

FOREWORD

And here's one more way that poetry is like music. It's said that people's favorite tune is the one most popular when they first fell seriously in love—though probably everything surrounding such a moment remains memorable. It has to do with what the heart is paying rapt attention to. So too with poems. Our allegiances are formed by our first serious readings—the poems we get by heart, as it were. I don't mean childhood rhymes or classroom assignments. I mean those few poems that you parsed and plumbed, dazzled by their knowledge of your very soul. They are usually slightly elliptical: what we cannot grasp is the mystery that draws us in. For many, then, it was Emily Dickinson or Robert Frost who first revealed the stakes for which the game is played. But it could as easily have been Robert Herrick or Frank O'Hara.

The trouble is that those poems block out others. I had seen it happen. Friends with discerning taste and heightened intelligence would, when discussing the poetry of some master or peer, invariably return to the one early poem they had favored for decades. So I swore I would not let this happen to me. I swore—not just swore, *worked*—to keep myself open to new voices, different strategies. Even with those masters—Yeats, Stevens, Auden, Merrill, Hecht—whose work literally meant the world to me, I promised to keep shuffling the deck. But I didn't. I saw the same thing happen to myself that I had seen in other, better readers. I sealed the tomb and lit candles in front of the few shrines at which I had worshipped all along.

That is why I am especially grateful for the book you have in your hands now. When it came into mine, it revealed a whole new generation of exceptionally talented—*differently* talented—poets. As David Yezzi notes in his astute introduction, these thirty-five poets seem simply to have ignored the ideological wars that had raged in the magazines for half a century. He calls them “unified sensibilities,” and that seems an apt term to describe a group of poets—I wouldn’t say “a poetry” because these are a set of very individual writers—who haven’t been blinded by fealties or hardened against traditional ways. It’s probable that their teachers were embedded, on one side or the other, in those poetry wars, but these students—who undoubtedly paid attention and then read, under the sheets at night by flashlight, the books mocked in class—ignored those teachers who had insisted there is only one way to write a poem. Instead, they quickly got down to the task of writing, not of posing; of pursuing their poetic arguments through both what they had lived and what they had read (which is the best, or at least the clearest, part of life) rather than shrilly sounding one particular note or showing off their po-mo credentials.

If I were to generalize about the poets in this remarkable anthology, I would want to say something about the tone of this book. There is noticeably a common voice or approach. This is not a collection of vatic lyrics or dissociated rambles. The poems are often set at a middle distance, in a voice aware that it is speaking, pondering, puzzling, but alert as well to impulses that are unspoken or shocking. These are poets who have read, and who expect their readers also to have read. The poetry of the recent and distant past sometimes functions as a scaffolding but is rarely the excuse for a poem. These poets *use* their reading; they don’t flaunt it. They like history, lore, *facts*, the kinds of details that annex new territory for the imagination to explore. And this gives their poems—of whatever length—a valuable amplitude. Facts, stubborn facts also prompt an informing irony and often a certain wryness. When these poets write of the personal life, they are never merely private. The ordinary pleasures and terrors of the domestic life reach out sensibly for moral dimensions

and weight. The “personal” does not lie behind but upon a work of art: not Turner lashed to the mast in order to *experience* the storm at sea he will translate into a chaos of colors, but his fingerprint still visible today in the glob of pigment applied to make the sun that drove that storm aside.

Some of these poets would be called formalists, others not. But all of them are craftsmen rather than bards. They know how to knead and turn, glaze and fire. Their sense of poetic form is less the virtuosic display than the sign of care being taken to shape a thought or ease an emotion into unexpected consequences. They have tried, in other words, and with astonishing success, to avoid writing what Dr. Johnson called “temporary poems.” Above all, there is no sense here of improvisation, of things written about just because they were come upon. As Yvor Winters once wrote, “Poetry is the most difficult form of human utterance; we revise poems carefully in order to make them more nearly perfect. . . . We do not praise a violinist for playing as if he were improvising; we praise him for playing well. And when a man plays well or writes well, his audience must have intelligence, training, and patience in order to appreciate him. We do not understand difficult matters ‘naturally.’”

As the editor of a journal, I read thousands of new poems every year. Most of them, as you might guess, are earnest or awkward, sleek or turgid. Invariably, though, from the miasma of smudged paper, the genuine *poem* leaps out, and asks for a true judgment. I have my own intuitive criteria, but as often as not I am happy to yield to those Elizabeth Bishop once recommended as the markers of a good poem: accuracy, spontaneity, and mystery. These are precisely the characteristics of the poems in this book. *Accuracy* is not literalism or pedantry; it is the ability to see and describe things as, at first glance or second thought, they truly are. *Spontaneity* is not improvisation or loafing; it is a fresh apprehension of the uneven textures of life. *Mystery* is not profundity or spirituality; it is the ability of a poem to clear space for what couldn’t before have been anticipated, even by the poem itself—the passing thought or startling image that makes a thrilled reader stop and wonder. This is what good poems do. This is what David Yezzi’s anthology does. You are holding now a whole new

world of thought and feeling. Reading it will make it yours, will change your sense of what is possible and necessary. Plato, when he met Socrates, immediately burned his own poems. I am not suggesting you do that. I am suggesting you read these new poets, poets who question how we know what is familiar. You will not want to burn the poems you admire. You will want to add *these* to them.

J. D. McClatchy