



Celebrating Poetry Month

The Best of the Best American Poetry.

Ed. by David Lehman and Robert Pinsky.

Apr. 2013. 352p. Scribner, \$35 (9781451658873); paper, \$18 (9781451658880). 811.

Each year a new volume in the Best American Poetry series, founded by poet Lehman, appears, each edited by a distinguished American poet, the likes of A. R. Ammons and Amy Gerstler. To celebrate the series' twenty-fifth anniversary, Lehman asked former poet laureate Pinsky to select 100 "best of the best." The result is a concentrated, high-caliber, and exhilarating overview of the intensity and artistry that have made American poetry so splendidly varied and vital since 1988. In his far-reaching and enlightening introduction, Pinsky, an inspired poetry advocate, explains that his criteria were "ear, imagination, and urgency"; that is, poems that embody the "sense that the ancient art must strive to get to the bottom of things, that a lot is at stake." The selections are arranged alphabetically by poet, ranging from Allen Ginsberg to Kevin Young, Megan O'Rourke to Adrienne Rich. Given the depth of Lehman and Pinsky's opening essays and the concise poet biographies and the poets' original statements about the writing of the poems, this is an anthology of broad scope, serious pleasure, and invaluable illumination. —Donna Seaman

YA: Teens enamored of, curious about, or leery of poetry will make discoveries in this dynamic gathering of 100 poets. DS.

The Cineaste.

By A. Van Jordan.

Apr. 2013. 160p. Norton, \$26.95 (9780393239157). 811.

From the French for "film enthusiast," *The Cineaste* blends the musicality of Jordan's debut, *Rise* (2001), with the cinematic passages of his *Quantum Lyrics* (2009). Here Jordan continues his look at race in the U.S., this time through the lens of 35mm filmmaking. Poems titled "The Great Train Robbery" (Edwin S. Porter, 1903), "Do the Right Thing" (Spike Lee, 1989), and "Blazing Saddles" (Mel Brooks, 1975) give new meaning to "moving pictures" as they explore a liminal space between silver screen and rapt audience, both worlds alight with racial tension. And not every poem is homage. In a sequence of linked sonnets, Jordan juxtaposes the plights of early black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux and Jewish lynching victim Leo Frank. Jordan treats this history with characteristic dexterity and the narcotic clarity of a camera that "repeats / the eye's questions of what is acting and what is life." Jordan's shimmering lyrics reflect our fascination with starlets and Technicolor, the ruinous heat of Hollywood ever encroaching into the frame. —Diego Báez

Elegy Owed.

By Bob Hicok.

Apr. 2013. 120p. Copper Canyon, \$22 (9781556594366). 811.

Words have weight in Hicok's poems. They feel nailed in place, and the meter hits like the sure pounding of a hammer. Yet as heft, muscle, and precision draw you forward, Hicok evokes not solidity but, rather, shifting ground, flux, metamorphosis, and, most arrestingly, most unnervingly, death. In his seventh collection, Hicok builds startling images out of the everyday and the surreal, the comic and the sorrowful. Avoiding abstraction and pretension (one particularly teasing poem is titled "Knockturn"), he cleaves to earth, skin, breath. He describes odd, private rituals involving attempts to reassemble shards

and stop time. His variations on the elegy can be haunting, romantic, and bracingly irreverent. "Elegy to hunger" begins, "There's a strain of cannibalism / I admire." Intimate lyrics of love, fear, loss, and cosmic perplexity are matched by robust dissections and protests. Hicok's mordant view of our doomed consumer culture in "Obituary for the middle class" is balanced by his gruffly tender objection to the word *inanimate*, "Steel's got a pulse / as far as I'm concerned." This trenchant collection's got heart and soul. —Donna Seaman

The Hundred Grasses.

By Leila Wilson.

Apr. 2013. 96p. Milkweed, paper, \$16 (9781571314475). 811.

Wilson's first book of poetry is an ode to and reflection on nature—how it works on us and we on it. Motifs of erosion, germination, decay, and migration highlight omnipresent cycles and connect to their human equivalents, as in "What Is the Field?," when the opening stanza answers the titular question: "The field is filled / with what we see / without sleep. / Never completely / closed, it quickly erodes / when tilled before rain." Wilson's keen ear for rhythm and internal rhyme also sculpts poignant images in "Span": "A warbler / as long as my thumb / draws cottonwood / around its song." At times, however, her language overpowers, turning "Sail Dilation" code-like: "Always tending / toward, / first half / prolonged / of a yawn." But careful readers will appreciate Wilson's concise stanzas that not only build illuminating poetry but stand on their own, as in "Nether": "We wait / for a balance so grand / that any flicker / of inverse could / pull us up to spires." —Katharine Fronk

Recalculating.

By Charles Bernstein.

Mar. 2013. 184p. Univ. of Chicago, \$25 (9780226925288). 811.

In 1978, Bernstein and fellow avant-gardist Bruce Andrews founded *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine as a place to oppose the "confessional" voice and lyrical verse popular at the time. In dozens of books over the course of nearly 40 years, Bernstein has inspired and puzzled, annoyed and amused readers by rethinking what poetry is and what language can do. While difficult to define, we find a clue to Bernstein's aesthetic in the epigraph to a new poem, which "adapts a line from Judith Malina's 1967 translation of Brecht's 1948 version of Hölderlin's 1804 translation of Sophocles's *Antigone*." For Bernstein, historical works, interpretation, and adaptation all contribute to the cacophony of contemporary life. This collection contains a characteristically wide range of innovative verse, including formal stanzas with predictable end rhymes, columns of replicated phrases, essays in verse, axiomatic maxims, zen koans, and translations of Baudelaire, Apollinaire, and Catullus. Throughout, Bernstein usurps expectations and even anticipates, jokingly, how skeptical readers might receive his work: "I try to get them to see it as formal, structural, historical, collaborative, and ideological. What a downer!" —Diego Báez

Women's Poetry: Poems and Advice.

By Daisy Fried.

Mar. 2013. 88p. Univ. of Pittsburgh, paper, \$15.95 (9780822962380). 811.

The title poem in Fried's dazzling new collection begins, "I, too, dislike it. / However," and skips down a full stanza before completing the line and lavishly describing a tricked-out Nissan G-TR emerging from a garage. The patently masculine sight sparks an unexpected epiphany in the speaker about desire. In the potent blank space between "However" and the rush of the second stanza, Fried displays her gift for honoring hesitation not as a feminine quirk but more as a necessary pause before reaching enlightenment and sometimes even ecstasy. Fried (*My Brother Is Getting Arrested Again*, 2006), ponders pregnancy, Italian art, frustrating adjunct teaching jobs, Stendahl, and Henry Kissinger. The final section, "Ask the Poetess: An Advice Column," shows wit and range worthy of playwright Wendy Wasserstein. In one of the most memorable exchanges, the oracular, tongue-in-cheek poetess is asked why people write confessional poetry when they could just "go to church and confess." With irony and equanimity, she responds, "In church confession, Catholics confess their sins. In confessional poetry, persons of all faiths confess how others have sinned against them." —Carolyn Alessio