

Tampa

Keith Tuma

“Hey! Great tote bags!” the young woman said looking back at Booth #1305, two booths down from ours in the row at the AWP book fair. At #1305 [The Academy of American Poets](#) was handing out book bags to anyone willing to sign up for their Poem-a-Day email delivery. This seemed like a good deal, one sturdy book bag for 365 poems I can easily ignore, so I wrote down my email address on their sheet and took my tote, with “poets” printed on one side inside a sky blue circle and “Read More Poems” and “poets.org” in a bright white font on the other. It had stuff in it, too, the 2018 National Poetry Month [poster](#) designed by Paula Scher—I tossed that when I emptied the bag at home—a bookmark, and a sky blue card asking me to advertise in the house journal at a special rate reserved for AWP attendees. There was also a copy of that journal, the Fall/Winter 2017 edition of *American Poets*.

As I started drafting this note I saw someone’s copy of *American Poets* on the English department coffee table, left there for the interested to peruse, I guess. I don’t think anybody had cracked it open, but I’ve read my copy now. It features a letter from Executive Director Jennifer Benka about matters including the \$200,000 grant the Academy recently received from the Ford Foundation “to support the Poetry Coalition and its joint programming each spring on important issues” and Katie Peterson’s essay “Fragility and Repetition: On the Poetry of Robert Lowell,” where we learn that her “favorite Lowell poems are not flickers of consciousness, emblems of the merely spontaneous, but whole days lived through, entire days survived” (24). Four poems by the poet who is still dug in on the lower slopes of Parnassus follow, including “Pleasure,” where Lowell remembers what it was like to cook and sit “Indian style” and “never talk to anyone again” while thinking about cutting up his shirt. Elsewhere in the magazine there’s an interview with Javier Zamora and two poems from his *Unaccompanied* (2017), a book that “chronicles his harrowing migration from El Salvador to the United States following the Salvadoran Civil War” (48), and a new long poem by U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith based on several documents concerning some of the damage DuPont has done to the environment, prefaced by a photograph and a note about Smith’s recent prizes and awards. There is also one poem each by Dawn Lundy Martin, Maureen N. McLane, Kamilah Aisha Moon, Meghan O’Rourke, and Cedar Sigo and a collection of brief reviews by Stephanie Burt, who notices books by Mary Jo Bang, Victoria Chang, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Danez Smith, Frank Bidart, William Brewer, Nicole Sealey, Marcus Wicker, Jennifer Chang, HAUNTIE, June Jordan, and CAConrad. Add 27 pages of ads mostly for books, a list of recent prize winners with their photos, and the names of donors to the Academy, and that’s pretty much the magazine. I won’t use Charles Bernstein’s phrase “official verse culture” to describe what is on view in it because I’m not sure what those three words mean anymore—an awful lot of poetry today is prose, for one thing—but the Academy’s house organ clearly is promoting the diversity of contemporary American poetry, or at least the diversity of its authors. Meanwhile, I couldn’t help notice as I was reading it a photograph of this year’s [White House interns](#), 98% of them white. That made me think about the quote from the late C. D. Wright that the Academy includes on its card

asking me to buy an ad: “If I wanted to understand a culture...I would turn to poetry first.” The Academy is doing what it can.

Good swag is important at the AWP book fair, they say. It’s not only book bags, it’s pens and hats and T-shirts, occasionally a shot of whiskey, this year even little plastic hippos—the [Cincinnati Review](#) did well to cash in on the [Fiona craze](#) and gave out a hippo with each subscription. Numbers at the Tampa AWP were down about 4000, I was told, and at a reception one evening several of us took turns guessing why that was so—a bad location, bad weather on the East Coast, hotels more expensive than usual, and so on—but there were plenty of people attending, roughly 9000 I heard, and the book fair had 800 booths and tables, which doesn’t count some 30 small presses that opted out and set up a “Whale Prom” about a mile away from the Convention Center at the [Rialto Theatre](#) one afternoon. Tables and booths at the AWP Book Fair are expensive, and this alternative book fair aimed to establish “an accessible, free-admission book event dedicated to independent presses & for the people who love them” while advocating for “historically marginalized voices” and promoting “presses that do-it-together.” I went over to check it out and bought a few books while noticing that Futurepoem, which has published books by a number of post-avant poets, had a table at the [Whale Prom](#) and the Convention Center, thereby covering all bets. I liked the vibe at this smaller gathering of publishers away from the conference, much as years ago when they were newer and rarer I liked offsite readings. I spoke with a few publishers and friends before ordering a cubano sandwich at a restaurant across the street and heading back to the Miami University Press booth two down from the Academy of American Poets and next to the Coffee House Press double booth. Every time I walked by #1305 the credit card commercial featuring Samuel Jackson echoed for me, “What’s in your wallet?” become “What’s in your bag?” Still, I’m glad to have the bag. Every year that I sell books at AWP I come home with the conference bag and several others. Maybe next year in Portland I’ll give some of the old ones away as a Miami University Press promotion.

I usually attend only a few talks and readings at AWP, depending on how many friends and colleagues are presenting and if anything catches my eye. So for me the AWP is mostly the book fair. This year to make it more interesting I told Michael Boughn and Kent Johnson that I’d use the occasion to write a few notices about recent poetry books. I’d make it a game, I said, and established rules. I’d walk up and down the aisles of the book fair checking out the tables and booths and chatting with the people who were working at them earnestly trying to sell their books and select a few books that interested me for one reason or another and try to write a few words about them. The main rule was that they had to be books by authors I didn’t know, ideally poets I hadn’t heard about or read previously. That way I’d be sure to come at the books cold, with little more to base my notes on than what I saw or heard at the table or booth or could find in a fast web search.

Often I’ll take a chance on books I haven’t read for courses I am teaching. This semester that includes recent poetry books by Anne Boyer, Layli Long Soldier, Solmaz Sharif, and Eleni Sikelianos, a critical book by Reginald Gibbons, *How Poems Think* (2015), and the anthology [Atlantic Drift](#) (2017), edited by Robert Sheppard and James Byrne. Typically, I’ll have heard good things about these books and thus know something about them, but at the AWP I wanted to do something a little different. That meant

staying away from the bigger, more established small presses like Copper Canyon and our neighbor Coffee House and most university presses. Of course I looked over the books these presses had for sale and bought a few of them, including books by authors whose work I know pretty well. I will break my rule below to say a few words about Steven Zultanski's *Honestly* (2018), which is published by a press I admire, [Jay MillAr's BookThug](#), which is now apparently called [Book*hug](#). These days Americans have a duty to support Canadian publishing at every opportunity.

It's too easy to make fun of the AWP. Yes, it makes possible ridiculous displays of ego and self-promotion. But it also seems possible that not all that many people really *like* attending AWP. Certainly few are prepared to admit to liking it, no matter how many old friends one plans to meet. The most successful, high profile writers tend to avoid it—Rita Dove has been one exception in recent years, I have happily noted—unless they are offered a big reading, which means that everybody who is present understands at some level that they are not a big deal however much they pretend to be. What remains of the last avant-garde in poetry, now mostly long in the tooth anyway, seems to avoid it these days, perhaps because they aren't submitting panel proposals, or their panel proposals aren't being accepted, or they just aren't interested in it. Creative writing pedagogy and issues in the profession are popular topics at the conference. Whereas decades ago the MLA seemed an institution worth engaging, a site where serious discourse concerning poetics could be ventured and entertained in a few corners of the conference, the panels at the AWP tilt toward more practical matters. There are exceptions, of course. I've heard interesting papers and presentations at the AWP. Several of my colleagues presented on the use of comics in teaching narrative this year and I learned a lot from their panel, not least about some interesting comics. I remember plenty of boring talks from the MLA back in the years when I attended it; there was pretension and self-loathing on display there too. Big hotels and convention centers seem built to promote such things and serve them up with overpriced cocktails. These days, I am no longer young or new to any of this, and I find that I admire more than pity the graduate students who confront the rituals of the AWP for the first time, excited or bewildered by it, as I also admire the many regulars who show up to say their piece or to sell the books of a small press they are often sustaining on limited funds, sometimes on their own dime.

Anyway, having told the excellent managing editor of [Miami University Press](#), Amy Toland, what I'd promised Mike and Kent at *Dispatches* I went off one afternoon when business was slow at the booth to see what caught my eye. I didn't have too far to go before I spotted a table set up by the creative writing program at the University of South Dakota. Three or four of its graduate students were working at it. In looking at the books on view one caught my eye because of its color scheme and design, [The Botanical Garden](#), by Ellen Welcker. For my poetry consumption I often opt first for chapbooks and books of atypical shapes and sizes that can be handled and read easily rather than for big tomes, though those have their place too. So this square 6x6" book of what I guess we can call prose poems (or just prose) with its burnt orange, black and tan cover and illustration of a spouting whale caught my eye. Its publisher is [Astrophil Press](#), which is run by duncan b. barlow; the press is now at the University of South Dakota. Alas, the book dates from 2009, which shows you how current I am. It won a prize judged by Eleni Sikelianos and sports blurbs by Juliana Spahr and Levi Stahl. Sikelianos remarks in her

introduction about one distinguishing trope in the book, its abundance of place names, nations from around the world, placed within quotation marks: “Quote marks hang around the names of the countries, and so we hang out in the imaginative space of the names that attach to places, some we’ve perhaps visited, many not.” The whale is a central figure in the book because of its fate as a mammal much victimized in the global destruction of the environment, which is one focus of the book together with migration and borders, identity and anonymity, and so on. As I am writing this I am reading a news story about a whale dead off the coast of Spain with 57 pounds of garbage, mostly plastics, blocking its stomach. Here’s page 24 of Welcker’s book:

In earth and rock and language and “Laos,” we were only and always. Separated by ocean, fragmented by blood and bone and borders, only and always.

When I say *you*, I mean this is love.

Assign value. Or insert “not.” Consider whether and how often one is subject to a recount.

In “Burundi” I wanted to suck the roots that go tapping the deep. Want the glistening, the ever-changing surface. Want the color in me.

I was in “Russia,” “Guinea-Bissau,” “Samoa.”

A plastic soup of waste floating in the Pacific Ocean was growing at an alarming rate. The trash vortex covered an area twice the size of the continent of Antarctica, though its borders were shifting and ill-defined.

The nations are in quotes because they refer to “imaginative space(s)” (with real trash) and because they are, from the perspective of the environment and international capital, arbitrary constructs, however specific their histories. While its author is clearly aware of some of these specifics the book doesn’t document many of them—though there is some of that, with sources listed in the back—but instead takes up the status of refugees and immigrants and ecological catastrophe in other ways: “The cries of whales sound eerily like the cries of displaced peoples” (41). There is a second, much shorter passage of prose at the end of the book titled “a map, my loves, I am drawing it by heart” which relates to the methods of the longer work. “Lyric elegy,” Spahr calls it, which seems right. The editor wasn’t at the table when I stopped by and I wasn’t certain that the students working behind it had read the book, which was likely published before they started their program, but they seemed proud that Astrophil Press is housed at the university and that they are able to help out with its publishing program.

A couple aisles over from Astrophil/USD I came across the table for Unicorn Books and talked with [Andrew Saulters](#), who edits, designs, and produces its books while teaching writing at Guilford College in Greensboro. Running the press, which was founded in Santa Barbara over fifty years ago by Al Brilliant and Jack Shoemaker, is his main gig, as I understood matters. While he has an MFA he is not writing poems these days, he told me, so I was immediately interested in what he was publishing. After all, many small presses exist at least in part to promote the poetic values of the editor and his or her associates as they try to make their way in the world as writers. That familiar story does not apply in this

case. Unicorn has an extensive [list](#) going back all those years, and its authors include writers whose work I admire such as Thomas Merton, Jerome Rothenberg, and Peter Whigham. The press has also published translations of Villon, Istarú, Vietnamese folk poets and many others, though I can't say I remember seeing its books previously. That's been my loss. The book I most wanted on the AWP table was an anthology of haiku called [One Window's Light](#) (2017) edited and introduced by Lenard D. Moore and featuring haiku by five members of the [Carolina African American Writers Collective](#). It has blurbs by distinguished scholars of African American writing including Lauri Ramey and Jerry Ward, Jr. I have a lot of time these days for poets who adapt familiar forms such as the haiku to comment on everyday life; Harryette Mullen's Graywolf book from a few years ago, *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary* (2013), is a favorite for its observations, note-taking, and wit, and for recasting the tanka in a three-line form. The haiku in *One Window's Light* are organized by subject matter rather than setting up as a diary like Mullen's book, but the subjects allow for commentary on and presentation of ordinary experience. Here's one by the editor under the subject heading "Families":

hunter's moon
we drive block after block
for a parking space (15)

and another in the same subject category by Gideon Young:

Christmas Eve
my wife dons
her nursing scrubs (16).

Odd the way that reading works; this one has me remembering Christmas Eves when my wife Diane, a pediatric nurse, had to work. Here's a last poem from the book that I find pretty sharp in the analogy it offers, this time under the subject heading of Harmony. It is authored by L. Teresa Church:

frogs croak
in the shallows
tambourines (44).

The collective practice of these writers interests me. Why isn't there more of this kind of thing?

As long as I'm writing about very short poems, I will mention Cameron Anstee's *Book of Annotations*, which I had the chance to preview thanks to a promotional chapbook I spotted on the table of The Emergency Response Unit, a micropress based in Picton, Ontario. I hadn't heard of Anstee, but one of the things he seems to be doing is cutting poems out of other poems. Here is T. E. Hulme's famous Imagist poem "Above the Dock":

Above the quiet dock in midnight,

After I visited the BatCat table I wandered up and down a few aisles to see what else looked interesting and eventually came upon a table covered by lots of thin little (4x6") books of poetry in translation. I couldn't resist. This was Periscope, the newest imprint of [A Midsummer Night's Press](#), which is run by Lawrence Schimel. Thumbing through a few of them and considering titles that interested me I bought English translations of three Eastern European women poets, Kätlin Kaldmaa's *One Is None* (2014, trans. Miriam McIlfratrick-Ksenofontov), Inga Pizāne's *Having Never Met* (n.d., trans. Jayde Will), and Jana Putrlje Srđić's *Anything Could Happen* (2014, trans. Barbara Jurša). Kaldmaa is Estonian—I see that she's been [interviewed](#) for the *Huffington Post*. Pizāne is Latvian and Srđić is Slovenian. You can see and hear Srđić reading her poem "Fish" and somebody else reading its English translation [here](#):

No matter how carefully you cut into the belly
of this wonderful silver fish and clean
the entrails, wipe the dust from the shelves,
and place fragile objects somewhere high,
safety will not save you from fear.
Misery doesn't ensure a good
poem. The closeness of death only makes you
more alone. Filled with joy, like an aquarium
with spawning fish,
we watch the ducks
follow one another with their shovel-like feet,
one two one two
in a line.
There is an order in everything,
Some feathery lightness. (35)

I guess you could say that these ducks are goose-stepping, though that last line as translated is a little odd since one doesn't think of "order" as feathery or light. I liked the work of all three of these poets. Kaldmaa and Pizāne write about relationships, Kaldmaa bluntly about sex; they turn often to poems of direct address. Perhaps Srđić's poems showed me the most breadth of content and tone, the most striking figures and images, at least in these small samples, but Kaldmaa's "My Swiss Lover" is not to be missed.

By the time I went over to the Rialto Theater and the "Whale Prom" book fair on the Friday afternoon I'd spent as much money on books—only a few of them mentioned here—as I wanted to spend. But I bought a few books there nevertheless, including Anne Boyer's [A Handbook of Disappointed Fate](#) (2018), a collection of essays from Ugly Duckling Presse. I have only started into it but it is promising; her remarks on the immortal [Bo Diddley](#) and the meaning of his name are what I turned to initially since I rarely read a book of short essays in the order I'm asked to read it. The book of poems that caught my eye at the Prom was Matt Cook's [Irsome Particulars](#) from [Publishing Genius Press](#), which is another little book (4x6"). It consists of a series of prose poems, prefaced by an epigraph from

Baudelaire concerning “poetic prose” and “the lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of reverie” and “flip-flops of consciousness” that the prose poem is supposed to stage. I hadn’t heard of Matt Cook, though Paul Vogel, who is from Milwaukee where Cook lives, has since told me a little about his fame in that great city, but I liked the look of his book. I enjoyed speaking with its publisher [Adam Robinson](#), who is also half of [Real Pants](#), about the poetry of Mairéad Byrne, whose book of prose poems *Talk Poetry* (2007) Miami University Press published. That’s also a small format book and has a little of the deadpan commentary about everyday life that Cook’s book includes, though that is where the comparison ends, since Cook’s prose poems are shorter and in a series and more interested in responding to a certain Midwestern dumbfounded logic and speech:

You wonder sometimes where horseshoe crabs come from and then you give the matter some thought and then you determine that they probably come from horseshoe crabs. (9)

The poems are all in the second-person like this, which puts the reader in a rusty bumper car as it collides with other rusty bumper cars at a rusty carnival near Baraboo, without really hurting anybody:

Sometimes you catch yourself accidentally having authentic thoughts. You’re aware, for example, that a doctor, for a fee, can prescribe medication to relieve the pain brought on by authentic thoughts.

Strong blurbs by Rob Fitterman and Dorothy Lasky introduce the book, and “Irksome Particulars” is an appropriate title for it, though in the end I fear that at this late date I may have more to worry about than what “irks” me. Cook’s poems, pitched between “flabbergasting options” (73)—this from a poem that has to do with what a friend remarks upon concerning the relationship of penis size and IQ—and “a conundrum wrapped in a pain in the ass” (42) are as bemused as they are critical, and I found them engaging and funny, if also more prosaic than Baudelaire’s “miracle of a poetic prose” and the two excited blurbs led me to expect.

Okay, so here we are near the end of my [ramble](#). Maybe the best book, or to be more precise my favorite book, found at the AWP book fair in Tampa is *Honestly* by Steven Zultanski. As I said, naming it violates my self-imposed criteria for this exercise: I’ve heard of Zultanski. I even once published a few sentences about his *Cop Kisser* (2010) from the same publisher. That is a very different book, however, relentless in its formulaic excess, its take on the “long tail” economy. For the much missed *Attention Span* of Steve Evans I quoted its perfect, still relevant line: “Workers of the world, come on already.” *Honestly* is more intimate, probably more readable, if equally “experimental” for the frame shifts Zultanski uses to redirect narrative in a few of his texts (little stories and poem-essays, or something in between) in the sequence. I can’t say how many of the stories are truly or entirely autobiographical, but it doesn’t matter. The book begins with the story of Dick Stryker, said to be his great-uncle. Stryker, with his porn star name, led an ultimately sad life on the fringes of society—he did time in jail, for example— and was a pianist and composer who hung out in New York City with [avant-garde types](#) including Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery and Harold Norse, the last apparently his lover, until a fire “burned his face off” (7) and he became a recluse who composed little and was mostly forgotten by his (and Zultanski’s) family. The book follows his story (he returns near the end) with another about

moving to a small apartment in New York City, the proverbial New York apartment too small for a [small bird](#). In classic Zultanski fashion he catalogs its contents and his expenses in moving, and then we get commentary that leads to one of the frame shifts I just mentioned:

If a friend needs a place to sleep, they can't sleep here.
If they need a place to hide, they can't hide here.
The closet is cramped.
The bathroom is narrow.
There's nothing to crouch behind, nothing to hide under.
The front door is easy to pry open.
Someone could walk right in.

Where are they?
Where the fuck are they?
I know they're here.
I know they're fucking here.
I bet you hid them behind the fucking shower curtain, right?
That's your genius hiding spot, right?
You probably thought we wouldn't look here, right, in the most
Fucking obvious spot, right? (19)

Yes, you've got it right, dear reader, someone has just walked into this poem, someone who becomes pretty aggressive, uttering threats like a mobster. After this the book moves on to a discussion of the mob and unions and real estate and the mob's surprising alliances with environmental activist groups as explained by the author's friend Zach, and then to a description of taking long showers and worrying about yellow dust falling from the ceiling while wishing his girlfriend was in the shower with him, and so on—I won't summarize all of the book's parts. The great Chris Kraus blurbs *Honestly* and notes that it "loquaciously monologues about everything from municipal corruption to asparagus horticulture with charm and authority," which seems right, though I'm not sure what she is getting at when she ends by saying that "*Honestly* spirals closer and closer to the silence behind speech" unless she means that all of this storytelling is finally a little melancholy. That makes it more moving (I'll take the pun) than the sub-Beckettian absurdity presented in Cook's fine book.

Maybe I'll write about the other books I bought this year at AWP another time, but I've gone on too long already. I hope there's not too much in common in what caught my eye other than the small size of many of the books, unless it is that their authors are underappreciated like most authors and their editors and publishers deserving of praise for bringing this work into a poetry world that the Academy of American Poets and its book bags and advertisements will never be able to represent fully, however much it tries. Other than that, I don't have anything to say about the AWP in Tampa. It was cold the day I got in, and when Florida is cold what's the point of it? A few of us rode the quaint and apparently underused streetcar from the stop across from the Convention Center out to Ybor City—that's party

central, where the streets must run with vomit much of the year—to have dinner at an [old, famous restaurant](#). We were lucky to get a table. The savages of the AWP are always good for business.