

## POETRY WITHIN THE PALE

Garrison Keillor. *Good Poems: American Places*. Viking Adult, 2011.

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Garrison Keillor has released another collection of good poems culled from the collection of daily readings on his daily radio program “The Writer’s Almanac.” The first in this series was simply titled *Good Poems*, the second *Good Poems for Hard Times*.

Keillor’s aim in *Good Poems: American Places* is to present poems that are “straightforward, declarative, in plain English.” Here are a couple of opening lines.

On a rainy day in Seattle stumble into any coffee shop  
and look wounded by the rain.

(“Black Umbrellas” by Rick Agran)

Perhaps, in a distant café,  
four or five people are talking  
with four or five people  
who are chatting on their cell phones this morning  
in my favorite café.

(“Bridal Shower” by George Bilgere)

Keillor remarks in his introduction, “The real world trumps the imaginary. They may not tell you this in Poetry Writing 101: the dear readers, bless their hearts, have their bullshit detectors turned up high when reading a poem and usually those detectors start beeping by the second line.” Later he says, “Paging through the unreadable work of various highly honorable poets, one longs for a little humanity, a little attention paid to their surroundings.” So with my bullshit detector on I decided to page through Keillor’s *American Places* to discover just how much attention has been paid to our American surroundings. Here is another by George Bilgere:

I’m sitting here reading the paper,  
feeling warm and satisfied, basically content  
with my life and all I have achieved.  
Then I go up for a refill and suddenly realize

how much happier I could be with the barista.

(“The Ineffable”)

I cannot count how many times this has been written by students in my Poetry Writing 101 class. I turn the page to Edward Field:

People who eat in coffee shops  
are not worried about nutrition.  
They order the toasted cheese sandwiches blithely,  
followed by chocolate egg creams and plaster of paris  
wedges of lemon meringue pie.

(“People Who Eat in Coffee Shops”)

There are a lot of coffee shops in these poems. And liquor stores.

After work at H and M Market Liquor and Deli,  
quietly pondering the choices life gives us—  
a Twenty-First Century natural selection:

Coke or Pepsi  
Seven-Up or Sprite...

and the list goes on in this cliché fashion before turning into a stock dialogue between the presumed poet / customer and the presumed Muslim clerk who just finished his prayers behind the counter,

He says, “How’s it goin’?”  
I say, “Pretty good, same as usual.”  
He says, “Anything else?”  
I say, “Yeah, a newspaper.”

The poem, “To Mecca with Love” by James Tracy, ends with a forced image of the newspaper headline: “BLOODSHED AS ISRAEL RETALIATES IN WEST BANK: 13 DEAD.” My bullshit detector started beeping early in the poem, but by the end I am reminded of an essay I read in Poetry Writing 101 by Robert Hass in which he imagines Basho saying to him, “Hass, you have Edo-taste. You have the weakness of trying to say something unusual.” It is almost as if the poet created a scenario as a means to arrive at this image that would “say something” profound about the tensions between cultures.

And that is just what is missing from this collection that, according to

the jacket, “celebrates the geography and culture that bind us together as a nation.” Virginia Hamilton Adair’s “Porches II” begins,

All over the U.S. the porches were dying.  
The porch swing and the rocking chair moved to the village dump.

The poem continues in this same nostalgic tone for many lines that include “drinking Coca-Cola from bottles” only to culminate,

The old porch is removed, and the grandparents with it.  
So long, friends, neighbors, passerby.

So much for the “grit” and “spark” that Keillor pronounces in the introduction.

Keillor has managed to create an oeuvre that is so plain and ordinary that it becomes tedious and insipid.

I write a letter for my client today.  
I sit with him on the deck  
of the skilled nursing facility.  
He eats breakfast, smokes cigarettes...

(“Only What I Can Do” by Julene Tripp Weaver)

and

Exhausted from a week of work and PMS,  
Thursday afternoon, the reports all written,  
We drove north to a cabin near Point Reyes...

(“By the Pacific” by Jessica Joyce)

To the point of kitsch:

I still recall that early day  
When we went to the Saturday matinee  
There was Roy and Hoppy and Lash LaRue  
Gene Autry and a lot of others too...

(“The Saturday Matinee” by Jon Bowerman)

I am not faulting the individual poems rather Keillor’s choice to exclude diversity and cultural variety that America represents, thus creating an ethno-

centric view of our country. There isn't much range of emotion either. The seventh section is titled "A Sort of Rapture," as if absolute rapture couldn't happen in America. The highlight of this section is "The Critic" by C. K. Williams,

In the Boston Public Library on Boylston Street, where all the  
bums come in stinking from the cold...

Finally, some grit, a spark of reality. When I look around me this is what I see: "The crack of gunshot" and "expressways carv[ing] / neighborhoods to shreds" as in Marge Piercy's "Motown, Arsenal of Democracy," another one of the rare moments of reality, which ends:

Only the old anger lives there  
bubbling up like chemicals dumped  
seething now into the water  
building now into the bones.

There are a handful of other really good poems like these but not many. Among some of the better poems, Robinson Jeffers' "Carmel Point:"

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;  
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident  
As the rock and ocean that we are made from

And one of the more lively poems in the collection is Kevin Young's "Eddie Priest's Barbershop & Notary," which should be read in its entirety to truly be appreciated.

This time Keillor has put together the most diverse assembly yet. *Good Poems: American Places* features 164 poets, four of whom are black: Philip Bryant, W. C. Handy, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Kevin Young. There is also a Japanese American, a Palestinian American, and an Egyptian! The rest, well, are white. Plus, how can a poetry anthology called *Good Poems: American Places* not include any American Indians?

Let's compare this to the previous collections. Of the 173 poets featured in *Good Poems*, three are African American: blues singer Bessie Jackson (Lucille Bogan), Robert Hayden, and Langston Hughes. There are no Latinos or Asian Americans. Of the 142 poets in *Good Poems for Hard Times*, one African American, Rita Dove, and none by Asians or Latinos. There are no American Indians that I can find in either of these collections.

This is a major step for Keillor who, on his venerable radio program,

reads mainly white people. Of the 365 poems on “The Writer’s Almanac” in 2010 only two were by African Americans and two by Latinos, California-born Gary Soto and University of Minnesota Professor Ray Gonzales. There was also one Asian American. The rest were white. In 2011 Keillor read only one African American: Nikki Giovanni. The closest he has gotten to an American Indian is Louise Erdrich, a fellow Minnesotan whose father was a German-American and mother of Métis ancestry.

I would like to suggest that Mr. Keillor venture outside of Lake Wobegon and visit some real American places and discover Joy Harjo, Michael S. Harper, Sherwin Bitsui, Maria Melendez, Yusef Komunyakaa, Louis J. Rodriguez, Wanda Coleman, Sherman Alexie, Suji Kwock Kim, Rigoberto González, Terrance Hayes, Ruth Forman, Kazim Ali, Mary TallMountain, Major Jackson, Mari Evans, Nick Carbó, Etheridge Knight, Nathalie Handal, Ray A. Young Bear, Ai, Askia Muhammad Touré, Eugene Gloria, Roberta Hill, Arthur Sze, Abayomi Animashaun, Cornelius Eady, Quincy Troupe, Jayne Cortez, Li-Young Lee, Patricia Smith, Orlando Ricardo Menes, Ethelbert Miller, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Amiri Baraka, Marilyn Chin, Chris Abani, Cathy Song, Allison Joseph, Simon J. Ortiz, Francisco Aragón, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alberto Ríos, Haki R. Madhubuti, Eduardo C. Corral, Rita Maria Martinez, Bei Dao, Victor Hernandez Cruz.... This is just a start.