BOOK REVIEWS

POETRY OF THE PERSONAL: FOUR NEW BOOKS
by Matthew Ladd


Exactly fifty years after the term “confessional” entered our lexicon as a way of describing poetry, American poets are still divided over whether the page can function as a psychoanalyst’s couch. That’s how Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton used it—and to mesmerizing effect—but not everyone is Robert Lowell or Anne Sexton. The past few years seem to have witnessed a backlash against the “new confessionalism” of the eighties and nineties, when the stock of such poets as Mark Doty, Marie Howe, and Sharon Olds was still peaking. The poetry of the personal narrative, however, has never departed far from its roots—it has simply taken some unexpected turns, as demonstrated by the four new books under discussion here.

I

Readers of poetry who subscribe without reservation to that famous and famously overused dictum of writing teachers everywhere—Show, Don’t Tell—will probably bristle at many of the lines in Susan Hutton’s first book, like those that declare from the middle of “Light, Lasting”: “Time passes, and this is its virtue: its economy, / the ways it consumes everything we give it.” Or the penultimate phrases from “On Returning
to the Midwest After a Seven-Year Absence,” a meditation on the concept of homeland: “All boundaries are arbitrary / as is the way we love them.” For those familiar with Pound’s imagist manifesto ABC of Reading, or any of its numerous progeny, these are mortal sins.

Yet On the Vanishing of Large Creatures, Hutton’s first book, seems tuned to another manifesto, this one written in 1963 by Robert Bly. His essay “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry” made the case for the poet as seer, as passionate seeker of subjective truths (instead of objective correlatives) who cultivates “an interest in spiritual development.” Hutton’s poems tend to be longer and more narrative than those of the Spanish poets Bly recommends (Machado, Jiminez, Vallejo); instead, they are reminiscent of the writers who took up Bly’s call to arms: James Wright, for instance, and more recently Robert Hass. They share with Wright and Hass a fondness for telling, which in Wright’s hands produced the devastating “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota,” and in less masterful hands can produce, well, less masterful poems.

Hutton’s plainspoken declarations, while not as arresting as Wright’s, are nevertheless an ideal vehicle for her meditations on the passing of time and that notoriously fickle instrument, the human memory. At their best, the poems zero in on otherwise distant figures of history, as in “Seven Journeys”:

. . . Marconi believed sound never stopped
and that one day we would create an instrument
that could capture every noise ever emitted in space.
We haven’t, and that’s just the beginning—
the bees can weave their honeycombs
from two or three different places and join the cells together
without leaving a seam. And Henry Hudson’s men knew they were near
the New World when they began to smell the trees.

This final surprise, Hutton’s conversational, almost didactic monologue rising out of itself to deliver an image of grace and precision, recurs a few pages later:

When Prokofiev was called away from Moscow
and his returning train was cancelled,
he heard his symphony played for the first time over the phone.
‘It is not too bad,’ he said, or they say he said.

What might have otherwise devolved into saccharine historical fiction is instead yanked back to the present: we have no idea *what* Prokofiev said, and given his reputation as Russia’s symphonic *enfant terrible*, it was probably something much louder. Here Hutton treats music, that most romantic of subjects, with brusque practicality.

Hutton’s best lines in this vein usually adopt a similar tone, firm but not unkind, as in the beginning of a poem on the extinction of indigenous languages: “Before a language dies we record the last speaker / to capture the sounds of the words. When he dies / we go on living, and the world is not different.” In fact, in what might seem a direct departure from the passionate, spirit-driven poetry for which Bly argued, Hutton delivers many of her lines in just such a voice: flat and a little clinical, seemingly void of the emotional force that can drive a poem to lyrical heights. Yet their ostensible flatness is the driving force behind many of these poems, especially of “On Being Wrong,” “Montgolfier,” and the title-poem. Their individual lines are profoundly un-lyrical. They bear witness with a minimum of ornament, but with a keen sense of history’s power over our own short lives.

Given the fragile equilibrium Hutton achieves in these poems, it is no surprise to discover that the part of her work that remains wholly centered on her own experience falters by comparison. The declarative lines and naked syntax that proved so surprisingly dynamic when bringing us face-to-face with history are helpless to render the poet’s present-day subjects—newborn twins, loving husband, various relatives of unremarkable aspect—of anything more than occasional interest. In the most refreshing exception to this rule, “On Being Wrong,” the poem departs from its initial subject, a motherless friend, and turns its attention to a single, surreal event: the accidental capture of an enormous sea-turtle by a pair of fishermen, its submerged body a “green coin” until it is hauled onto the pier, “snapping, hissing, huge and terrifying.” When the fishermen dislodge the hook and heave the creature back into the water, Hutton’s puzzled delight at the episode is reminiscent of a poet Bly never mentioned in his essay, but who was an equally fervent admirer of Spanish-language poetry—Elizabeth Bishop.
Whether or not he wanted the job, at some point Jeffrey McDaniel was appointed the spoken-word poetry ambassador to what are generally regarded as the more respectable circles of the university campus and academic conference. *The Endarkenment*, his fourth book, seals this fate. It is the first of his books to be printed by a university press instead of the independent Manic D Press of his previous books. (In what could be seen as another blow to his street cred, McDaniel now teaches at the cash-swaddled liberal-arts bubble of Sarah Lawrence College.) He is evidently determined, however, not to let his readers forget what kind of world he’s coming from; as he puts it early on in “Origins,” “I’m from half-brothers and three-quarter nelsons / I’m from watered-down blue blood and finger-painting on subway walls / I’m from tongue kisses in stairwells and tequila sunsets in the closet.” In real life McDaniel was raised in Philadelphia; on the page, he hails from a psychological space untethered to any particular city, but redolent of the slumlord apartments, needle-parks, and windowless liquor stores that crowd the dim underbelly of urban America (of which, to be fair, certain Philadelphia neighborhoods are prime examples).

Given his ongoing interest in spoken-word poetry, McDaniel’s approach to wordplay and metaphor is radically unlike what many readers are accustomed to, and the tricks he performs sometimes flirt with the sophomoric. A poem titled “Exercising My Demons” never departs from its two-cent homonym; a subsequent poem finds “a dandelion / roaring in a field.” The collection’s title is a more effective demonstration of his skills, a simple inversion of light and dark that questions the ultimate usefulness of the eighteenth century’s intellectual credo.

Some passages also suffer from a related fascination with the infantile: a cocktail of drugs used in lethal injection is “lullaby serum”; a garbage-truck “rumbles onto the curb like a big puppy / that wants to be petted.” Spoken-word poetry tends to give more credence to this brand of metaphorical mugging. In that same vein, poems such as “Origins,” “Zugzwang,” or “don’t touch it!” are firmly grounded in that peculiar genre of obsessive-compulsive anaphora that Christopher Smart invented 250 years ago in “Jubilate Agno,” whose most familiar excerpt begins “For I will consider my cat Jeoffry,” and which has been
praised by spoken-word poets for its hypnotic refrains and driving rhythms.

These poems, however—the loud few that McDaniel could just as well be performing at the Nuyorican or KGB Bar—are far less successful than those written mainly for the page. (This might also be a good time to jettison a couple of embarrassing duds, e.g. “The Real Dick Cheney” and “Trent Lott Addresses the Log Cabin Republicans,” that prove for the umpteenth time that political indignation, however righteous, rarely makes for good verse.) McDaniel’s best endeavors are rather those that transcend his penchant for cheap fireworks and instead bloom into passages of extended—and much more subtle—beauty. When they arrive, they do so in a disarmingly plain language: McDaniel has decided that keeping his readers at arm’s length is no longer necessary. In “Watch the Closing Doors,” a chance encounter on the subway leads to a series of troubling visions:

. . . Some nights

I am a seventh-grade girl playing Spin the Bottle
with her classmates and noticing her uncle’s fingerprints

on the glass. Somewhere in my ribs, a mother holds a pill bottle
to her ear as if the echo of the ocean is inside. Somewhere

in my spleen a twelve-year-old boy bobs in the oceanic
darkness and peers into a neighbor’s window. . . .

As in his earlier books Alibi School, The Forgiveness Parade, and The Splinter Factory, McDaniel is at his best when pitting these disparate images against each other; the poem borders on the surreal but never quite surrenders to it, restrained by the need to invest its vision with emotional coherence.

Behind the veneer of the bare-knuckle imagist, McDaniel can also engage in some old-fashioned confessionalism. The four-page “Day 4305,” which serves as a sort of climax to the slow procession of shabby drunks, dirty syringes and meth-rocks that precedes it, plainly recounts the author’s struggle with alcoholism and drug abuse:

Eleven years, three months sober, I enter a liquor store
to buy a pack of chewing gum for a friend . . .

. . . On every leaf

of every branch of my family tree, I see this illness, this hunger
that multiplies when you feed it, this octopus

expanding in the belly. I haven’t used in eleven years, and still
it runs through me.”

This observation unleashes a startling litany of drug-and-alcohol-
fueled misadventures, not all of them the author’s, but enough that when
he finally states near the end of the poem, “I am the hand / reaching
out of the wreck,” we can’t help but believe him. And while most of
us have long ago put to bed that juvenile creed that one must suffer
to write well, it is no coincidence that the best poems in McDaniel’s
newest collection are those in which he utilizes his Lynchian flair for
the grotesque not as a party trick, but as an unorthodox instrument of
human empathy.

III

“Since the time of Homer every European, in what he could say about
the Orient, was a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.”
The controversial barbs in Orientalism, Edward Said’s startling and
sometimes brilliant critique of Western attitudes toward the East,
have been haunting American writers for over thirty years. Few have
negotiated the territory without finding themselves forced to take
to sides. In high school, the study of Wharton or Conrad (not to mention
Kipling) inevitably entails plucking out examples of their latent or
overt colonialism; in the pages of literary newspapers, novelists such
as V.S. Naipaul and J. M. Coetzee (not to mention Martin Amis) are
routinely taken to task for their remarks on race. Writers reared in this
environment gravitate, quite naturally, to positions of safety: to attempt
in fiction or poetry a critical analysis of ‘the Orient’ is to invite a chorus
of protests.

This is weighty stuff, and Heather Derr-Smith is the latest in a
line of young American poets to tackle it with a book on the Middle
East. The Bride Minaret is largely situated in Damascus, which has been
intermittently torn to pieces by western and eastern armies alike, and takes its title from one of two minarets (the other is the ‘Jesus’ minaret) that flank the city’s 14th-century Umayyad Mosque, one of Islam’s most significant monuments. The title is an apt symbol for the constraints that Damascus presents. For one of the oldest continually inhabited cities on Earth, the daily lives of its residents can seem remarkably fragile. “The boys sleep till midday, / Filthy with the grime of night-before back rooms, sprawled / On old couches in the courtyard,” and in the nearby Tanf refugee camp, hundreds of tents “beat like cream-colored hearts.”

A quick glance through *The Bride Minaret* reveals dozens of these functional snapshots. The poems improve mightily, however, when the author permits her language to muscle in on her photojournalism. Here, for comparison, are the last two stanzas of “Iraqi-Style Fish Shop, Damascus”:

Naranj is a small bitter orange used to heal.
It grows in the courtyard, resisting the concrete.
We call the orange a Portugal
Because the sweet orange came from Portugal.
This is interpretation in the House of War.

*The Ummah is Changing* is written on my chocolate bar.
The flavor is Ummah Orange.
These are the delights of the House of War.
Back home, the dense orange groves were scorched.
Through the warren of alleyways
And cinderblock homes was an incense of burnt oranges,
Burnt blossoms, burnt Portugal.

At this point the poem takes a turn for the hypnotic, its intertwined repetition of words—orange, Portugal, burnt—suggesting a lingering sweetness as well as the lingering presence of some vague unresolved danger. Derr-Smith’s repetition of short, one-line sentences also highlights her unwillingness to explain the poem’s immediate context—what war? whose homes? These deliberate omissions reinforce the anonymity of the poem’s subjects. Derr-Smith achieves a similar effect in the final lines of “The Girl Named *Tents*, Tanf Refugee Camp”: “Everyone wants to write to you. // They are pulling up all the reeds in Iraq. // No one can stop all the ink from flowing.” The tone here is
hard to decipher. Perhaps in homage to the poem’s subjects, the author is attempting to take on the Sisyphean “I can’t go on / I’ll go on” psychology of the chronically displaced.

What’s more important, however, is that final line, in which the image of ink—letters from people writing to ‘you,’ the girl of the poem’s title—is used to reappropriate a more common (and less positive) image of conflict. In time of war the liquid that ends up flowing, often unstoppably, is hardly ever ink. “The Girl Named Tents” is probably the book’s best poem, in large part because the poet allows its lines to meander, or at least to create the impression of meandering. In the Damascene poems of The Bride Minaret, such meandering lines are more reminiscent of Persian ghazals than American free verse.

How disappointing, then, to discover that many of the poems situated in the United States (and an unlucky handful that take place elsewhere) do not rise to nearly the same level. These poems are often bogged down by the author’s parochial metaphors and imprecise diction, almost as if the lack of dramatic subject matter has drained her powers. A couple of frankly awful lines are marred by a jarring and inexplicable recourse to pop culture metaphors: an Iowa town is “like the kind in Sleeping With the Enemy”; during the siege of Sarajevo, “bodies were snapped like Pop Rocks in God’s mouth”; a painting of Jesus in the West Bank depicts him with “Kim Basinger lips.” Derr-Smith also falters when writing on the subject of her young son, which calls forth clichés: “. . . I say: No biting. / But he does. // One day this one I love could kill me, if he wanted.” Maybe the author felt compelled to include these domestic anti-dramas as ‘bride’ counterpoints to the minarets of Damascus, but her foreign poems are already so replete with observations on the complicated position of Middle Eastern women, especially young girls, that her reflections on American motherhood seem bland by comparison. Derr-Smith may be exactly the kind of western writer that Edward Said loved to hate, but it’s still refreshing to find a young American poet whose vision extends farther than the view from the living room window.

IV

Charles Simic’s body of work, already impressive, is fast approaching a volume that seems better served by the adjective ‘ubiquitous.’ Last year was an especially fruitful one. It saw the publication of new poems in
That Little Something, a selected volume simply titled Sixty Poems, and The Monster Loves Its Labyrinth, a scattershot assemblage of what are purportedly entries from Simic’s notebooks. His faithful readers (legion, compared to the followings of most poets) may envision the writer surrounded by scraps of paper from dozens of spiral-bound notebooks, piecing the book together entry by entry. Those who reluctantly stepped off the Simic train, after years of watching his work dive into the shrilly political or the armchair-metaphysical, probably imagine him just mailing a stack of notebooks to his publisher’s office.

As this latest collection shows, however, Simic doesn’t much care for the imaginings of his fans or detractors. He has his own imagination to take care of. Simic may have harvested The Monster Loves His Labyrinth from his odd jottings and desultory philosophizing, but the book nevertheless reveals some degree of organization, enough to distinguish it from, say, the inevitable (and almost inevitably disappointing) multi-volume ‘Journals’ that smart poets only give permission to release after they’re dead.

Simic is far from dead, and even his simplest verbal gestures are often layered with multiple meanings. The most telling example of this is the title, suggesting a caricature of the poet himself: a self-fascinated figure who forgoes the normal pleasures and pains of human existence, preferring instead to construct incomprehensible mazes of verse that may or may not see the light of day. Yet for all of Simic’s cheeky ironies, his title conceals a much more earnest sensibility. The first ‘monster’ to appear in these pages is not a literary figure but a political one.

The huge crowd cheering the dictator; the smiling faces of children offering flowers in welcome. How many times have I seen that? And always the same blonde girl curtsying! Here she is surrounded by the high boots of the dignitaries and a couple of tightly leashed police dogs. The monster himself is patting her on the head and whispering in her ear.

This passage arrives early in the book, which Simic has stuffed with reminiscences—some nostalgic, some horrifying—of post-war Belgrade, where he was born. His stone-faced accounts of air-raids, Eastern bloc tenements, and dead German soldiers gradually give way to memories of Chicago and later New York, but the first section is colored throughout by the acute and sophisticated political awareness
that characterized his early work. These fragmented narratives are also superior, politically and poetically, to a smattering of lines that Simic—having developed a soapboxing tic that his editors are shamelessly eager to indulge—delivers later in the book: lines that castigate the former president and his enablers on the Iraq War, inequitable tax breaks, etc., and generally prove themselves hopelessly topical right out of the starting gate.

Thankfully, the author usually chooses to take aim at more complex targets. These are usually literary or philosophical, revealing Simic’s wide range of influences and passing interests: Plato, Isaiah Berlin, Gertrude Stein, Buster Keaton, a few long-forgotten jazz musicians or rumpled sibyls from the benches of Washington Square Park. (He also spills a good deal of ink lustily reflecting on the virtues of the female body.) His aphorisms range from the academic (“Poetry . . . cannot be understood without an understanding of modern intellectual history”) to the frankly lyrical (“Melville nursed his melancholy by eating fresh strawberries in cream on summer mornings”), and from the tongue-in-cheek (“Irony and wit are acceptable, but laughter in a lyric poem is a serious transgression”) to the somber (“As a child, I saw faces on walls, ceiling, doorknobs and spoons. Then, one day, they were all gone”).

Most of all, however, *The Monster Loves His Labyrinth* identifies its author as a vital member of an international, ever-dwindling club of secular humanists, that worldly, cosmopolitan, mildly hedonistic, fiercely agnostic generation of writers for whom a devotion to the arts is both a religious and political calling, and whose bitter experience of Cold War-era ideology has led them to approach the hack journalist and the starry-eyed poetaster with equal derision. This is not to peg Simic neatly into some prescribed movement—as he himself says, “I associate tidiness with dictatorship.” Rather, it is to recast his puckishness as a weapon instead of a weakness. His self-avowed zeal for curiosity as the handmaiden of discipline makes him a fitting counterweight to more ‘serious’ poets such as Geoffrey Hill or Jorie Graham. Yet the motivation behind his methods is no less serious; as he himself writes in these pages, “All my life I strove to make a small truth out of an infinity of errors.”