

Singular Voices

AMERICAN POETRY TODAY

NEW POEMS WITH SELF-INTERPRETIVE ESSAYS BY 31
NOTED AMERICAN POETS: MARVIN BELL • ROBERT BLY
• HAYDEN CARRUTH • JAMES DICKEY • STEPHEN DOBYNS
• CAROLYN FORCHÉ • TESS GALLAGHER • LOUISE GLÜCK • JORIE
GRAHAM • DONALD HALL • ROBERT HASS • DONALD JUSTICE
• GALWAY KINNELL • TED SOLOTAROFF • ETHERIDGE KNIGHT
• MAXINE KUMIN • STANLEY KUNITZ • DENISE LEVERTOV
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SIMPSON • W.D. SNODGRASS • WILLIAM STAFFORD • GERALD
STERN • LUCIEN STRYK • ROBERT PENN WARREN • THEODORE
WEISS • RICHARD WILBUR • C.K. WILLIAMS

Edited by
STEPHEN BERG Editor of
THE AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW

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POETRY
TODAY

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For Richard Hugo

INTRODUCTION

I conceived this book for a few simple reasons. First, I wanted to bring together poems by living American poets whose work exemplifies strong new styles. There may be few today of Yeats's, Williams's, or Stevens's stature, but that doesn't matter. What we have is a wealth of original voices: some leaning on structures of prose fiction; some involved in the uses of traditional prosodic forms; some eclectic, wandering among the endless formal possibilities of a territory between poetry and prose. Each poet in this book writes his or her own kind of poem, yet it would be hard to predict what kind of poem any of them will write next.

Respect for the power of narrative, for content drawn from the ordinary world one lives in, seems to dominate much of the new poetry, but ideas nakedly stated also shape the poetry of our time. An obsession with prose clarity, a moral drive toward significance immediately and clearly revealed, informs the complex passions of these poems: a desire to speak sincerely of what one feels and knows, not without freedom of imagination but also not without a commitment to discover durable meaning in a time of lost standards, when millions of human lives can be bulldozed and tortured out of existence, and when few seem able to say what "good" poetry is. I think Milosz's words express the basic underlying esthetic and ethical restlessness of these poems: "Each of us is so ashamed of his own helplessness and ignorance that he considers it appropriate to communicate only what he thinks others will understand. There are, however, times when somehow we slowly divest ourselves of that shame and begin

to speak openly about all the things we do not understand." Perhaps, then, we have a new poetry of conscience, a poetry that aims to change who we are and what we do with each other and with nature.

I decided to include only one poem per poet because I wanted to make room for the other main part of my conception—a belief that the poet, in writing about his or her own poem, would write the most helpful "criticism" for literate readers. "Go ask the poets," Freud said in another context, and his advice applies here equally well. The reader won't find attempts to establish theories into which all poetry must fit; there are no flashing career swords, no need to rank or compare. Faced with their own poems, in fact, the poets were driven to talk about the difficulties of creation and interpretation and just plain understanding, and to come up with fresh, personal ways to guide the reader. It is difficult, therefore, to separate writer from reader: each wants to explain to himself what has happened between him and the poem—a lucky problem. In these essays you can taste the confusion and honest ignorance and discovery appropriate to the innocence behind *any* good reader's approach to a text.

But above all, the variety of thematic passion shared in eloquent voices makes these poems live. James Dickey's utterances of love to a young woman; Bell's weird quest in an Italian hotel room; Forché's character Anna and her private political history in "Endurance"; Gallagher's "When a taboo is broken there is often the feeling of freshness . . ."; Glück's explanation of love and our lust for oblivion; Graham's poem on Klimt's painting, which leads her back to Buchenwald; Hall's mysterious sheep; Kinnell's analytic anger at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as they continue to echo their sad detail; Kunitz's myth of rapture and dread; Levertov's lament, a nature poem against nuclear war; Milosz's elegy, tender, political, to an old love; Plumly's resurrection of Keats near death; Ryan's Henry James dream that leads him back to a loving memory of his mother; Snodgrass's intricate musical portrait of apple trees; Stern's pitiable mosquitoes transformed into Mexican workers; Weiss's lost, longed-for Hungarian father; Williams's searing depiction of Vietnam vets, ending at night

with one in his wheelchair plowing a figure eight in the snow. These sketches of some of what will be found in the poems say almost nothing about the equally dramatic discussions of the poems—their intimacy of response, their unexpected revelations: a missing detail supplied, a dark line explained and clarified, a source dug up, an attitude toward life rejected, revised—technical matters, political matters, private matters, ways of seeing everyday events. The struggle and grace in these poems and essays you may well recognize as your own on any given day as you try to understand your life.

What I believe *Singular Voices* offers is an unpredictable cache of poems and essays durable enough to enter the reader's life, stay there, and affect it. That means they will feel necessary to us: moving versions of our personal/historical experience. These poems and essays are also a substantial introduction to what is happening in American poetry today, and to how and what those who write poems think about it—talking to themselves, to friends, to students in a class, to any dedicated reader. In the essays, I hoped the personal, literary, and political would fuse as they do in many of the poems, and in life. I hoped the writers would avoid the arrogant esotericism of some critics, who do not write poetry, and instead articulate an awareness of contradictory responses to particular poems and to the changing nature of poetry. No editor can predict the outcome of his wishes, but I can now say that as a reader among readers I am grateful for the results: pleasure, instruction, sincerity, the warmth of so many crucial, humane presences.

—Stephen Berg
1983

EDITOR'S NOTE

By nature such collections are limited: money, space, circumstance. Some poets were unable to deliver, or declined. Taste also keeps this from being comprehensively representative instead of a wide personal selection. Another editor would no doubt have produced a very different book. Snyder, Ginsberg, Creeley, Oppen, Duncan, Ashbery, Valentine, Logan, Gibbins, Dugan, Lieberman, Hecht, are only some of the poets whose work I wish could have been included.

Opportunities emerged in the course of putting *Singular Voices* together. When Galway Kinnell informed me that his hectic schedule would prevent him from writing an essay, I asked Ted Solotaroff if he would be the one nonpoet critic in the book and write about Galway's poem. Fortunately, he agreed. John Ashbery declined, on principle, to have a poem of his included in a book of this kind (poets writing about their own work), but he plans to write an essay arguing against the main assumption of the book, and I hope we will see it soon.

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MARVIN BELL

