

## REVIEWS

Robert Creeley, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1975–2005*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. 622pp. \$60

Robert Creeley spoke in an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1968 about his sense of place, and about those places “where one feels an intimate association with the ground underfoot”:

I, for example, feel much more comfortable in a small town. I've always felt so, I think, because I grew up in one in New England. I like that spill of life all around, like the spring you get in New England with that crazy water, the trickles of water everyplace, the moisture, the shyness, and the particularity of things like blue jays.

It's easy to think of Creeley's poetic emerging from those beginnings: smallness and particularity are his trademarks, along with the kind of inwardness that's been associated with New England since the Puritans. Shyness and self-scrutiny could sometimes end in upset: in the same interview, Creeley says of his early relationships, “the confusions of how to be with people became so heightened I would just spill.” These contradictory habits of thought or speech—shyness and spillage—come together in Creeley's (too) much anthologized “I Know a Man,” a poem that, as Tom Clark has said, “reveals the isolation of the compulsive speaker.” By 1965, Creeley had found some different places to feel at home, among them New Mexico, whose spaces opened into broader coordinates:

[In New Mexico] I'm offered a scale, with mountains to the southeast, the Rio Grande coming through below us to the west, and then that wild range of mesa off to the west. This is a very basic place to live. The dimensions are of such size and of such curious eternity that they embarrass any assumption that man is the totality of all that is significant in life.

So you can hear where Creeley is coming from when he speaks of being “embarrassed for a so-called larger view”: that New England reticence knits into a feeling of the self's smallness and brevity in relation to the timescales and landscapes against which he later measures himself.

Thirty years after the conversation that became *The Paris Review* interview, Creeley wrote in “My New Mexico,”

Oh sun! Three years,  
when I came first,  
it had shone unblinking,  
sky vast aching blue—

The sharpness of each  
shift the pleasure,  
pain, of particulars—  
All inside gone out.

“Unblinking” and “aching” transfer readily from sky to eye, the outcome a lyric consciousness newly exposed in this bright space. You don’t know, in that last line, whether “gone out” means extinguished or gone outside—whether the relentless light leaves no room for the darker interiority that has been Creeley’s refuge, or whether he has chosen to step out into the edged shapes and flat planes, the “miles of spaced echo” of his new place. Either way, the poems in the second volume of this *Collected Poems* frequently attempt this feat of turning inside out. The University of California Press has also reissued the first volume—*Collected Poems, 1945–1975*—in paperback, and between the two books there is a discernible shift of attention from singular, private experience to the sharable and common.

The later volume begins with *Hello*, the poetic journal of a two month tour Creeley took in 1976 through nine countries in Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. “The tourist will always be singular,” he writes in a note to the book, and his journey brought that habitual isolation into relation with other cultures in which “center and strength [were found] in the collective.” The poems in *Hello* are not travel writings in the sense that they deliver postcards of places visited. Rather, in rendering the experience of travel they begin to literalize, or turn inside out, some troubles with selfhood that have long been Creeley’s preoccupation. The sudden arrivals and departures of a whistle-stop tour put the self’s timings out of step with each new locale, so that jet lag localizes a longer-term project in which writing has struggled to keep up with the abrupt transitions of consciousness. With the stopover of each new poem we see a lyric subject trying to get his bearings in time and space. Creeley was in several respects between situations in 1976: *Hello* finds him at the end of a marriage and the start of a new relationship (he has just met Penelope Highton, who became his third wife, in New Zealand). Given that, it’s unsurprising that matters of permanence and transitoriness should preoccupy him. “Cebu” has him wondering whether anyone leaves his mark:

Magellan was x’ed here  
but not much now left,  
  
seemingly, of that event

The cross Magellan planted when he arrived on the Island of Cebu in the Philippines survives now as a tourist attraction, but “x’ed” also means struck out—this is where Magellan eventually came to a violent end. Creeley, a latter-day explorer traveling from the airport in a taxi, is struck by the lightness of things:

particularly the people moseying

along. Also the detention home  
for boys, and another casual prison

beside the old airport now  
used for light planes.

As ever the student of Williams, Creeley is adept at seeing things “in passing with [his] mind / on nothing,” and the result in this poem is a kind of poetic moseying where the touring eye projects its own casualness onto the things it chooses not to be detained by. The poem thinks across to Singapore and its “crash housing for the poor, / that hurtles them skywards off / the only physical thing they / had left,” and against that kind of vertigo Creeley prefers to “keep [his] feet on the ground,” but he does learn from Cebu’s fragile homes to countenance impermanence, to accept if not to relish it: “Whatever, it’s got to / be yielded, let go of, it can’t / live any longer than it has to.” Perhaps this witnesses some self-persuasion about letting go of a marriage, but it is also, as is much of this second volume, about mortality. Creeley puts it quite plainly:

Being human, at times I  
get scared, of dying, growing

old, and think my body’s  
possibly the exception to all

that I know has to happen.  
It isn’t, and some of those

bananas are already rotten

Creeley’s verse, by hearing the speaking subject come into being in the very act of articulation, makes the continuity of selfhood seem more than usually a fiction. Even so, you can’t help tracing the arc of a single life in a collected poems; you can’t help noticing Creeley getting older, or rather, noticing him noticing he’s getting older and doing some of the things that older people are supposed to do, like being nostalgic. Loosening the ties with

home—getting away for a while and more permanently severing a domestic connection—gives room for memory to take up residence. Creeley’s backward glances confess their own brokenness and partiality:

Long gone time—  
waves still crash in?  
Fall coming on?

Shifting head to  
make transition, rapid  
mind to think it.

Halfway to wherever,  
places, things  
I used to do.

(“Place”)

“Fall” is seasonal transition, and that word also has a medial place: it picks up some vertigo from “crash in” (incidentally, there’s quite a bit of crashing in *Hello*—was Creeley afraid of flying?) and more delicately it’s drawn forward to “rapid,” which hovers as a noun before the turn of the line sweeps it into an adjective. If “waves,” “Fall,” and “rapid” indicate water in motion, that is out of kilter with the staccato rhythms of the piece, its abrupt changes of course.

It feels appropriate that the second volume of Creeley’s *Collected Poems* should begin with these transitional poems that come from between places and relationships and from a poet who seems to think that he’s halfway through his life. So Creeley jokes with Milton, “When I consider / how my life is spent / ere half my years / on this vast blast,” and he spells it out again in “Out Here,” written from Tokyo Airport:

it’s later,

and is going to get later yet  
'fore I get on plane, go home,  
go somewhere else at least.

It’s raining, outside, in  
this interjurisdictional headquarters.  
I’m spooked, tired, and approaching

my fiftieth birthday. Appropriately  
I feel happy and sad,  
at the same time.

This sees Creeley at his micro-attentive best: there are the ins and outs of “raining, outside, in / this interjurisdictional...” and the replacement of end rhyme with front rhyme, so that “appropriately” can appropriate something from “approaching.” “[I]nterjurisdictional headquarters” might be jargon for a middling state of mind or mood as well as the no-place of an airport. Creeley interrupts these densely played games of sound and self-reference with some straight talking. “I’m spooked, tired, and approaching / my fiftieth birthday”: well, either you know just what he means or you have a bad feeling that you will when the time comes. Perhaps the cruel trick of fifty is its having a halffish feeling about it, only to reveal when you get there that “it’s later,” that the halfway point in a lifetime was probably some way back, and that you’ve missed it along the way. Anyway, Creeley knows it’s “going to get later yet” and so do we, at the start of a volume that neatly parcels out the second thirty years of this poetic career—and it has to be said that the symmetry of the two-volume split is in part responsible for throwing these halves into relief.

There are hopes and regrets of an unextraordinary kind in the second volume. Creeley wishes he’d talked more to his mother before she died; he hopes for a better world for his small son to live in. He comes back to his mother’s death often, in part because her tight-lipped puritanism was so much his own starting point. Creeley is not the only person to have caught himself sounding like his mother, but he turns that common experience into something more complex:

I look out  
at all this demanding world

and try to put it quietly back,  
from me, say, thank you,  
I’ve already had some  
though I haven’t

and would like to  
but I’ve said no, she has,  
it’s not my own voice anymore.

(“Mother’s Voice”)

Is “no” his own self-correction (but I’ve said—or rather she has) or is it hers (I’ve said “no,” just as she has)? Either way, Creeley is doubled up in this poem between his mother’s self-denyingly modest appetites and his own wants. In this way he shows where the constraint of his slender verses might have come from, and at the same time the pull, especially in the later years of this volume, toward more ample figures.

There is a fuller, more generous poem to his mother later in the volume, the title poem of *Memory Gardens* (1986):

Had gone up to  
down or across dis-  
placed eagerly  
unwitting hoped for

mother's place in time  
for supper just  
to say anything  
to her again one

simple clarity her  
unstuck glued  
deadness emptied  
into vagueness hair

remembered wisp that  
smile like half  
her eyes brown eyes  
her thinning arms

could lift her  
in my arms so  
*hold* to her so  
take her in my arms.

This poem gets in the way of itself just as it's starting out, so that the simple sentence "had gone up to mother's place in time for supper" takes some recovering; meanwhile the line breaks lift out "mother's place in time" as though to bring static memory from the drift of narrative. When Williams wrote, "This is just to say," he meant most simply "only to say," but Creeley makes "just to say" into "if only I could say," and the poem ends by trying fully to recollect or gather up his mother's thinning memory in those lovely closing lines.

There are other love poems in this volume, to Pen, Creeley's wife of thirty years, and indeed the settled domesticity of the couple's life runs through the book. From the outset he thinks about oneness and twoness, as in this fragment from *Hello*:

*Bye-bye*, kid says,  
girl, about five—  
peering look,  
digs my one eye.  
(“Soup”)

There are two long i's in "Bye-bye," and another in "five," set against the short ones in "kid" and "dig," and if that joke makes you wince, you do again at "digs my one eye" because "digs" is too much a reminder of what happened to the other (Creeley's left eye had to be removed after a childhood accident). This is all a bit of a game, and there is more play with twoness at the other end of the volume, when the awkward grammars of rhymed couplets poke fun at strained coupledness:

Us was never happy we,  
all that's ever left is me.

Oneness plays a nastier trick on Creeley, though. In some poems he imagines aging as falling apart, but in "Time" there is a more horrible realization:

When I was young,  
the freshness of a single  
moment came to me  
  
with all hope, all tangent wonder.  
Now I am one, inexorably  
in this body, in this time.

Creeley alerts us in several poems to the "one" in "wonder," but here the thought that self and body are one and that you can't get out of what he elsewhere calls "this—physical sentence" pits the oneness of age against the wonder of the past. He makes lighter of it later in "I'll win":

I'll win the way  
I always do  
by being gone  
when they come.

This poem anticipates the Houdini-like trick its speaker will play on befuddled future readers, but it ends, "Being dead, then, / I'll have won completely," where the hollow victory of the escape artist is to vanish into the oneness of death.

In his late essay on Whitman, Creeley wrote of death as "the utterly common fate of all beyond any differentiation." Facing that common end meant something particular to a poet who had sought throughout his life to differentiate, to find the edges of things. He tries to do that in "The Sound":

Early mornings, in the light still  
faint making stones, herons, marsh  
grass all but indistinguishable in the muck,  
  
one looks to the far side, of the sound, the sand

side with low growing brush and  
reeds, to the long horizontal of land's edge,

You can't quite make things out here: "light still" might be adjectives awaiting their noun ("in the light, still landscape"). Rounding the corner, "light" turns out to have been a noun, qualified by "still faint," and the poem goes about its task of picking things out even as it says they're hard to distinguish. Looking further out, things are clearer, but at the same time "sound" registers doubly: a sound is an inlet, or narrow channel of water, in this poem between the observing self and "that / other side, that outside, place of / imagined real openness." And sound is also, of course, the channel that comes between inner consciousness an outer expression, along which distinctions are made, or in which they are sometimes lost. So "sound" threatens to disintegrate when put too close to its kin "the sound, the sand / side," and yet on the other side sound preserves seen distinctions, as where "low growing" measures its long o's against the short ones in "long horizontal."

Creeley plays with this double sense of sound in several places, including the long poem "Histoire de Florida." You can't go to Florida, especially in French, without taking some Wallace Stevens with you. Stevens's "Idea of Order at Key West" in which maker and made were so fully bound up, ends, "In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." Creeley's "Histoire de Florida" reminds us again of the other sense of "sound":

Out over that piece of water  
where the sound is, the place  
it loops round on the map from  
the frontal ocean and makes a  
spit of land this sits on, here, flat,  
filled with a patent detritus left  
from times previous whatever  
else was here before become  
now brushy conclave thick with  
hidden birds, nimble, small lizards.

This thinks about the sounds and surfaces of the page as well as the landscape it surveys: "where the sound is" is both out over there where it's pointing and here, the channel through which the poem makes its way. "[A] / spit of land this sits on, here, flat," gestures insistently at the page as well as the peninsula. Pages, like swamps, might be covered in detritus, and this one is littered, as you might expect, with bits of Stevens—in fact "Histoire de Florida" winds up winding itself, perhaps too predictably, around his "Anecdote of the Jar."

In the latter part of this volume sound turns inside out. Readers of Creeley are used to listening for delicate internal sound patterns while pick-



ing their way through the verbiage, but in many of the later poems these internal threads turn into external frameworks, internal rhymes pushed out into end rhymes and interior rhythms into strictly metrical ballad forms. These familiar frames are a kind of homecoming, in that return and recall are embedded in their structures, and insofar as they recall “earlier” oral forms known from childhood. Sometimes, as in “Memory,” the layers of self-reference threaten to evacuate the poem into pure form. Dedicated to Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, the poem begins, “Remember when / we all were ten.” Here is its last stanza:

Because it's when  
all thoughts occur  
to say again  
we're where we were

The coming together of that last line feels somehow inevitable, “were” dropping back almost where the line started in “we’re.” Almost but not quite; memory doesn’t quite take you back where you began. Meter collaborates in that thought in “Provincetown”:

Could walk on water backwards  
to the very place  
and all around was sand  
where grandma dug, bloomers up,  
with her pail, for clams.

This is almost but not quite short meter, the hymn stanza whose four-beat penultimate line signals so clearly the closure to come. Only there are five lines here, and if you listen to it you notice that either of the three-beat lines “to the very place” or “and all around was sand” would have done nicely. These two lines jostle to occupy one position, as though two thoughts were squabbling over the space, and the poem were trying to choose between them—between the hope that walking backwards, remembering, would miraculously get you “to the very place” and the worry that you’d end up not walking on water but beached on some featureless strand (“all around was sand”). Although the form ends at the expected time, the meter and (almost) rhyme closing appropriately with “clams,” its second and third lines betray a hesitation in its making, an imperfection that pulls it back from the brink of nostalgia.

Like any collected poems, this book irons out the contingencies of earlier publication; there’s no sense, for example, of the work Creeley did in collaboration, nor that the poems in *On Earth* were those left in a folder on his desk when he died. There are no dates in the list of contents; you have to

turn to the credits for those. Perhaps the resulting sense of disorientation is appropriate, but on balance I'd have preferred less minimalist bibliographical apparatus. There are compensations, though, like the index where you can count up the number of times Creeley titled a poem "Here" (8) or "There" (8) or "Place" (5). These are small measures of his persistence perhaps; but these two volumes also bring the larger-scale ambition of this particular, obsessive, and yet various and vital poet plainly into the light.

Fiona Green

§

Devin Johnston, *Sources*. New York: Turtle Point, 2008. 96pp. \$15.95

Devin Johnston's *Sources* deals in the stuff of poetry: birds, weather, love, other poems. But its main pleasure is Johnston's mastery of craft. "Thunderheads," a weather poem, begins,

Days spent in the shelter of work  
blown apart at dusk:

skirts rustle mimic rain  
as shadows bloom across the draw;  
a five-ton hammer taps  
a crimped leaf; cutterheads  
dredge voices through the wall.

Discrete perspectives on the storm complement each other like rhymes. "Skirts" links to images of rustling curtains and women fleeing the "bloom of shadows"; the sound of a tapped leaf predicts—and then joins—the dredge of voices. The word "taps" seems commissioned specially for the poem—manufactured to note the gentle action of the cloud's "five-ton hammer." (In another poem, the word "auctioneering," which describes a warbler's call, is similarly fitted for its line.) Johnston, here, records the changing scene as he remains focused on the present. Change is a condition of presentness.

"Four Nights" describes another cloud-scene:

A wave, a welter  
of clouds cross-  
hatched with rain:

excess, happiness.

A wave of clouds becomes a welter as the rain appears. The break at “cross- / hatched” reenacts the storm’s crash or clash, and the rain’s hatching. The comma between “excess” and “happiness” marks the transformation’s near-imperceptibility: excess leads to happiness, the poem suggests, and is happiness. The sense of excess-as-surplus is a subtle joke, called out by the poem’s precision: the rain is in excess of the clouds as “cross- / hatched” is in excess of its line or the poem is in excess of the storm. (“Excess” has the Latin root “excedere”—to surpass, to outperform.)

Writing like this is the main key of *Sources*. The poems are exquisite and comprehensive. Their music and surface beauty invite intense scrutiny, asking us to look deeper and better—at the objects they describe, but more importantly at the resources and effects of description itself. (Johnston has developed this key through two earlier books, *Telepathy* and *Aversions*, and promoted it with Flood Editions, a publishing house he co-directs with Michael O’Leary.) The poem “Clouds” considers the stakes of this invitation. It opens with another cloudscape, this time viewed through a kitchen window. The clouds “diurnal, tidal” evoke their literal, liquid sources: “spume of Puget Sound, eggs / boiled at Little Bighorn, evaporated / birdbaths on display, sunbathers / stretched beside the pool....” It concludes:

We say, *that’s life, that’s love*—  
Yet the active file distinguishes  
hounds, greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs;  
gate and mirror; heads of lettuce  
glazed with rain; Taj Mahal  
and traveler; marching trees of  
Birnam Wood; sheep from Deuteronomy.

Above the kitchen sink, we skim  
a massive novel shorn of names, wild  
ramifications of dis-  
    appointment, old life  
convoluted past recall.

Descriptions from the “active file”—descriptions actively crafted, rather than spontaneously recalled—replace the earlier catalogue. A “file” abrades as it houses. Clouds come to resemble trees from *Macbeth*’s Birnam Wood, sheep from Deuteronomy. This “novel” is both a “dis- / appointment” and literally a series of appointments: a recognition of the poem’s incommensurability with one’s “old life” and of its potential to realize a new one. Craft, here, is not an instrument of memorialization, but of discovery. A “novel shorn of names” is not a novel without names; it’s a novel with names constantly recast in the imagination. Read “shorn” think “wind shear.” The poem records this

discovery as loss and gain: the “old life / convoluted past recall” met by the “wild / ramifications” of the poem itself. Valéry would call Johnston’s “wild ramifications” *wonder*.

The less successful poems in *Sources* seem to actively avoid such ramifications. They are instead content with aphorism or willfully minor. “Swift-footed” opens with an unconvincing epigram:

Look at the sun  
beating down  
on what was  
February’s cold  
mud:  
    everything  
durable proves  
unendurable.

“The Door” asks, “What was this basement door / scratched by the dog, / cut from the hardest / shagbark stock?” Its answer literalizes the book’s title as a poetic exercise: “The straightest went / for ax hafts / turned on a lathe, / the trunk for sash / and door.” This is pretty but not nearly as exciting (or revelatory) as the book’s best poems.

Johnston’s translations from Latin and Greek suggest another gloss on the volume’s title. “After Sappho” begins,

Some say flashing metal, some say fire,  
others call a Sea Harrier  
in vertical ascent  
    the loveliest sight  
that dark earth offers. I say  
whatever you love most.

This translation from fragment 16 is first an occasion to vitalize English—a revitalized original is byproduct. Where Jim Powell, for instance, renders Sappho’s “fleet,” Johnston presents a fighter-jet. The tack mocks the problem of anachronism in translation, while creating a complex of music and imagery that is the poet’s own. Internal repetition galvanizes the stanza: “Some say” leads to “Sea Harrier” and to “say fire”; “metal” leads to “call,” and to “loveliest”; “ascent” to “sight” to “most.” As with the cloud poems, the true source and subject of “After Sappho” is the imagination—the mind reshaping its environment as it discovers it.

Joshua Kotin

Kent Johnson, *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2008. 124pp. \$16

Kent Johnson's *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*, a de facto selected poems long overdue from this singular author, features an epigraph from Frank O'Hara's anti-manifesto, "Personism": "You just go on your nerve." It's a fitting place to begin since admirers and detractors will agree that nerve is not something that Johnson lacks. He first came to prominence as a shadowy figure entangled in the Araki Yasusada affair of the mid-90s. Yasusada was supposedly a Hiroshima survivor and a disciple of the New American Poetry; several translations of his work were published in notable venues, including *American Poetry Review*, *Grand Street*, and *Conjunctions*. When it was discovered that Yasusada did not in fact exist, suspicion fell on Johnson, the poet's American representative, then as now a community college professor in Freeport, Illinois. The ensuing brouhaha drew brickbats from the poetic right and left alike: *APR* editor Arthur Vogelsang fulminated that the hoax was a criminal act, while Charles Bernstein decried the poems as a white American appropriation of Japanese suffering akin to the Gingrichian revolution then regnant in Washington. Even after the 1997 publication of *Doubled Flowering: From the Notebooks of Araki Yasusada* demonstrated that the Yasusada work represented no mere stunt but rather a strangely gorgeous and novel aesthetic project, Johnson has remained saddled with a reputation (one that he has at times helped to promote) as a gadfly, a crazed bomb-thrower in the halls of Poetry—especially within its self-styled experimental wing. While *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde* on the one hand confirms Johnson's taste for troublemaking and shows an occasionally adolescent glee in taking swipes at sacred cows, it simultaneously makes clear the sweep of his ambition: like the vanguard poets whom he tweaks and honors, he is out to clear space for the new by preserving the living energy of the past and clearing away all that is dead. It is a rich and astonishing collection, stuffed with dynamite, shit, and orchids.

Past is everywhere present in *Homage*, and the book's blend of reverence and ironizing gamesmanship regarding that past is announced on the cover. A socialist realist collage by Geoffrey Gatza simultaneously evokes Dziga Vertov and the satirical play of the Russian conceptual artists Komar and Melamid, while the title name-checks David Lehman's history of the New York School, *The Last Avant-Garde*—a book Johnson no doubt recognizes as at once a useful account of a vital movement in postwar American poetry and a chit in the game of contemporary poetic reputation-making. *Homage* itself takes its structure from Jack Spicer's *Book of Magazine Verse*. While Spicer titled his sections after various publications (*The Nation*, *Poetry Chicago*, *The St. Louis Sporting News*) that would never recognize his dis-

patches from outside as acceptable, Johnson offers his poems to the landmark magazines of the midcentury avant-garde: *Angel Hair*, *C*, *Locus Solus*. The gesture is fraught with mourning and critique: even as the book longs for a lost cultural moment, it accurately locates the new poetic establishment as the inheritors of that avant-garde impulse. In particular, while Johnson has both personal and aesthetic bones to pick with the Language writing that came to dominate post-60s experimental writing, reflected in such poems as “Epistle to David Shapiro” and “Even Though He’s Known as a Language Poet, I Want to Write Like Norman Fischer,” his sustained attack on that school seems fundamentally a sociological one: having made a remarkable success of their long march through the institutions, these poets have been rewarded by becoming institutions themselves. Johnson treats them with the mistrust demanded by his antinomian convictions.

His sensitivity to the micropolitics of interpersonal relations accounts for the omnipresence of the New York School throughout the collection, as though this poetic community provided a Bourdieuan test case for the contamination of aesthetic and personal friendships by ceaseless jockeying for position. The exquisite “Sestina: Avantforte,” for instance, while formally shuffling the names of its hero poets Schuyler, Guest, Ceravolo, Ashbery, O’Hara, and Koch, delineates a consistent, and consistently hilarious, concern over who might potentially top whom. In an imagined telephone conversation, O’Hara instructs Schuyler to keep mum about a visiting Dutch film crew: “[D]on’t tell Kenneth, because you know how he takes these things.” Shortly after, Koch arrives at Schuyler’s apartment to announce an impending translation of his own work into Dutch. Frenetically executing jumping jacks, Koch ends up reduced to ecstatic bursts of conjunctions: “And! But!” The paired conjunctions, quoting Koch’s own poem “Permanently,” serve at one level as a kind of index of the tensions inherent in any joint aesthetic enterprise, any shared school: the New York School is Ashbery and O’Hara and Koch and Ceravolo and Schuyler and Guest, but only some of them will become chancellors of the American Academy of Poets. The conjunctions serve, at another level, as a reflection of Johnson’s complex stance toward the scenes he depicts. “Sestina: Avantforte” doesn’t just make use of a form closely associated with the New York School, but also slyly deploys throughout allusions to such landmark poems as “Why I Am Not a Painter” and “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape”:

But look at this wonderful painting

Barbara Guest

has brought to show us...Kenneth looked up. **You have TANGERINES in it**, said Kenneth. **And hey, by the way**, he literally yelled, as he started to do jumping jacks at a great velocity, **What’s up with Frank O’Hara?**

**Wait until he hears about Holland! Last time I saw him he said he felt  
like he'd never write again! I'm writing a lot, though! So  
where's he been? Huh?** Uh, said Jimmy, he's, uh, been editing  
a new, um, sestina...full of, you know, cartoon characters...  
by John Ashbery...

Moreover, its chatty, gossipy mode is unthinkable without the innovations of the authors depicted within. The poem exhibits Johnson's palpable desire to inhabit the "and"; to this extent, it's a kind of extended fantasia on the close to Ted Berrigan's "Poem" on Pasternak and Mayakovsky: "They were great. / Now it's me." But this desire is saturated with skepticism, with a recognition of the minute betrayals that attend poetic exuberance, bound up as it is with self-regard. Barbara Guest, whose painting's debut is eclipsed throughout the poem by masculine posturing, gets the last word: "you've got to be fucking kidding me."

Johnson's obsessive concern with the ups and downs of poetic reputation, not to mention allusions to long-dormant dustups on the Buffalo Poetics list, may seem at first sight unattractively inside baseball. But while some of Johnson's poetry will be lost on readers less embroiled in the minutiae of the contemporary experimental scene, his writing uses tempests in teacups to tackle larger issues of power and domination. His sleight-of-hand depictions of the landscape of contemporary American avant-garde poetry, at once suspicious and mythologizing and visible not only in this collection but also in such recent works as *Epigrammitis* and *I Once Met*, may remind the reader of Roberto Bolaño, who also raised a marginal literary scene into fodder for comic epics. And the case might be made that Johnson, who spent much of his childhood in Uruguay and has published with Forrest Gander remarkable translations of the Bolivian poet Jaime Sáenz, is really a Latin American poet who just happens to have turned up in the Midwest. The affinity to such poets as Nicanor Parra and Raul Zurita lies not just in a shared disregard for poetic convention and propriety, or in a sustained assault upon the lyric self, but even more in the ruthless gaze of his geopolitical vision. Johnson's own engagement with Latin American politics (he taught literacy programs under the Sandinista revolution) no doubt taught him that the U.S. outsourcing of torture is nothing particularly new; throughout the collection, hapless avant-gardists continually rub up against the victims of state-inflicted agonies, hooded, scarred, burned.

"When I First Read Ange Mlinko," for instance, juxtaposes praise for the eponymous poet with the image of four girls incinerated by a missile from a drone plane, while "The New York School (or: I Grew Ever More Intense)" alternates sections in which the poet reimagines members of the school as personal grooming products with panoramas of torched cities and children

dying from radiation poisoning. The collection closes with what remains to my mind the most potent poetic critique of our atrocious Iraqi adventure: “Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz, or: ‘Get the Hood Back On.’” In a series of monologues, the all-American torturers in undisclosed locations around the world offer brief yearbook-style autobiographies before letting their charges know what they’re in for:

...it was just amazing, we had our pictures in all the papers and stuff, you should see my scrap book. I hope this isn’t awkward and uncomfortable for you, and I hope you don’t mind my starting out by just getting straight to the point and saying so: But I’m going to fuck you in the ass now with a fluorescent light tube, you sorry-assed, primitive thug.

The poem closes with a confession by an anonymous American poet, who bewails the ineffectuality of poetry to put a stop to the poem’s scenes of horror, while talking up the exciting literary vistas ahead.

Johnson’s never on riskier ground than in his engagement with the radical horror of industrialized killing. His methods invite the accusations that he is exploiting and trivializing the suffering of others. But it seems to me a measure of his fierce ethical vision, in fact, that he takes this precise risk, representing and exemplifying the impossible situation in which we all function: living reasonably comfortable lives that are complicit in the brutal pacification of generally invisible multitudes. The critique is all the more effective in that its most salient target is an aspect of the poet himself. No figure in the book, ultimately, is more narcissistically concerned with his poetic image, more genially and ineffectually aware of the anonymous suffering that suffuses the world. To the extent that Johnson’s writing hinges on a sustained assault on the very idea of authorship, after all, one would hardly expect the author himself to escape his own slings and arrows. “The Impropriety of the Hours,” after cataloguing the flaming death of various inhabitants of Southeast Asia, closes: “Yes, the whole town has gone up in flames, and I am speaking of it now, inappropriately, in the on-line light, of this fun avant life.” After Arkadii Dragomoshchenko declares a Soviet banquet for visiting American poets “a great quantity of such repulsive fucking dog shit,” Johnson can only reply:

“You think so?” I burbled, my mouth full of bread and sturgeon eggs.  
“Why it’s the first time in my life that I feel like a real Poet...I think this is fantastic!”

And here is the close of “Lyric Poetry After Auschwitz,” the last lines of Johnson’s book:



I want you to take this self-righteous poem, soak it in this bedpan of crude oil, and shove it down your pleading, screaming throat.

Now get the hood back on.

In these ferocious lines, as throughout *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*, one hears the voice of Whitman transplanted into the national security state: the self now dispersed, furtive, anguished, mocking, at times sadistically cruel. It is not an easy voice to attend to, but even in the springtime called Obama, it remains indispensable.

John Beer

§

*The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*. Edited by Arnold Rampersad. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 424pp. \$45

*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*. Edited by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 224pp. \$27.95

*Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African American Poetry*. Edited by Keith Tuma. Miami, OH: Miami University Press, 2006. 226pp. \$17.95

*The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South*. Edited by Nikky Finney. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. 405pp. \$18.95

Does an anthology of African American poetry best explain its subject by beginning at the beginning? What do we make of African American poetry when there is no dutiful march forward through time? Chronology has always allowed African American poetry to demonstrate how it and its poets have progressed. Thus, the deictics at work in many African American anthologies—"that was *then*, this is *now*," "*look* how far we have come," "*these* poems show us what African American poetry is"—usually end up reverberating louder than the poems themselves. In other words, African American anthologies, in the pronouncement of their goals, are particularly susceptible to drowning out their poems. Time, but for the rare exception, pushes the anthology. But can the anthology push time back?

Enter *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*. It begins with Elizabeth Alexander's "Today's News":

I didn't want to write a poem that said "blackness is," because we know better than anyone

that we are not one or ten or ten thousand things  
Not one poem      We could count ourselves forever  
and never agree on the number.

and is followed by Lucille Clifton's "when i stand around among poets":

when i stand around  
among poets, sometimes  
i hear a single music  
in us, one note  
dancing us through the  
singular moving world.

The question implied by these poems and by *The Oxford Anthology* in general is: What do we continue to learn about poetry written by African Americans by putting together time and again anthologies that span from Phillis Wheatley to [fill in Youngest Established Poet here]? Antebellum poets, poets of the Reconstruction, poets of the Harlem Renaissance, the modernist poets, the Black Arts poets, the post-Black Arts poets, plus a sprinkling of the outsiders of the editor's choice. We know the routine. And in terms of making a discursive, repeatable subject out of African American poetry, the routine works. But it stiffens the poetry.

Instead of giving us what we've already seen or attempting to put out something akin to the footnote-laden Norton anthologies, *The Oxford Anthology* offers a different and idiosyncratic vision of the African American poetry anthology. And what are some of these idiosyncrasies? Arnold Rampersad writes in his introduction that he had no room for "a poem simply because it was thought to be of historical importance, or of some other significance, if we saw it was also technically flawed in some obvious way." Translation: this is an anthology built around personal taste. And Rampersad's taste is broad and unpredictable. In one section the experimental poet Raymond Patterson's "Black Power" precedes Carl Phillips' classically tinged "Blue"; "Holy Days" by Larry Neal, one of the foundational voices of the Black Arts Movement, follows on the heels of "Cavalry Way" by May Miller, a writer known most for her involvement in the Harlem Renaissance; and in yet another section is Claude McKay's stately and internationally renowned sonnet "If We Must Die":

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,

So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

This, written in response to the wave of lynchings during the Red Summer of 1919, is immediately followed by Conrad Kent Rivers' "Watts," a lyric psychological portrait situated within the massive race riots that took place in that Los Angeles neighborhood in 1965:

Must I shoot the  
white man dead  
to free the nigger  
in his head?

This iridescent weaving of poems is typical in *The Oxford Anthology*. The poems resonate with a peculiar intertextual power.

Idiosyncrasies, however, also have their drawbacks, and not all of the idiosyncrasies in *The Oxford Anthology* pay off. In a brief introduction to the anthology Rampersad explains the motives behind some of these sections with poignant clarity:

The flaws of the South were well known but so were its charms. The South bespeaks for many blacks not simply the pleasures of fertile fields, lazy streams, and cool, inviting woods but also the treasure of kinship and community lost or at risk in the North. Now, according to demographers, blacks are returning to the South in great numbers—a movement that the black poet prophesied in the many works that deal realistically with both its appeal and its violent history.

Yet others come off as generalized and forced:

The black child, too, has also served as a vital inspiration to the poet. Over the generations, the child has been perhaps the most poignant symbol of despair and hope, of cynicism and optimism. Here, too, might be seen an example of the ways in which African-American poetry must be different from its mainstream counterpart. In canonical poetry written in English, except in the works of poets such as Wordsworth and Blake, the child possesses little significance as a subject.... However, the social and historical reality surrounding the black child typically makes that child a more

compelling, freighted subject. The black poet has recognized the special, indispensable aspect of this subject.

Some of the best poems of Katherine Philips, Ben Jonson, Coleridge, Whitman, Bishop, Cummings, Merrill, Plath, and Roethke are too casually overlooked here for the sake of an unnecessary African American artistic exceptionalism. English is not bereft of poetry about children or childhood. The rationale is clear: black children have had a long-standing fraught relationship with the country they live in, and this creates a unique anxiety that has manifested itself in compelling ways in poetry written by African Americans. That this subject then is *inherently* different from the paucity of poems produced by “its mainstream counterpart” is simply not true. There is no need to sell the English poetic tradition short in order to emphasize the historical difference of the African American experience.

Also, a fair warning to anyone interested in using this anthology to teach African American poetry: a canonical poem like “If We Must Die” is the exception in the *Oxford Anthology*. This is not an anthology that seeks the comprehensive authority of, for instance, the Norton or Heath anthology series. Many, many well-known poems written by African Americans have been excluded. If we take Rampersad at his word, then he found technical flaws in numerous important poems. Phyllis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” would seem an obvious choice for the section “What Is Africa to Me?” The fact that Countee Cullen has only one poem in this anthology is a shock—especially considering that it contains six poems by Colleen J. McElroy, four by E. Ethelbert Miller, five by Quincy Troupe, and nine apiece by Rita Dove and Harryette Mullen. Now don’t get me wrong: I can think of reasons to exclude Countee Cullen from an anthology of African American poetry (“I just don’t like Cullen’s verses” perhaps being the most reasonable). But implying in its absence that his work is “technically flawed in some obvious way”—that leaves me perplexed. If there is some obvious flaw that Cullen’s work suffered from, technique is certainly not it. Alas, Jay Wright is another poet whose absence disappoints, but by now I’m accustomed to it. We leave later generations to atone for our continued omission of his work, and they will.

My intention is not to enter into a fray of inclusion and omission. It is the burden of an anthology by nature to make these choices. Nevertheless, an anthology with the editorial trappings of *The Oxford Anthology* does seem to want to have it both ways. Rampersad’s introduction calls his anthology a “composite portrait” of African American poetry’s “orderly history.” Yet the best thing about *The Oxford Anthology* seems to me to be that these claims are exactly what the book avoids. Place more faith in the texture of this anthology than in its introduction. You will find something to cherish. This is a wonder-

ful occurrence. It means that at some point within the shell of the book, the poems took *The Oxford Anthology* back and turned it into a pearl.

Finally, the absence of footnotes will seem a pleasure for some and a curse for others. Readers unfamiliar with these poems or with African American history and culture (Who was Mary McLeod Bethune? Who was Glenn Spearman?) will have some heavy lifting to do. But there is a point to that as well: we are better off for the search and for avoiding the spurious belief that one book can suffice in giving us a full picture of African American poetry.

“Every new reading requires a break from the established disciplinary modes, a break from regnant pecking orders, and a breakthrough,” write Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey in their introduction to *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*. Their aim was to put together a collection “[that] affords a fresh perspective on the more experimental poetics created by African American artists in the decades following the Second World War.” Some poets formed, and some were drawn in by, budding vanguardist literary groups that had sprung up in major American cities during the civil rights era: the Umbra Workshop group (and *Umbra* magazine), which was based on New York’s Lower East Side; the Dasein workshop group (and *Dasein* magazine), which was based at Washington, D.C.’s Howard University; and the Free Lance workshop group (as well as *Free Lance* magazine), which was based in Cleveland.

The idea behind *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* is to revitalize our sense of African American poetic possibility by remembering the efforts of an avant-garde whose members have not achieved canonical status the way that comparable white American poets have. Instead of arguing that these are poets who have always been underappreciated—surprisingly, *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* contains a number of well-known African American poets who moved in avant-garde circles early in their careers, such as Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, June Jordan, Bob Kaufman, Clarence Major, Ishmael Reed, and one not-so-young poet, Melvin Tolson—*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* begins with a discussion of how the center supported the margins. Langston Hughes was a strong, supportive influence on poets such as Russell Atkins, Julia Fields, and Calvin Hernton, for example. Later in his career, Hughes published in some of the same venues as these poets and encouraged them to meet one another and to write. Combine this with the fact that some of the finest African American poets of that era held regular teaching positions at universities—Sterling A. Brown at Howard and Robert Hayden at Fisk were easily accessible to a young, emergent African American student body—and what you have is a confluence of generations, poets, styles, and ideals after the Second World War and prior to the Black Arts Movement that is far more varied and chatoyant than is generally perceived. Given the

pyrotechnics of the Black Arts Movement and the dominant presence of Ellison, Wright, Brooks, Baldwin, and Hayden prior to it, the critical tendency is to consider this post-war period as the modernist era of African American writing. In this regard the Black Power aesthetic that follows makes sense as frustration, counterpoint, and revolution. Yet whatever the Black Power movement devolved into, its prelapsarian state fed on an almost *fin de siècle* practice of artistic activity and an intrinsic belief in poetic experimentation. We need to become better acquainted with it if we really want to speak of an African American literary tradition in its full complexity.

Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton's essential *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945* offers an intriguing mix of familiar and experimental poets and poems. *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* gestures toward Harper and Walton's anthology by means of its title: together the titles complete the African American proverb "Every shut eye ain't asleep, every goodbye ain't gone." While *Every Shut Eye* collects a large number of remarkable poems that are thematic in their experimentations—Raymond Patterson's underrated "Twenty-Six Ways of Looking at a Blackman," for example—*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* focuses more on poems that insist on technical experimentation. Some of the experimentation is typographical play at its most modest. One example is the use of underlining for emphasis in Lawrence S. Cumberbatch's conclusion to his "I Swear to You, That Ship Never Sunk in Middle-Passage!"

Tomorrow is for the planters.

Plantation people dance at the Harlem Inn, Winstonville, Mississippi.

Some of the poems push further, with varying degrees of success. Here are the first six lines of Norman H. Pritchard's "Metagnomy":

A mid the non com mit t e d  
 com pound s of t he m in d  
 an i m age less gleam in g  
 we at h e r s h a u n t s a s y e t u n k n o w n  
 & t a u n t s  
 t h r u a c h e m i s t r y o f o u g h t

And the beginning of Pritchard's "":

” ” ” ” ”  
 ” ” ” red ”  
 ” ” ” ” ” red ” ”  
 ” ” ” ” red ” ” ” red  
 red red ” ” ” red ” ” ”

Some poems are even more complex in their mixing of shapes, scribbling, symbols, and hieroglyphs with conventional writing. Others reach toward the more discursive side of the spectrum and are a welcome relief given the difficulty of weathering too many poems like these on the trot. That said, the polyvalence of experimentation displayed by the poets collected in this volume is remarkable. And not all of these poets were throwing their typewriters against a wall to see what would happen. Here is Ishmael Reed's lyric address "Paul Laurence Dunbar in the Tenderloin":

Even at 26, the hush when  
you unexpectedly walked  
into a theatre. One year  
after *The History of Cakewalk*.

Desiring not to cause  
a fuss, you sit alone  
in the rear, watching a re  
hearsal.  
The actors are impressed. Wel  
don Johnson, so super at des  
cription, jots it all down.

I don't blame you for  
disliking Whitman, Paul.  
He lacked your style, like  
your highcollared mandalead  
portait in Hayden's  
*Kaleidoscope*; unobserved,  
Death, the uncouth critic  
does a first draft on your  
breath.

Dunbar, Johnson, and Hayden coincide with Hayden's anthology *Kaleidoscope*. The poem, so attentive to literary history and to the interactions of African American poets of earlier generations, offers us in its quiet register, its "hush," an apt response to some of the skepticism toward avant-garde poetry's ability to be "properly" poetic, to instruct and delight lyrically. If upon seeing the words "innovative poetry" in the title of *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone*, you assume it merely contains a book full of "," think again. Reed was a transplant from Buffalo to the Lower East Side and found his way within the Umbra group. Upon first meeting Amiri Baraka at the Five Spot, he greeted him by saying, "I like your prose. I don't like your poetry." *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* is by no means a monolithic expression of poetic experiment.

Ed Roberson's "poll," for example, uses a moderately distended poetic

line in order to meditate on race and identity. Note, first of all, the prismatic moods and textures of the title “poll.” Its meanings lie on top of one another like a palimpsest: the top or crown of the head, especially used in reference to horses; a common name for a parrot, as in *Robinson Crusoe*’s, “I taught my Poll...to speak” and the “‘Pretty Poll!’ (His yellow parrot beak gabbles nasally)” in *Ulysses*; to tally opinion and/or record votes; to behead, to steal, to sack and plunder, to extort:

skin that is closed    curtain.  
it is impossible to know.    how  
the light is cast.

a mark that is kept    the elect-  
ion determining the race  
before the candidate    runs.

darkie is the night is  
an old image given color.  
the skin is history,the dark horse

Roberson uses a triple-tiered play on the word “race.” Race is skin and culture; race is another expression of culture, an election run; and—with that full stop and field-space after “candidate”—“run” becomes more physical, the expression more literal, evoking an actual race. This resonance culminates, in the third and final stanza, in another triple-tiered play: Roberson leaves the final three words “the dark horse” open to speculation. Is it literal: the dark horse in the night that is difficult to see and can be used to escape? Is it “the dark horse” as in the underdog (an American favorite)? By placing “history” and the period immediately before “the dark horse,” does the line imply the end and beginning of two cultures—as Yeats did in “Leda and the Swan”—and point toward the Trojan Horse? Three plays within three in this three-stanza poem, and the manner in which the beginning and end act as hinges to a world beyond make Roberson’s “poll” a representation of expert and provocative work.

*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* is in essence the poetic incarnation of Nielsen’s 1997 study *Black Chant: Languages of African American Postmodernism*, and it makes the same argument, albeit through poetry rather than through archival research and literary theory. Both books are important contributions to African American literary history. Yet neither book is as strong without the other. The poetry (despite a fantastic introduction) lacks some of the important context that critical work provides. And the critical work, without a healthy dose of the best poems to invigorate the subject, is a little dry.



The best thing an anthology can do is to activate a thirst to find more poems or poets encountered within that collection. In this sense, a good anthology is paradoxical by nature: its finest characteristic is the one that urges you to turn away from it. An anthology's second best quality is its ability to draw you back to it. And an anthology's third best quality is its most perfunctory: convenience. Every page of an anthology is marked with the editor's taste and judiciousness while the editor, one hopes, fades away into the poems. It is a difficult game of presence and absence that is difficult to explain and at which it is even more difficult to succeed.

*The Oxford Anthology* and *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* are two examples of getting it right. Nikky Finney's *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South* is an example of getting it wrong. Finney's formulation of her subject is bizarrely arch even in the mere act of laying out its claims:

Not all of us on these pages have come to or from the South by the same dirt road. We have not chosen our dark olive words from the same patch of earth.... We who are here claim the South in what and how we hear ourselves say do and wonder. Our South, with its ghosts and fiddles, its fine sugar waters and shine.

Dirt roads, olive words (dark olive words, at that), patches of earth, wonder, ghosts, fiddle, sugar water, and shine. That the poems in this collection do not fall far from these conceits is a shame, as some of the poems are quite good. But collected as unevenly as they are, they seem repetitive and derivative of a South that has already been poeticized repeatedly both within and without the realm of African American poetry. Why an editor would decide in the twenty-first century to introduce Southern poets in terms so flat is confusing. And more so when you look again at this passage and see that Finney's goal is to talk of the diversity of the poets in the collection. They are not all from the same patches of earth, but all of their words are dark olives. They have not all walked the same dirt road, rather they have gathered from different dirt roads. Perhaps the intention was to take ownership of the lingua franca of the Southern imagination of the days of old; I don't know. But the formulation here is awkward and contrived.

Worse, the poems for the most part respond tautologically to the editor's mission statement and reinforce, instead of challenging, tepid claims. There are so many poor poems that the strong ones don't stand a chance. *The Ringing Ear* contains far, far too many dirt roads and cooked meals and wise grandmothers. At times they all appear in the same poem. Here is how Joanne Gabbin's "Pot Meals" begins:

Pot meals hold so many possibilities.  
Not like meat, potatoes, beets

Discriminately sectioned on the plate,  
No red touching brown, or brown  
Intruding its rudeness on white fluff.  
In Mama's kitchen neck bones add  
Their gray-brown juices to string beans and potatoes  
Whistling and sputtering in the family pot.

This has been the case for my mother and grandmother, too, bless their souls. Empathy can lead an enthusiastic editor to think, perhaps for that reason, that this poem says something interesting. But this poem can only be one of two possible types: a workshop poem or a poem by someone who is not a poet. Either option would inevitably yield the same end resolution: a dash of remembrance, the introduction of the speaker as an active participant, a return to the same central object from the beginning of the poem (which is also undoubtedly in the title), the penultimate addition of an enlightened appreciation for something, and then the wrap up:

Now when I want to remember Mama,  
To bring back the woman  
Whose only vanity was her reputation  
As a scrupulously clean cook,  
In whose kitchen nothing was wasted  
And no one turned away,  
I get to the family pot, add love  
And cook up some possibilities.

Hayden follows this formula in “Those Winter Sundays” and produces one of the best poems of our language. But Hayden’s ability to contextualize these elements into something poignant, rigorous, and surprising—from his use of the sonnet form to craft a love poem to his absent father, to having the speaker’s lack of appreciation replace where the lesson would be, to the concluding question at the end of the poem—is beyond the reach of most poets. That’s fine. “Pot Meals” does not need to be “Those Winter Sundays.” But an editor has a responsibility to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Sections titled “Music, Food, and Work: Heeding the Lamentation and Roar of Things Made by Hand”; “Swimming, Childhood, and Other Thunders: Don’t Get Your Hot Hair Wet or Your Good Shoes Dirty”; “Religion and Nature: The Lord Looks Out for Babies and Fools; The Anvil of Heaven Murmuring”; “Love, Flesh, and Family: The Hush and Holler Portraits”; “The Echo and Din of Place: Turn in by the Silver Queen and Double Twisted Pine”; and “The Twenty-first Century Southern Riff and Shout: Modern Lullabies for Planet Octavia” don’t allow us to make head or tail of where the anthology is going or what is being said through this collection. Again,

if the subject were something new I could understand better the enthusiasm behind the jumbled vision on display in *The Ringing Ear*. But between the moonlit trees in the Southern night there's not much to see here. Take, for instance, Kalamu Ya Salaam's "Quarter Moon Rise":

soft moon shimmers out  
of cloudy dress, stirred by night's  
suggestive caress

which makes me yearn for Etheridge Knight's "Haiku":

Making jazz swing  
In seventeen syllables AIN'T  
No square poets job

A haiku about a moon wearing clouds for a dress and enticed by the embrace of night in an anthology about African American poets writing about the South is exactly the type of cliché I would have hoped that this anthology would have avoided.

*Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African American Poetry*, edited by Keith Tuma, is the fruit of the Marjorie Cook Conference on Diversity in African American Poetry that was held at Miami University in September 2003. The collection makes no pretense of being more than a group of poems and essays from one hurricane-tossed conference weekend in Ohio. Yet in its modest shape and size provide an invigorating limit within which contemporary African American poetry is given a chance to explore some of its varied incarnations. If you are looking for a collection of African American poets in their element, *Rainbow Darkness* provides an energetic complement to, or an entire change of pace from, the other anthologies.

At conferences, poets tend to read work they know will be successful with the audience or they read work that they want to try out. Poetry events, which are like literary movements in miniature, are charged with an immediacy that prepares an audience for the more visceral effects of poetry. Tone is picked up well before form; speech acts are more easily recognized than are prose poems and sestinas. And so when these events are collected into print, they face the challenge of translating one series of real-time effects for the more delayed and distanced gratification one receives from reading poems in books. In the give-and-take between presence and print, *Rainbow Darkness* manages to achieve this. Keith Tuma, the editor, confesses in his introduction that the choices involved in making this transition are not easy:

We wanted a conversation at the conference, and we were happy that discussions did not result in everybody more or less agreeing. And there was little consensus even as I tried to get the poets included here to agree upon a title for the anthology. Eight or nine titles were proposed, most of them using phrases from poems by canonical African American poets, but I could not get a single poet to sign to a title proposed by another poet.

But that these struggles yield their rewards:

In the end I was left to choose between my two favorites among those that had been proposed, “Bessie, bop, or Bach” from Langston Hughes’s “Theme for English B” and “Rainbow Darkness” from Robert Hayden’s “Theme and Variation.” I opted at first for the phrase from the poem by Hughes because it speaks directly to the matter of several divergent streams as they inform African American poetic practice. As I have indicated, this was a key concept in imaging and organizing the conference. But I also admired the poem by Robert Hayden, in particular for its insistence on mutability and mystery, on a “changing permanence” and “an imminence / that turns to curiosa all I know.” The optimism, the idea that light might be a “rainbow darkness / wherein God waylays us and empowers”—well, in the end, I couldn’t resist. Let the phrase stand for the many possibilities for African American poetry still on the horizon.

The poets who read at the event were Jeffery Renard Allen, Wanda Coleman, C.S. Giscombe, Terrance Hayes, Kim Hunter, Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, Nathaniel Mackey, Tracie Morris, Harryette Mullen, Mendi Lewis Obadike, James Richardson, Tim Seibles, Reginald Shepherd, Evie Shockley, Lorenzo Thomas, Natasha Trethewey, Anthony Walton, Crystal Williams, and Tyrone Williams. And their poems, when read together, offer a richness and an element of surprise that *The Ringing Ear*, for example, so sorely lacks. Here is part of Evie Shockley’s “cause i’m from Dixie too”:

i am southern hear me roar i am burning flags crosses i  
am scarlet and prissy like a piece of carmine velvet at christmas  
don’t know nothing bout birthin no rabies so don’t come foamin  
at my mouth i am miss Dixie and a miss is as good as a guile i  
am a daughter of the con-federacy come on dad don’t you know  
me here let me put on this hood and sheet do my eyes look more  
familiar now surrounded by bleach i am southern damn it y’all keep  
forgetting my birth was our wedding till death do us part

And the fourth part of James Richardson’s “Parnassus Rising,” which opens up to reveal a pearl of a haiku:

IV. Calliope, muse of epic poetry

Rappers slice airwaves  
sword-fight AM/FM haze:  
afroed Beowulves

Richardson, who is a poet I did not know much about, also strikes a chord in *Rainbow Darkness* with “My Man Caliban!”

Were you (I suppose) expecting  
an angry, homeboy soliloquy,  
deep, gruff voice, spit cornering  
some nigga mouth, a staccato repartee  
replete with *muthafuckas*, *damn straights*,  
and you (of course) could liberally recoil,  
gape at those thick, angry lips,  
mythologize my passion,  
make sure you got first rights  
to the movie version?

But for some reason spring came  
today, and that gash on my head  
from the pop bottle you threw  
is sprouting roses (you thought  
was a scab). And that was you  
on the steps of the teatro del negro  
talkin’ ‘bout my momma and how  
we all got tails, wasn’t it?  
Well, that’s o.k.—I’ll fix you some  
punch spiked with collard green juice,  
and that escargot you liked—  
them’s chitlins! Now, look at you:  
greasy-mouthed, head thrown back,  
grinning, belching, farting:  
Caliban, my man!

The recently departed Reginald Shepherd offers with his poem “Refrain” more of the elegant lyricism for which he was praised: “Petrarch whispers leaves into my ear.” And the poem has Shepherd’s recognizable, sonorous probing all over it:

He loves me nowhere  
but in words (another of the several things

which I refrain from mentioning), boys' names  
on trees or boys named after trees:  
fixing beauty in the win, fixing hunger  
in the eye, the *x* of it.

*Rainbow Darkness* does not offer itself as an elixir to the world's problems, nor does it pretend to exist in a vacuum for the exceptional. Tuma is generous both to his readers, to the publication, to the event, and to African American poetry itself when he writes:

Readers seeking to learn something about African American poetry in the new century will do well also to seek out the work of some of the other poets we considered inviting, including...Rita Dove, Erica Hunt, Jay Wright, Marilyn Nelson, Fred Moten, Amiri Baraka, Tracy K. Smith, Mark McMorris, Renee Gladman, Ed Roberson, Carl Phillips, Michael Harper, and many others whose work is mentioned in the essays included here and still others whose work can be found in *Hambone* and *Callaloo*, and a dozen other fine journals.

You can add a name here or there, take another away from there or here. Regardless, a sense of scope and a belief in intertextuality always does African American poetry a world of good. We, who write poems and look to make sense of what has been written, canonized, forgotten or coming next, are all part of a search.

In this sense, if you want to find a collection of African American poets in their element, *Rainbow Darkness* provides a wonderful complement to *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone*, and both provide a wonderful complement to *The Oxford Anthology*. As for *Rainbow Darkness*, the structure of essays-poems-essays lends to the feeling of an event, a movement of concentration from one level of engagement to another, while the essays by Keith Tuma, Evie Shockley, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Kathy Lou Schultz, and Herman Beavers, as well as a closing essay by the late Lorenzo Thomas (whose poetry, to bring this discussion full circle, appears in *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone*) frame the poems not as examples of prose theses but rather as art which livens their prose; the two dancing together instead of one dancing for the other. In this sense the closing words of Thomas, which are also the close of the book, seem the best way for me to close as well:

Now that I think about it, dancing may not be so bad after all. As a wise man once said, "We have got to dance our way out of this constriction."  
We, the poets, have the task of finding the words to go with the music.

Rowan Ricardo Phillips

Alistair McCartney, *The End of the World Book: A Novel*. Madison: Terrace Books, 2008. 314pp. \$26.95

“Surely there is nothing more melancholy than the sublime act of fingerfucking,” writes Alistair McCartney. One detects, beneath the cloistered smell of soap, the “the faint odor of feces, reminding us that all men, including ourselves, inevitably decay.” This entry, alphabetically organized in the “F” chapter of *The End of the World Book*, touches on McCartney’s predominant obsessions: death, desire, and memory. Even—or especially—in the midst of sex, an “abyss” opens up, linking the parties involved in the act not only to “every historical instance of fingerfucking” but even “to every bar of soap that every man in the history of humanity has ever used, in a hopeful yet ultimately futile attempt to erase the stench of death.” McCartney’s book—a kind of parody of an encyclopedia—ranges through traces of literature and philosophy, recollections of porn films, and meditations on AIDS, looking for the scent of the human in an industrialized, information-crazed, and increasingly coffin-bound age. It is a familiar story about the melancholy of modernity told in a strikingly new way.

*The End of the World Book* is a novel, and, while it might not have a plot per se, it exploits the encyclopedic form to generate dramatic tension. The narrator assumes multiple voices in a bricolage of small pieces, sometimes resembling ephemeral comic routines or surrealistic dream scenes, at other points recalling seemingly autobiographical anecdotes. These stories are “barely stories, just shards really,” but, as they accumulate, they echo each other, and the novel gains a sense of urgency. McCartney couples his formal experimentalism with a straightforwardly didactic drive, drawing lines between Aristotle and the Holocaust, assholes and eternity, gym machines and death, suicide bombers and boredom. At one point the narrator identifies himself “in large part a satirist...born into an age that is unavoidably satiric—satire being a natural response to overwhelming foolishness and horror, the two qualities that perhaps most characterize the present day.” This narrator teaches at a “progressive university,” sterile as a nursing home, and likes to watch the heaving bodies of the USC track team as they rest after their morning run among the stones of Rosedale Cemetery. He seems self-identified with the author, who thanks Dennis Cooper (an obvious influence) in his acknowledgements.

Satire requires a delicate instinct for balance, however. McCartney’s text when it fails does so by slipping into the overly cute locution, the clichéd aphorism, or the cheap cattiness of camp. At such times the book reads like the work of a very young writer, too wedded to the imitation of past fathers (Cooper, certainly, but also Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Kafka’s short, strange tales). His appreciation of the erotics of Freddy Krueger or

the dreamy interweaving of the Brontë sisters and L.A.'s Latino gang cultures may be ultimately forgettable, his quips on homosexuality in the Bible a little canned, or his observations on the ontology of football players' asses a bit flat. There are several weakly served attempts at the scatological citationality of Kathy Acker (see "Hula Hoops," a discussion of Hegel and his ex-boyfriend Immanuel Kant), and moments indicative of someone who spends a bit too much time as an English professor (See "Hardy, Thomas," and the relation of the term "bonnet pink" to the assholes of young English farmers). Yet such minor off-key moments may indeed be necessary to build the sort of text McCartney has designed, one that often forces a crossing of discourses, as when holding forth upon the romance of "awaiting one's HIV test results," or locating Burke's notions of beauty and sublimity in two scenes from the same kitschy porn film.

It is notable that in this book there is no entry for "AIDS" (the closest is "AIDS, pre-"), nor is there an entry under "Holocaust" (the closest to that is, perhaps, "Stein, Gertrude"). McCartney's interest is in edging around a subject, contemplating the fragrant rim of the abyss instead of toppling over into the abyss itself. Here, in full, is the entry under "Diana's Wedding Dress, Theories of":

A group of scientists in Paris are currently examining a possible connection between Princess Diana's wedding dress, designed by the Emmanuels, and the AIDS virus. The link, which at this point in time still remains tentative, is that both the dress and the virus appeared in 1981, and the dress was itself a bit like a virus, a virus of ivory silk. The scientists are conducting tests in an attempt to prove that the Emmanuels and the wedding and the dress—in particular the puffy sleeves—somehow caused AIDS, which up until then had been latent, to bubble to the surface.

The end of the world being nothing compared to the world itself, the narrator finds himself "besotted" with "every object and every hairline crack in every object," rhapsodizing even about threats. "It's safe to say that if there were a contest, AIDS would probably win the prize for the most interesting disease," reads one memorable school-essay-like line. Another entry begins, "If there's one thing I love, it's asbestos."

The encyclopedic project creates a contradiction: it produces knowledge, but, as it does so, it threatens to eliminate that experience from which knowledge arises, namely, wonder. The entries in *The End of the World Book* deliberately hinge on wonder, flirting with yet simultaneously transcending the end of the world. Suicide bombers become depressed boys in hoodies, exit signs on their wrists, jeans sagging sensually. Death becomes Erik Estrada in *CHiPs*, with mirrored shades and "tight crème regulation pants." When such entries succeed—striking an unexpected juxtaposition between reality and



fantasy—they open an abyss, a new perspective, allowing us at once to transcend the real horrors evoked and recognize how deeply moored to them we are. Death is not degraded or defused by our laughter; rather, we come to some deeper, elusive knowledge of it. At his best, McCartney delivers these moments with surprising grace. Here is “Liberace,” wherein beauty is celebrated in the midst of deep melancholy, sublimity at the edge of death:

It is said that Liberace, in an attempt to come to terms with the Kaposi’s sores that covered his body, thought of them as sequins. In the days leading up to his death from AIDS-related symptoms on February 4, 1987, he made numerous references to his sequins, often remarking that his sequins were hurting him. Yes, he said in his final interview, *I am disfigured by sequins. I am studded with the strangest, darkest sequins.*

Spencer Dew