

MARGINALIA

Recommendations from Our Editors

One Hundred Names for Love: A Stroke, a Marriage, and the Language of Healing, by Diane Ackerman. W.W. Norton & Company, 322 pp., \$26.95.

The epic struggles narrated in Ackerman's memoir possess all the hallmarks of the Hero's Journey—departures, refusals, initiations, and returns—but it's a journey in which hero and heroine practically never leave their Ithaca, New York home. When Ackerman's husband Paul West, the imposing novelist, poet, and critic, suffers a massive stroke and global aphasia, it seems likely he'll never speak again—the ultimate purgatory for an author of over fifty books, who had “wordsmithed for seven decades.” The tragedy recalls Mr. Chu in Ang Lee's film “Eat Drink Man Woman,” a master chef who loses the ability to taste. Readers are forced to imagine the horrors of life without access to language, without the pleasures of reading or writing it, without the consolation of speaking your feelings. For months the once prolific West can summon only a single syllable—“Mem. Mem. Mem.”—as stand-in for the universe of thoughts and frustrations tumbling across his mind. After multiple experts have professed there is little hope West will recover, we witness, through Ackerman's florid, love-infused prose, him doing just that. West's Herculean efforts to speak are buffeted by Ackerman's relentlessly playful writerly therapies. Armed with the magic of a long-term marriage, she can read her spouse's very thoughts—well enough to understand, say, that his simple request for a “cantilever of light” means he wants his velour jogging suit. The setbacks are many, and the triumphs, when they come, are private triumphs for the couple. Still, readers will cheer West's first aphasic efforts to write again, their clumsy originality, their humor and clear pain. What grounds this memoir is the miraculous faith of a wife who believes she can will her

husband's gifts back to him. Buried in the magnificence of the tale is a humbling illustration of what it means to be truly married to a person, and the terrifying duties such love entails.

—Robert Rosenberg

Anxiety of Words: Contemporary Poetry by Korean Women, by Ch'oe Sung-ja, Kim Hyesoon, and Yi Yon-ju, (trans. by Don Mee Choi). Zephyr Press, 175 pp., \$16.

Anxiety of Words is a bilingual anthology featuring work by three Korean women poets, Ch'oe Sung-ja (b. 1952), Kim Hyesoon (b. 1955), and Yi Yon-ju (1953-1992). More than twenty poems by each poet, published between 1981 and 1994, are here available in English for the first time. The right-hand pages show Don Mee Choi's translations, and those on the left display the original poems in Hangul, the written Korean language established in 1446 that consists of fourteen consonants and ten vowels. This anthology includes biographical notes on the three poets and begins with an introduction on women's poetry in Korea, contextualizing the poets' work and providing context for their innovations.

These poets share similarities other than gender and nationality. They were born after the Japanese occupation and educated only in hangul. They became adults during the military dictatorships of Presidents Park Chung Hee (1961-79) and Chun Doo Hwan (1980-87), when the government suppressed student-led pro-democratic protests and enforced censorship. They belong to a culture, still influenced by Confucian ideals of womanhood, in which a woman is expected to be ch'onryo (a young virgin), ajumma (a wife with children), and halmoni (a grandmother). Their poems depict a reality in which many women fulfill none of these roles or all of them at once. The language of the poems can be plainspoken, gritty at times, and it takes various forms, defying traditional yoryu (female) poetry, which prizes a certain type of gentleness expressed in refined language. Ch'oe, Kim, and Yi challenge social and literary expectations.

The work of each poet is distinct, as each woman possesses her own voice and concerns. Ch'oe Sung-ja uses what Kim Hyesoon calls a “confessional device” to resist an external world, dominated by patriarchy and military rule, for this world turns the body into a “coffin” or makes it so ill that “the core of pus glows / like a halo.” Kim Hyesoon defines identity with a “conversational device,” exploring multiple selves within a woman. In “Memories of Giving Birth to a Daughter,” she describes labor as entering a series of mirrors and finding “all the ancestral mothers are sitting inside.” Yi Yon-ju documents the lives of neglected women, women in poverty, and women working as military prostitutes, in what Kim Hyesoon describes as a “diary-like” style. In “What’s Wrong,” she brings to our attention a woman who chooses to be childless, and in “Lying on a Mat at the Market,” a woman who sells dried sardines. This poetry moves beyond the polemical; it is grounded in details of everyday life, family, and loss.

Don Mee Choi’s thoughtful translations convey the originals’ despair while preserving, in some poems, a matter-of-fact tone and playfulness. Her selections for this anthology suggest that poetry can be a force for social change. Yet, like any anthology, *Anxiety of Words* is limited in its scope. This book provides only a glimpse of what these three poets—or any woman writing in Korea today—have to offer. Still, it is a must-read for anyone interested in Korea and modern women’s literature.

—Diana Park

Beautiful and Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry, by David Orr. Harper Collins, 200 pp., \$25.99.

This compelling and often funny treatise is less a “guide” in the technical sense than an *apologia*, à la Sir Philip Sidney, for the art of poetry in its current manifestation and the culture that surrounds it. Orr, a poet, critic, and practicing attorney, brings an insider/outsider perspective to bear on his subject, which he depicts as occasionally excessive, narcissistic, esoteric, or ridiculous, and, importantly, ultimately

harmless. He makes clear that his intention is not to indict or bemoan the state of poetry—we've had plenty of such from less evenhanded critics than Orr—but to observe and explain, ostensibly for the lay person, some of the art's principal incongruities and conflicts. Under such chapter headings as "The Personal," "Politics," and "Form," he seeks to demystify some of the issues that poets squabble about, always with a keen sense for how these squabbles might come across to that too often overlooked third party, the non-poetry-writing public. The effect can be a little like opening a window in a suffocating room.

At the heart of the book is a chapter on Ambition (capital *A* intended): what it looks like in a poem, how it shapes our reading of a poet, what it might mean for a poet's legacy. "We expect 'ambition' and 'Greatness' to announce themselves in a certain way," Orr writes, "and if they don't, we're slow to recognize them." Which is to say, as readers we are culturally attuned to register a certain grandiose approach to poetry—an amalgam of poetic style, personality, and other factors—as particularly deserving of our notice. This manifestation of ambition, Orr suggests, might garner attention, but it does not necessarily guarantee longevity. He offers the example of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, in his telling a sort of tortoise-and-hare parable in which the unobtrusive Bishop, who in many ways shunned the outward trappings of Greatness, has come to eclipse in reputation her "thunderbolt-chucking" rival. This is no doubt an irony to be relished, but I would caution against calling the race too soon. If the current poetic age, in its preference for a spare, understated, enigmatic lyricism, is drawn to Bishop, the next age, its tastes shaped by a new set of social and aesthetic imperatives, might just as well be drawn to Lowell.

Orr is particularly illuminating on the difference between the personal and the intimate in poetry, the rise of MFA culture and the consequent democratization of the art, and the effect of the culture of poetry on the way poems are made. His only misstep, to my mind, is undue attention to what he calls "mechanical forms"—lipograms, centos, and specimens far more marginal—which have little currency among serious poets; their inclusion here is a distraction from the important business of form. But this is a minor complaint. Orr's incisive and edifying tour of poetry culture is an important addition to our dialogue about what poets do and why they do it. As befits an age of

ambivalence and uncertainty, this tour is short on pronouncements and long on speculation. Orr's most valuable achievement here may be to confirm what Auden claimed a generation ago, and what many of us in the poetry world suspect of the art: in Orr's words, that "poetry itself can never be proven right or wrong, effective or ineffective, beneficial or harmful; it can only be agreed to be interesting ...". Perhaps *anti-apologia* would be the more appropriate term.

—Andrew Ciotola