

winter.” But Lyk could, and so could her grandmother. The bond they share is a sensitivity to the natural world and the ability to see the supernatural within it. In “The Room Weeps,” Lyk’s grandmother tells her “*The mermaid’s spirit inside our palms— / it asks we pay attention to her.*”

The book remains true to its call and response format with each poem appearing on a separate page, each written in its own discreet voice. But in the final poem, “Contrapuntal: *Two Voices of the Lake*,” the lines and the voices unfold in tandem. Like the ebb and flow of lakes, oceans, rivers and ponds, the verses are both separate and inseparable. One is not elevated over the other, and the balance between them is harmoniously elegant.

No matter how many times we reach for it, *The Lake Michigan Mermaid* continues to open us into a world where water is always speaking and implores us to listen to the many voices flowing through its currents. This important and timely work, lyrically told and lovingly illustrated, has been honored as a 2019 Michigan Notable Book.

**Mary Ladany** is a Writing Specialist and Adjunct Professor in the Department of English at Caldwell University. She wrote and co-produced a full-length performance piece, *Having Opened the Book*, at a variety of venues in the New York/New Jersey metropolitan area and, most recently, a ten-minute play, *Herstory*, for the New York Theater Workshop's Mind the Gap: Intergenerational Theater. She is currently finishing a hybrid piece, *You Will Find Me in My Poems*, which integrates prose and lyric to form a loosely constructed narrative. Mary is a member of the Caldwell University Tower Poets, a group of working poets, which this year celebrates its twentieth anniversary.

***The Best American Poetry 2018.*** Dana Gioia, guest editor; David Lehman, series editor (Scribner-Simon & Schuster, 2018)

Compiling an anthology of the year’s “best” American poetry is, unavoidably, a challenge. Is it even possible to achieve consensus on which poems are truly the “best” when our aesthetic options are more numerous than ever? Of course, the title of the series is merely good marketing

(who would buy *Excellent American Poetry, Some of It the Best in Our Opinion?*). What matters, instead, is how good the contents are, and whether the editor's selection reflects a wide array of styles. In these respects, the current collection is an unqualified success, thanks to Dana Gioia—poet, critic, librettist, Laetare Medal-winner, California's Poet Laureate, and the editor-curator of this year's volume.

Series editor David Lehman contributes a lively foreword that reviews the year's developments, from the death of titans Richard Wilbur and John Ashbery to the rise of the Instagram poets, and poetry's loss (or possible surge) of popularity. Regarding America's public dialogue on poetry, Lehman observes, "The only time articles about poetry appear in the culture pages of our newspapers is when the subject is a counterfeit, the implication being that we'd be prepared to embrace poetry if only it weren't poetry." Later, Lehman concedes, wryly, that one defense of the Instagram poets and their ilk is that "such verse...may serve as 'gateway' to the real stuff."

It's the real stuff that makes up the current book. Gioia's choices range widely across geography and generations, belying his own passing doubt that "any single editor can have sympathies broad enough to evaluate everything fairly." As former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts and author of the influential essay "Can Poetry Matter?", Gioia is a vital figure in the resurgence of narrative and/or metrical work—a role that has sometimes overshadowed his broad taste and tireless efforts in service of *all* poetries, and the arts in general. Keenly attuned to recent developments, Gioia offers an introduction that may be read as a timely update of "Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture," the title essay of his 2004 collection of literary prose, in which he examined the effect of new technologies on how poetry is viewed, shared, performed, and created.

This time, Gioia reminds us of what's changed in the past fifteen years: "Print now coexists with other equally powerful media for poetry," a fact that accounts for any number of trends—from the renewed emphasis on sound in literary poetry (born of hip-hop and performance poetry's popularity, Gioia asserts), to poetry's increased online presence and as a reference in film or television. Seeking a gathering equal to such scope, Gioia assembles poets from both coasts and every region between: elders secure in (or retired from) academia, middle-agers at the height of their powers, and poets under forty (several under thirty, in fact).

Some are the sons or daughters of immigrants, or immigrants themselves, bringing fresh perspectives to the American experience. As an editor, Gioia's poetic curiosity and enthusiasm for discovery remain undimmed.

There are more fine poems than a brief review can single out, but my own favorites demonstrate the wide range represented. Stephen Kampa's "The Quiet Boy" depicts romantically challenged post-pubescent boys imagining the superpowers they'll never have: in conversational pentameter, they argue, only to pause: "Invisibility? Dumb. Just plain dumb. / Why choose a power you already had?" Equally attuned to teen angst is Hieu Minh Nguyen whose free verse "B.F.F." explores the anguish of remaining a friend while wanting more—wanting, in fact, to *be* the object of desire: "I even took her to the winter formal / watched, in the green glow of the gymnasium / at how I—she danced, chiffon willow / silk mystic." Nkosi Nkululeko (like Kampa, a musician and, like Nguyen, a poet whose contributor's note reveals a love of movies) uses the curt, clear lines of "Skin Deep" to examine national attitudes and private perceptions of race: "I once tried to drown my / skin & be human without it." The work of such a trio, born in the '80s or '90s, bodes well for the future of American verse.

Poets in mid-career make their voices heard as well. A. E. Stallings' use of varying trimeter lends "Pencil," all point and potential erasure, an unsettling precision: Time is "the other implement / That sharpens and grows shorter." Natasha Trethewey's "Shooting Wild," a powerful sonnet, examines a daughter's dawning recognition of the abuse her mother suffers: "Then one morning, the imprint of his hand // dark on her face, I learned to watch her more..." Aimee Nezhukumatathil's "Invitation" opens playfully—"Come in, come in—the water's fine!"—summoning a world as "oceanic, boundless, limitless" as the "dark sky" or "all / the shades of blue revealed in a glacier"; but in its vivid descriptions of "plankton hurricaning in open / whale mouths" or narwhals that "spin upside down while their singular tooth needles / you like a compass," the poet's unfolding, urgent lines remind us of all we stand to lose.

One of Gioia's most striking selections is Paisley Rekdal's retelling of Philomela's rape in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's Philomela is silenced by having her tongue cut out but reveals what happened (and that she is still alive) through a tapestry she weaves. Rekdal's response, "Philomela," is a contemporary narrative: its

protagonist visits the barn where a distant cousin displays the large-scale sculptures that capture what cannot be said, including one that, though it resembles “a tree blasted by lightning,” depicts a rape that triggers her own painful memory: “the plank face / had been scraped clean; all the fear / and anger burned instead inside / their twisting bodies.” Rekdal’s poem contains much else as well, its power a testament to her skill in crafting a narrative of impressive scope into subtle, tightly woven free verse lines.

As in Rekdal’s poem and others, the defining quality of Gioia’s choices may be one too often undervalued. Whatever its stance, style, or structure, each poem is *about* something—a recognizable human experience conveyed in memorable language. Whether celebrating a despot, willingly lost in moral quandaries (see Aaron Poochigian’s “Happy Birthday, Herod”), or speaking in praise of flawed splendor (see Nausheen Eusuf’s “Pied Beauty”), each poem asks us to enter a world: a person’s perspective, striking or strange, based in fact or wholly invented, openly funny or quietly moving. As Gioia quips, American poetry has entered its “anything goes” phase—one where free verse and form “are no longer viewed as mutually exclusive techniques.” Thank goodness: one of this collection’s singular virtues is that Tracy K. Smith’s “An Old Story,” the troubling fable of one era’s passing into another, can occupy the same poetic cosmos as Alfred Nicol’s “Addendum,” a darkly witty revision of Christ’s instruction to render unto Caesar what is his: “Caesar’s arms are open wide; / your whole estate will fit inside.”

Happily, authors known to readers of *Presence* are represented, too. James Matthew Wilson’s “On a Palm,” originally published in these pages, offers a sympathetic, tightly metrical portrait of a psychic already relegated to the past tense by the time the poem begins: “But, when I see my hands gripped round the wheel, / . . . / I think how there is no one who will peel / Them open, lay the fingers gently straight, / And study all those tracteries of fate.” On the next page, Ryan Wilson weighs in with a fluent sonnet of troubling self-recognition: “That unidentified fleck, approaching and / Receding at once, rapt in the wind’s spell— / . . . / That thing that you’re becoming, that you are” (“Face It”). A similar unease resides in David Mason’s “First Christmas in the Village.” On a stormy night after an unexpected birth, the guest of a widow’s family finds comfort in their company, in food and fire’s sustenance, despite a nagging awareness of violence: “That night all

murders were forgotten / in the salt abundance and the storm / and the warm fire in the widow's house . . . .” Another poet familiar from *Presence*, Maryann Corbett, offers a “Prayer Concerning the New, More ‘Accurate’ Translation of Certain Prayers,” a beautifully crafted tetrameter sonnet in gentle protest against unnecessary improvement: “These prayers translated plumb-and-squarely / Pinch and constrict us (though we grant / They broaden our vocabulary.)”

In sum, Gioia’s instincts and insights unerringly hit the mark, and this new entry in *The Best American Poetry* series provides a richly rewarding compendium of styles and possibilities. In deftly channeling Auden’s “The Fall of Rome,” Ernest Hilbert’s “Mars Ultor” (another of my favorites in the book) observes, “Brutes push their way to power, / But the muddiest barbarian / Also wants the throne an hour.” So, too, do poets, and the seventy-five assembled here have earned their hour of pageantry in this most distinguished gathering.

**Ned Balbo**’s most recent book is *3 Nights of the Perseids* (University of Evansville Press), selected by Erica Dawson for the 2018 Richard Wilbur Award. His previous books are *The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems* (Story Line Press), awarded the Donald Justice Prize and the Poets’ Prize; *Galileo’s Banquet; Upcycling Paumanok*; and *Lives of the Sleepers* (University of Notre Dame Press), awarded the Ernest Sandeen Prize and a finalist for the Arlin G. Meyer Prize of the Lilly Fellows Program. He recently received an NEA translation grant, and an excerpt from his version of Paul Valéry’s *La Jeune Parque* recently appeared in *The Hopkins Review*. See more at <https://nedbalbo.com/>.

## ***Magdalene*** by Marie Howe (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017)

Closure might be a term to encompass what is important about Marie Howe’s latest volume. Not the narrow question of closure as a matter of poetics, of the way poems end, but larger questions: how to close the gap between text considered scripture for a particular group and story considered as a bequest for all humanity; how the sacred and