

## GOOD DAY TO DIE

Travis Mossotti. *About the Dead*.  
Utah State University Press, 2011.

Mossotti's first book and winner of the 2011 Mary Swenson Poetry Competition takes a stark look at Great-Recession America. In a variety of forms, including couplets and tercets, Mossotti tells us about murder, pay-per-view porn, and one girl's sexually explicit gait. These poems, though, aren't offensive. They are precise portrayals of what it's like to live in a country filled with desire but empty of money and competent governance. The anger and frustration Mossotti presents is instantly relatable. In "An Apology," Mossotti castigates a "you" (presumably himself) for pretending to be "sanctimonious" when, truthfully, he wants to "carpet-bomb" the network of financiers who decimated his father's retirement fund. Poems about being miserable at an airport and black birds ousting a woodpecker from its nest astutely capture the despondency that many currently feel.

—Seth Oelbaum

## GRAB A STORY BY THE TAIL

Yuriy Tarnawsky. *Short Tails*. Jef  
Books, 2011.

A collection of 24 short stories, Tarnawsky's *Short Tails* covers multiple subjects. While many collections revolve around a theme (motherhood, travel, sexuality, national identity), Tarnawsky threads a needle of style and pulls it through the concerns of (typically) aging male characters. They are curious about death, new beginnings, history, sex, perception. In long, beautifully constructed sentences, Tarnawsky offers up comparisons that create clear images and juxtapose real feelings. When a man thinks he is being followed, he tells himself, "You have a desire to turn around and run or scamper off into the fog...but you suppress the thought ruthlessly like a parent grabbing a child who is misbehaving in public by an arm or the collar and letting it know who's in charge. You can't let your neuroses get the better of you! You must behave like an adult!" (83). The exclamation points stand out as a stylistic mark of Tarnawsky. His mastery over the mark changes the tone of characters subtly, from fear to excitement to stupidity. In fact, the whole collection speaks of a sophistication not found in much short fictions. The stories aren't "weird" for their own sake, but use unfamiliar concepts, like a couple that keeps their seven miscarried fetuses in separate jars on the windowsill, to connect with common emotions, such as the desire for family. Because each tale

has so much to offer, they are best read slowly, letting, their many vivid images creep in and get cozy; not spending time with them would be doing a disservice to this proud example of a short story collection.

—Melanie Page

## EDITORS SELECT

Gerald L. Bruns, *What Are Poets For? An Anthropology of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, Iowa, 2012. Contributing editor Gerald Bruns's most recent book of criticism answers his own question in ten related essays dealing with the work of Susan Howe, Karen Mac Cormack, Lyn Hejinian, John Matthias, J.H. Prynne, Steve McCaffery, and Theodore Adorno's aesthetic theory. Marjorie Perloff calls Bruns "one of our most distinguished philosophical critics" and Charles Altieri says that "Bruns writes elegantly, fluidly, and lucidly on quite difficult material." The book extends some of the insights of Bruns's *The Material of Poetry* (which the reader of *What Are Poets For?* will also want to own) and is dedicated to, and in one sense a dialogue with, the author's friend and colleague Stephen Fredman, along with a number of other writers and critics who will be known to the *NDR* community of readers.

Norman Finkelstein, *Track: A Poem*, Shearsman, 2012; *Inside the Ghost Factory*, Marsh Hawk Press, 2012. Both of these books are fascinating. *Track* was originally published in three separate volumes by Spuyten Duyvil in 1999, 2002, and 2005. As a single volume, it runs to just over 300 pages and includes several "Statements" at the end, which constitute a kind of poetics for the piece. Because of the mostly short lines, it is a pretty fast read if one takes care to cultivate a little negative capability along the careening way. The first of the "statements" calls *Track* "a series of controlled discontinuities," the second "the result of the conjunction of (or the tension between) a post-Objectivist procedure and a sensibility that is personal, perhaps even confessional, devotional, religious." A reader new to Finkelstein's work might want to begin with *Inside the Ghost Factory* since it is a book of short poems that are quite accessible and sometimes also funny. Even here, however, the "tension" or "conjunction" described in the statements from *Track* exists. As one poem has it, "Norman Finkelstein' is an object, not a subject."

Barry Goldensohn, *The Listener Aspires to the Condition of Music*, Fomite Press, 2012. *NDR* contributor Barry Goldensohn has collaborated with Notre Dame artist Douglas Kinsey on this book of poems about music accompanied

by a dozen monotype illustrations. The poems—mostly on the subject of classical composers and performers—but also including a terrific piece on jazz pianist Thelonius Monk—are selected from Goldensohn’s previous books. The poet and artist have known each other since they were undergraduates at Oberlin, and their shared love of the compositions and musicians they have listened to over the decades indeed “aspires to the condition of music,” as Walter Pater argued all arts and artists—Goldensohn has added the “listeners”—must do.

Keith Tuma, *On Leave: A Book of Anecdotes*, Salt Publishing, 2012. Poet and critic Keith Tuma spent part of a leave from teaching writing up remembered anecdotes in the context of year’s travel and rumination. Mainly dealing with encounters involving poets, the book makes itself companionable by often being very funny. Tuma is, as Randolph Healy writes, “one of nature’s most agreeable raconteurs.” Great beach reading for the summer. But there should be a warning on the cover: Take care, you will be stuck repeating some of these stories for the rest of your life.

Peter Robinson, *The Returning Sky*, Shearsman, 2012. British *NDR* contributor Peter Robinson begins his new book with a suite of poems having to do with Chicago and a

journey on the South Shore railroad line with stops at Randolph St., Roosevelt, Kensington, Gary Metro, Hudson Lake, and South Bend in a cold and wet November. The returning sky may first be glimpsed in “Enigmas of Departure”—from the regional airport where “the Michiana field / hazes off. . . in a great plain” and the poet returns to his more familiar settings in Reading, where he now lives, and the remembered Liverpool of his youth. Some of these poems appeared previously in *English Nettles*, a collaboration with the Reading artist Sally Castle. In spite of the overlap, Robinson’s readers will want this book as well. The dialogue between artist and poet is as sharp and impressive as that between Barry Goldensohn and Douglas Kinsey in *The Listener Aspires to the Condition of Music*.

Richard Blanco, *Looking for the Gulf Motel*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012. Emma Trelles, *Tropicalia*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Here are two new and noteworthy books by Richard Blanco and Emma Trelles, both Cuban-American poets. Blanco’s *Looking for the Gulf Motel* is his third collection, which deftly illuminates the exile experience within the family. Spencer Reece recommends the book for its “generous love of others and a persistent reach for what is absent. There is nothing here you will not remember.” Blanco’s

first collection, *City of a Hundred Fires*, won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize in 1997. *Tropicalia* is Trelles's first full-length collection, winner of the Andrés Montoya Prize from the University of Notre Dame Press, in cooperation with our Institute for Latino Studies. Denise Duhamel praises these poems about Miami in all its exoticness as "luxurious and scrumptious, socially relevant, with oomph and sizzle."

Nathaniel Perry, *Nine Acres*, APR/Copper Canyon, 2011. Another award-winning first book of poetry to recommend is Nathaniel Perry's *Nine Acres*. Perry teaches at Hampden-Sydney College in West Virginia. He is also an accomplished translator of Spanish poetry and a small farmer in rural Virginia, which explains the title, but the book is also inspired by (and a homage to) M.G. Kains's *Five Acres and Independence*. Each poem consists of four rhymed quatrains, and Perry's command of form is simply superb. Marie Howe selected *Nine Acres* out of one thousand manuscripts for the APR/Honickman First Book Prize in 2010.

Rebecca Morgan Frank, *Little Murders Everywhere*, Salmon Poetry, 2012. A previous contributor to the *Notre Dame Review*, Frank has just had her first poetry collection, entitled *Little Murders Everywhere*, published. Frank's poems have ap-

peared in numerous and prestigious literary magazines, among them *The Georgia Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Prairie Schooner*, besides, of course, our own venerable magazine. Linda Gregerson calls this collection an "an extraordinary debut" and David Barber writes that Frank's poems are "arresting and unflinching...daring you to see another soul at the white heat with a mind and music all her own."

David Matlin, *A Halfman Dreaming*, Red Hen Press, 2012. *NDR* contributor Matlin's place in the sparsely-occupied zone of literary excellence and accomplishment is secured by his new novel, the second of a trilogy; *A HalfMan Dreaming* is a Melville-ian quest to discover the Leviathan heart of America's love affair with death and destruction. A totally absorbing, harrowing tale of growing up in a post-war 1950s America that leads inexorably to a state of continuous serial conflicts, both foreign and domestic, propelled by a culture of martial-products-driven prosperity, haunted by America's ruthless, bloody history. *A HalfMan Dreaming* confronts and reveals all its hard truths with a lyrical intensity and rhetorical pyrotechnics, through its population of memorable characters. Matlin's entertaining and unnerving novel is my first pick for one of the best novels of the year.

Bonnie Jo Campbell, *Once Upon A River*, Norton, 2011. Campbell, another *NDR* contributor and acclaimed short story writer, about whom the always reliable Jaimy Gordon reports, “American fiction waited a long time for Bonnie Jo Campbell to come along. A lot of us, not only women, were looking for a fictional heroine who would be deeply good, brave as a wolverine, never a crybaby, as able as Saccagawea, with a strong and unapologetic sexuality. We wanted to feel her roots in some ancient story; we wanted Diana the huntress, but not her virginity; we wanted a real human girl whom we could believe had been suckled by bears, or wolves. To give us heroines like this, the gods finally brought us Bonnie Jo, one of our most important and necessary writers.” And Dorothy Allison, of *Bastard Out of Carolina* fame, says about Campbell’s second novel, “*Once Upon a River* is a beautiful piece of work.... Never simple, never predictable, utterly wonderful. I just loved this book.” As do we.

Thomas Mallon, *Watergate*, Pantheon, 2012. Mallon, the justly praised author of a number of historical novels (*Henry and Clara*, *Fellow Travelers*, etc.); his new “historical” novel is on the cusp of history, in so far as the Watergate affair is still alive in the minds of any number of people still walking the globe, or the USA, at least. Mallon has written

both fiction and nonfiction (*Mrs. Paine’s Garage*, etc.) that deal with the near historic past (the McCarthy era, the Kennedy assassination), but *Watergate* is the one novel that still nips at the heels of those alive. Fiction, I’ve always held, is the least censored genre in American publishing and that alone is justification for novels that contain a good bit of historical fact to exist. Mallon, whose writing continues to get better and better, finds himself in this novel to be writing the curious genre of contemporary fiction that is also historical. The one—I hesitate to say—drawback to such fiction is how it is to be read by those who don’t know the history well; in this case, the young, anyone less than 40. When an author writes historical fiction set before he/she was alive (or, at least, still a child) that author shares what most readers have: ignorance of the facts. And usually the successful writers supply the “history” that will make any reader sufficiently knowledgeable about the events described. Here Mallon may have the problem of not supplying enough about the forest all his trees are in. *Watergate* is full of delights, but I kept wondering what a reader who couldn’t fill in between the lines would make of some of its arcana. Concerning the novel, that is my central—and only—concern. Like a good number of Mallon’s books, *Watergate* is a remarkable tour de force.