New and Selected 2017

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Pitt Poetry Series
2017 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Pitt Poetry Series. Since its inception in 1967, the Pitt Poetry Series has been a vehicle for America’s finest contemporary poets. The series list includes Inaugural Poet Richard Blanco, Poet Laureate Billy Collins, Toi Derricotte, Denise Duhamel, Lynn Emanuel, Ross Gay, Etheridge Knight, Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner Ted Kooser, Larry Levis, Sharon Olds, Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Afaa Michael Weaver, David Wojahn, Dean Young, and many others.

Throughout its history, the Pitt Poetry Series has provided a voice for the diversity that is American poetry, representing poets from many backgrounds without allegiance to any one school or style. Beginning in 1978, Ed Ochester has been the editor and creative force behind the series.

**Ed Ochester** is the former director of the creative writing program at the University of Pittsburgh, and is professor emeritus of English there. Ochester is a core faculty member of the Bennington College MFA Writing Seminars, and has twice served as president of the Association of Writers & Writing Programs, where he received the George Garrett Award for Outstanding Community Service in Literature. He is the author of numerous poetry collections including *Sugar Run Road*, *Unreconstructed: Poems Selected and New*, *The Republic of Lies*, and editor of *American Poetry Now*. 

*Photo by Judith Vollmer*
Waiting for the Light
Alicia Suskin Ostriker

“‘Let us now praise famous cities,’ says Alicia Ostriker in Waiting for the Light. Indeed, let us now praise these poems, their ferocity, tenderness, intelligence, compassion, and joy. A seeker and seer in the tradition of Whitman, Ostriker searches for the ‘light that stabs me with joy’ amid the sidewalks, schoolyards, marketplaces, and many tongues of her beloved New York, spurred by ‘ancestors who remember tenements.’ A walker in the city and a walker in the world, she knows about the flow of dollars and blood through the streets, speaking fearlessly against whoever crushes the body and the spirit. Wait for the light no longer; the light is right here, in the pages of this book.”—Martin Espada

Times Square

Great white way when I was a tender ten first time downtown agape at cheerful billboard
smoke rings every four seconds puffed from the painted lips of a man who would walk a mile for a Camel
then sordid shabby & sleazy, risky & stinky & low digital Godzillas catapulted from manhole
now crazy clean your Disney scene warrior girl in heels, boy with banana
sky-high waxed torsos & the crawl at the bottom to let us know how the Dow is doing this very minute
selling everything in the world—luxury limos, lattes fashion entertainment & sport—your neon fire
forever changing forever displaying the same intolerable unquenchable human desire

Alicia Suskin Ostriker is a major American poet and critic. She is the author of numerous poetry collections, including, most recently, The Old Woman, the Tulip, and the Dog; The Book of Life: Selected Jewish Poems, 1979–2011; and The Book of Seventy, winner of the National Jewish Book Award. She has received the Paterson Poetry Prize, the San Francisco State Poetry Center Award, the William Carlos Williams Award, and has twice been a finalist for the National Book Award, among other honors. Ostriker teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Drew University and is currently a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.
Spirit Boxing

Afaa Michael Weaver

Past praise for Afaa Michael Weaver

“Afiaa Michael Weaver is one of the most significant poets writing today. With its blend of Chinese spiritualism and American groundedness, his poetry presents the reader (and the listener, for his body of work is meant to be read aloud) with challenging questions about identity, about how physicality and spirit act together or counteract each other to shape who we are in the world.” —Henry Louis Gates Jr. for Baltimore Magazine

Spirit Boxing

It is the tightness in the gut when the load
is heavy enough to knock me over backwards, turn me back on my heel until my ankle cracks

and I holler out Jesus, this Jesus of Joe Gans setting up for the next punch while taking in one that just made his soul wobble, the grunt

I make when the shift is young, my body
a heavy meat on bones, conveyors not wired for compassion, trucks on deadlines, uncaring

pressure of a nation waiting to be washed, made clean, me looking into the eye of something like death, and I look up, throwing fifty pound boxes,

Jesus now John Henry pounding visions of what work is, the wish for black life to crumble, snap under all it is given, these three souls of spirit,

hands like hammers, a hammer like the word made holy, word echoing a scripture from inside the wise mind that knows men cannot be makers,

that in making we want to break each other, ache moving us to refuse to surrender to time in factories, catacombs feeding on the spirit.
Excerpt from *Body Politic: To Ezra Pound in Purgatory*

IV.
The Dyeing of bin Laden’s Beard, 2009

*The chess board is too lucid*
the squares are too even… *theatre of war*
“*theatre*” is good. There are those who do not want
it to come to an end

—Canto LXVIII

In paradise, its color shall not fade.
In paradise, the virgins shall offer up
Their 177 hymens,
white thighs supplicant & splayed.
But today, no virgins: only burkah-ed wives atop
A pair of stools. They weave the bootblack
In with tiny horsehair brushes,
the dark streaking down their wrists.

Now to the half-moon mustache, now to the detail work—
They’ve traded their bifocals for a magnifying glass,
Shared to permit the coverage of each follicle.
& Allah, we know, is in the details,
Each hair blown upon to dry it more speedily.
& then he rises, our Prince of Shadows.

Laptop powered up, he views a cherished video of himself—
White robes streaming
& the chattering Kalashnikov.
Jan Beatty’s fourth full-length collection, The Switching/Yard, was named one of “30 New Books That Will Help You Rediscover Poetry” by Library Journal. The Huffington Post named her as one of ten women writers for “required reading.” Her other books include Red Sugar, Boneshaker, and Mad River, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize. Beatty is host and producer of Prosody, on NPR affiliate WESA-FM, featuring the work of national writers. She is director of creative writing at Carlow University, where she runs the Madwomen in the Attic writing workshops and teaches in the MFA program.

**Jackknife**

New and Selected Poems

Jan Beatty

“Beatty’s lyric comes from the edge of a knife that continues to carve honest beauty from an America we learn only from gifted hands. The arc of this poet’s brave heart moving through her life brings back to us the song of who we are. This is a fabulous collection.”

—Afaa M. Weaver

**Abortion with Gun Barrel**

The 12 year-old walks thin, like a child/
her hair alive in vibrating threads
in the clinic light.
Her mother: My daughter. I give my permission.
And the girl cannot be real, or the sky
would burn—not bleed like it does in
the waiting room of grown women.
The mother in the brittle inner office scribbles
her name small on the collapsing form.
Now move the flying hands of the counselor
who becomes the first bird,
stripping the sky blank with air leaving.
Now she walks back to the maze of illuminated
bodies to find a way to make herself dissolve:
Not what I wanted for you, not this.
In the inner body of the clinic, the divining
of this choice: the small name solid,
the songbird stopped/
the singing continues.
I am the counselor,
there are cracks in the barrel of the gun/
there is aiming/
shots of sorrow—
shots of light.
I am ruinous with light, we are ruinous with making
our lives in the procedure room.
The 12 year-old opens the leaving door—
a bird let loose, no clear note to sing.
Song of sorrow and praise as she wears
the skin of herself,
this idea of skin that she’s learning.
Scald
Denise Duhamel

“As much a manifesto as it is a book of poems, Scald is Denise Duhamel’s great feminist statement—by way of pantoums and villanelles, of course. But more than a feminist, I would say that Duhamel is a humanitarian. Her words dignify the disenfranchised. Glory to Denise Duhamel for her formal ingenuity and her gleeful political imagination.”—David Trinidad

Bikini Kill Villanelle

Whatever happened to those Riot Grrrl fanzines? Extra r’s slashed to “girl power,” the growl softened by the mainstream Spice Girls who, in black Wonderbras, spout faux pearls of wisdom and flirt with Matt Lauer. Whatever happened to those Riot Grrrls—Tobi Vail’s drums, Kathleen Hanna’s snarls? I put batteries in dancing flowers that boogied down with the mainstream Spice Girls.

Kurt Cobain knew music’s future was girls, their pink/punk scalding fury and glower. Whatever happened to those Riot Grrrls happened to us, too. Revolution swirled with sugar in blenders. We devoured the stuff, sweetened by the mainstream Spice Girls.

Women do crunches, pushups and leg curls so they’ll look good at cocktail hour. Whatever happened to those Riot Grrrls who kicked open that door for the Spice Girls?
The Thin Wall

Martha Rhodes

“In books that are as demanding as they are beautiful, Martha Rhodes has been mapping the psychic terrain of family life and romantic life in contemporary America. The way we are betrayed by others, the way we betray ourselves, the way love is both harbor and harm, the way memory is both a form of elation and of wounding—Rhodes looks at our instances of extremity and somehow turns them into bittersweet lyric utterance. Spare and unsparing, *The Thin Wall* is Rhodes doing her most powerful work so far.”—Rick Barot

What brews here, you think, is a hard green, gnarled and able to grab and pull me down. Do not spill myself here, you think, for none will pry me free.

I know your thoughts and tempt you with a splash of pink to lure you down, your nostrils working madly. Darling Pink, you sing, who planted you for me?

The stirring in your head drives you to the ground. This is not my death field, you weep. Keep the nightstand, your fevered call. Oh, I am a child unworthy of time.

And so you are. Thus, I continue to take it from you, one second, then another.
Milk Black Carbon
Joan Naviyuk Kane

“Milk Black Carbon is at once a brilliant work of lyric art and a decoding of knowledges written ‘in the dark cursive of a wolf / circling on sea ice.’ Kane’s is a vertiginous sensibility, chiseled into language in a precarious time, as the rising seas ‘rephrase us.’ She writes in English and Inupiaq Eskimo, toward a horizon of radical futurity, against nostalgia, with awareness that there is no turning back. This is a twenty-first-century poetry, urgent, necessary, and of its time.”—Carolyn Forché

The Straits
Ledum, Labrador Tea, saayumik.
A matted growth beneath the most shallow depth of snow on record in all our winters.

Pausing upbluff from the edge of ice
I broke from branches leaves to pin
between my teeth and tongue

until warmed enough for their fragrant oil to cleanse you from me.

Somewhere in a bank of fog
beyond the visible end of open water,
alleged hills were windfeathered—
drainages venous. In routes
along the shore forever slipping
under, I am reminded — in the city

one finds it simple to conceive nothing
but a system, and nothing but a world of men.
Lynne Sharon Schwartz is the author of two previous poetry collections: See You in the Dark, and In Solitary. Her twenty-three books include the novels Disturbances in the Field, Leaving Brooklyn, a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award, and Rough Strife, a finalist for the National Book Award. She has also published nonfiction, short stories, a memoir, essays, and translations. Schwartz is the recipient of awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts (in fiction and translation), and the New York State Foundation for the Arts. She teaches at the Bennington College Writing Seminars and the Columbia University School of the Arts.

No Way Out but Through
Lynne Sharon Schwartz

“One marvels at the force of seeing in Schwartz’s No Way Out but Through and cannot help but feel a particular gratitude for her abundant humor. Go all in with these poems; you’ll reap unknown rewards. She possesses a quick-witted imagination that sanctifies memories and makes room for the wondrous nature of our cosmopolitan lights.”

—Major Jackson

Mist
Of all she taught me I like best the lore of spray-on cologne. Forget, she said, the dabbing at wrists and collarbone. Spray a column of air in front of you then walk through it, preferably naked. Walk through the mist. The mist will cling to you.

I sprayed the air and ventured through the mist, a sweet fleeting pleasure, like a brief kiss, or an instant in a tropical jungle, or in the juicy heart of a flower. A minuscule light shower of scented rain.

I suspect she was speaking in metaphor, some lesson about life I can’t decipher. I want it to signify something, like an heirloom with a tale attached. Something to unwrap from time to time and contemplate.

But all she’s left me is a fragrant mist that shapes itself to my skin, a shower of scented particles that cling.
Primer
Aaron Smith

“Aaron Smith’s poems have always exuded a blue that’s simultaneously melancholy and bawdy. Primer sharpens his seemingly paradoxical blend of vigor and vulnerability. These marvelous poems are confrontational not simply for readers, but for the poet/self kissing the window between light and darkness, splendor and despair. Smith writes with more provocativeness and compassion than any poet of his generation.”—Terrance Hayes

Homosexuality
Dad said someone shot the albino deer, with a gun, out of season. Eyes pink, white fur, a reverse shadow in dusk against the hillside. Not in all the years I’ve hunted have I seen an animal like that. It’s cruel, he says, for nature to make such a thing, unable to hide when hiding is how it survives. He looks through my eyes, then away, he wants us to stay ordinary men.

Aaron Smith is the author of Appetite, and Blue on Blue Ground, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize, as well as the chapbooks Men in Groups and What’s Required. His work has appeared in a number of literary magazines, including Ploughshares and Prairie Schooner, and The Best American Poetry 2013. He is assistant professor of creative writing at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
Star Journal
Selected Poems
Christopher Buckley

Past praise for Christopher Buckley
“The poems are modest, straight forward, intensely lyrical and totally accessible. This is a humble poetry of great truths and profound emotions that never overstates its concerns for the events both in and above the world. It rewards countless readings and never betrays itself.”—Philip Levine in Ploughshares

Dust Light, Leaves
Above autumn’s burgundy and rust,
beyond the orange groves
chafing and ruddy in the frost,
a cloud lifts into blue . . .
the west goes up all hay-dust, flame,
and the flat land glimmers
out to it on the day-stream—
it is Millet’s sky of “The Angelus,”
that nineteenth-century sky
we have only in paintings
and in these few still moments
in their rose and amber rags.
As a child, I remember this . . .
standing on the creek stones,
dusk moving over the fields
like a ship’s hull pulling away
with that first sense of loss
and release; I saw it was
all about the beginning of dust
rising into the long sky’s seam,
into my own two eyes and hands.
A chalk-white moon overhead
and to the right, umber waves
of sparrows back and through
the empty trees. . . .
Soon, stars will draw analogies
in the dark, but now the world
is simple as the dead leaves
glowing in this late hour,
simple as our desire
to rise lucent as clouds
in their camisoles of dust,
the cool air burning through us
over leaves drifting on a pond,
over the last memory
of ourselves looking up,
stunned as carp blinking at the light.
Photo by Gary Isaacs

Daniel Grandbois is the author of the prose poetry/flash fiction collection *Unlucky Lucky Days*, the art novel *The Hermaphrodite: An Hallucinated Memoir*, and the prose poetry collection *Unlucky Lucky Tales*. His work has appeared in *Fiction*, *Boulevard*, *Mississippi Review*, *Conjunctions*, and *Electric Lit*, among other publications, and often includes collaborations with visual artists across the Americas.

“A Revised Poetry of Western Philosophy

Daniel Grandbois

“Imagine, as Daniel Grandbois has, a conflation of Marxes (Karl and Groucho) and a hipster Plato, and you can begin to understand the enterprise of reimagining the history of Western philosophy as a series of comic summaries, complete with abstracts for the novice and infused with a storyteller’s sense of the need to entertain, while shedding light on the great intellectual enterprises from ancient to modern times. This book is a marvel.”

—Christopher Kennedy

Excerpt from “Aristotle”

Who, at age seventeen, enrolled in Plato’s academy and later founded his own school in Athens; who believed that knowledge could be obtained through interacting with physical objects and recognized that personal associations played a role in our understanding of those objects.

It is the same with almost all the early phallic songs: they were not treated seriously. The ludicrous, however, must be seen as a subdivision of the ugly, and even the ugliest of uglies, once implanted, so to speak, can give the liveliest pleasure. Nature herself discovered the tendency. What a man chooses to show or sheath (or show and sheath repeatedly) reveals his moral compass, be it true north or any of the lesser angles, and it is by such choices that man is made happy or the reverse. These principles being established, let us discuss the proper structure.

A beautiful object must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order, not to mention an order of magnitude that is, well . . . breathtaking to say the least. A lot depends on length . . .

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Showtime at the Ministry of Lost Causes

Cheryl Dumesnil

“Cheryl Dumesnil transforms the seemingly useless—the discarded, the broken off, what we keep in the kitchen drawer—into proof of our humanity, asserting that it’s to the things of this world, whether they be oil-slicked puddles, cathedrals, tampons or Pink Floyd, that our lives are anchored. These poems are as tactile as that kitchen junk drawer and just as rewarding to rummage through. Each poem begs to be picked up, turned over in the palm.”
—Dorianne Laux

Showtime at the Ministry of Lost Causes

On the corner of North Main and Bonanza,
Sandy busks for change, her rope-yellow hair
gone weeks without water, sun-chapped lips
mouthing a rusted harmonica. Give her
a cup of coffee, she’ll call you broken
blue wing. Ask her where she comes from,
she’ll sing, her voice a forest full of birds
you can’t name:

You got field mice in your corn palace,
ain’t nothin’ you can do.

Field mice in the corn palace,
ain’t nothin’ you can do.

Melancholy’s comin’ for you,
better put down your broom.

Y’all die a little every day,
go ‘head now, put down your broom.

Cheryl Dumesnil’s books include the 2008 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize winner, In Praise of Falling, the memoir Love Song for Baby X: How I Stayed (Almost) Sane on the Rocky Road to Parenthood, and the anthology Dorothy Parker’s Elbow: Tattoos on Writers, Writers on Tattoos, co-edited with Kim Addonizio.
In the Volcano’s Mouth

Miriam Bird Greenberg

WINNER OF THE 2015 AGNES LYNCH STARRETT POETRY PRIZE

“These poems do what the best poetry sometimes does: reveal and deepen our understanding of the strangeness in the ordinary. And do so in language clear as a bell.”
—Ed Ochester, judge

Love Poem

The look some men have in the early morning, light slanting through the window. As if they’d been born in a volcano where the boys metamorphosed during puberty into birds. There’s so much to surmise about rites of passage, but in the end even ones who brought back rabbits from nights beyond the brim and rinsed their bloodied hands in kitchen mop buckets wished to shrug off their bird bodies as soon as they could. Their mothers learned to speak bird—only a little magic was necessary—you could buy tongues harvested from starlings in a war-ridden country, and a mother must speak to her sons somehow. There are ways of making violence into an offering. All women grow into knowing this, bodies verbs in the noun-filled fields of pumice rock specked with obsidian and the air wild until dusk, tall grass rustling with voles and rabbits. Overhead, raptors circle in the cool air, and what can I do but feel my own skin set around me as if it were fur? No—I mean when the fireflies first appear we’ll want to paste their luminescent bodies on our skin like jewel-lit fish living in deep ocean trenches. Like the fish will want to devour smaller fish. Or the wolf, smelling carefully every current of air; the thief, sharpening a penknife idly beneath a tree before nightfall, each regarding the object of his affection gently. The caress a butcher gives the goat, the steady, swift blade that follows.
Hour of the Ox

Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello

WINNER OF THE 2015 DONALD HALL PRIZE FOR POETRY

“Hour of the Ox is a timeless collection written by a poet of exceptional talent and grace, a voice as tough as it is tender. Poignant and beautifully composed, these elegies hum with emotional potency and moved me beyond measure. This immigrant story emerges through the hands, mouths, hearts, mournings, and voices of a family an ocean away and is exquisite, lyrical, and an incredible and rare gift.”—Crystal Ann Williams, judge

The Last Supper

Father killed the thin black pig for the last supper.
Mother sliced strips of backfat and brought out the table-grill.
The room filled with the smell of grease and coal-smoke.
My metal chopsticks clicked the loudest, deft fingers laying rice in cabbage leaves, rolling tightly.
A borrowed suitcase by the door, latched with new life—
if new life smells of red pepper paste and dried squid,
is heavy as a stone hotpot wrapped in three towels and a sweater.

Pour the tea, my father said, and I pressed my fingers against the lid to keep from spilling. Not one small drop.

After the pile of black boar bristles was wiped from the plate and the last persimmon speared and swallowed, after the blankets had been unrolled and my father’s breath steadied, I pressed my spine into the warm floor where the coals had burned.

Counting the breaths in the dark, my fingers crept lightly across the floor and against my father’s calloused palm, willing his lifeline to grow long as a stream of tea poured green and steaming and smelling of herbs.

Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello

is the author of the poetry collection Last Train to the Midnight Market. She is the recipient of a Kundiman Poetry Fellowship and the inaugural John S. and James L. Knight Fellowship at Florida International University. She currently serves as a program coordinator for Miami Book Fair, cofounding editor of Print-Oriented Bastards, and producer for The Working Poet Radio Show. Her poems have appeared in Best New Poets 2015, Columbia: A Journal of Literature & Art, Narrative Magazine, Southern Humanities Review, and other journals.
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Poems New and Selected
Lynn Emanuel
WINNER, 2016 LENORE MARSHALL POETRY PRIZE
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“Emanuel’s uninhibited manner and her noir sensibilities are constants, especially the finely wrought use of melodrama and the erotic. New readers will gain a strong sense of Emanuel’s poetics, and those familiar with her work will see old poems in a new light as their shifted contexts draw out new resonances.” —Publishers Weekly

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“In his powerful debut collection, Marshall explores the perils and praise songs of black lives on the South Side of Chicago. Marshall’s poetry offers an insider’s perspective that asks the reader to parse the sociopolitical systems that imperil black lives—not through abstract ideology, but through authentically rendered eyes.” —Publishers Weekly
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"Laurentiis's debut collection oscillates between a lament for the brutalization of black bodies throughout history and a celebration of the pleasures of sexuality and desire. An anxious tension that haunts the book; Laurentiis's difficulty in reconciling his relationship to canonical art, art's relationship to white supremacy, and his dual celebration of and mourning for lives at society's margins. Laurentiis possesses the formal tools of a strong poet."—Publishers Weekly

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“A fierce conflagration of lyric and gorgeously rendered narrative that refuses to give the reader a chance, or reason, to turn away. Beatty’s staunch refusal to bow to the ordinary—her ‘switching’ of gender roles, positions of power, or the very idea of home—infuses this volume with a brilliance not open to debate.” —Patricia Smith

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