

The New Criterion

Verse Chronicle

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Valentine's Day massacre

by [William Logan](#)

On *Valentines* by Ted Kooser, *Fifty-Two* by Melissa Green, *The Wave-Maker* by Elizabeth Spires, *Seven Notebooks* by Campbell McGrath, *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* by Marie Howe, and *Sea Change* by Jorie Graham.

Back in 1986, Ted Kooser wrote a poem for Valentine's Day, printed it up on a postcard, and sent it to women he knew. He did this the next year, and the next, adding a name or two, each year shipping the cards over to Valentine, Nebraska, for the postmark. After two decades of this sweet, facetious nonsense, he decided to call it quits—by then the mailing list had grown to 2,600 names and the postage exceeded the annual budget of Omaha. *Valentines* collects these poems, pieced out with black-and-white drawings of farmhouses, prairie landscapes, and an alarming number of dead trees. [1] Perhaps they're just waiting for spring; but it does seem odd to illustrate a book of love poems with a lot of leafless shrubbery.

Joseph Brodsky wrote a poem every year at Christmas; more poets might adopt a holiday, preferably an obscure one like Liberty Tree Day or National Mustard Day, commemorating it year by year until they have a tidy chapbook. It would keep a lot of poets out of trouble, at least until the holidays ran out. *Valentines* would have made a wonderful book had the poems been any good.

If this comes creased and creased again and soiled
as if I'd opened it a thousand times
to see if what I'd written here was right,
it's all because I looked too long for you
to put it in your pocket.

This, you can't help but feel, is what most people want poetry to be. A poem should be like a greeting card—with a point so blindingly obvious that reading it is like getting hit by a lead pipe. The poem should tell a little joke, perhaps shout *Ba-da-boom!*, and skip off stage. If it can't make a joke, it should squeeze out a few cheap tears.

If you feel sorry for yourself
this Valentine's Day, think of
the dozens of little paper poppies
left in the box when the last
of the candy is gone, how *they*
must feel, dried out and brown
in their sad old heart-shaped box.

Well, you say, as you stand around the cracker barrel, I bet them paper wrappers don't feel too good,

now, do they? (I'd be sorrier for those discarded wrappings if the poet didn't go on to write that there's "not even/ one pimpled nose to root and snort/ through their delicate pot pourri.")

Kooser must have been told that poems have musical language, because at times he tries out a jingly phrase ("high in the chaffy, taffy-colored haze"). He must have heard somewhere that poems use metaphors, because he tosses a few in, higgledy-piggledy: "those solemn Sunday/ sacraments of Clorox in the church/ of starch," or, considering some refrigerated celery, "Surely it misses those long fly balls of light/ its leaves once leapt to catch." Technique doesn't matter much to a poet whose versified prose, sometimes beaten out on a bongo drum, is used mainly to say something whimsical or twinkly. The poems are short (they had to be short to fit on a postcard) and uplifting, though they don't have a lot to lift and don't try to lift a lot.

What's curious about *Valentines* is how vacant and insipid the poems are. Surely a poet who sets himself up writing love poems ought to have suffered a passion or two; yet the language is as generic as a pair of blue jeans. Just when you think the poet might be making a point, he begins to gush; and then it's sentiment all the way down, enough to fill a lard bucket. If you want poems of thwarted love, try Hardy. If you want passion, read Donne. *Valentines* is the sort of gift book you'd buy for your sweetheart if you had no imagination but somehow knew that, on Valentine's Day, women like flowers, and chocolate, and ... and poetry. Should you be too cheap for the first two, poetry would have to do.

In the House of Fame, there's no doubt a broom closet for Ted Kooser. If poetry can survive Jimmy Stewart and Jimmy Carter, it can survive anything. Kooser lives on borrowed capital, in this case the capital accrued by Robert Frost. Frost was a complicated man, so complicated that sometimes he tried to seem simple—he contained as many multitudes as Whitman, and perhaps a few more. Most Frost imitators have tried to get away with just being simple. Frost's backwoods manner was too good to be true, but not too true to be good; when he said something wise, often it *was* wise.

Just when I thought that Kooser didn't have a brain in his head, however, he surprised me. The last poem in the book, written for his wife, has all the fierce, stubborn Frost-like humor the rest of the volume lacks.

The hog-nosed snake, when playing dead,
Lets its tongue loll out of its ugly head.

It lies on its back as stiff as a stick;
If you flip it over it'll flip back quick.

If I seem dead when you awake,
Just flip me once, like the hog-nosed snake.

There might be life in the old snake yet.

Twenty years back, Melissa Green published a striking debut volume, *The Squanicook Eclogues*, and then more or less vanished. Full of gorgeous detail, blowsy with observation, the verse flaunted the giddy excesses of a young poet coming to terms with her talent. Then there was silence, apart from a scarifying memoir on mental illness more than a decade ago.

Last fall Green reappeared in a quiet way, publishing a limited-edition chapbook that quickly sold out. The poems in *Fifty-Two*, each consisting of six lines, are abrupt, hard bitten, and revealing in a discomfiting way. [2] They have little of the appetite of her early work; some terrible nemesis

changed her life and altered—indeed, for a time almost destroyed—her gift.

I was lovely once. The semester I was twenty-eight.

After, scalpel-thin, my shocked soul shut down. A century, a hundred pounds later,
I woke. Why do my roses bloat into bud, blush, die unopened?

The landscapes and gardens once splashily decorative now haunt her with loss. The eclogues have become elegies.

The form Green has chosen might easily have gone unrequited. Of the half-dozen lines, the third and fourth are half lines, with a sharp pause or breach between, the other lines long and prosy. This broke-back stanza rewards the snapshot, the intake of breath—the poems are cuttings, postscripts, musings that must be spoken with purse-lipped brevity. They exist in a world of Greek gods, the Old Testament, and fine art:

Paul César Helleu used to borrow pen nibs from his friend Singer Sargent
and do dry point portraits of society women in the *belle époque*. One
inexplicably turned up in our cellar. I live in a big black house.
Whoever heard of a *black house*? I ought to laugh—and sometimes do.

Helleu was an artist who outlived his time. The tone here moves quickly, deliciously, through matter-of-fact narrative, mild surprise, self-mockery, solemnity—are we to take the black house as fact and symbol both? Is the self-portrait meant to be dry as drypoint? Does the beauty of the society women make more cruel the poet's loss of beauty? From such tentative, teasing amputations are these poems made.

The most explicit poems, those that confront her severe depression, are the most shocking, but also the most familiar. After Plath, after Sexton, there's only so much ground to cover when a poet says, "I forgot to let myself be loved" or "*Someone else is living the life I thought I'd get.*" (Men often recount their bouts of madness in a robust and even jocular way, as if they'd been off stalking a lion. Women tend to be braver in their bereavements, and more honest.) The stark revelations, though they verge on self-pity, are merciless:

The latest in a series of sunset-colored dogs,
our tall sons, their stair-step children stamping off snow, the holiday table groaning
with our work: *vegetables, poetry, merriment*. It never happened, the house, the oeuvre,
the husband holding me, older. Illness married me.

This is a poet learning to make art of her losses but finding that loss remains despite the art.

Fifty-Two is a difficult book, often unappealing, at times overwritten ("Raise, oh lift me from this barrow./ Breathe into me a flux of wonder. Rinse my phosphorescent palms and kiss.") The tone and diction veer wildly from pre-Raphaelite fustian to the delirious slang of "fuck-me pumps"—in one poem the flaying of Marsyas gives way to "I want flamenco./ two beaded McEwan's Ales, a friendly fuck." It's no surprise that the *Metamorphoses* sustains this poet—she calls herself a "middle-aged Daphne caught in Dante's silvery, arthritic, suicidal wood."

This book of barely three hundred lines is a relief from the stultifying manners of contemporary verse even if writing offers only a secondhand salvation:

A fusillade of blossoms blows from the sour plum, a siege of horizontal hail
riddles the garden's infantry dense with bleeding hearts, the lilac bush
hammered by the east wind into a scythe.

These rueful, damaged poems present the uncomfortable portrait of a woman who has been to the

edge.

Elizabeth Spires is in love with ordinary things. The best poems in *The Wave-Maker*, her sixth volume, are quiet, unprepossessing, filled with wonder at the mortalities and fleeting beauties of the world.^[3] Like many connoisseurs of the small, she tries to make the familiar unfamiliar again, as it was for those innocents in the Garden of Eden.

There was intricate machinery involved & a powerful desire
to make it all move. It had been easy then to stand waist-deep
in the waves & will the world into existence, sea, sky, & cloud,
the ever-changing elements, moving and robed, like characters
on a stage delivering their lines. Or so she had thought at the time.

Spires never tries to overwhelm the reader—she has placed herself in the tradition of Elizabeth Bishop, whose faux innocence she has shamelessly borrowed. We are so used to our makeshift world, at times it takes a scientist of happenstance to see anything unusual there. Yet while contenting herself with the homely fact, no less transcendent for being true, this poet lives in the dangerous intersection of religion, linguistic tact, and the bald-faced lie. It makes poetry no more morally abrupt if you call religion philosophy.

Spires is never afraid of abstractions (she's rare in being able to write abstractly without sounding ridiculous); her poems consider the degradations of age, the loss of beauty, the shadows rising slowly around her.

The road is dust,
and the town is dust,
and even my mother
is dust. But here,

set back among the pines,
a teahouse long and low
where we sit like ancients,
cradling lacquered cups.

Outside, the storm of afternoon.
The dust of existence.
Then the storm passes.
The bamboo shines.

The simple lines, effortlessly compact, have abraded some of the verbs into nothingness. This confident elegance suffers a shimmer of doubt at that shining bamboo. Soon a cherry tree blooms, autumn is blazing, and the poem collapses into a chummy plea for sympathy: "My friend, sit with me/ for a little while./ Let us cleanse ourselves/ of the dust of existence."

These shy, religiously tinged meditations often stop in the middle of an ordinary day to ask questions (Spires's question marks are more unnerving than her exclamation points, of which there is a bumper crop). The poems show how much can be written from nothing, without the jazzed-up heartiness of a Frank O'Hara, so concerned with trivia he misses the moments between incidents when life takes place. Spires's poems are loveliest in the mildness of their ambitions. She looks at a snail (she may be more interested in snails than even snails are), or a fish, or an insect, or perhaps just stares out a window—at times you wish she'd get out a little more. Not much happens, and not

much is meant to happen except a woman coming to terms with herself.

Spires once kept her sentimental side in delicate balance with the brooding skeptic, but the sentiment has begun to win out. Her new poems are often infiltrated by the magical awe of children's tales, tales where anything might happen and, alas, anything does, tales where you can suffer only so much innocence before you want to push the poet into an oven and bake her the way the witch should have baked Hansel.

Sometimes I cannot bear the world
the beauty & perfection of a snail created
by the same Creator who created me

It's hard to feel such things, but even harder to make poetry of them. When Spires contemplates the mute world, the poems suffer from their self-conscious soulfulness. What might have been the rage of natural history becomes something closer to prayer, without the haunted bearing of religious supplication. As she writes of Advent, "We felt its approach,/ peered like curious children/ into the bright cave// where the miracle happened."

Like Bishop, like Moore, Spires has the courage of her modesty, which is no less than faith in her procedure (she lacks Bishop's cheerful apprehensions and Moore's disarticulating eye, the eye of a taxidermist); yet it's often in the depths of technique that her poems break down—they are winsome rather than unbearable. There's a struggle in her soul between a conventional poetry of superficial instinct and a darker one more wounded, more unlikely, more indomitable.

Campbell McGrath loves the world's bewildering variety (you might mistake his poems—gaudily colored, artificially flavored—for a candy shop), and like most gods he can't bear to leave a single thing out. He has an eye for the natural world, particularly the shell-strewn beaches of south Florida, and a sculptor's understanding of nature's forged, damascened surface:

Ocean like beaten metal removed from the cooling pail,
mark of the hammer and tongs, the smith's signage,
grain revealed as by pressure of the burin in a Japanese print,
substantial, bodily, color of agave, color of bitter medicine ...

Such gorgeous, insistent language suffers only a touch of self-congratulation; but McGrath has trouble knowing when to stop—the poem soon breaks down into pointless and exhausting profusion:

the frilled lips and spooned-out tails of horse and queen conchs,
sponge tubes, varieties of seaweed and uprooted coral,
tiny broken elkhorn infants, torn fans, punch cards,
serrated disks and tribal ornaments, teeth, dismembered ears
and bleached stone knuckles of a skeleton seeking restitution.

Whew!, a critic once wrote. Hiroshige has his endless views of Edo and McGrath his endless views of Miami sand and Miami sky; but such jerry-built lines seem far too much like the rampant property development he complains about.

Seven Notebooks is a pell-mell jaunt through one poet's calendar year, diary entries interrupted by poems, poems abandoned for long quotations—this catch-all lacks any noticeable pressure toward concision or hint of deep-browed introspection. [4] Accumulation is all. Some of these notebooks claim a presiding form (the ode, the haiku), some an artistic familiar (Neruda, Whitman, Hiroshige), and some a theme (rhetoric, disorder), though few notebooks possess all of them. At times, McGraw shows how an acorn of prose becomes a poem—freshly sawn and sanded in the workshop, the poem is often less attractive than the rough block of prose with which it began.

Because we're still in the great Age of Confession, the notebooks tell you a lot about the poet's wife and his sons and his plantar fasciitis, tales that might be gripping in a Christmas letter but are of little interest outside the immediate family. It's a pity that suburban lives and suburban worries are rarely riveting—not every man is a Larkin. It would be all right if McGrath's nattering were an excuse for poetry, though the poetry seems an excuse for the nattering. He can write a musing, probing line that suggests all the virtues of curiosity:

Then the imagination withdraws, drifts across the table
to investigate the glass flowers rolled in cloth tape.

It hovers, probes the petals, some like galaxies,
some like figs or seashells. Dutiful and penitent,

it shimmers back across the gulf of air,
without a metaphor, to doze away the afternoon.

Then just as reasonably, just as artfully, he can write lines of fatuous self-absorption or ponderous mumbo-jumbo: "The opposite of sunlight/ is not darkness but anti-light,/ a mass of ionic occlusion,/ seams of which riven/ with purple fire illuminate/ the parataxis of butterflies." That sounds like Isaac Asimov on a bad day.

McGrath takes himself seriously, which means too seriously. He writes a lot about "cognitive manipulation," "rhetorical posture," "ethics of stimulus," "harmonies of fulfillment"—trying to make poems of such things is like trying to build a Ferrari from spit and cardboard. ("Ideas that burn in the mind!" he exclaims at the end of one poem. *Good luck with that, you want to reply.*) It's nice to have a loose baggy monster as a form, but not if what you get in the end is a loose baggy monster.

Whitman is the dominating presence here; but it's a mistake for a poet without the gift for blather or much warmth of spirit to quote the good gray poet so lavishly. Whitman *thought* about things (later readers condescend to him at their peril), where McGrath just writes agreeably about them in his sun-addled way. The modern poet wants to make 9/11 his Civil War, but he sounds like William Jennings Bryan—he won't stop the rhetorical roar until the Apocalypse comes to town:

And I beheld a city
where blood ran through streets the color of raw liver,
stench of offal and kerosene and torched flesh,

tongueless heads impaled on poles and severed limbs
strung on barbed wire beneath unresting surveillance cameras ...

On and on it goes, like some PG-13 version of *Howl*. Poetry has to be more than a mass of images presented without taste or judgment, or pretentious witterings about language ("If language is a circulatory system of symbols ..."). McGrath never notices when the reader's eyes have glazed over.

The long line in poetry requires a page too narrow—if you designed a book as wide as the longest line in *Leaves of Grass*, the lines would seem mere prose, or typography run amok. Though it might seem counterintuitive, a poem's long lines need the runovers imposed by a rational margin. Such lines reveal their character in a continual breach of manners.

Marie Howe makes her lines fabulously long—twenty or thirty or even forty syllables can go by before she feels obliged to call it quits. The poems in *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, her first book

in ten years, have a lot to say.^[5] Angry, foul-mouthed at times, she writes as if she were thrashing her enemies with a club.

The thing about those Greeks and Romans is that
at least mythologically,

they could get mad. If the man broke your heart, if he
fucked your sister speechless

then real true hell broke loose:
“You know that stew you just ate for dinner, honey?—

It was your son.”
That’s Ovid for you.

Poets have looked to Homer and Virgil and Ovid for a lot of things, but rarely for permission to get mad. Angry poets are almost always angry *at* someone—usually parent or spouse or lover (how many poets have ever been angry at their kids?), but you wonder if they would have been any less angry if the wife or father or boyfriend had never existed.

Howe is better than most poets in this vein—it’s unfair to call them Confessional Poets, because they have so little to confess. They might better be christened the Memoir School, poets so wrapped up in the truth of their lives (though truth is the first victim of memoir), the poems seem claustrophobic. The trouble with such poets is that their lives become an end in themselves, rather than a needle’s eye used to interpret the world. Shakespeare’s sonnets are memoirs of a sort, probably drawn from hard experience—but they tell us about the modes of love, not the manners of his life.

Howe’s poems are always a little more honest than you would expect, and a little funnier than you could hope for. She’s gloomy, to be sure, and unappealingly self-dramatic, on occasion jabbering on witlessly; but her sardonic humor comprehends her limitations.

I don’t want to offend anybody but I never did like
fucking all that much. Like I always say

the saw enjoys the wood more than the wood enjoys
the saw—know what I mean?

These remarks are laid at another woman’s doorstep; but such things are rarely said, and even more rarely hilarious. Howe has a way of making you think—she’s a bully at times—and then making you sorry for it. That’s what good art does.

Howe’s life seems too privileged for her to ask for so much sympathy; but she listens to the irritable part of her soul, and sometimes her ironies are more visible when you read the poems again. The weakest poems here are meditations in the voice of the Virgin Mary—the idea is too self-important and the sequence too pious to let in Howe’s compromised vision. She’s far better in a horrific poem about her drunken father, who in the middle of the night orders his children to clean the kitchen, then the basement, then the garage. Her small acts of defiance explain a lot in the poems that follow—they’re the aftereffects of a Catholic girlhood.

Howe has a knack for finding the small inscrutable moments in life and leaving them inscrutable. (Airless as contemporary poetry often is, it could gain a lot from the short stories of Flannery O'Connor and Grace Paley.) In my favorite poem here, the poet has been ordering her daughter to hurry here, hurry there, to keep up. Then:

Today, when all the errands are finally done, I say to her,
Honey I'm sorry I keep saying Hurry—
you walk ahead of me. You be the mother.

And, Hurry up, she says, over her shoulder, looking
back at me, laughing. Hurry up now darling, she says,
hurry, hurry, taking the house keys from my hands.

There's a recognition of mortality in those lines. Not all Howe's poems cohere; sometimes they're collections of bits and stunts that make a discordant whole, if they make a whole at all. Though she rarely does more than C. K. Williams (she must be president of the Manhattan chapter of the C. K. Williams Fan Club), though at times she's so intense she holds eye contact too long, these bitter, bittersweet poems offer the woman's half of an unanswerable equation. Howe has learned how not to be ordinary about ordinary time.

When Jorie Graham has a message, it's a very big message; and it couldn't be any BIGGER if it were plastered on a BILLBOARD. Things MATTER, they matter a LOT, no REALLY, they matter this VERY SECOND. Graham wasn't always a poet reduced to pouting and pontification; but the reader can keep track of her now only by how loudly she's shouting:

blues, you know the trouble at the heart, blue, blue, what
pandemonium, blur of spears roots cries leaves master & slave, the crop destroyed,
water everywhere not
drinkable, & radioactive waste in it, & human bodily
waste

Graham's poems in the past two decades have forgotten the cunning deployments of language her earlier poems knew by heart. The not-so-quiet point in *Sea Change* is that time is running out—the waters are poisoned, the ground is polluted, and it's all our fault.[\[6\]](#) Messages are very difficult in poetry, if you're not witty and Augustan or you don't work for Western Union.

Poetry is a graveyard of talent destroyed by ambition, yet ambition is rarely ruined by talent. Graham has long taken the medium for the message, shifting her style from book to book, adopting a new punctuation mark or changing the movement of her lines (peculiar mid-word enjambments are the hallmark here). *Sea Change* alternates lines very, very long with lines very, very short; this drama of displacement might be effective if the reader didn't suspect there was a secret purpose behind it. Graham bared all in a recent issue of *Poetry*:

[The poems] marry the long line of Whitman to the short line of Williams, two poets convinced that their extreme lines—very long, very short—were generative instruments for a music that would explore and enact the idea of, and sensation of, “the democratic experience.” Of course these are poems being written at a time when much of what might have been imagined to be “a democracy” has failed. These utopian poetics ... ,

but perhaps I should leave her in full flow. What such lines have to do with democracy (and Williams didn't always use very short lines) is beyond me.

Whatever the change of form, the style of thinking is exactly the same, a fretful record of the mind's

hesitations and repetitions (call it the idling of consciousness)—we used to refer to it as dithering. The poems are busy with their own business, flighty, intensely and doggedly and wearily serious, with a breathless delivery full of its own importance:

& what

is the structure of freedom but this, & grace, & the politics of time—look south, look north—yes—east west compile hope synthesize
exceed look look again hold fast attach
speculate drift drift recognize forget—terrible
gush—gash—of form.

Having made your way through the thickets of style, often you discover that Graham is saying something rather banal—the great maze has only a mouse in the middle.

If ecology is the subject, more or less, some of these poems become lectures by a latterday Mr. Wizard (“which also contains/ contributions from the Labrador Sea and entrainment of other water masses, try to hold a/ complete collapse, in the North Atlantic Drift, in the/ thermohaline circulation”). However worthy the sentiments, the poem is no more interesting than a pile of scrap metal or a mound of compost, fascinating though these might be to the chemist or the art critic. It’s hard for Graham to complete one thought without being distracted by another, as if she suffered some form of poetic ADHD. The gushing is awful enough; but, every time I think she has written as badly as she can, she exceeds my expectations: “breathing into this oxygen which also pockets my/ looking hard,” “the very fact of God as/ invention seems to sit, fast, as in its saddle.”

The disparity between what Graham believes she’s doing and what the reader sees on the page is enormous. Perhaps these rambling, doddering, lifeless poems *are* “crucial,” as she claims; yet it’s as if all their imaginative energy went to “enact the idea of, and sensation of” writing the poem itself. I’m not sure aesthetic choices should be justified in philosophic terms, because it makes matters of taste seem conditioned or inevitable (taste can have philosophical carriage, but perhaps it takes a century or more to discover it). Her language, so slack and unbearable now, doesn’t possess the resources of Williams or Whitman, whose arguments lay in language, not length of line. Graham can chatter in the latest philosopher’s mode but can’t compose a good metaphor.

It’s hard to say to a poet that her career has gone off course, especially when she has been showered with awards for just the things that seem disastrous. Graham was once a poet of magnifying charm and an appealing wildness; but her editorials are so at odds with the evenhanded articulation of thought, she has lost almost all the graces of language that once graced her work. The poems have become elegies to their own progress. Some poets are born dull, some achieve dullness, and some have dullness thrust upon them.

Notes

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1. *Valentines*, by Ted Kooser; University of Nebraska, 47 pages, \$14.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Fifty-Two*, by Melissa Green; Arrowsmith, 62 pages, \$20. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. *The Wave-Maker*, Elizabeth Spires; Norton, 71 pages, \$23.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
4. *Seven Notebooks*, by Campbell McGrath; Ecco, 223 pages, \$23.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
5. *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*, by Marie Howe; Norton, 68 pages \$23.95. [Go back to the text.](#)
6. *Sea Change*, by Jorie Graham; Ecco, 61 pages, \$23.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

William Logan's next book of poetry, *Strange Flesh* (Penguin), is due out in October.

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