

***In Code*** by Maryann Corbett  
(Able Muse Press, 2020)

In another time and place, Maryann Corbett might have been the scholar of Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature she once aspired to be, or in a very different time and place (if a woman could have assumed the role), the Chaucerian poet-diplomat whose wit and political savvy were as valued as her eloquence. Instead, despite her doctorate, Corbett ended up a career civil servant in the Minnesota state legislature, applying her extraordinary linguistic skills to the painstaking repair of attorneys' prose. What may have once struck me as poetry's loss and bureaucracy's indifferent gain is, in fact, anything but: in the past eight years, Corbett has made up for lost time by publishing five outstanding books—a belated flowering comparable to that of the late Amy Clampitt, another poet of empathy, lively imagination, and commitment to craft whose debut volume didn't appear until she was in her early sixties.

*In Code*, Corbett's fifth and latest book, is astonishingly good. Deeply moving, technically accomplished, and utterly memorable, it is grounded in seemingly quotidian material: her career with the Minnesota legislature, her ongoing immersion in the literature for which she earned her degree, and her acute observations of the human and natural world. The "codes" to which Corbett's title refers are various—legal, moral, linguistic, and more—although equally fascinating are the ways in which her poems uncover unexpected correlations in unlikely places.

"Apparition at University and Park" unfolds with that blend of irony and awe most of us recognize from chance encounters with celebrity. The speaker, catching sight of a local anchorwoman, offers, "That talking head haloed in golden curls— / the one I see in every night's devotions / to the gods of local news—is here, in flesh." Wearing her designer label "Hermès scarf," the poem's subject leads a camera crew to their unknown destination, awash in the poet's playful mythologizing; but the "oracle" turns out to be only human, and the speaker concludes, "Decency seems to require that I look away." The poem—remarkable for its fluent blank verse and attention to visual detail—is a prime example of one of Corbett's great talents: the ability to write compelling poems that only *appear* to be light. Far from being merely anecdotal, the poem explores how media fame distorts our sense of scale: the speaker's looking away is both the ancients' response in the presence of god or angel, and the way we respond today when

we witness something embarrassing—in this case, the revelation of a media figure’s humanness.

Corbett’s poetic gaze envisions everyday settings as inseparable from their public and historical contexts. “Threats” opens the book by recounting an unexpected office drill: “*A threat has been reported in this building. // Who on this skyblue April day believes it?*” (Corbett’s knack for fusing ordinary speech and/or the culture’s banalities with her own heightened language is another gift to appreciate.) A government employee herself, Corbett uses the poem to reflect on the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City with its foreshadowing of further right-wing violence and the tragic loss of life for those who received no warning:

That was an April day. The sun was shining,  
the wounded building gaping in the daylight.  
The children bleeding in the arms of firemen.

But not here, not today. . . .

“Fugue in October” gives further evidence of its author’s compassion and social conscience in rhyming lines that capture two alternating narratives. In one, the speaker describes the music of a baroque chamber ensemble performance; in the other, the denizens of a “squatters’ district” struggle with addiction, homelessness, and hunger: “**for this is God’s mind, woven of harmonies** / for once. Tonight, for once, no one ODs—.” Ingeniously constructed, the poem may be read as two separate interwoven poems (unrhymed) or as a single poem in which meter and rhyme draw the two strands together into a single cinematic whole of jump-cuts and vivid images: a contrast of high art and neglected human suffering.

When Corbett’s apparent subject is the literature she loves, she finds unexpected connections to contemporary experience. “Wildfire Season,” based on a passage in Homer’s *Iliad*, updates the epic simile to reflect the American West’s environmental devastation due to climate change: “. . . Just as a lightning strike, / or a stray spark, or some such randomness / takes hold,” the poem begins, beauty and horror flare into life: “tall tonguings of molten saffron-orange,” the families who “listen nervously for updates,” the vehicles of all types “gut-stuffed / with people in flight, angry and disbelieving / that a random flash or spark could wrest from them / the lovely form and matter of their lives.” “Just so,” the poem cuts off abruptly, providing no object of comparison. The poem’s implied message: the wildfires’ devastation, no mere literary trope, transcends

any attempt at artifice or analogue; but at the same time, it is the arts that preserve human experience, including disasters past comprehension: from the *Iliad* to our own time, and from our own to some faraway future—perhaps, in this case, through the vehicle of Corbett’s poem.

In poems about Chaucer and Dante—those titans of her youthful studies—Corbett breathes new life into biography’s revelations. The neatly enjambed rhymed couplets of “December 1399” lend a contemporary ring to the shifts in political fortune that afflict every era—“The old king’s man, he mourned the old court’s dead. / Could ribald tales in rhyme cost you your head?”—reminding us that Chaucer’s own *Canterbury Tales* retraction may have been written with political, and literal, survival in mind: “(When stories change, who knows where safety is?) / Feeling unsafe, he had retracted his. // Well, he would wait. And what would come would come.”

“Reassessment,” a masterful sonnet in the *Divine Comedy*’s terza rima, looks to the vengeful rage that may have driven Dante’s masterwork—“Nearly every page // was fury, shouted from the losing side / out of his exile”—and yet, Corbett concludes, “Fast-forward seven centuries. How odd / that rage now seems to speak the mind of God.” The drily witty couplet reminds us that high-minded vengeance and petty revenge are often as difficult to distinguish in human affairs as they are when we confront the Old Testament’s angry God. At the same time, Corbett’s interest in long-ago authors’ lives is multifaceted: their history fascinates, but it is her own identity as a fellow poet that animates her literary accounts with special insight and humanity; and it is the fusion of scholarly depth with technical facility that ensures a flawless foundation.

*In Code* is a confidently focused, seamlessly constructed volume. Poems of the legislative workplace shine beside poems of wider political import; poems that acknowledge newsworthy disasters unfold beside poems of personal loss perceived at some remove (“Open Verdict,” a tetrameter ballad about an office worker found dead in her apartment, offers a chilling balance of mystery and horror.) Although much of *In Code* is grounded in urban and suburban Minnesota, the author’s acute intelligence and deep responsiveness to nature, literature, history, and the wider world are everywhere evident. Best of all, Corbett’s mastery of tone and syntax frequently brings these virtues together, as in the lovely miniature “Spotter Observations” in which irony, political commentary, alarm, and natural wonder effortlessly blend:

All morning the news  
    goes south,  
geese mobilizing  
    abaft  
a leader's bluster.  
    The sky  
rumpled camouflage.

No clear  
outlook for these days.

Fortunately, the outlook for Corbett's readers is very bright indeed. I urge anyone who wants to become better acquainted with one of our under-appreciated masters to explore the rest of what is becoming—with the quiet subtlety we'd expect of one who devoted much of her life to helping others shape the law—a body of work that is extraordinarily accomplished, superbly alive, and deeply moving.

**Ned Balbo** 's six books include his two most recent volumes, *3 Nights of the Perseids* (Richard Wilbur Award) and *The Cylburn Touch-Me-Nots* (New Criterion Prize), both published in 2019. He received a 2017 National Endowment for the Arts Literature in Translation grant and has recorded a collection of election-themed original songs for 2020. He is married to poet and essayist Jane Satterfield and lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Visit: [nedbalbo.com](http://nedbalbo.com) or [nedsdemos.bandcamp.com/releases](http://nedsdemos.bandcamp.com/releases).

### ***Without My Asking*** by Robert Cording (CavanKerry Press, 2019)

In his latest collection, Robert Cording opens with a poem that is, as he titles it, an "Evening Prayer with Opening Question." That opening question—

What does it mean to call this life my own,  
as if it could be possessed  
  rather than simply lived,  
its discrete stages just that,  
  
even if, at moments,