

BOOK REVIEWS

SO WHAT?: FOUR NEW BOOKS

by Sarah Kennedy

Bringing the Shovel Down, by Ross Gay. University of Pittsburgh Press
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Lucky Fish, by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. Tupelo Press

Sharp Stars, Sharon Bryan, BOA

The Raindrop's Gospel: The Trials of St. Jerome and St. Paula, by Maurya Simon (Elixir 2010)

I almost can't watch the news anymore, especially on days when I teach. The stock market fluctuates wildly; the unemployment rate stays high; houses all over Virginia sit empty while homelessness increases. My students, fearful of their economic futures and already tens of thousands of dollars in debt for college, ask me why they should study or write poetry. Shouldn't they be studying business or computer science instead? The obvious answer is the creation of important, significant beauty. Many poets, I tell them, respond to the world with poems deeply immersed in contemporary politics; many others turn to their private worlds and make poems intensely personal, creating personae that become emblematic of our shared humanity. Others yet turn to a more elliptical expression, interrogating the very grounds of meaning on which our so-called rational culture claims to be based.

And yet, sometimes I feel myself infected by the despair I hear in their voices, and I turn to new books looking for an answer to the perennial classroom question: so what? My students are smart, savvy, and capable, and they don't waste their time. They want to know that, reading a new book of poems, they have not squandered the hours on something worthless. They want to be able to articulate literary value.

I don't suppose we can ever really hope anymore for poetry to make us feel as though the tops of our heads are coming off. And we

surely can't tell our young readers that poetry will make them wealthy or protect them from recession. What I want, I tell my classes, is an alternative to the economics of the marketplace, where we jostle and fret in our search for bargains, for financial return that at least equals our investments. I want joyful excess from a poem, the most meaning from as few words as possible, that makes me want to spend my time freely in return. I still want that telescoped, pressurized language that explodes with additional meaning upon each reading. I find that my students—and students are some of our best and most faithful readers—demand such density as an escape from dumbed-down social-networking conversation or political sloganing, and it was this extravagance of expression I searched for as I read through the following books.

I

Ross Gay is a young poet and his second book, *Bringing the Shovel Down*, has just appeared. Leafing through, I noticed a number of prose poems sprinkled among the more regularly stanzaic ones, and my eye fell on some appealing titles: “Axe Blade,” “Ode to the Beekeeper,” “Praising the Snake.” The book, at sixty-one pages, is neither heart-sinking long nor irritatingly slim. It's just right, especially given that it has no section breaks, a trend these days, and a welcome one.

My initial pleased reaction to *Bringing the Shovel Down* was borne out by the engaging voice in the first few poems. The subjects may often be personal, and anecdote may govern some of the formal structure of the poems, but the language Gay brings to his poems is fresh and inviting. “Love, You Got Me Good,” is a series of poems addressed to a personified though never really fleshed-out Love (one of several such series interwoven throughout the book). The speaker uses pet names as foils to an increasingly political, and increasingly gruesome, set of self-descriptions:

Honeybunny, for you, I've got a mouthful
of soot. Sweetpea, for you, I always smell
like blood. . . .
. . . Love you got me
standing at attention.
Clutching my heart. Polishing guns.
Love, I got a piggy bank
painted like a flag. I got a flag

li the shape of a piggy bank. For you,
Sugarfoot, I've been dancing
the waterboard.

The two other “Love” poems also build from the personal to the political and become increasingly less funny. “Love, I’m Done with You” is the most subtle, but “Love, Here’s the Deal” places the speaker—and Love—in “a bloody land” with “razor-wired walls” in which “cities of the dead” make “a kind of music.” It’s difficult not to read in this series a connection between this kind of love—which sounds quite a lot like sexual infatuation—and a simple-minded patriotism.

Another, more visible, thread in the weave of the book is the series of “Syndrome” poems, all prose poems that define fabricated maladies. The metaphor of illness keeps the tone of these poems nonjudgmental and so increases the potential for humor, but the diseases themselves clearly satirize, sometimes hilariously, various retrograde, offensive, or simple-minded aspects of American culture. “The Syndromes: Mason’s Syndrome,” which follows in its entirety, sends up the group-think of social clubs masquerading as quasi-mystical societies:

One of the few syndromes that afflicts large and unified groups of people, Mason’s Syndrome is characterized by children hallucinating in common. From a distance, the activity of these children is indistinguishable from common imaginative play, but upon closer inspection is observed a peculiar industry, reverence for the smallest insect, and overwhelming quiet aside from an indistinct tune they seem to be humming together. The affliction reveals itself when any of the children are asked what he or she is doing, to which the afflicted reply, without variation, *building a road*. Upon mentioning that you can’t see the road, they respond, without variation, *we know*.

Any reader who knows anything about the Masons or has suffered through *The Da Vinci Code* will want to pin this up on her office door.

Following “Mason’s Syndrome” is a lovely trio of short odes focusing on the beauty of the natural world. A beekeeper, an orchid, and the redbud tree are the subjects, rendered in a more and more ecstatic diction. The beekeeper works in a seriously productive dreamworld—“dream / of the queen, dream of the brood chamber, / dream of the desiccated world”—while the orchid poem is more playful in its joy.

The flower is lover to a wasp, and the speaker gives himself up to the bliss of their union:

who cares
 why the orchid does it, or the wasp
 for that matter? The earth has a taste
 so good you could mess your pants
 for it. Now have a nice day.”

The “Ode to the Redbud” is an all-stops-out celebration: “You trillion hallelujahs you jump up / silly and scream you / luscious you luminous / you firebrand blazing you sugar-knot ...” This is a charming lyric series, and it improves the entire book by adding a counter-tone of joy to the more sarcastic narrative and declamatory poems that surround it.

Personal lyric abounds here as well, but Gay turns to narrative to self-consciously satirize the political and literary cultures of which he is part. Two poems that focus on race sit face to face; “Within Two Weeks the African American Poet Ross Gay Is Mistaken for Both the African American Poet Terrance Hayes and the African American Poet Kyle Dargan, Not One of Whom Looks Anything Like the Others” is a controlled rant against a moron who asks the speaker to sign someone else’s book because he can’t tell the photo from the man sitting in front of him. It begins this way:

If you think you know enough to say this poem
 is about good hair, I’ll correct you
 and tell you it’s about history
 which is the blacksmith of our tongues.

That last clause is one of the best-turned that I have read in a long time, so good that I took the book into class and read it to my students. And they agreed with me that this is what we want from poetry: the surprising, resonant, perfectly compressed metaphor. The self-control of the speaker in this personal situation is seamlessly tied to the story of our nation and our culture(s) and renders the poem both beautiful and horrifying.

“Some Instructions on Black Masculinity Offered to My Black Friend by the White Woman He Briefly Dated: A Monologue”

is hideous but compelling drama. The number of demeaning and simplifying stereotypes that the speaker is able to pack into his complaint is astonishing. On a page facing “Within Two Weeks,” this poem completes a pair that any poet who wants to make poems that are funny, smart, beautiful, and (if this is not hopelessly old-fashioned) *important* would be well advised to study. These are poems in which the political and personal, as well as the persona of the speaker, are all woven intricately into a fabric unmistakably, and sometimes embarrassingly, American.

My only gripe about the book is the variation on the title poem in “Again,” which ends the collection. It isn’t significantly different enough from “Bringing the Shovel Down” to warrant three and one-half more pages, and its presence feels like padding, perhaps to make the book long enough. This, however, is a small objection. Overall, Ross Gay’s *Bringing the Shovel Down* is one of the most satisfying new books I have read in a long time.

II

Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s poetry has always been full of natural lore and interesting bits of information, and her third book, *Lucky Fish*, is no exception. This three-part book is full of poems about etymology (sometimes fanciful), folk medicine, Michael Jackson’s pet ape, and other quirky topics. The first section moves all over the world, with poems set in Florida, India, and the Phillipines.

When Nezhukumatathil is at her best, her poems blend the personal, historic, and political effortlessly, as in the middle section of “Lobison Song”:

... In Argentina,
 the seventh son in a family was assumed to be a *lobison*,
 A werewolf. So many furry babies were drowned or left
 in a field. In the 1920s, a law said that the country’s president

was the automatic godfather of the seventh son, thus
 ensuring their protection. My son was born with lanugo—
 fine hairs like the furred stem of a daisy—across his shoulders
 and on the tops of his ears.

This fluid shift from history and cultural lore to the autobiographical gives Nezhukumatathil's poems traction, and she negotiates such transitions well in many different kinds of poems. "Letter Found at the Tower of Silence" is an epistolary poem impersonating a found poem—all of which is explained by the epigraph. The speaker has supposedly left this letter (or an imagined letter) at a site for exposing dead bodies for scavenger birds, and the second half is terrifyingly beautiful:

My body drying under the sun is the ultimate act of charity
for birds and mice.

Sometimes a peacock saunters at the base of the Tower, a shot
of blue to nip me.

There is no need for melon slice, no need for a bit
of talk, absolutely no need to write me back—

I wish *Lucky Fish* sustained this level of imagery and voice throughout, because when the poems are good, they are very good. Sadly, however, I found myself asking the so-what question too often, usually because the poems were so personal that they didn't achieve any greater intensity than anecdote. It may be that *Lucky Fish* is a hastily-finished book. I look at moments like the first line of "Lobison Song"—"I can't hardly believe my geriatric and deaf dachshund"—and wonder why an editor didn't point out that it should read either "I can't believe" or "I can hardly believe," or why the poet herself didn't correct the phrase.

This may seem a trivial complaint, but it points to larger problems. Many of the poems are too cute, too gimmicky, or too literal. The list poem "Reptilian's Lament" is in fact a column of nouns and adjectives introduced by "too" ("Too crawl / Too fang / Too Spots"—you get the idea); "TWELVE TWELVE TWELVE" is also a list of alphabetized sections, each a small anecdote of a twelve-year-old girl's life, except for "h" which is simply "home" and "l" which ends the poem with the question "Just who *are* these girls?" There's nothing inherently wrong with the list poem, but the list needs to add up to something greater than the sum of its parts to become a poem. The items in "TWELVE TWELVE TWELVE" do not.

Three poems, “Thanksgiving,” “Sweet Tooth,” and “Baked Goods,” use food as a controlling metaphor for relationships. They are all love poems, too. The connection between food and sexual love has a long history, of course, but *because* of that history, such poems need to do something more than be cute. Here’s the end of “Sweet Tooth,” which comes after a long list of foods:

Pumpkins are as convivial as snickerdoodles.
 When you hold my hand on a windy day
 while I am wearing my violet coat and tangerine
 scarf, and perhaps a squirrel is raining walnut debris
 from the top of a telephone pole—I am as jubilant as
 butterscotch budino drenched with rum, dusted
 with cocoa powder and topped with whipped crème fraîche.

I don’t mean to be a curmudgeon, but a very little bit of precious foodiness goes a long way. And there’s quite a lot of it in this book.

My other complaint about this book is the number of self-consciously poetic poems. I don’t mean meta-poems, or poems that contain an *ars poetic*. I mean poems like “Dear Amy Nehzooukammyatootill,” which is described as “a found poem, composed of e-mails from various high school students.” The poem is a list of questions and statements, during which it becomes clear that the poet’s work is being studied alongside Walt Whitman in what sounds like a high school. This may or may not be true, and many of the statements, like “Walt Whitman is better than you,” are self-deprecatory and amusing—at least the first time. It’s hard, however, to ignore the way this poem seems to brag, to advertise the poet’s popularity. The very fact that she is on the same syllabus with Walt Whitman seems central to this poem’s project. I quickly turned the page, and found on the next a poem titled “Are All the Break-Ups in Your Poems Real?” This poem is also based on a message to the poet from a young reader and seemed mostly designed to give information that didn’t fit into the previous poem.

I will skip over the many poems chronicling the poet’s love for her adorable son and end with a return to the strengths of *Lucky Fish*. The best poems are in the first section, and they are filled with the flora and fauna and folklore that Aimee Nezhukumatathil renders so beautifully. Poems like “Pie Plate” show the poet at her best:

... He gave me this
 red shell—inverted, it's a drum—
 the tink-tink-tink of cold ceramic and my spoon
 like a calling for dinner, and especially, what comes

after. I love the promise of buttery crust and scoop
 of fruit. I love what it smells like: home.

Even these few lines show that food poems, like anecdotal poems, can be tender and sweet without becoming syrupy. Poems like this require time and attention, though. Slow cooking.

III

Sharp Stars, by Sharon Bryan, is also an award-winning volume, having received the 2009 Isabella Gardner Award from BOA editions. This four-part book reveals through some of its titles that one of Bryan's abiding poetic interests is aging and death: "Why We Die," "Body and Soul," "My Last Night," "The Underworld," "Afterlife," "Die Happy," "At Last." Bryan's poems are neatly broken into readable, non-gimmicky stanzas, and she writes with an accessible, conversational diction that makes reading fairly effortless. Take the opening, for example, of the meta-poetic "Barking Dog":

After an hour of trying to write
 over the high-pitched yap coming
 from a neighbor's yard, I decide
 to let the dog into the poem,
 hoping he'll be a charming detail
 or at least curl up quietly
 at my feet, but instead he pees
 on the first three stanzas, and
 though I see what he means,
 I have no intention of taking
 advice from a dog—he knows
 nothing about the pleasures
 of solitude, obviously, so what
 can he know about poetry?

The poem goes on in this jaunty way for a page. It's amusing, and the dog as metaphor—for anything quotidian that hinders the making of art—skillfully controls the poem.

“Flood,” with similar skill, uses an allusion to Noah and Superman to launch a rant against God:

You’ve won a trip for two,
all you have to do

is build the boat and say
goodbye to everyone

you know, knowing
they’ll die as soon

as you’re afloat, like
all the people on Krypton

once Superman was launched.

The point of the poem appears near the end, when the speaker announces that “all you have to do is swallow / your contempt for a god // who blotted his copybook / and then asked you to help him // cover it up.” The poem seems to be driving toward this message, but it does so quickly and easily and there’s no doubt at the end what the speaker thinks of the conventional Judeo-Christian God.

Bryan tackles all the big subjects in this book, even attempting to create a theology of her own in poems like “My Last Night,” “The Underworld,” and “Afterlife” (these appear together in this order). “My Last Night” imagines the possibility of an afterlife in which storytelling dominates leisure time (though I suppose it’s all leisure time), and this seems to be the only way the speaker can make sense of the inevitability of death: “How would I know // what to make of [my last dream] unless / I could tell someone after // the fact: *You’ll never guess / what happened. Listen to this.*”

“The Underworld” imagines in more detail what happens after death, and in doing so the poem ends up in some trouble. It likens the dead to birds who come intermittently to a feeder, but the imagery becomes a bit confused. Suddenly the birds are “the world that lifts slightly / away from us” at death (how would it do this?) and comes back now and then to see if “we’ve refilled / the feeder” (but I thought “we” were dead). In “Afterlife,” being dead is “almost like a party” or “a

dining car / full of interesting people,” until the speaker realizes that, no, the dead “bury themselves in us,” which sounds rather uncomfortable. The three poems epitomize the book’s strengths and weaknesses. The poems make use of recognizable, easily rendered images and they feature the questions on which poems are supposed to focus. They are also, however, so easily readable that one speeds through them, barely stopping at the end of a page. The poems are accessible, but they’re also uncomplicated, even sentimental, and when complications are brought in, the poems falter.

“Ode Sentimentale” is one example. This five and a half page poem opens on an allusion: How could so much have / depended / on a damned black and brown / chicken” and goes on to talk about the chicken (which “even posed on the rim of a rusted / wheelbarrow”), the chicken’s little habits, the chicken’s owner, the possible meanings of the chicken’s appearance, the chicken’s horrible accident, bad chicken jokes, and so on and so on. It is funny for a page and a half and then it is just tedious. I shudder to think what would have happened to “In a Station of the Metro.”

Let me repeat that many of the poems in *Sharp Stars* are clear and readable and pleasing. They incorporate a wide variety of references in a way that many poetry workshops would applaud. They do not, however, require a great deal of reflection, and I found it too easy, after I closed the book, to set it aside and turn to another.

IV

I have to admit that I picked up Maurya Simon’s *The Raindrop’s Gospel: The Trials of St. Jerome and St. Paula* with trepidation. Physically, it’s a beautiful book, but I have always associated Jerome with some of the worst misogyny of the church fathers. The description on the cover—“A Novel in Verse”—didn’t help this much. I love novels, but often find verse novels difficult plowing.

Not so with this book. At over a hundred pages, it’s long, and some readers may find the density of information off-putting. The poems, moreover, are supplemented with endnotes, genealogies, line drawing reproductions, and chronologies. It’s not the sort of collection one skims through. And yet, as I read from poem to poem, I was caught up in the conflicts, both moral and social, that Jerome and Paula—as well as Paula’s children—face as they reject customs and conventions to

devote themselves to spiritual lives. Jerome's well-publicized misogyny is contextualized as part of his struggle with sexual desire, and though this doesn't excuse it as theology, it does at least humanize the saint.

The poems themselves work best as part of the series, though a few of them could easily stand alone. "St. Jerome Rests from His Labors" is one of these. This sample from the middle of the poem shows how deftly Simon uses metaphor and literal image to characterize Jerome:

On the periphery of his mind, the woman sulks.
she's done her dawn ablutions, her stint of weeping,

making bread: she's worked silently this Sabbath,
and now she's withdrawn into a corner to mend.

Why so sullen, he asks, but Paula's lips are closed.
Sultry drafts gust around the sanctum, stirring

the dust into small piles. She begins to weep.
Were she an anvil, he would strike her hard

like a dull bell, he would swing her clapper

into a deafening tumult of rebuke and echo.
But she bears a mortal stench, and seems softer

than an ash with her womanly sorrow—gray,
easily rent—and he feels ambushed by pity for her

The sound devices alone would make this a lovely passage, but the rendering of contradictory emotions in Jerome is also sophisticated and complex.

St. Paula is not given short shrift, either. Many of the Paula poems focus on her daughters to the nobleman Toxotius, and "Eustochium and Blesilla" reveals the corruption of imperial Rome that drove her from the city and the wealth she enjoyed. Paula remembers a birthday celebration for the girls (they are twins), but this is no innocent party for children:

Such was the decayed state of our city's customs,
that incest was excused among patriarchs, or,

at most, looked at askance, yet it went unpunished.
as our gods behaved, so we mortals mimicked them.

Oil lamps flickered on the mosaic table as he purred
like a lion, his daughters pleased, nervous, teasing
his eyelids with rose petals, Silla moistening her smile
as her buttocks rubbed against his crotch, and Eusto coy,

whispering naughty tidbits in his ear, or tickling him,
her nubile breasts romancing his chest, the small nipples
grazing his skin with goosebumps; his voice hoarse,
his eyes wild and clouded, aroused and tender, glittering.

This passage is beautifully disgusting, and it's the sort of gorgeous working of sound, image, and character that makes *The Raindrop's Gospel* both intelligent history and insightful contemporary poetry. Simon uses history to say something not only about Rome, the early church, and these two saints, but also about human character, its weaknesses and strengths, and how people come to make meaning out of chaos. And she does it with rare grace and depth.

The book's pace flags somewhat in the section titled "The Lost Diaries," because some of the material is covered by narratives in previous sections. Paula, by this time, is dead, so a great deal of the conflict has been resolved by now as well. The fragmentary, sometimes spare poems of "The Lost Diaries," however, may appeal to some readers more than the fuller monologues and narratives of the Jerome and Paula sections; the structure reminds me of Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia*, in which the story of the title characters is told twice, once in epistolary poems, then again in a sonnet sequence. In Trethewey's book, the repetition reinforces the need to make artful form of violence and fear in order to conquer or control it. Simon may have had something similar in mind, as the various voices of Jerome, Paula's daughter, and other church leaders harmonize to more fully show the intertwining of the saints' work.

The Raindrop's Gospel ends, appropriately, with an epistle written by Paula's daughter, Paula the Younger. She ends with a new list of beatitudes that speaks to her catalogue of humanity:

Assyrian, African, Jew and Egyptian, even the loin-
clothed Brahman and chanting Buddhist of whom Jerome spoke

in his letters—anchorite or centurion, Essene or harlot—what we
 want,
 both in the kingdom of man and in the promise of heaven, is
transcendence,
 a harmony of breath with the divine—

A rebel angel he was, Cousin.
 Bless Jerome's bones. Bless Paula's long-dried tears.
 Herein I enclose the remainder of his writings.
 Your faithful servant and friend,
 chaste bride of Christ,
 Paula.

One need not be a Christian to appreciate Maurya Simon's lyric novel about these early saints. In fact, *The Raindrop's Gospel*, like all good historical fiction, feels both ancient and very modern, and I closed the book with the wistful satisfaction that I feel when I finish an engrossing novel—pleased but sorry that the story is over.

And so I have some answers to my students' questions about why they should bother reading contemporary poetry in English, or any poetry for that matter. Yes, there is a lot of poetry being published now, and, no, it's not all excellent. Much of it, sadly, is derivative, thin, and narcissistic. What pushes a book out of that slushy pile and into the small stack of books I will read again? More meaning, more layers of history, culture, persona, etymology, tone, and image. Surface accessibility is fine, but what makes a poem worthwhile, for me, is the wealth of secondary and tertiary meanings and suggestions that glimmer beneath, rising and flashing every time I look again. It's the quality that, instead of leaving me thinking "so what?," draws me back to experience the poem again. And that wealth of meaning? It's worth more, in the long run, than any numbers, however high they may soar, on the New York stock market.