

AMERICAN

POET

THE JOURNAL OF

VOLUME 41

THE ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS

FALL 2011

GERALD STERN ON HART CRANE

MICHAEL RYAN ON MICHAEL DICKMAN

MARK JARMAN AND NOELLE KOCOT INTRODUCE
EMERGING POETS MALACHI BLACK AND KELLY
FORSYTHE

MATTHEW ZAPRUDER ON W.S. MERWIN

THOMAS HARRISON ON DOMINIC SIRACUSA AND
EMILIO VILLA

CHARLES MARTIN ON JEFFREY ANGLÉS AND
TADA CHIMAKO

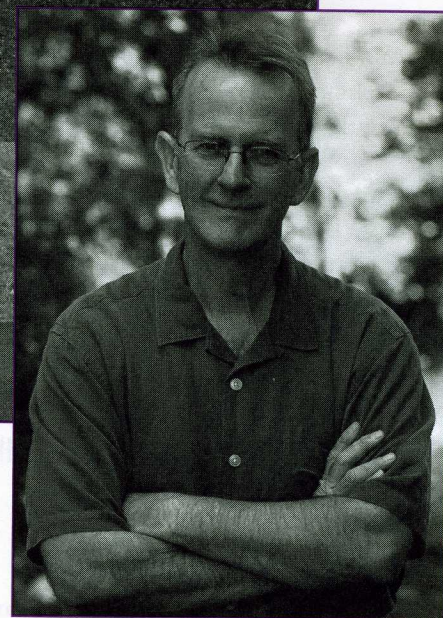
PLUS POEMS FROM TWELVE RECENT RELEASES

EMERGING POETS



MALACHI BLACK

Photo by Carmen Radley



MARK JARMAN

Photo by Jonathan Rodgers

A LYRIC DEVOTION

Introducing Malachi Black

Mark Jarman

IN POETRY, SYNTAX holds the potential for tremendous energy, which the plain style often leaves untapped. Among younger poets, I have noticed recently a willingness to set a blasting cap in that potential and to exploit the traditional sonic effects of English verse—alliteration, assonance, rhyme itself—in dazzling and unpredictable ways. Such poetry includes play in the three dances of imagery, diction, and music, which Ezra Pound described as phanopoeia, logopoeia, and melopoeia, all consorting at once. Reading poets such as Melissa Range or Stephen Kampa, who have just published their first books, I have found myself recognizing with pleasure that not only Gerard Manley Hopkins is back but also John Berryman. When I first encountered the poetry of Malachi Black, in a sequence based on the canonical hours, called “Quarantine,” I knew for sure that something exciting was happening.

oeia, and melopoeia, all consorting at once. Reading poets such as Melissa Range or Stephen Kampa, who have just published their first books, I have found myself recognizing with pleasure that not only Gerard Manley Hopkins is back but also John Berryman. When I first encountered the poetry of Malachi Black, in a sequence based on the canonical hours, called “Quarantine,” I knew for sure that something exciting was happening.

Lauds

Somehow I am sturdier, more shore
than sea-spray as I thicken through
the bedroom door. I gleam of sickness.
You give me morning, Lord, as you
give earthquake to all architecture.
I can forget.

You put that sugar
in the melon's breath, and it is wet
with what you are. (I, too, ferment.)
You rub the hum and simple warmth
of summer from afar into the hips
of insects and of everything.
I can forget.

And like the sea,
one more machine without a memory,
I don't believe that you made me.

That "Quarantine" turns out to be a crown and a half of
nonce sonnets is a bonus, for the poet makes the form work
for him; he does not work for the form. Delighted but
unintimidated, delighted *to be* unintimidated—these are the
attitudes of a poet who has discovered that his gift is more

THE LYRIC I, THE DYNAMO THAT DRIVES BLACK'S POETRY, PLAYS WITH ITS SHIFTING IDENTITY . . .

than just a way with words.

That poetry is set apart from prose by its patterns of repeti-
tion is acknowledged in the title of Black's recent chapbook
Echolocation. Surely poetry is located in its echoes, its echoic
effects, in the way it can make those echoes the focus of
readers' attention. The lyric *I*, the dynamo that drives Black's
poetry, plays with its shifting identity and is happy to dissolve
in the poem's music, as in the opening lines of "Dining After
Dawn."

Behind this round and solid sound, I square:
an egg is scrambled on the scalding pan

I am; I am what I can't quite withstand.
A flippant wind, disheveling my hair,

is there to cool and oscillate the air
around me when the stove ignites again,

but I am almost liquid.

A similar ocular and aural hallucination occurs in these lines
from "As a Draft."

Now there is nothing I can touch:
I am an element, an air

of nothing much: a subtle lisp
of what was substance: what was once

a skin and all its fingertips
falling in love with what, with what

it could, with what it was, with what
it could brush up against?

Like Hopkins, like Berryman, Black also dares a few some-
what outlandish conceits and, like Hopkins and Berryman,
brings them off, even as these conceits remain outlandish.
I'm thinking of that dove of the Holy Spirit in Hopkins's
"God's Grandeur" brooding over the earth as if it were an
egg or that dog in Berryman's most famous Dream Song,
beginning "Life, friends, is boring," who has taken itself far
away and left behind only its "wag," the poet himself. In one
instance, Black asks readers to imagine him as a pan in which
an egg is being scrambled, in another as a disembodied draft.
In "Insomnia & So On," he unleashes a barrage of images to
associate with sleeplessness.

Fat bed, lick the black cat in my mouth
each morning. Unfasten all the bones

that make a head, and let me rest: unknown
among the oboe-throated geese gone south

to drop their down and sleep beside the out-
bound tides. Now there's no nighttime I can own

that isn't anxious as a phone
about to ring.

He ends "Ode to the Sun" with a somewhat risky image of the sun as "a breast, round / behind a blouse of clouds built to be / unbuttoned." But he also reveals a reverential attitude, which is an essential element of a devotional poet—the kind of poet he may very well be in "Quarantine." Black addresses the sun like a psalmist:

You love: You share
yourself and you are always naked:
You love: You show us how to take
our places: You love: You cover our faces

To be both visionary and accurate, true to physics and metaphysics at the same time, is rare and puts the poet in some rarefied company.

Black, like a few other younger poets, is willing to include all the traditional effects of the lyric poem in his work, but he has set them going in new and lively ways, with the confidence of virtuosity and a belief in the ancient pleasures of pattern and repetition. Yet there is more than a pyrotechnic display going on. The second poem in "Quarantine," "Prime," echoes many another devotional poet in a time of illness and distress. Think of John Donne in "Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness" or Milton in "When I consider how my light is spent" or Hopkins in "I wake and feel the fell of dark not day." Prime is the canonical hour that corresponds most closely to sunrise. In the following fourteen lines, Black takes readers from the paradox of illness to the paradox of belief.

I don't believe that you made me
into this tremolo of hands,
this fever, this flat-footed dance
of tendons and the drapery

of skin along a skeleton.
I am that I am: a brittle
ribcage and the hummingbird
of breath that flickers in it.

Incrementally, I stand:
in me are eons and the cramp
of endless ancestry.

Sun is in the leaves again.
I think I see you in the wind
but then I think I see the wind.

Discovering the work of this poet, who has already enjoyed recognition, has been exciting. I am looking forward to seeing what he does next with his lyric gift.

Poems by **Malachi Black**

Dining after Dawn

Behind this round and solid sound, I square:
an egg is scrambled on the scalding pan

I am; I am what I can't quite withstand.
A flippant wind, disheveling my hair,

is there to cool and oscillate the air
around me when the stove ignites again,

but I am almost liquid. When I can,
I speak through bubbles in the skin that's bare

against the metal. Something I can find
is something lost, is something not to lose,

is something I am song enough to stutter:
if I am just a seed enclosed in rind,

then won't you give me something I can use
when I am walking into water?

Insomnia & So On

Fat bed, lick the black cat in my mouth
each morning. Unfasten all the bones

that make a head, and let me rest: unknown
among the oboe-throated geese gone south

to drop their down and sleep beside the out-
bound tides. Now there's no nighttime I can own

that isn't anxious as a phone
about to ring. Give me some doubt

on loan; give me a way to get away
from what I know. I pace until the sun

is in my window. I lie down. I'm a coal:
I smolder to a bloodshot glow. Each day

I die down in my bed of snow, undone
by my red mind and what it woke.

Poem by **Mark Jarman**

Ode to the Sun

You repeat yourself like no one
I know. Steadily somewhere,
you roll unnoticeably forward

even now, showing. Your finger
lifts the flowers and their faces
by the chin, but you will leave them

behind like blown-out beach
umbrellas. You will always reach
and extend. You will always

try to keep me to yourself on Monday
mornings: You will glare and I will go,
but you don't care and you can't know.

I will look at you too long and cry.
I will wonder where you've gone, at night.
I'll fall asleep and dream: an acorn.

You are nothing but a breast, round
behind a blouse of clouds built to be
unbuttoned. You love: You share

yourself and you are always naked:
You love: You show us how to take
our places: You love: You cover our faces

Touched Hem

If I may touch but his clothes . . .
Mark 5:28

A notion in the hurt brain,
Nagging as your years-long flow of blood,
Made you press and struggle through the crowd.

"Your faith has made you well," said the healer.
He did not see or touch you.
But he felt a power pass from him. You felt it, too.

Like some personal possession—
Your needle, stylus, purse or sandal,
Your poverty, your hunger—your faith has made you well.

Woman with no name except your illness,
You may return now to your name.
Child, you may go back to growing up.

Servant, awake restored to servitude.
And blood, which would not cease without a reason,
You are not needed. You may stop