

Book Reviews

Judith Kitchen

an excerpt of

*Keeping Company**

Lovers of poetry may total a million people
on the whole planet. Fewer than the players of *skat*.

—Les Murray

Uh-oh. I can feel it coming—the grump-in-waiting who surfaces whenever I open yet another book of poems that feels to me like merely lineated prose. Has poetry lost its defining edges? Why has the ear fallen suddenly so flat?

Luckily, when I turn to the charming collection of one-liners that is *Quote Poet Unquote: Contemporary Quotations on Poets and Poetry*, I find I have some wonderfully curmudgeonly cohorts. But I also find there a statement that is not ill-tempered or petulant, and whose light humor makes the point better—and cleaner—than I would: “If you dribble past five defenders, it isn’t called sheer prose” (Tom Leonard). Before I know it, I’m caught up in Stanley Plumly’s careful explanation: “In prose, the connective tissue is allowed to show; in poetry it is subverted, subtracted, made invisible, suggested.” Yes, I think, that’s exactly what I have felt myself missing—the gaps.

“A poem is language distilled into premium whiskey, no mix, no ice, no little paper umbrella” (Penny Dyer). So opens the contents page of *Quote Poet Unquote*, an

*An essay-review of

QUOTE POET UNQUOTE: CONTEMPORARY QUOTATIONS ON POETS AND POETRY. Edited by Dennis O’Driscoll. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2008. 315 pp. \$18.00, paper.

A TIME IN XANADU. By Lars Gustafsson. Translated by John Irons. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2008. 89 pp. \$16.00, paper.

YELLOWROCKET. By Todd Boss. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. 121 pp. \$23.95.

THE INVENTION OF THE KALEIDOSCOPE. By Paisley Rekdal. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007. 77 pp. \$14.00, paper.

IN PRAISE OF AUNTS. By M. R. Peacocke. Cornwall, UK: Peterloo Poets, 2008. 64 pp. £7.95, paper.

NATIONAL ANTHEM. By Kevin Prufer. New York: Four Way Books, 2008. 82 pp. \$15.95, paper.

WANT. By Rick Barot. Louisville: Sarabande Books, 2008. 67 pp. \$13.95, paper.

GLORY RIVER. By David Huddle. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. 66 pp. \$16.95, paper.

anthology of “observations” compiled by Dennis O’Driscoll—who twenty years ago, while serving as editor of *Poetry Ireland Review*, began to save remarks excerpted from contemporary essays, reviews, interviews, and broadcasts, remarks that are “capable of surviving outside of their original habitats.” Published first in Britain as *The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations*, this collection owes its American appearance to the enthusiasm of Michael Wiegiers at Copper Canyon Press. If my own enthusiasm is any indicator, he has an instant winner on his hands. . . .

It turns out that talk of poetry can handle all this excerpting and emerge unscathed. What we hear in *Quote Poet Unquote* are not so much the epigrammatic pronouncements of the modernists as they are remarks that, as O’Driscoll defines them, “sound out ideas memorably—encapsulating larger debates in bonsai form.” The book’s layout and arrangement further the discussion by clustering the quotes under seventy-four separate headings: “Inspired Moves,” “Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know,” “Getting into Difficulty,” “Poetry at War,” and “Post-Poetry Tristesse,” to name a few—and, to whet your appetite, I’ll note that “Pushy Poets” does deliver all its heading promises.

Fascinating how, in one or two sentences, so much can be said about poetry—its ways of “being,” its resistance to “meaning,” its value, and its values. Juxtapose one person’s few sentences with another’s pithy remark, and a lively dialogue ensues: “There is no such thing as a silent poem,” says Gillian Clarke, while Marianne Boruch contradicts her with “poetry is the closest literary form we have to silence.” Alice Oswald plays peacemaker with “poetry is only there to frame the silence.” Then Don Paterson takes up the thought, claiming poetic form is a “codified pattern of silence.” Li-Young Lee chimes in to encompass the ear—“we use language to inflect silence so we can hear it better”—and Billy Collins counters with the visual as he forces us to see the very heft of a poem by claiming that it “displaces silence the way your body displaces water.” In a different section, Collins extends his idea, saying, “A poem is an interruption of silence, whereas prose is a continuation of noise.”

Not all the observations go together so tidily to break open idea and compel us to “contain multitudes,” but the range and variety of these voices plus the very different imaginations that have formed these thoughts make for a giddy strobe-light effect.

*Editor’s note: Judith Kitchen would not specify her included comments, but we will: “It’s all too typical for contemporary poets to write as if they assume that the social importance of what they advocate—justice for women, the environment, the poor, etc.—gives importance to the self-identity of the poet, as if suffering can be ‘borrowed’” (Winter 1995), and “Sad to say, the academy has not been a healthy home for writers. They end up overeducated and underexperienced. My advice to young poets? Work anywhere else. Write anything, but write from the heart” (Spring 2006).

And to top it all off, there are five hilarious appreciations of the “genius” of William McGonagall! The reader of all this relaxes into an attitude that “fits” but then instantly takes umbrage with one that doesn’t, all the time testing his or her own aesthetic against what has been said. Indeed, the mind finds itself changing its mind.

Quote Poet Unquote is the perfect book for writers who have honed their craft, precisely because it does not deal with craft. It deals with the *effects* of craft, the thing the poem aspires to. It’s also ideal for the slightly more casual reader of poetry, who will find familiar feelings articulated in wholly new ways. And it’s especially good for critics or reviewers, since it reminds us that all our specifics must be in service to a generality, that our “job” is to ferret out precisely these kinds of ideas and maybe even formulate some of our own. Since I want everyone to rush out and buy this book, I don’t want to give too many of these gems away. However, I found that these quotations seemed to worm their way into what I was reading, and to provide a catalyst for response. So, to demonstrate the way they open up discussion, I’ll apply a few of them to a wide assortment of recent books.