest Editor **Mark Doty**, Series Editor **David Lehman**.

I concluded my most recent Books in Brief review with the phrase "no more mosts," suggesting frustration at the likelihood that any volume and by implication any editors could ascertain the best poetry that had appeared during the previous year. To my delight, this year's *BAP* editor, Mark Doty, makes no such claim. For him, "'Best' is problematic, if unavoidable; poetry is not an Olympic competition." He chooses instead to identify "the ones that engaged me most during a year of reading a great many poems." I like that word: engage. Doty states clearly: "I read (and read and read) through the filters of my own taste. . . . Anthology-making is, at least on one level, a form of self-portraiture."

And that's about all editors can do. Doty and series editor David Lehman, despite combing hundreds of publications, cannot have considered all work published in every little magazine, every e-zine, every campus or community or personal outlet for poetry available in the United States. Similarly, when the *Beloit Poetry Journal* editorial board decides which poems we wish to publish, we're only asserting that, among those submitted to us during a given quarter, they are the ones that met our individual and collective criteria for excellence, that engaged us most.

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If Mark Doty, whose paean "To Joan Mitchell" graced our first *Split This Rock* chapbook in 2008, found these poems engaging, what do I find that engages me as well? First, I'm delighted he selected two works originally published in the *BPJ* to reappear in these pages. One is "Tenor," a short, enigmatic piece by Fady Joudah that subtly complements his accomplishments as a translator of the late Mahmoud Darwish and as a medical doctor for Médecins Sans Frontières. The other, much longer, is Jenny Johnson's "Aria," a rich medley of song, grief, and lesbian community that we awarded our annual Chad Walsh Prize. Readers of both poems will benefit from a most useful quality of the *BAP* series: commitment to significant and substantial (one-fifth of the volume) back-of-the-book annotations to the poems themselves. We praise again these two excellent artists.

Who else? I love the music, the *musics* actually, that emerge from Doty's choices. Erica Dawson begins "Back Matter,"

> Semantics 2.0,
> Daughter, still, of absurdities,
> I like "street-talker" now. Yes, please.
> Breathless with ghetto woe
> (". . . and his mama cried") I'd call
> Me too American, too black,
> Too Negro dialect. My back
> Is to your front. I'm all
> Set with my Nikes on.

then, without taking her hand from the wheel, drives from self-portraiture to landscape—one that is both external and internal:

> Streets are talking, rakes
> Catcalling, and the new
> Sky's crisp as all the streams
> Of frozen runoff.
> There's no help
> For me, just voices: barest yelp,
> Incessant chatter, screams

As she observes in her note, "I try capturing moments when I'm part of the world with my back to it at the same time—in that cage of loneliness."

Different in both music and theme, yet equally successful, is Steven Heighton's "Collision," in which, as he tells us in the notes, he attempts to "inhabit with sympathy the solitude of another being," in this case a deer he has struck with his car and whose internal voice he tries to capture:

> Away in the eyefar
> nightrise over the sapwood, and one likes
> under hooves the heatfeel after sun flees, heat stays on this
> smooth to the hoof hardpan, part trail
> part saltlick now as snowlast moults back
> into the sapwood
> to yard and rot

One hears Hopkins here, the attempt to instress the inscape, the *haecceitas,* to identify and then share the core of this soon-to-die deer, without leaning too hard on all other dead-deer poems that have saturated our poetic landscape at least since William Stafford published "Traveling through the Dark." As Hopkins

insists, “Each mortal thing does one thing and the same / . . . Selves” or in ordinary language, creates its self. So there’s a certain daring in trying to write (yet another) dead-deer poem, but it’s sometimes the poet’s job to accept that challenge, recognizing that only through the individual language of the poem will the magic of individual experience manifest itself. Whether Heighton’s language manages that magic, I’ll leave to the reader to decide. For me it does.

Hopping, or “Hopkinsing,” one step further I come to Brenda Shaughnessy; the beginning of her poem contains the title, “Artless”

> is my heart. A stranger
> berry there never was,
> tartless. . . .
>
> No poetry. Plain. No
> fresh, special recipe
> to bless. . . .
>
> Spectacular in its way,
> its way of not seeing,
> congealing dayless
>
> but in everdayness.

I enjoy here the verbal interplay among five image clusters that run through the poem: art, food, heart, ordinariness, vision—the first four announced swiftly in the first stanza—carried through in language that reminds me of Emily Dickinson and Lucille Clifton to a portrait of isolation in the face of love.

At least in these poems, the music the poets create might represent a rejection of the lineated prose that dominates much of contemporary poetry in the United States. At the same time their technique does not represent a return to formalism. They use internal as often as end rhyme; their rhythms remain syncopated and irregular. Their music, like Hopkins’, is often harmonic rather than melodic, as in the overlaying of four “es” sounds in Shaughnessy’s “fresh, special recipe / to bless.”

If these poets attract me with their music, snippets of other work dart into my consciousness like sunfish in a pond. In a volume

like this, where clearly some poems will engage the reader more than others, I can—to shift metaphors—window shop, catch glimpses of current fashion without needing to make a purchase.

A poet can link words freshly to shape a world, a vision. Maxine Kumin, whose work we published first in 1957, begins "Either Or" with lines that memorably load significant nouns with initially deprecatory but eventually weighty adverbs and adjectives:

> *Death,* in the orderly procession
> of random events on this gradually
> expiring planet crooked in a negligible
>
> arm of a minor galaxy adrift among
> millions of others bursting apart in
> the amnion of space

Or can capture my eye with a metaphor. Mary Jo Salter attends an evening orchestral performance:

> Some nights there's a concerto,
> and ranks of sound amass
> until it's raining upward
> (violin-bows for lightning)
> from a black thundercloud.

Or a single image. Eric Pankey ends "Sober Then Drunk Again," "The moon's celadon glaze dulls in the morning's cold kiln."

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Snippets and musical moments aside, the one poem in this year's *BAP* that as a whole most engaged me was "Samara" by Lucia Perillo, another of our Walsh Prize winners. In praising her work I immediately demonstrate my own inconsistency. Having earlier lauded the music of Shaughnessy, Dawson, and Heighton for rejecting both formlessness and formalism, I admit that much of Perillo's language reads like lineated prose:

> And doesn't vigilance call for
> at least an ounce of expectation,
> imagining the lion's tooth inside your neck already

Not much music there, for my ear! But Perillo dances well between the prosaic and the melodic. The poem begins:

> At first they're yellow butterflies
> whirling outside the window—

The assonance ("butterflies," "outside"; "first," "whirling") and the almost-rhyme ("yellow," "window") carry just enough melody for me to move me into the poem. But about the moment I'm engaged in her music she deliberately trainwrecks my interest, undercutting what seems a serious and substantial discussion by citing the dictionary, its "overzealous bit of whittlework" in defining *samsara*. She confesses she had at first confused the Buddhist concept with *samara,* the flying seeds released by maples and certain other plants, but then goes on to identify "'the wheel of birth and misery and death,' / nothing in between the birth and death but misery" before tossing in an off-the-cuff "if you eliminate dogs and pie and swimming / feels about right to me" and then lecturing herself about the interruption: "oh shut up, Lucia."

Slowly she moves through this eclectic combination of lyric moment, religious principle, and self-interruption (to say nothing of Darwin and the "Autonomous Vehicle Laboratory") to articulate her "fear that in the future all the beauties / will be replaced by replicas" since "this way there'll be no blight //. . . when the blight was what we loved." In her sixth and final section Perillo returns to both samsara and samara, returns in a sense to her whirling self, to a moment which transcends her concern about the misery between birth and death, when her "speck," "some molecule" of her, can become

> the afterthought of a flower
> that was the afterthought of a bud,
>
> transformed now into a seed with a wing,
> like the one I wore on the tip of my nose
>
> back when I was green.

A poem like this, bridging worlds of botany, religion, technology, autobiography—whimsical, thoughtful, attentive, moving—makes the whole book worthwhile.

Commenting on past *BAP* volumes I've spent considerable time riding various hobbyhorses. In writing this review I decided to dismount. I could continue to bemoan the relative paucity in *BAP* of references to countries or regions beyond our borders, the comparative absence of allusions to other writers or artists, as if

as poets and citizens we remain caged within our own boundaries. Following a three-day editorial board meeting at which our staff argued frequently and passionately, but always respectfully, about the ethics and aesthetics of political poetry, I want such discussions, especially during this election year, to serve as microcosm for discourse in the nation as a whole.

Though most of the poems in this year's *BAP* predictably remain short, lyric, concerned with personal or private emotions and experiences, I'd like to identify three that treat instead, in quite different ways, significant political issues. Two are long, surprisingly long for a book of this type and size, consuming 15 percent of the pages given to poetry in the entire volume: Spencer Reece's "The Road to Emmaus" and Paisley Rekdal's "Wax." In his poem Reece traces the apparently autobiographical relationship between himself and "Sister Ann," a Franciscan nun to whom he turns to help him understand his relationship with "Durell H.," whom he meets at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, who "sponsors" him, inspires him, teaches him to live. The politics emerge from a personal concern with society's view of alcohol as an illness and the fate of the homeless and indigent, "inconvenient obstacles / momentarily removed, much to the city's relief." The style remains plainsong, the narrative treatment matter-of-fact. Only rarely does the lineated prose aspire to musicality, and even then it almost immediately relinquishes the aspiration:

> And the more she told me, the less I knew.
> All about us, a stillness began to displace the light
> and Durell was there, and no longer there, staining that
> stillness.
> After an estrangement ends there comes a great stillness,
> the greater the estrangement the greater the stillness.
> Across the parking lot, a gate rattled.

The title, the presence of Sister Ann, Reece's status as an Episcopalian priest, and his comments in the notes on the biblical story of Emmaus all suggest a metaphoric level to the poem, but if present the poet continually underplays it.

Not so with Paisley Rekdal's "Wax." Here the poet links multiple stories: her mother's cancer, the general incidence of cancer in Rekdal's family, the French Revolution, the history of Madame Tussaud. These stories lead on one hand to a meditation on the transitory nature of life and on the other to an assertion, in the

face of certain death and possible revolution, to the inherent equality of all humans. As we enter the wax museum we are invited to "Come and look. The king / is seated by the emperor. He is just your size." "That is what the wax says, and then / denies it: you are a king, too." Yet even so, even if we achieve what seems the immortality of fame, "there is a death even for the deathless." "You will not see these same figures five years in a row." In the notes Rekdal comments perceptively on the complex ways poems such as this one come into being, combining interest in a friend's "book about the French Revolution and spectacles of violence," her mother's cancer, and her realization that her "obsession with wax was perhaps an obsession with the ways we see ourselves and our loved ones when we are least in control of our bodies."

Finally there's "The Autobiography of Khwaja Mustasim" by Amit Majmudar. Much of the poem lies beyond my knowledge, so I value the instruction the narrative forces me to obtain. Majmudar creates a composite, archetypal resident of the Middle East, an alter ego who appears at significant moments in Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim cultural history and political life:

> I stood for twenty years a chess piece in Córdoba, the black
> rook. . . .
> I bound books in Bukhara, burned them in Balkh. . . .
> I walked that lush Hafiz home and held his head while he
> puked.
> I was one of those four palm trees smart-bomb-shaken
> behind the reporter's khaki vest. . . .
> Here I am at last. . . .
> A mullah for a mauled age, a Muslim whose memory goes
> back farther than the Balfour Declaration.
> You may remember me as the grandfather who guided the gaze
> of a six-year-old Omar Khayyám to the constellations.
> Also maybe as the inmate of a Cairo jail who took the top
> bunk and shouted down at Sayyid Qutb to please please
> please shut up.

Instance follows instance, transporting me across the centuries along with the fictional Mustasim, whose position seems to me similar to the one William Faulkner ascribes to Dilsey and all others of her race in his appendix to *The Sound and the Fury*: "They endured." As Majmudar implies, endurance until justice

is obtained is one of the most noble and most unlikely of human virtues.

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One hobbyhorse remains. Parallel to the relative absence of international vision in *BAP 2012* is the paucity of formal variety, which is eventually a lack of auditory imagination, and more broadly of verbal experiment. Past *BAP* volumes have often had at least some experimental poetry. This year almost nothing. In "Becca," Kerrin McCadden creates perhaps the most imaginative poem, leading us first into what seems an abstract discussion of typefaces:

> She says, *It's my birthday, I'm going tomorrow,*
> *What's your favorite font? What should I*
> *have him write? Serifs,* I say. *I like serifs.*

Soon, however, we learn that the discussion is not abstract, that Becca is asking her father what style the tattoo artist should use as he engraves on her back, "*Make of my life a few wild stanzas.*" "Make of my life / a poem," she later asks her mother and father as she begins the departure from her parental world, "tattoo flashing with each stroke / and there is barely enough time to read it."

"Barely enough time to read" "the wheel of birth and misery and death"? No, Lucia Perillo reminds us, "The rule is: you can't nullify the world / in the middle of your singing." Though we are in winter, soon there will be "a whirling outside my window," samara flying, carrying their seed. Thanks as usual to David Lehman and this time to Mark Doty for helping to keep the tree of poetry alive in this country. May these poems, these rejecters of what Perillo calls "Roboseed, roborose, roboheart, robosoul," these "cherished encapsulations" of music and wonder, land on fertile soil.