

READ & RECOMMENDED

Jeffery Beam

BECAUSE A GREAT deal of time has passed since our last issue, I wanted to make note of a number of books that have been piling up on my desk which would have gotten fuller reviews earlier. I hope you'll go off in search of these.



Erotic Love Poems from India.
Andrew Schelling, translator.
Shambhala, 2004.
120 pages, \$16.95 (hardcover).

Schelling is our best translator of Indian poetry and has given us many fine collections. One of my favorites is *The Cane Groves of Narmada River: Erotic Poems from Old India*, published by City Lights. A handful of poems from that book appear in this newer collection which presents for the first time a full translation of the *Amarushataka* (*One Hundred Poems of Amaru*). Schelling's translations remind one of Merwin's inspired *The Peacock Egg: Love Poems of Ancient India*. Once believed to be the writings of King Amaru of Kashmir, the anthology is now assumed to be the work of many poets, yet remains as one of India's finest and most well-loved compilations of love poetry.

Schelling has a deft touch. Writing in a familiar yet restrained style, he imparts the poets' and the lovers' flesh, blood, and spirit. Indian love poems blend spiritual luminosity with sweats and fevers. Longing and separation are frequent subjects as the poems recall the spirit's entrapment by Desire, and the body's hunger for something other and beyond. The poets yield themselves wittily, haughtily, tenderly, and hotly in turns. Each poem seems ripe with a hidden nugget.

Schelling's introduction offers insight into the mythology and history of the poems—including the fascinating myth of how the Vedic master Shankara created the poems by possessing the body of the sensualist king Amaru, proving through his poems that the art of love is also the

art of spiritual revelation. This was a response to a debate with a rival philosopher's wife who puts the celibate Shankara in his place with a series of metaphysical arguments couched in the language of love. Schelling's afterword is no less interesting—he admires the poems' compression, their delineation of the human troubled heart, how they demonstrate love's physical and natural state of ecstasy, and how lovers overcome the gods' tyranny by going beyond human imagining of the celestial to the true mystery beyond. Schelling describes what happens in the poems as a disappearing “into a confounding wilderness.” It's difficult in contemporary mainstream poetry to find anything quite like this. Schelling deserves high praise.

Two poems:

We'd been drinking.
she noticed wounds on my skin
from her own
fingernails
and bolted up jealously.
Let go, she cried when I caught her skirt.
Tear-streaked face averted
lower lip quavering—
who could forget
what she said next?

Long minutes her
haunted eyes stared,
with clasped palms she pleaded,
clutched the white robe's
edge and held him tormentedly.
When he pushed her aside
and coldly started out
she let go first her hold
on life
then him.

As always, Shambhala books are lovely to hold, and this volume is one among many in the new Shambhala Library series—pocket-sized printings of new and ancient classics of poetry, and spiritual seeking. The Shambhala series, and some recent works by New Directions, can be likened to the importance of *The White Pony*, the trans-

lations of Waley, Rexroth, and Pound in the twentieth century. And the feast continues to broaden with translations by other poets and publishers with work from Vietnam, India, and other Asian cultures.



The Poetry of Zen.

Sam Hamill, J. P. Seaton, translators.

Shambhala, 2004.

193 pages, \$16.95 (hardcover).

Another volume in the series adds significantly to the cornucopia of excellent Asian anthologies recently published. Hamill and Seaton are two of our best translators of Chinese and Japanese poetry, especially in Zen, and their skills are in conspicuous display here. I've already learned much from living with this little book and expect many years of pleasure from its company.

Hamill and Seaton's book also includes two outstanding introductions and an equally important preface. Hamill's preface relays a summation, in a gold nutshell, of the practice and meaning of Zen and the difficulty of writing poems about a subject which requires silence. He states, "Ninety-nine percent accuracy in poetry is not as good as silence. A good poem says more than the sum of its words, leading the reader into the practice of understanding the great unsaid that is contained, framed in a poem's rhythms, words, and silence. In these ways, poetry opens the mind. 'The mind is Buddha!' Hui Neng declares. All of this makes poetry an excellent aid to practice." The two introductions, one on Chinese Zen by Seaton, the other by Hamill on Japanese Zen, deepen the survey. One realizes that Hamill's and Seaton's translations are not just the product of poetic craftsmen, but of well-honed spirits.

I won't try to convey the frothy, charming, stubborn, sincere, and witty wisdom of the poets in my own words. Here's a haiku by Issa (Hamill):

In the midst of this world
we stroll along the roof of hell
gawking at flowers.

And Wang Fan-Chih (Seaton):

The city wall's the noodle dumpling.
What's inside's just the meatball.

One each, and don't complain
about the flavor.



Mirabai: Ecstatic Poems.

Robert Bly, Jane Hirshfield, translators.

Beacon Press, 2004.

103 pages, \$16 (hardcover).

Kabir: Ecstatic Poems.

Robert Bly, translator.

Beacon Press, 2004.

104 pages, \$16 (hardcover).

These two volumes of revised versions reprint earlier works by Bly—the renowned Kabir translations and some fugitive Mirabai poems now expanded with the aid of poet Jane Hirshfield.

Two of India's saint-poets, Mirabai and Kabir devoted their lives and their works to the Bhakti path—the path to God through intense poems and acts of devotion in which the particularized connection to God becomes as rich and ecstatic as that between worldly lovers. I have always loved these poems, and these matching illustrated editions have found a perfect home on my spiritual studies bookshelf. Both books include afterwords by John Stratton Hawley which recount the fascinating stories associated with the two saints, while arguing convincingly that these versions, despite occasional missteps of enthusiasm for making the poems relevant to contemporary westerners, follow in the tradition of the oral transmutation of their works.

Both poets, more so than any others except perhaps Rumi, shock us into enlightenment with irreverent humor, grace, and mischievous comeuppance, rousing the reader to the divinity in her or himself, and the beloved in the fluid elixirs of love. Their poems have an optimistic radiance that dispels despair. Not only do they teach, but they are fun, they're accessible, and their intelligence insists only that one open the heart to hear them. Mirabai says, "The one I love is dark: he is an herb growing in secret places, an herb that heals wounds. / . . . The town thinks I am loose, but I am faithful to the Dark One."



Dogwood and Honeysuckle.

John Martone.

Red Moon Press, 2004.

Unpaged, price unknown (paperback).

Dogwood and Honeysuckle gathers twenty-four booklets which originally appeared under Martone's own Dogwood and Honeysuckle imprint. I'll repeat something I said in reviewing many of these fugitive works collectively in a past *Oyster Boy*: The poems—single words

(and sometimes even just parts of words) strung down the page like prayer beads . . . Give oneself entirely into the paced ladder of words, then each syllable becomes a ringing bell—each single breath a little koan or stretched line of breaths and moments tied together with other breath-moments forming an intimately textured warp and weft of living time—the poet’s life, thoughts, and search for illuminating acceptance in single cloth. Cor van den Heuvel’s assessment in *Modern Haiku* further illuminates: “The poems are . . . polished, lapidary, vertical constructions that, aside from a few startling seceptions, look little like regular haiku.” And quoting reviewer Bob Grumman, “Martone exhibits an especially near-perfect sense of where to break off lines, and stanzas, to snatch away the ‘verb-ness’ of the word . . . and the ‘preposition-ness’ of the syllable . . . with wonderful tact.” As in:

then
again
this

2-
storey

wasp nest
is

a
lantern



deed, go about embracing “everything.” Forming almost a sequence, the book narrates departure and repeats the usual themes we’ve already discussed—the bliss of meeting, the grief in separation, the wretchedness of longing and waiting, and the transformational power of love’s experience in absence: “The sighs and tears my lover gives me are the beautiful art of life.” “Who says that when a person goes far away, / love also goes far away?” These poems are profoundly sad, and yet, as with much poetry in this genre, one comes away with hope and stirred by the obsessive power of love.



Everything Yearned For: Manhae’s Poems of Love & Longing.
Francisca Cho, translator.
Wisdom Publications, 2005.
171 pages, \$15 (hardcover).

Testament to the fruitful translating and publishing of Asian work now going on is Cho’s expert translations of one of Korea’s most well-loved poets and heroes, Manhae, a Buddhist monk who lived during the Japanese colonial occupation (1879-1944). His fight to preserve Korean Buddhism led to a dominant role in the 1919 Declaration of Independence from Japanese rule. Manhae’s brand of “Bhakti” devotion centers on the word “nim” which in Korean carries not only an erotic sense, but an all-encompassing term for anyone held in high esteem—in other words, “everything yearned for.”

Unlike most Asian poetry, Manhae writes in a distinctive long line which seems Western and familiar. Cho also gives a thorough account of Manhae’s life and work, including an assessment as to whether Manhae’s beloved was Korea, the more traditional mystical object of desire, or a woman. True to Manhae’s own definition of “nim” it is perhaps best not to speculate and let the poems, in-