

THE BEST *American* POETRY

2011



Guest Editor, **KEVIN YOUNG**

Series Editor, **DAVID LEHMAN**

"A 'best' anthology that really lives up to its title." —CHICAGO TRIBUNE

My Strip Club



In my strip club
the girls crawl on stage
wearing overalls
and turtlenecks
then slowly pull on
gloves, ski masks
and hiking boots.
As the music slows,
they lick the pole
and for a tantalizing second
their tongues stick
because it's so cold.
They zip up parkas
and tie tight bows
under their hoods.
A big spender
can take one of my girls
into a back room
where he can clamp
her snowshoes.

from *DMQ Review*

The Pilgrim Is Bridled and Bespectacled



World, I honor you.
After everything
we've been through

I honor you and take you with me
up the mountainside
where we will live
in wonderment.

I take you to the desert
where we shrivel like worms
and become tongues
for other people to kiss with.

World, there are two baskets
on my back.
Fill them. Fill them with fruit
and more fruit.

Or fill them with whatever
is customary
but tell me it is fruit.
Call it something good.

World, some have satisfied their thirst.
But I am the crying-out animal
who can see in the dark.
Forgive me.

from *Ploughshares*

Pillow Talk



As an insomniac compulsively flips a pillow
to cool the cheek, I turn you over again & again
& again in my mind when I need the cold side
of the said affair to rail against
“the ruinous work of nostalgia.”
If life imitates art, then each stillborn
has its own mucus-bright Blue Period.
Sharks keep moving to prevent dying.
People keep moving too, unwittingly staving off
the comfort of stasis, the virility of expiration, blah, blah . . .
But Death, the great highlighter, makes us all shine
a bit more dearly. I’m a widowchild who needs sunblock
against your blinding legacy. I used to get my cardio up
by just sleeping next to you. In a sane world,
I’d be bumped off to warn the others of a sky
so blue at the end of the working business day
if your veins hadn’t stolen the purest
Pearl Paint blue first. A broken thoroughbred—
I need a passport & vertigo pills to reach you.
Godspeed, galloping into your Misty Blue
OMG I miss you.

from *Hanging Loose*

Nineteen Thirty-Eight



That was the year the Nazis marched into Vienna,
Superman made his debut in Action Comics,
Stalin was killing off his fellow revolutionaries,
The first Dairy Queen opened in Kankakee, Ill.,
As I lay in my crib peeing in my diapers.

“You must have been a beautiful baby,” Bing Crosby sang.
A pilot the newspapers called Wrong Way Corrigan
Took off from New York heading for California
And landed instead in Ireland, as I watched my mother
Take a breast out of her blue robe and come closer.

There was a hurricane that September causing a movie theater
At Westhampton Beach to be lifted out to sea.
People worried the world was about to end.
A fish believed to have been extinct for seventy million years
Came up in a fishing net off the coast of South Africa.

I lay in my crib as the days got shorter and colder,
And the first heavy snow fell in the night.
Making everything very quiet in my room.
I believe I heard myself cry for a long, long time.

from The Paris Review

Ecclesiastes II:I

◇ ◇ ◇

We must *cast our bread*
Upon the waters, as the
Ancient preacher said,

Trusting that it may
Amplly be restored to us
After many a day.

That old metaphor,
Drawn from rice farming on the
River's flooded shore,

Helps us to believe
That it's no great sin to give,
Hoping to receive.

Therefore I shall throw
Broken bread, this sullen day,
Out across the snow,

Betting crust and crumb
That birds will gather, and that
One more spring will come.

from *The New Yorker*

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JENNIFER CHANG

Dorothy Wordsworth

The daffodils can go fuck themselves.
I'm tired of their crowds, yellow ranting
about the spastic sun that dines and shines
and shines. How are they any different

from me? I, too, have a big messy head
on a fragile stalk. I spin with the wind.
I flower and don't apologize. There's nothing
funny about good weather. O, spring again,

The critics nod. They know the old joy,
that wakeful quotidian, the dark plot
of future growing things, each one
labeled *Narcissus nobilis* or Jennifer Chang.

If I died falling from a helicopter, then
this would be an important poem. Then
the ex-boyfriends would swim to shore
declaiming their knowledge of my bulbous

youth. O, Flower, one said, why aren't you
meat? But I won't be another bashful shank.
The tulips have their nervous joie-de-vivre,
the lilacs their taunt. Fractious petals, stop

interrupting my poem with boring beauty.
All the boys are in the field gnawing raw
bones of ambition and calling it ardor. Who
the hell are they? This is a poem about war.

from the February 7, 2011 issue of *The Nation*

MARK STRAND

The Mysterious Arrival of an Unusual Letter

It had been a long day at the office and a long ride back to the small apartment where I lived. When I got there I flicked on the light and saw on the table an envelope with my name on it. Where was the clock? Where was the calendar? The handwriting was my father's, but he had been dead for forty years. As one might, I began to think that maybe, just maybe, he was alive, living a secret life somewhere nearby. How else to explain the envelope? To steady myself, I sat down, opened it, and pulled out the letter. "Dear Son," was the way it began. "Dear Son" and then nothing.

from *Poetry* (January 2011).

STEPHANIE BROWN

Notre Dame

I was staying in an apartment near Notre Dame.
There was a park for the kids to play.
Roller skaters in front of the cathedral in the evening, and my older son joined in.
We shared the floor of the apartment.
Too many family members of mine sleeping there.
One morning I woke up and in the instant
Before my full vision came back I saw or apprehended or felt or however
You want to call that almost-seeing that happens—
Two angels hovering: one was male and one was female.
They were there to be with my younger son, protecting him or visiting.
The male especially was there to care for him.
They were checking on him as he slept.
I had interrupted by seeing them and so they had to leave.
In fact, the male angel stayed maybe a moment too long
And the female was communicating this message like, “Hurry up, come on!”
It was known to me that I wasn’t supposed to see them.
They were annoyed with me.
After waking, fully, and lying on the floor before everyone else stirred,
My mind wandered over to Notre Dame:
My parents made a pilgrimage every year, just to be near it.
I loved the thoughtful gargoyles up at the top.
Inside the human souls came to visit out of pain or tourism
Or death approaching, or craving union,
Out of loneliness and sickness. Out of boredom.
Candles burned their prayers for someone.
What had I seen? Anything? You always doubt something like that.
How could that be real? And yet
It was a terrible summer, and it required angels, real or dreamed,
With my father losing his mind, getting lost;
My mother losing the ability to walk,
A sister comforting me as I lamented and talked
My sad story while our children played together at the playground

At the Tuileries. Later, when I could laugh again
And tell the summer as a tale, I said that
It's sad to walk around the Seine when you are getting divorced while every-
one else
Is kissing and filming their honeymoons or new loves. Even
My husband, after we got back together, laughed at that.
Because he, too, had been heartsick on another part of the planet.

From *The American Poetry Review*

TRACIE SMITH

Everything That Ever Was

Like a wide wake, rippling
Infinitely into the distance, everything

That ever was still is, somewhere,
Floating near the surface, nursing
Its hunger for you and me

Like groundswell sometimes
It surges up, claiming a little piece
Of what we stand on.

Like the wind the rains ride in on,
It sweeps across the leaves,

Pushing in past the windows

We didn't slam quickly enough.
Dark water it will take days to drain.

It surprised us last night in my sleep.
Brought food, a gift. Stood squarely

There between us, while your eyes
Danced toward mine, and my hands
Sat working in my lap.

Up close, it was so thin. And when finally
You reached for me, it backed away.

Bereft, but not vanquished. After it left,
All I wanted was your broad back

To steady my limbs. Today,
Whatever it was seems slight, a trail
Of cloud rising up and off like smoke.

And the trees that watch as I write
Sway in the breeze, as if all that stirs
Under the soil is a little tickle of knowledge

The great blind roots will tease through
And push eventually past.

From *Zoland Poetry*



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