

EXEMPLARS

Book Reviews by Grace Cavalieri.

December. It's a wonderful temptation to tell people what books to buy, especially since *The Washington Independent Review* allows an excellent platform. I'd like to talk about another kind of gift as well. The gift of *self* the writer gives. Courage is what it takes to tell the truth. We all think the same things, but the writer takes it upon him/herself to open the heart, no matter what falls out. Some claim it is a moral life; others, ethical. I say the writer's life is a spiritual one. For whatever is buried is brought to life. This is the Holiday gift in every culture, every belief system. That spirit does not die. This December column features two books of poetry, two anthologies and, "very honorably mentioned," three of our best literary periodicals.

Author's Note: *I've been asked if I have bionic eyes. No. I receive these books, and proofs of books, sometimes months prior to writing this feature. We wait until publication date of the book to publish/post my reviews. This, we hope, assists readers with purchasing books. GC.*

Thom Ward was the editor at Boa Editions for many years, gentling, burnishing and guiding other poets to print. It's good to see his sixth book after his recent past success, *The Matter of the Casket*. I know genius when I see it or something close enough to count. *Etcetera's Mistress* by Thom Ward is acerbic magic made from a mind of weird connections. This works well only because someone competent is in charge. These poems will tell you about those things that make us more human than humanly possible and you can marvel at the neurons that make this happen. Here are a few lines lifted from the poems: "He could not wait for his successes so he went on without them..." "...Oh to be worthy of the lies we tell..." "...Everyday exists so one more can be dropped." Thom Ward has a radical perception of the world, passionately revealing neither comfort nor pain but something in between. He is interested in many kinds of beauty and not all of them are pretty. As you read the poems, your comprehension doubles for there is an astute intelligence furthering the story. What is he trying to tell us? Simply that there are big quantities of humanity that have not been described adequately before, so he sets out to do this. He starts with the curtain of language and pushes inward until the stone walls of our reserve

dissolve. Ward has a purpose and uses his writerly ear to display an athlete's vulnerability disguised as skill. Some are a series of questions, just downright funny. The results are compelling.

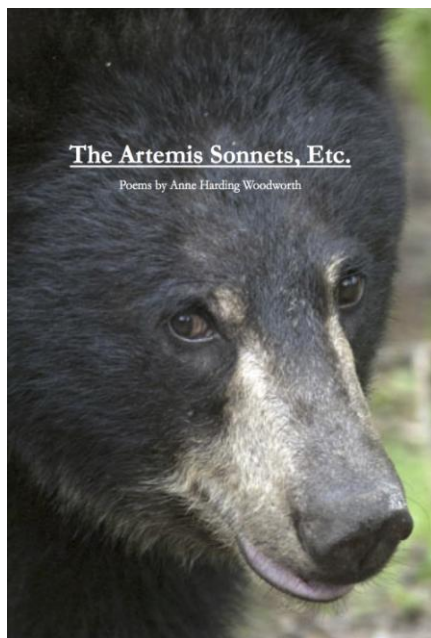


The Invention of Where

How do you keep the four guys who hate you away from
the five who are undecided? Isn't not to be chosen still a
choice? What's forgiveness without oblivion? Were
incompetence a crime, wouldn't everyone be convicts?
And where would we put them? Is there a place dreams
meander to dream? Now that we know beauty is merciless,
what good is it? When old Spot leaves his spots all over
the couch, the recliner, the rug, where, besides the vet, will
he go? Isn't heaven just another name for Special Ed.?
How do you respond to the white-gloved proctologist?
If I fall in the woods and finally stop talking, could anyone

else get a word in edgewise? Aren't most of these hours just stand-up tragedy? What's the purpose of ice and Triple Sec without a blender? Even if I were lucky enough to concoct an original thought, where would I put it?

Music. Music. Music. A lyrical voice. In *The Artemis Sonnets, Etc.*, Anne Harding Woodward divides her poetry (as in her own life) between the mountains of North Carolina and the island of Greece. Part I is a set of sonnets about the speaker in relation to wild life. Sonnets are a motion of sound. In Greek mythology Artemis is the Greek Goddess of Animals. Others term her "Diana the Huntress." But these poems hunt not for the flesh but for a kinship. Part II is set in the Greek Isles. It details the destruction of a marriage and, although heart sore, there is renewal in the heart's true kingdom of Greece. Part III is a medley of philosophical speculations harking to the past, sustaining its legends. Although a woman is hurtled out of domestic life into the world of the future, this is not mournful writing. Because it is disciplined, the emotional differences are placed into a perspective of poetic thought. The excavation site is one of human disruption. The history is of Greece with its tissue of folklore and unalloyed beauty. Surely we can approve of personal grief if its revealed mysteries are made permanent in the movement of poetry. And movement is Anne Woodworth's forte. Especially in Part I, music comes from the motion of words making sounds radiant. This is a cri de coeur, a fin de siècle. This is Woodworth's sixth book; and in the poem below, a journey begins.



Beyond Parthenon, 1971

The projector still works,
and the 8-mm celluloid won't split—
not this time anyway, I hope. That's us
on the Acropolis, Alexi in the Gerry pack
looking over my brother's shoulder
toward ships in the Saronic Gulf,
as if the baby knows where he's going
and what's to happen next,
while his mother, me, follows them
under the brilliant shadow of columns.

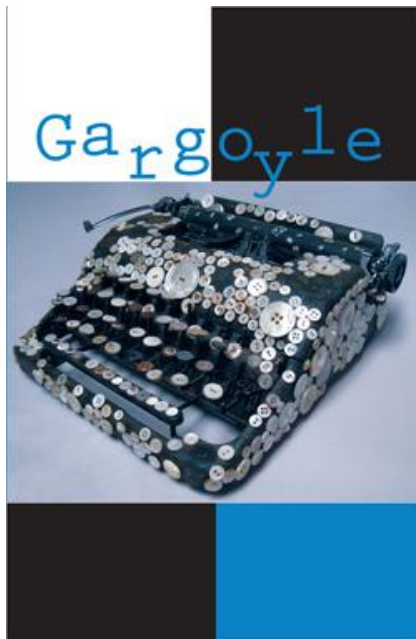
There must be someone else with us.

There always is—unseen, someone taking the movie.

The young woman is oblivious
to what she's not seeing and not knowing
about what's to come,
that some say she will be the viewer
watching herself watch herself being projected
from brittle film onto an off-white wall,
unable to read omens put there
by an ephemeron she once knew
and surely loved at the time.

Anthologies

Gargoyle 57 is edited by Richard Peabody and Lucinda Ebersole; and has been delivering prose and poetry into the culture since the late 1970's. The enterprise is a "collective benefit," allowing hundreds of writers public exposure. **Gargoyle** is surviving the electronic age with undeniable fervor. Hoarders of memory will want to collect the volumes and keep for an interesting lexical image of hip culture in America. Our legends are here: love, hate, betrayal, loss, and greed. Darkness is occasioned by satire. It's here for the reading in **Gargoyle 57** presenting five slices of nonfiction, 110 poets—some with numerous poems— 69 fiction writers, and art by 4 contributors. I often wonder if I'm the only one reading **Gargoyle** cover to cover, because I go to a lot of swimming meets where you wait 4 hours for a 3 minute event. But I'm sure this frisson from human thought is a daily companion to many others. Two favorites here are Nin Andrews's "How to Write an MFA Poem" and the terrific "How to Become a Famous Poet." Caution. There is a danger in holding too much good in your hand. The size of the book is off-putting and we tend to minimize the material because of sheer bulk. Take it a page a day and you'll be fine.





Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability is edited by Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black, and Michael Northen. This book will take your breath away. Jennifer Bartlett’s intro sets out the book’s premise, several views of disability. It hopes to consider the “social model of disability.” That sounds sociological but the anthology is pure humanity. Some 40 contributors offer multiple contributions. The reigning belief from the public at large is that disability is a liability. However, when the body is the *tool for art*, this establishes new dynamics and a new set of rules. All prior methods and theories of understanding disability are jettisoned by this resilient tour de force. It’s not “I am more like you than you know;” it is something better. It’s more like, “I am the master of my fate,” and explosively so. Highly intuitive and without artifice, the poetry in this compendium shows that the greatest difference may be the greatest triumph. This book’s a brain trust of talent in a world of doubt. Sensory memory, self analysis—the constants of the poet—acquire a greater spiritual value than before, teaching all of us to trust our own abilities. It is sumptuous. This is an album shaped by will and it’s sensational reading. From the venerable Josephine Miles to the present day Kathi Wolfe, I don’t know any reading that changed me more. An essay accompanies each poetic body of work. It adds a significant dimension. Here’s a poem by Laura Hershey:

Telling

What you risk telling your story:

You will bore them.

Your voice will break, your ink will

spill and stain your coat.

No one will understand, their eyes

become fences.

You will park yourself forever

on the outside, your differentness once

and for all revealed, dangerous,

the names you give to yourself

will become epithets.

Your happiness will be called

bravery, denial.

Your sadness will justify their pity.

Your fear will magnify their fears

Everything you say will prove something about

their god, or their economic system.

Your feelings, that change day

to day, kaleidoscopic,

will freeze in place,

brand you forever,

justify anything they decide to do

with you.

Those with power can afford

to tell their story

or not.

Those without power

risk everything to tell their story

and must.

Someone, somewhere

will hear your story and decide to fight,

to live and refuse compromise.

Someone else will tell

her own story,

risking everything.

VERY HONORABLY MENTIONED are the small magazines to subscribe to, for holiday gifts that last all year long: *New Letters*, *The Bitter Oleander*, and *Poet Lore*. The Little Magazine movement in America is a time-honored hydraulic system for American letters. It continues today stronger than ever, from its beginnings at the turn of the 20th century.



New Letters

It takes about as long as traveling from Washington, D.C. to Savannah Georgia, to read ***New Letters***. Who would not love a 6-(plus)-page poem by Dave Smith; or a short story of peppery piety by Joe Miller? The short story, as a form, has one thrust, one thing to accomplish, and less time than other prose; so we like magazines that keep this genre alive. The flagship criticism piece in this issue is by William Trowbridge on David Clewell (citing Schopenhauer, Hume, Oedipus, and more.) A conversation of our time is found in “Dead Silence” by Robin Hemley— funny and sharp. “Selected Notes on Beauty” by H.C. Palmer is a group of war torn poems—killing saved by art. And, our favorite Donald Hall is here with ragged grief and flawless writing.

About the time it takes to get from Charleston S.C. back to D.C. you can read editor Paul Roth’s ***The Bitter Oleander***. It’s so fine to have the art of translation consistently respected: poems from Chinese,

Faroese, French—Where else would we get such variety? The featured poet, this issue, is Singapore-born Parisian Fiona Sze-Lorrain, prize-winning poet who is also an international concert musician; and now co-director of a French publishing house in Paris. 18 of her poems are presented, and these are as luminous as the moon. In her interview she sees the future as something “in the passing of a cloud.” I love this poet. Also, it’s nice to know established literary magazines take risks, and established poets take advantage of that. For instance, Latino poet Ray Gonzalez always knows who he is even when adapting the themes of Max Jacob or Rene’Char. He occupies their dark realities, and brings his own, so he can turn on the light.

Once home I keep *Poet Lore* (edited by Jody Bolz & E. Ethelbert Miller) on my bedside table. It’s fitting to honor my middle-of-the-night reading with the first small magazine published in America; yes, even before *Poetry Magazine*. Americans generally consider *Poetry Magazine* (1912) the first poetry periodical of note. It may be the one we know the most about but that it was first is not true. Washington DC’s *POET LORE* preceded it by several years. In fact Walt Whitman took out an ad for his work in its pages, near the close of the 19th century. This current edition has 69 contributors—poetry and writing by favorites Linda Pastan, Naomi Shihab-Nye, Jane Shore, Charles Jensen, Heddy Reid, Nan Fry and the stunning energy of Wanda Coleman, among others. Merrill Leffler takes on 4 books of poems to review. He has the born skill of a poet, plus the ability to take things apart from his engineering background. Then, there is the scientific ability to braid it all together by virtue of being publisher and editor. I’d love to see his “index cards” as he writes.

*Grace Cavalieri is a poet and playwright. Her play “Quilting the Sun” recently saw production in South Carolina. Her latest books of poetry are **Navy Wife, Sounds Like Something I Would Say, and Millie’s Sunshine Tiki Villas** (2011, Casa Menendez.) Her series “The Poet and the Poem” is recorded at the Library of Congress for public radio.*