EDITORS SELECT

Christopher Merrill, *Necessities*, White Pine Press, 2013. One of our editors has written about *NDR* contributor Christopher Merrill as follows: "He is one of the few genuine men of letters left on our literary scene. He excels at everything—history, memoir, translation, poetry, and now *Necessities*. What are *Necessities*? A sequence of prose poems, we'll say. Sometimes they read like Jack London re-written by Rimbaud and Baudelaire working together. There's something as well of a quest theme or journal of exploration within a kind of dissolving dystopian narrative. And it's all a kind of theater." The three epigraphs suggest the range of this book: "Necessity knows no rules" (Primo Levi); "I wanted to know what was helpless in my behavior, how I would behave out of necessity" (Jasper Johns); "Necessity is the veil of God" (Simone Weil).

Rebecca Hazelton, *Fair Copy*, Ohio University Press, 2013; *Vow*, Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2013. Notre Dame MFA and *NDR* contributor Rebecca Hazelton has published two books of poetry showing very different aspects of her considerable talent. *Fair Copy* is a sequence of acrostic poems derived from the first line of every 29th poem in the *Complete Works of Emily Dickinson*. The dialogue that develops with Dickinson asks to be read beside recent experiments by Janet Holmes (*The Ms Of My Kin*) and Lucie Brock-Broido (*The Master Letters*). Dickinson is always alive in the imagination of contemporary women poets, and never more busily at work than in *Fair Copy*. *Vow* is a book written more or less in the poet's own voice, and the vow in question is the one where "dressed to the nines…they walked the aisle…and received the standard narration," unfortunately. The domestic drama, however, runs electric and unexpected variations on that "standard narration," including parts played and spoken by the unlikely personae of "fox" and "rabbit," as incompatible a pair as would have been Ms. Potter's Whiskered Gentleman and Jemima Puddleduck.

Catherine Barnett, *The Game of Boxes*, Graywolf Press, 2013. Catherine Barnett's book has recently been awarded the James Laughlin Prize by the Academy of American Poets. It is a stunning second volume. (Her first was *Into Perfect Spheres Such Holes Are Pierced*.) Barnett has some of Rebecca Hazelton's energy, but not her outward agitation. The poems about sex, children, mothers, and absent fathers seem to have percolated like a rare chemical on a very hot fire, leaving only a residue of virtually radioactive crystals behind. An analogous style in American English does not come immediately

to mind, and Ilya Kaminsky is right that the collection is "utterly modern, particular, and strange—strange as in not previously visited, strange as in deeply original." Barnett seems to be winning the awards she deserves right now—a Whiting and a Guggenheim, along with the Laughlin Prize—and one looks forward to the future work by this arresting and heartbreaking poet.

David Ferry, *Bewilderment*, Chicago, 2013. Ferry's work as translator and poet has been central in the consciousness of most poetry readers for many decades. The new book alternates original poems and translations from the Latin classics—Martial, Horace, Catullus, lots of Virgil—with original poems, often taking off from the translations. This kind of dialog is at its most moving in the elegiac sixth section, in which the poems consist of "readings" of late poems by the author's friend, Arthur Gold. Gold's poems appear in italics, signed AG, followed by Ferry's in Roman, signed DF. Before the last of these dialogues, Ferry places his translation of *Aeneid* VI, lines 719-61, in which Anchises appears in the underworld to tell his son why "it is / thinkable that any spirits want to go back / From this to the upper world and once again / Into the prisons of bodies."

Angela Leighton, *The Messages*, Shoestring Press, 2012. Angela Leighton is probably best known in the US for her criticism, especially her important book called *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*. But she has always written poetry, the present volume being her third. With epigraphs from Ungaretti, Marilynn Robinson, and the libretto of Britten's *Peter Grimes*, along with a gloss on "angel"—both "a messenger" and "an echo of unknown origin on radar"—these "messages" find their shapes mainly in traditional meters and stanzas. What makes them compelling is the number of times a "Wolf Note" breaks through—the term glossed as "a wavering or jarring note in a stringed instrument, caused by the resonance of the body of the instrument with the note played"—"as if you touched beyond all art / a hunger or a hunt to the kill, / the low rasp of a passion that turns: / heartwood (heart's blood)—a breaking point."

Aidan Semmens, *The Book of Isaac*, Parlor Press, 2013. In a sequence of over fifty fourteen line poems that Aidan Semmens calls "distressed sonnets," the story of a remarkable man is simultaneously told and untold, constructed and deconstructed, made and unmade. Isaac Hourwich, Semmens' great-grandfather, was a Russian-Jewish lawyer, economist, journalist and socialist. The "dis-

tressed" or discontinuous narrative draws on both his public and private papers, relating them to the apocryphal *Book of Esdras*, while also continuing the family story in the figures of his grandmother and her brother, Nicholas Hourwich, who was the first leader of the Communist Party of the United States. The many notes at the end of the volume are fascinating in their own right, and should probably be consulted before, rather than after, reading the poems. In part, Semmens is writing against Theodor Adorno's proscription against writing poetry after Auschwitz. He says, "I have attempted throughout this sequence to honor and continue the post-theistic Jewish tradition of my forebears."

Alfred Corn, *Tables*, Press 53, 2013. *NDR* 33 and 34 published Alfred Corn's play in two acts, *Robert Lowell's Bedlam*. He is of course best known as a poet. The new book contains epistolary poems, translations and imitations, derivations (from Katherine Anne Porter's "Flowering Judas," for example), found poems (from Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*), and experiments with very long lines (the seventeen syllables of "Oklahoma"). Corn is a very versatile poet, both in his choice of subjects and his forms. The *New York Times* has called him "eminently cosmopolitan" and "a stylist of the first order." *Tables* would be a good introduction to his work for readers who have not yet encountered it at book length.

John Wilkinson, *Reckitt's Blue*, Seagull Books, 2012. Former Notre Dame professor and *NDR* contributing editor, the prolific Wilkinson has produced another aggressively original, sometimes riddling, always-energetic text. If the question were, "What is Reckitt's Blue?" the answer might be, "Well, it's something like High Pink on Chrome (a color favored by J.H. Prynne), except that it's really 'a laundry product… which was originally a combination of synthetic ultramarine and sodium hydrogen carbonate…Use of Reckitt's blue and other laundry blueings is documented in a number of ethnographic contexts such as artifacts from Papua New Guinea… and Australian rock art.'" So that explains the poems about weaponry and ritual objects from the Jolika collection in the de Young Museum, San Francisco. But there are other blues: in Fragonard's *The Swing*, for example, and the cover (I think; there's no credit or note on it) shows a splotch of blue from that painting in such a small detail that it looks like something by an abstract expressionist. And no American reader (though of course Wilkinson is English) can read about Blue without summoning, at some point, "the blues." Enough hints. This is one of Wilkinson's best books.

Aase Berg, *Transfer Fat,* translated by Johannes Göransson, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012. This edition of Aase Berg's cycle of poems that depend very much on wordplay and puns in Swedish is fortunately bilingual and contains a very smart essay by Johannes Göransson on the solutions he has attempted in his English translation of a virtually untranslatable text. A bilingual poet himself, Göransson is clearly the man to have a go at what he calls "Ambient Translations: Transferring Aase Berg's Fat." That sounds rather impolite, except that the book, *Forsla fett*, translates as "transfer fat," and so anyone attempting to translate the *Forsla fett* becomes, inevitably, a "transfer-er" of "fat." Aasa Berg recently gave a reading at Notre Dame, and the best way for non-Swedish speakers to engage the book might be to have it in hand while looking at the reading, in Swedish and in Göransson's English, archived at the ND Creative Writing web site.

Susan Blackwell Ramsey, *A Mind Like This,* University of Nebraska Press, 2012. Ramsey, a poet who graduated from our MFA Program in 2007, is the winner of 2012 Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry. Her first collection demonstrates convincingly how serious poetry is made even more profound, more penetrating, by its sly use of trenchant humor. Bob Hicock praises Ramsey as "a poet of ending curiosity [who] gives us ample evidence here of what the mind can find when it goes looking for what it does not yet see." Aimee Nezhukumatathil is enchanted by Ramsey's humor and grace, praising the collection for its "supremely supple and cultivated imagination." We agree.

Laurie Ann Guerrero, *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying,* University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Another award-winning collection, Guerrero's, who teaches for the MFA Program at the University of Texas-El Paso, is the fifth winner of the University of Notre Dame's Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize; it was selected by poet Francisco Alarcón. Ross Gay exclaims that *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* "is a powerful, necessary book," while Martín Espada writes, "In an age when so many poems say nothing, these poems miss nothing…attention must be paid to such a poet now and for years to come." Deserved high praise for a young poet in her debut.

David Matlin, *Up the Fish Creek Road & other stories*, Spuyten Duyvil, 2013. *NDR* contributor Matilin's new collection of short stories earns a rare and perceptive encomium from the inimitable Irini Spanidou, who writes, "Though these stories are anchored in events unfolding in contemporary times, their power and beauty rest on Mat-

lin's rhapsodic evocation of America's past. It is all that has vanished—the majestic wilderness of the land and the heroic spirit of the men who inhabited it, Native Americans and early settlers alike—that comes full, hauntingly to life, making the present appear eviscerated not just diminished. The poetic cadence of the prose and the grandiloquent length of the sentences having a hypnotic effect, as all Matlin's work, *Up Fish Creek Road* reads like a dream: there is no linear time; there is no continuous space; depicted events have the mystique and ineffable grandeur of myth. Being dreamlike, the sense of reality is at times incoherent, but the images are always stunning and the sensuous, tactile language that paints them, magnificent." Amen.

Michael Hainey, *After Visiting Friends*, Scribner, 2013. Hainey, an ND grad and now an editor at *GQ,* has written both a memoir and a history, a hybrid that covers what he can reconstruct of his father's life, a man who died when the author was six, and, along the way, fills in the fecund post-WWII period of Chicago journalism, mostly the newspaper world, now a vanished time, as gone today as Hainey's father was for him as a six-year-old. The poignance of the volume, therefore, is both personal and public: losses of all sorts dominate. Hainey uses an epigraph from Sophocles, "It is the dead, not the living, who make the longest demands," and his story bears that out. Hainey, a journalist, too, uncovers a number of the secrets of his father's life, but not all. Memoirs (and histories) are an exacting form. They remain nonfiction only in name, because they often leave things out, either by design or by accident. One may pin down the truth of a moment, but it's harder to claim that for an entire life. Nonetheless, this is a moving tale, one that will illuminate any number of interests: journalism, Chicago, or the perennial search for parents and for who one is.

Jay Neugeboren, *The Other Side of the World,* Two Dollar Radio, 2012. *NDR* contributor Neugeboren's latest novel and 18th book is, as reported by Kirkus Reviews, "…a meditation of life, love, art and family relationships that's reminiscent of the best of John Updike." A novella extracted from the novel was published in *NDR* #35. A multi-generational tale, the most transnational of Neugeboren's work (Borneo and Singapore, as well as his more well-trodden New England, are the locales), dealing with the usual profound verities, along with a rarer assessment of the ultimate responsibilities of writers.

Gwendolyn Oxenham, *Finding the Game*, St. Martin's Press, 2012. Oxenham, an alum of the ND graduate creative writing program,

is the writer and co-star participant of the documentary film *Pelada*, released in 2010. It is an extraordinary film, showing her and her eventual husband, playing pick-up soccer all around the world. The project was long in gestation and, in an example of the first often being last, the documentary appeared just after the interest in professional soccer peaked and it didn't receive all the exposure it deserved. Her book, too, is remarkable, but since it falls into a number of genres at once—memoir, sport, adventure, how-to-manual—the literary world lets it slip between any number of its stools. But, it's a wonder, too. As its subtitle says: Three years, Twenty-five Countries, and the Search for Pickup Soccer, narrated by a writer of both subtle and straightforward powers. The book and the documentary will teach you things you don't yet know about the world. At sixteen, Oxenham was the youngest Division I athlete (soccer at Duke) in NCAA history. In this volume you will learn her prose is as nimble as her feet.

Gloria Whelan, *Living Together*, Wayne State University Press, 2013. A new collection of stories and one novella by *NDR* contributor Whelan, praised by Joyce Carol Oates as, "a writer of precision, grace, intelligence, and wit. Her stories, many set in Michigan, are a pleasure to read, in particular the elegantly composed novella 'Keeping Your Place' with its examination of loss and unexpected happiness." Whelan has had a long career as a YA author, winning a National Book Award for her novel *Homeless Bird*, and her adult stories have the authority of seasoned experience, as well as the mature compassion for long and complicated lives.

Kathleen Spivack, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle,* Northeastern University Press, 2012. Spivack, *NDR* contributor, whose first book of poetry, *Flying Inland*, was published by Doubleday in 1973, has now published a memoir, one full of the poetry world of her youth and life. The subtitle of *With Robert Lowell and His Circle* gives us some of the personnel: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz & Others, though it's the "& Others" that lend particular interest, since those folks get less press over the years than the brand-name poets. Indeed, it is just that pre-celebrity world of the fifties, sixties, seventies that Spivack chronicles that adds such weight to her portraits. And it was a time when major poets had a role in the life of the larger culture, one, it can be argued, that they have mainly relinquished; Spivack portrays an era when poetry of the highest ambition was alive in the great cities, especially New York, before it more or less retreated (with reason) to the redoubt of the country's universities.

Valerie Sayers, *The Powers*, Northwestern University Press, 2013. *NDR*'s founding editor Sayers' new novel, her first since *Brain Fever* (1996), is worth the wait. (And Northwestern is bringing out all her backlist novels in the Fall.) Sayers is praised by Jonathan Yardley at the *Washington Post* as "smart and irreverent, but she's also kind and compassionate; she gives us imperfect people and makes us like and care about them, an essential task for any novelist but one accomplished by surprisingly few." The novel is ablaze with popular culture (including contemporary photos of its time, which function more as imagery than photography), set on the eve of WWII, before the modern notion of popular culture came to be, but Sayers conjures the potent American alchemy of sports, celebrity, money and various degrees of "power", by means of its central biographical portrait of Joe DiMaggio, a man whose mythic status mixed all these concerns, even the coffee (Mr. Coffee) craze of generations yet to come. Weaving through these gaudy preoccupations are the more serious and lethal strands of pending world war, anti-Semitism, especially the Catholic version, the pull of pacifism and the always present battles of humanity's inhumanity against itself. *The Powers*' volatile mixtures of profundity and enjoyment are powerful, indeed.