

BOOKS IN PRINT

Stuttering into Song

"I stutter into song," claims the contemporary Chinese poet known as **Bei Dao**, suggesting both the importance of music to poetry and the difficulty of composition. As editors and reviewers we face the task of choosing which work to bring to the attention of our readers. For this cluster of reviews, four members of our editorial board each chose a recently published volume where a poet transforms difficulty into song. So here we treat a late eighteenth-century German lyric poet, a mid-twentieth-century American renegade, a late twentieth-century Chinese dissident, and a twenty-first-century Chinese American poet engaged with mathematics. One strength of poetry in the United States over the past hundred years remains its exploration of and commitment to voices other than its own, whether in the experiments of Fenellosa/Pound; the championing by Bly of Machado, Rumi, Mirabai; or the growth of a North American audience for Brodsky, Szymborska, Milosz. Like them, the poets we have selected serve as antidotes to the weak tea regularly served by many of our contemporaries. As Bly translates Mira, "I have felt the swaying of the elephant's shoulders, and now you want me to ride on a jackass? Try to be serious."

Some of the difficulty involves the stuttering itself. Like Friedrich Hölderlin struggling to write in his later years, Hayden Carruth attempting to identify the "voice that is great within us," Karen an-hwei Lee tracing an "open cycle" as she merges mathematical and layered verbal worlds, Bei Dao has fought both to "revive . . . an ancient language" and to blacksmith a new one. In his essay "Translation Style: A Quiet Revolution," he discusses the need to wrench Chinese from the official language demanded during the Maoist Dynasty. His poems frequently portray the inefficacy of words: "alphabets upside down," "words . . . the poison in a song," "a word has abolished another word." When he and his colleagues first published their magazine *Jintian (Today)* in 1978, they both created and entered the "exile of words," an exile no less intense than the political one many of them have endured.

In ***The Rose of Time: New and Selected Poems*** (New York, NY: New Directions, 2010, 300 pp, \$16.95 paper), editor Eliot Weinberger has skillfully compiled a rich selection of Bei Dao's work since his first attempts to liberate the Chinese language from itself. The volume offers both Chinese and English texts, providing versions from at least six different translators over the past three decades. Weinberger assumed responsibility for translating Bei

Dao around the turn of the millennium, working first with Iona Man-Cheong and now, in collaboration with the poet, on his own. Despite changes in translators and momentary linguistic fluctuations, the poems make a coherent volume. Perhaps it's the consistency of the poet's concerns, whether language, love, politics, or the search of an exile for his place in this world. Or perhaps it's the complexity of the imagery, which, early and late, seems close to surrealism:

a ladder goes deep into the mirror
fingers in a school for the blind
touch the extinction of birds

Given his personal and political history—including the risk he took in publishing *Jintian* and exile itself—Bei Dao's poetry often partakes of anger and darkness. Weinberger points out the irony of his being known mostly for the early and explicit poems with lines familiar to every Chinese student in the late 1980s: "In an age without heroes I just want to be a man." "I do not believe!" Many of the poems from the mid-1990s are dark and difficult to track, either in Chinese or in English. To read this volume as a whole, however, is to watch the poet emerge with his own language as he enters new phases of his life—accepting American citizenship, marrying a second time, fathering a new child. Despite the limitations of language itself, "we begin to speak"; "you listen closely / to a new city / built by a string quartet"; "earth and compass spin / through the secret combination— / daybreak!"

In the hands of many writers this movement from anger to darkness to dawn might turn stale, but Bei Dao avoids the trap of egocentricity, of the merely personal; very few of his poems *feel* autobiographical. One moving exception, "A Picture," sketches his daughter, unable to see her father during early days of his exile. Others, equally personal, give no indication that they describe their creator. "Ramallah" evokes the mood in Palestine when a group of international writers accepted Mahmoud Darwish's invitation to visit him and to meet Yasser Arafat. Bei Dao has treated this experience directly in his essay "Midnight's Gate"; the poem, however, describes the environment without drawing attention to the poet:

in Ramallah
the ancients play chess in the starry sky
the endgame flickers

It's not that the current vision ignores darkness. In one of his

strongest recent poems, “Black Map,” about his temporary return to China to visit his dying father, Bei Dao writes, “cold crows piece together / the night.” But a combined father/son figure manages to transcend the dark: “let my white hair lead / the way through the black map / as though a storm were taking you to fly.”

Image, music, absence of ego, presence of the world—all have contributed to Bei Dao’s stature as the leading Chinese poet of his generation. This stature complements his courage as an editor and a human rights activist, activities he explicitly separates from his work as a poet. I hope I’ve suggested how this volume demonstrates all these characteristics, except one. For those who have no Chinese, I can only convey Bei Dao’s music through an anecdote: In the early 1990s I gave a close Chinese friend a copy of one of the poet’s essays, asking her for a quick translation without revealing the author. She read one sentence, stopped, insisted on knowing who wrote it. She lauded the language: “So strong, so unique, so rich in sound.” And that’s just his prose.

— John Rosenwald



In a new en face compilation, ***Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*** (Richmond, CA: Omnidawn, 2008, 496 pp, \$24.95 paper), translators Maxine Chernoff and Paul Hoover, themselves accomplished poets, generously sample all phases of Hölderlin’s work: early odes, later odes, elegies and hymns, fragments of hymns, and last poems, along with plans and fragments. An introduction by Paul Hoover prepares readers for Hölderlin’s challenging work, where “all is change, interrelation, and transformation.”

Friedrich Hölderlin is well known as a key figure of German lyric poetry. His poems often explore the tension between the gods’ presence—in mountains, rivers, thunderstorms—and the gods’ departure from our world. The poet’s purpose, Hölderlin believed, was to render life in its entirety—a difficult and dangerous mission. His most valued work was created between 1796 and 1806, before he succumbed to insanity.

Hoover sums up the translators’ experience: “The drama of Hölderlin’s consciousness, the beauty of his lyrics, and the largeness of his vision drew us closer to him with each working day.” In my own close reading of *Selected Poems*, I have come to feel the same—

humbled by a poetry that is always grand but without any gesture of grandiosity. Chernoff and Hoover succeed in their ambition “to elucidate while retaining a sense of the poet’s complexity of syntax and theme.” More than once, their English translations helped me, a native speaker of German, to probe deeper into the original, especially since Hölderlin often uses bizarre syntax. (The term “garden path sentence” fits well here: the loosely attached modifiers keep altering one’s perspectives, both forward and backward, as one moves along its path.)

Take, for example, the last stanza of “The Dioscuri.” Hölderlin’s language is both compressed and fluid:

Mit Wolken, säng ich, tränkt das Gewitter dich
 Du spöttischer Boden, aber mit Blut der Mensch
 So schweigt, so heiligt, der sein Gleiches
 Droben und drunten umsonst erfragte.

Chernoff and Hoover offer this reading:

I would sing with clouds. Scornful soil, it’s not storms
 That soak you through, but rather the blood of men.
 Your equal above and below seeks for you
 In vain, thus silenced and made holy.

The first two lines of the translation offer the reader a logical bridge where Hölderlin offers none. The next lines work well with the story of the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux; the deceased, mortal twin cannot be brought back either from the underworld or from the heavens. I wonder, though, if Hölderlin is not proposing the more radical idea that the very act of seeking is a form of worship, as in “Thus in silence he hallows who asked / in vain for his equal above and below.” I would not have worked toward this understanding had I not measured it against the translation.

Chernoff and Hoover also infuse Hölderlin’s late fragments with a bit of modernist cohesion, lightly smoothing the syntax, and their fragments read especially well. In the introduction, Hoover says, “It is with the fragments, 1804–1807, that Hölderlin takes on his full stature. Especially important in presaging modern and postmodern discontinuity are works like ‘In the Forest,’” a nine-page, free-verse fragment that overall contains much blank space and dissolved semantics:

He remains nowhere.
 No sign

→

Binds.

Not ever

A vessel to contain him.

Hoover points out the “extraordinarily precise dream-like observation” in some of the fragments. It is tempting, of course, to understand this as a quasi-postmodern comment on the plight of language and meaning. I would add, though, that to read the entire fragment in German is a much more painful experience than to read the English. The dissolution of reason in this brilliant poet and thinker is all too evident.

I may be forgiven if my bias toward the poems in their original language inclines me to mourn the loss of a particularly beautiful phrase or of a long musical arc rather than to notice a clever solution to a seemingly impossible translation problem. Clearly, Chernoff and Hoover capture Hölderlin and present an impressive body of poems to English readers, who might have experienced Hölderlin’s poetry in translations by Richard Sieburth or by Michael Hamburger. All these translations elucidate one another. However, Hölderlin’s *ahnen* of the divine (accurately but clumsily translated in this collection as “having a premonition”) continues to resist easy pinpointing. Heidegger, who helped bring Hölderlin’s work out of obscurity, put it this way: “Poetry cannot name the unnameable, but it can keep open the space for it.”

— Leonore Hildebrandt

■
Hayden Carruth died in 2008, and I miss him terribly. Though I never met him, he was the contemporary poet whom I found myself most often rereading, the writer I most often wanted to emulate. Musical, erudite, he was a virtuosic technician as well as a deft lyricist and narrator. But Carruth was far more than a stylist: he was a moral and an aesthetic force—a man who, as his friend and longtime editor Sam Hamill has written, “wrestled with daemons and angels alike, not least of all himself, in his long writing life,” yet managed to mold his jumble of gifts and flaws into poems that stretch “from the formal to the spontaneous, from local vernacular to righteous oratory, from beautiful complexity to elegant understatement.” Not least, he was a conduit to the stony, stubborn outcrop that is the rural Northeast: to its failing farmers and hopeful drunks and melancholy parking-lot attendants; to the mysterious,

familiar world of the unspoken and the unlettered.

Toward the Distant Islands: New and Selected Poems (ed. Sam Hamill, Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2006, 198 pp, \$17.00 paper) is a slim compendium of poems sifted from the output of Carruth's enormously productive career, beginning with the 1959 publication of his first book and ending with a handful of uncollected poems written between 2001 and 2005. In his introduction, Hamill explains that he was striving to create "a little celebration of 'greatest hits,'" with the hope that "a portable Carruth [would be] a useful tool." Hamill's choice of the word *tool* implies that he was trying to construct an anthology that proffers a lesson of sorts. In my case, the lesson learned is reminiscent of the one I learned from Frank Bidart's and David Gewanter's massive edition of Robert Lowell's collected poems: that it's instructive, and glorious, and also painful, to watch a young poet's swaggering formal bravado swell into a mature and confident brilliance that cannot be maintained.

It's not that Carruth was a bad poet at the end: in many ways, these late poems are an exquisite critique of the way in which a man's life and talent can fade side by side into a kind of poisonous irrelevance. In the opening stanza of "A Few Dilapidated Arias," he recollects "those times when I made poems / like sweet tarts cooling on the windowsill of a / studio in the woods." And later in the poem he writes:

What is the worst part of growing old? you ask.
 Ok, my young friends and paltry scholars, I will
 tell you. It's becoming incompetent. All my life
 I was the epitome of competence. . . .
 And now? Other people must do everything for me
 and for themselves too. I'm useless. Can you imagine it?
 I might as well be a common amanita growing
 beneath the tall, tall hemlocks in the dark.

Yet in his prime, Carruth was peerless. "Under [his] spell," wrote Galway Kinnell, "we are not in the presence of a poem, but of the world." Consider "Adolf Eichmann" (1962), where the use of terza rima as a corkscrew into political and moral chaos rivals Shelley's best work. Or "Emergency Haying" (1973), which, with forthright modesty, seamlessly binds the image of Christ's crucifixion to brutal, unromantic fieldwork. Or "Marshall Washer" (1978), a

long dense narrative, deceptively prosy in visual structure, that by means of sentence flexibility, grammatical subtlety, and the intellectual and emotional underpinnings of its syntax reveals how much Carruth had learned from poets such as Donne and Milton. Toward the end of the poem, Carruth writes:

No doubt
 Marshall's sorrow is the same as human
 sorrow generally, but there is this
 difference. To live in a doomed city, a doomed
 nation, a doomed world is desolating, and we all,
 all are desolated. But to live on a doomed farm
 is worse. It must be worse. There the exact
 point of connection, gate of conversion, is—
 mind and life.

It seems to me that the great poems of Carruth's heyday hunt ceaselessly for this "exact point of connection, gate of conversion" between "mind and life." And perhaps that's why his late poems make me sad: the poet has become convinced of his own incompetence. He who, "roughly speaking / . . . could do anything," has been reduced to hurling invective at the television. Yet, of course, this will be everyone's story, everyone's lesson . . . as the anthology's final lines, Carruth's final published words, make sure to proclaim:

Remember me in your agony, my children. Think
 of what I have foretold. I wrote these words for you.

— Dawn Potter



When blue damselflies mate, the male's terminal pincers hook into the female's thorax. If she accepts his ministrations, she curls her abdomen under and stretches out to touch her vent to the sexual organ on a forward section of his abdomen. This is commonly termed a mating wheel, but what I saw one day this spring not three feet from where I sat, when a pair of damselflies alit on a stalk and began their rites, was the outline of a sapphire heart, fragile and pulsing. I'd been thinking of heart shapes because I'd been reading **Karen an-hwei Lee's** *Ardor* (Dorset, VT: Tupelo Press, 2008, 71 pp, \$16.95 paper), whose governing image is a cardioid, the "heart-shaped curve traced by a point / On the circumference of a circle rolling / Around an equal fixed circle." The mathematical formula for this shape is $\rho = a(1 + \cos \theta)$, one among

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many “translated version[s] of the algebraic heart” her text provides in its exploration of ardor as sexual passion, physical pulse and structure, and religious faith—“the invisible ardor of devotion.”

Lee’s sources includes a guide to bird biology, *Gray’s Anatomy*, two translations of the Bible, *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, and the poetry of Li Qingzhao, a much-honored woman poet of the Song Dynasty, Lee’s translations of which appear throughout her book. But though the list conveys the materials from which this book-length poem is worked, it does not convey what is at stake in her poetic project, or the tumbling spillover of imagery that brings their leavings together in Lee’s sensuous imagination to form a passionate faith for a time of dispossession, scientific hegemony, and faithlessness.

“How does a Song Dynasty poet’s / Collection of antiquities / Relate to me in this age,” this twenty-first-century poet asks, whose ground—like Bei Dao’s—is moving ground (“the indelible rose, diaspora”), whose mother tongue is “translingual migration.” One way to envision her method of response is to imagine yourself as that dot on the rolling circle—with every degree of arc in its constant turning, you are given a new perspective on the surrounding landscape from which to “Remember this eye’s / Circumference / In song.”

Ardor is structured as an interleaving of verse sections with prose letters, dreams, and prayers. Within the verse sections, Lee slips in other structures—a sonnet, a folding mirror poem, catalogs. The lines in the verse sections are double-spaced and function, therefore, as mini-stanzas. We read each as complete in itself before moving to the next, which may or may not extend the line of thought or field of imagery. This loosening of continuity draws attention to individual images as verbal and visual compositions with discrete fields of association. As these accumulate, implied narratives emerge of trauma and destruction (“They took the pomegranate and burned it. / You mean they burst it open. Ripe. / Tore it apart leaf by leaf and burned the seeds”) and suppressed speech (“this pomegranate’s / Vocal throat silenced in / Sequenced red ellipses . . .”).

The color red recurs with amplifying intensity alongside images of anatomical structure—of birds and the chambers of the heart.

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Forests and suitcases evoke perpetual journey. Characters appear and shape-shift: a blind woman seer we associate with Li Qingzhao, whom the speaker turns toward as a progenitor, and “nervous, broken men,” who cede their place in the speaker’s affections to the Holy Ghost as the book arcs toward healing:

Setting bones, an unseen surgeon

Cures the inconstant vision , , ,

Plunging deeper than

The first optic rain

You in parentheses raining

Over retinal insight

To read *Ardor* is to dive into its multifoliate passions—to see through your tongue, feed through your pores, mainline the generosity of the poetic impulse:

Rotary tenderness of the aorta, glistening under

Green meadows, arched meadows, red besotted

Uncovering humble ardor servicing the orchard

Praying deep, this swimming briefcase of a body That experience becomes in and of itself a response to Hölderlin’s two-centuries-old question, “What use are poets in a destitute time?” Happily, the world of poetry is not destitute. Two more of Lee’s books are in the Tupelo pipeline, along with the first full-length collection by Mary Molinary, whose ambitious and formally inventive poems frequently grace these pages. Reading their work and that of other young poets whose voices small literary presses make available to us, I watch a twenty-first-century aesthetic in the process of formation. Acknowledging the traditions that it both arises and has been exiled from, it deploys the arts and sciences with equal facility in moving toward a mutable coherence among the cognitive dissonances of the present—between the ardor of blue damselflies and the heavy hands that carelessly destroy.

— Lee Sharkey