

"I wear this strange name like a band on my eyes / it has the power / to blow up destinies."

And hence hope. Here's Piotr Sommer in "Medicine": "I'd like to wrap myself [like a lemon] in the world's thick crust, / I'd like to be bitter, but, finally, tasty—" and Adam Ziemianin in "Prayer for My Age": "Deliver today / from hatred / My heart my eyes / my thoughts." Jan Adamkiewicz's "Departures Poem," the first in the book, overcomes history: "we look over our shoulders" at our "false exposure in masks," which means "maybe / our hearts / exist." Ziemianin's "Meeting," poem #100, seals intimacy:

a spray of jasmine  
peeps in the window  
and all at once  
our glances meet

it's worth living  
for moments like that



*Ca Dao Viet Nam: Vietnamese Folk Poetry.*

John Balaban, editor & translator.

Copper Canyon Press, 2003.

73 pages, \$15 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jim Cory

In the fall of 1971, with the civil war raging, John Balaban set off into the Vietnamese countryside equipped with a tape recorder. His goal: to locate, and record, singers and speakers of the live—that is, existing—oral tradition of sung/spoken Vietnamese folk poetry called *ca dao*. Before leaving nine months later, Balaban had recorded more than 500 poems from 35 individuals and, with the aid of a translator, committed them to the page. Most had never been written down before.

*Ca Dao Viet Nam*, the resulting book from Copper Canyon Press and the first translation *ca dao* into any European language, distills those 500 lyrics to 48 of, presumably, the best. The poems—Balaban created a title for each—range in length from three to twenty-five lines. To imagine *ca dao*, think of the Negro spirituals circa 1900 or so, that is, before their elevation to the concert stage by Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson. They're simple lyrics, rendered *a capella*, easily committed to memory. They emerge anonymously from a fund of shared wisdom and experience, and are polished to perfection as they're passed from generation to generation.

As with the spirituals, the theme of hardship often recurs. But that's where comparison ends. A wry and earthy outlook—often bittersweet—propels many of

these *ca dao*. Yet they're also marked with a certain fatalism, a sense of resignation in the face of what can't be prevented or changed. Layered meanings, complexity, and irony characterize many. For instance, in "Arranged Marriage," the future mother-in-law's greed—she's after a big dowry—only assures that the wedded couple will be "like unmatched chopsticks, never equal." And fate plays an inordinate role, for instance, in bringing lovers together. In "Replies,"—a poem in two voices, with each voice assigned its own couplet—one speaker notes that:

Who tends the paddy repairs its dike.  
Whoever has true love shall meet. But when?

In another poem, a husband trapped in an unhappy marriage opines that: "When love is not fated, love has no life."

*Ca dao* offers a comparatively limited range of subjects. Apart from love, there is loneliness ("The Homesick Bride," "The Outpost Soldier"), the power of meditative thought ("Clear Skies, Clear Sea"), the dangers of alcohol ("Whiskey Lovers") or those moments when the life of the individual intersects that of the people, or the state ("At the Exiled King's River Pavilion"), to name the few sampled here. But these are part of the spiritual essence of rural life, and thus allow for infinite variations on themes, much like the blues in the rural South. (About 5,000 *ca dao* are thought to be in use at any given time.)

Balaban supplies a fifteen-page introductory essay explaining the prosodic forms, musical structures, and social/historical context of *ca dao*. He also includes a considerably helpful "Notes" section at the end. Apart from the aesthetic pleasure of reading them, which is considerable, *Ca Dao Viet Nam* gives us a glimpse of how poetry, in the larger sense, might have evolved prior to the printing press or written notation, and reminds us—at a time of fashionable obscurantism—that its most authentic definition is the transmission of spirit from writer to reader, or speaker to ear.



*The Penny Bride.*

Georgia Scott.

Poetry Salzburg, 2004.

120 pages, \$14.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Michael Dowdy

Georgia Scott's second book with Poetry Salzburg is immediately arresting. The crisp, unadorned black and white cover includes a partially shadowed photograph of a lean woman's torso, naked except for black bikini un-

derwear she appears to be removing slowly. The image summons forth poems of eroticism, adultery, submission, and sensual pleasure. But to label Scott as mere love poet undermines her versatile poetic oeuvre.

While *The Penny Bride*'s poems are usually topical and often sexual, "The Olives in the Vats" diverges from both; here Scott meditates on her craft and "poems that go unwritten":

They come up from the streets and gutters  
on the butt ends, spit, and rat  
flotsam of our failed sailings,  
envoys of the future sent to warn us to turn back.

But turn back the poet rarely does. Her first-person speakers celebrate sensuality, often in apostrophe to an absent lover—"Your love is food enough for me. / I don't need to dine on more." Scott is clever and mischievous, as when she imagines herself as a pinball machine played masterfully by a lover, and when she equates lovemaking with the writing process in "On the Desk." And when she juxtaposes the mystical and sexual in "Nazarenes," she poses the carnal as a spiritual wonder born of night.

Despite Scott's indulgent submissions to love, *The Penny Bride*—as the title suggests—is not without sadness. When her neighbor draws her "mother's laughter like / water from deep in a well," she brings reader and dead mother close. Her gift is the ability to write emotionally and artistically accessible poems as she moves through sex, masturbation, middle age, pregnancy, anorexia, deceased parents, and memory loss, amongst other topics.

Any potential disappointment in *The Penny Bride* would likely stem from its length. Sixty-eight poems is a handful too many, especially when the simplistic rhyming couplets of "Ink" and "The Girl of His Dreams" and the kitsch of poems like "The Magic Poetry Book" detract from what is a delightful book.



*Sea Gate.*

Jocelyn Emerson.

Alice James Books, 2002.

72 pages, \$12.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by David Need

Jocelyn Emerson's wonderful collection of poems *Sea Gate* gives evidence of the continued value of serious poetic inquiries into issues normally left to philosophical diction. Taking sea, shore, and river, but also mourning as her proximate subjects and primary metaphors, Emerson explores the relations of self and world that surface

and haunt expressive gesture.

This is poetry capable of concise grace:

As slightly as the routes of stars  
oak leaves fell on the lake  
as part of the rain's work.

More often though Emerson's sentences are long, full of parenthesis or ellipsis, with a driving rhythm reminiscent of Derrida's early prose.

It is also a poetry inflected by both the spoken tempers and plain thing-words of American poetry and the abstract music of late-twentieth-century continental critical thought, a poetry that modulates between the language of migration and weather, and the abstract vectors of sign, iteration, desire, and erasure.

Like Rilke, Emerson goes deep into the double-bind that marks being and language. And like Rilke, she finds an ecstatic transport finally in which double-bind reveals itself as "voluminous ellipsis," a full openness where, subsiding, she can fill the simple and minute with passion:

Listen to the scale of the varied day,  
shaken singer, to the charred song  
of the particle and of the mineral ash  
still and elemental in the whistling dark.

And still share in mourning:

In a manifest world broken by rough claim, flesh—  
earth's share—is scored by all those no longer living now.

Find this book, be touched and amazed.



*Claire: Poems.*

Marly Youmans.

Louisiana State University Press, 2004.

52 pages, \$15.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Tara Powell

Marly Youmans' first poetry collection, *Claire*, is a graceful debut blending romanticism and a formal temper to describe a woman's coming of age. Dreams, tales, doors, night skies, ice, births, and deaths, all follow Claire Ann, the "lepidopteran" character whose "songs" unite the collection. Through centuries and seasons, readers glimpse facets of Claire's elusive "ancient single self, / Toy queen of glass who broke to babel all / These casts of mind?"

The book's finest selections crystallize that self for fleeting moments. The jazzy "Piano Rag" captures a