

POETRY IN  
REVIEW



S T E P H E N B U R T

If that great democrat, that multiculturalist avant la lettre, that once far overrated, now far underrated good poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were to step into a time machine in 1866 and emerge today, he might be heartened, and unsurprised, by much of American culture: he might (no sure thing) even welcome modern feminism, given the years he spent as a stay-at-home dad. He'd also find much to admire — so I imagine — in Americans whose poetic careers began in the 1950s, and in the 1970s, and even in the 1990s (A. E. Stallings, I'm looking at you). Then he might scratch his great beard and look up to the heavens; plenty of new verse techniques have emerged in the years that I missed (he might muse), but what of the old ones? Can anyone now under forty come even close to the mastery of accentual-syllabic verse, to the strictly rhymed sonnets, the consonance-rich couplets, and the

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**Scriptorium**, by Melissa Range (Beacon, 96 pp., \$18 paper)

**Bastards of the Reagan Era**, by Reginald Dwayne Betts (Four Way, 72 pp., \$15.95 paper)

**Book Seventeen**, by Greg Delanty (Louisiana State University Press, 94 pp., \$19.95 paper)

**Hell Figures**, by E. Tracy Grinnell (Nightboat, 160 pp., \$16.95 paper)

**Coherer**, by Alicia Cohen (Verge, 107 pp., \$15 paper)

**A Swarm of Bees in High Court**, by Tonya Foster (Belladonna, 140 pp., \$16 paper)

smooth stanzas that I and my hundreds of thousands of readers once prized? Can they do it – and this, in my time, was the hard part – while finding something memorable to say?

I imagine the great technician, the irenic sage, frowning gently over a stack of two dozen undistinguished but perfectly metrical first books, and then I imagine him smiling as he reads Melissa Range's *Scriptorium*, in which the native Tennessean (now teaching in Wisconsin) does what the best of the Fireside Poets once did. She has not only mastered received technique but used that technique to say things about her language and mine, about modern politics and geography, about Christian and post-Christian outlooks that she could not have said otherwise.

Like Range's earlier volume *Horse and Rider*, *Scriptorium* has a plan, or (as we say now) an elevator pitch, an aspect common to most of the poems, or rather two aspects that alternate (with additional poems in between). It holds perhaps a dozen sonnets (depending on how you count them) about medieval pigments in illuminated manuscripts – woad, verdigris, "Orpiment":

King's yellow for the King's hair and halo,  
mixed if the monastery can't afford  
the shell gold or gold leaf to crown the Lord,  
to work the letters of his name, the Chi-Ro,  
in trumpet spirals and triquetras, the yellow  
a cheap and lethal burnishing, the hoard  
not gold but arsenic and sulfur.

It also holds almost a dozen stanzaic poems about southern upland dialect words and pronunciations heard in Range's family, such as "hit" (for "it") and "skiff":

"It's a-skiffin'," we say,  
to mean there's not much,  
there won't be much, and it'll be gone  
  
in two shakes.

When Range rhymes – when she fills pages with internal rhymes and half-rhymes and intricate consonance – she isn't just filling out forms; she's asking why we have forms, in life and in art, and how we can tell when the forms are empty, as in the ghazal

“Negative Theology”: “My mother calls me name, asks me to pray. / When you’ve got nothing to say, better to say nothing.” The Christian doctrine that animates such poems may be one she no longer believes.

She does, though, believe in adapting lofty conventions to less prestigious vernaculars, as Catholic mystics and Protestant preachers once did. “The end of Latin is where I begin,” Range writes in the voice of Mechthild of Magdeburg, a Cistercian mystic and nun who wrote, pathbreakingly, in German; she seeks, as Mechthild sought, phrases that are simultaneously transparent, immediate, and flexible enough to speak at once of heaven and earth, of ethereal treasures and common poverty. Range devotes two pages to the proto-comic books, the illustrated wordless scenes, called *Biblia Pauperum*: in one Last Supper,

The colors are so garish  
even the poor can understand  
(not the poor in spirit but the poor  
in fact) what illuminates  
Christ’s dough-white face – the waste  
of love, the supper gone cold without a taste.

At worst, as when she praises the (obviously praiseworthy) Navajo Code Talkers, Range writes a kind of light verse with moral tags, the sort that the eighth-graders who once had to read Longfellow were required to imitate. An average Range poem will have false notes and rushed bits, as when elite gymnasts (I write during the Rio Olympics) undertake a routine with a high D and an uncertain E. Yet, as with the gymnasts, even an average performance reflects technique that most of us can’t reach; and a superior performance by Range in the sonnet or the off-rhymed triplet has an astonishing aural, and moral force, along with a thoughtful commitment to democracy, to social and moral equality. (Some Christians and former Christians are vexed by the fear of damnation; Range, I suspect, is haunted by John 12:3.) As for Range’s South, a villanelle exclaims, citing Faulkner, “I’m damned if I don’t hate it, and damned if I do.” If she, or her region, or her techniques, or for that matter her leftist politics are damned by

outsiders – so her poems suggest – it’s a *felix culpa*, a fortunate fall: these are poems to be savored, and saved.

The people in Reginald Dwayne Betts’s second book of verse, *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, have been damned, or condemned, in a clearer, even a literal, sense: the volume depicts young black men from the late 1980s through the early 2000s in the toughest parts of Washington, D.C., the years when the nation’s capital became the nation’s murder capital, thanks (but no thanks) to crack cocaine and to drug laws that locked many survivors away. Betts wrote about his own incarceration in his 2010 debut, *Shahid Reads His Own Palm*, and in a prose memoir published that year: this second volume returns to his prison years, but much of it concentrates on the culture and society that made it so easy for him to end up there, and left his brother still inside.

Betts titles eleven separate poems “For the City That Nearly Broke Me”; most of them use a distinctively syncopated line reminiscent of Yusef Komunyakaa. Most of the rest adopt a deft blank verse, and most of the best depend on intricate patterns of repeated common words, from the Provençal ballade form of “Elegy with a City in It” to the less regular, more insistent cycles of the five-part final poem:

Who admits this cage embraces  
 him? “History is written  
 on the back of the horse” broken  
 by the world. We all in prison now.  
 I stare at this man, my kin  
 ruined by embracing  
 night. Call this place a horse collar,  
 & watch how it cuts into skin.

Flexing and flailing against their repetitions, Betts’s best passages attack at once the institutional racism and neglect that let crack take root and the counterproductive (so the poems say) valorization of stylish criminals, the either-or, cops-and-robbers, fight-or-flight ethos of Betts’s block. “Stop pretending to be Crispus Attucks,” one of the poems called “For the City” implores; “stop thinking one more nameless man / can get named eternally after

a bullet.” Yet what else, Betts asks, could have developed there? Betts’s D.C. became an “abyss where men come to die. & the rest / of America goes to watch,” its antiheroes – “Rayful. Freeway Ricky. Supreme” – equipping their neighbors with “pockets full of stones . . . It take a nation of millions to hold / us back? Well they got that. We got that too.”

Betts segues between a tragic, or naturalistic, sense of doomed youth and a caustic attack on the social structures that doomed them. The first outlook produces metaphors: “the lit end / of anything will / burn you”; “This begins the concept of tragedy: / infinity the image of smoke running / from a soda can split & crumpled into a makeshift pipe.” (Betts’s sentence itself runs down, almost malevolently, from its lofty abstract nouns.) The second outlook produces facts and names: streets, neighborhoods, boys who suffered, men behind bars, and politicians who deserve opprobrium. When the two attitudes work together Betts creates scenes like this one, of backyard football:

Touchdowns are as rare as angels  
 & when the boy turns his body,  
 the RIP shirt slants against the wind,  
 & there is a moment when he is not  
 weighted down by gravity, when  
 he owns the moment before he crashes  
 into the other boys’ waiting arms & they  
 all look like a dozen mannequins,  
 controlled by the spinning sneaker  
 strings of the dead boys above them.

Even the athletes look helpless; no person, and no higher power, has taken charge. As on that field, so in that ballade:

The black  
 hole is now the block. Steel  
 swallows men, spits them out black  
 eyed, spits them out black-  
 balled. Reagan’s curse might be real,  
 might be what has niggas black-  
 mailing themselves, dancing in black-  
 face.

It is the language of someone who knows (as Range does too) enough dialects not to think one will suit all his tasks, and enough history to reject monocausal explanations; it is, too, the language of bitter, righteous frustration, with so many targets that the poet cannot choose one.

Betts can repeat himself; he can (like Range) get caught up in stating clearly what's important to the writer but already obvious to the reader – “I could tell you I changed / But history will haunt us all.” Yet it feels as if history, and geography, required that this poet repeat himself, as American history repeats itself: he will go on about this criminal injustice system, this schoolyard-to-prison-yard pipeline, until it stops repeating itself in the lives of young black men, however long it takes. (Betts now holds a degree from Yale Law School.) The scenes in his poems look back to the 1980s, but the poems themselves look farther back than that: to George Jackson (Betts dedicates a poem to him) and to Etheridge Knight (whose character Hard Rock he names), and to muckraking reportage, to firsthand accounts of poverty amid plenty, in the verse and prose of the nineteenth century. Longfellow – who wrote in 1842, “There is a poor blind Samson in this land, / Shorn of his strength and bound in bonds of steel” – could have recognized those.

There's nothing half so urgent, or so consequential, in Greg Delanty's *Book Seventeen*, but I've been enjoying it, and time-displaced Longfellow might enjoy it too: the nineteenth-century poet known – and mocked by his friend J. R. Lowell – for “Greek meters in English” would at least understand what Delanty has tried to do. To the sixteen books of the actual Greek Anthology, the famous collection of lyric, epigrammatic, and occasional verse from late antiquity, Delanty has added his own: a set of original (but not startlingly original), brief, and trustworthy verse commentaries and quiet reactions to the modern bourgeois life cycle, all in an offhand, almost jaded, low-pressure line, printed in sawtooth indentations as if it were ancient Greek. The almost syllabic scansion lets Delanty pile up near-synonyms and related words, building up overtones, gaining our trust, and sounding uncommonly conversational no matter what he observes: “Teen-agers” for example, “loiter, smoke, giggle, strut, wolf-whistle, / shout obscene remarks, text, ogle / each other's crushes, torpedo into the Aegean.”

Delanty's goal, as he says – they're the last three words in the book – is not to frame brand new truths, but to "Behold the normal." When he fails he's just dull, but half the time he succeeds, and his successes can range from the congratulatory to the appalled. "In a Diner Above the Lamoile River," foam-covered rocks look

as if they swim upstream along with the salmon  
returning to spawning grounds, leaping falls, freshets,  
whirlpools, the ancient anonymous struggle.  
The fish age instantly to mottled old-timers,  
dying in the nursing pool of their birth waters.  
A tour group of elderly are the only other diners,  
their skin mottled not unlike the salmon.

What other poet could get away with "not unlike"? But it fits; the whole style fits a poet trying to say bleak things about life in ways that render it pleasant. He also offers good, hard-to-follow advice:

Forgive your fighting parents the post-argument silence  
game  
assigning you go-between, their Hermes, till tension  
thawed:  
"Tell your father dinner's ready," etc. Always the same.  
Give thanks for making you their ankle-winged, fleet-as-  
thought god.

The myth in this quatrain does what the pseudo-Greek textures, settings, and line shapes do throughout *Book Seventeen*: it finds, in a demanding or sorrowful part of modern life, some commonality with antiquity, as if to say, "They survived that; we'll survive this."

But of course nobody survives forever; no country, no culture lasts forever either, and Delanty uses late antiquity, as Robert Lowell used it, to think about how America might go. Take the poem called "Resort":

The ocean wraps its surf scarf round the shoulder  
of the shore. Everything's in touch with everything else:  
the sky with the sea, the wave susurrus  
with the zephyr in the fuchsia and furze, the cock crowing

again and again, dawning on us  
 every second is now. And then the day trippers come,  
     I among them, a scout,  
 already parked. The army of cars wind along the road.  
     They glitter like the helmets of hoplites.  
 The legions take over for a while, then go,  
     as is the way of all empires.

Like actual classical epigrammatists, Delanty can manage brisk humor: jokes about types of people (“Master Tardy,” who is always late) and better jokes about sex, from a straight or bisexual cis male point of view, as when he muses that Zen monks probably masturbate: “so that’s the One Hand Clap . . . Come now.” The table of contents offers in-jokes about poets, attributing each of Delanty’s works to an appropriate pseudonym (“Rosanna Dedalus” for Rosanna Warren, “Longlius” for Michael Longley, and so on); readers not ready for a deep dive into literary gossip can, fortunately, ignore them.

We cannot, however, ignore our own bodies – what they seem to want, that they don’t get it, how they rise up, take us with them, and then decline through what Delanty calls “the muddy, tangled wood of middle age.” Delanty concludes with sex poems and then with divorce poems, whose air of resignation suggests that marriages, like empires, like aging bodies, simply come to an end. The question is what to do with that end: whether to look ahead to it or run away. Usually he chooses the former. In some of his best and some of his worst pages he even sounds bored, like someone who knows exactly what’s coming: “The drudgeries of another day ticked off the list, / the palimpsest already filling with tomorrow’s chores.” This poetry, too, repeats itself – it’s not meant to be read straight through. You could say the same thing about the sixteen books of the actual Greek Anthology, and for that matter about a collected Longfellow; it’s something you open and skim, to which you might return.

Our time-displaced Longfellow would have recognized the ancient Greek sources for E. Tracy Grinnell’s *Hell Figures*, but he might sputter at what she does to them. Her mythic and tragic figures defy their fates in an alienated, shocked free verse that

splits the difference between Grinnell's avant-garde mentors (Leslie Scalapino, for example) and the classical adaptations of Anne Carson. Here is a stranded soul, perhaps Helen, in a sequence titled "Leukadia":

I remember the anodyne  
 for my own inventions  
 the insinuation I pale  
 for death without sentences  
  
 there is the air  
 as one waits for things

"All works, I venture, are written *After*," Grinnell concludes, countering hopes for originality, for a way to break out of disabling order by acknowledging that the past – which is to say, the classical past, and also the American past, and also the patriarchal habits ingrained in most of us – is where we start: a clarity that does not distort our feelings seems, to her as to many poets, an almost impossible achievement, one that requires both the skeptical tools of modernism and the older matter those tools were designed to break. "What can I do? / / in the narrow mirror / showing the part for the whole," she asks, as if echoing Elizabeth Bishop's "Sonnet."

Most of the time, of course, Grinnell sounds nothing like Bishop: she invites, and interprets, such chaos as Bishop held off or disdained. Grinnell's post-New American poetics purports to disable rationality and prose sense and capitalism, and to put us in touch with the id, with capital-N Nature, with a chthonic liberatory force, "shattering / the imagination . . . into weightlessness." And yet she comes up with Sapphic stanzas like these – they are what won me over:

Rebellious bird of uncommon waters  
 I am what is bested, the beast and all, by  
 violins, the lyre, or whatever cursed love  
 fixes in triumph . . .

Gentle cushions, water of wings unfurling  
 only glassless while unemployed, the mirror  
 mars its mirror, faceless until it's gazed on  
 wits gone to wander

This segment of *Hell Figures* prints one stanza per page – each could be its own poem. The first describes a kind of perverse albatross, the spirit that tells us our real lives are never enough; the second, I think, imagines that when we look at the sea, we see – and may be driven out of our wits by – our unlived lives, our alternate selves.

Grinnell's central myths – Helen, Leda, Procne and Philomela, the Sirens – are almost all tales of rape, abduction, or bodily violation: they, or she, or we meditate on “my self, my very very self / interred, to/ / sea as blood.” She's trying to get, from the injury done to everyone – but especially to women – by myth and stereotype, and by physical violence, some source of verbal power, some flag to follow, some way to fly. In the sequence called “Helen, a Fugue,” Grinnell writes:

that is no swan, boiling  
 raining, swan, as  
                   long gone  
 swan,                   raped what imprint  
 left to imprint on  
 the perfect swan  
 eidolon, a dotting  
 , swan

Punctuation, after such trauma, reverses itself, dissolves. (Remember that “fugue” means both “counterpoint” and “flight”; remember, too, Yeats's “Leda and the Swan,” which many readers now see as a poem about rape.) Much of Grinnell's work reads like freely translated Greek tragic drama ripped into bits, then read backward, as if to run the long story that gave us modern patriarchy back to its source. A series of poems all titled “The Birds” takes this trope of reversal literally, with lines that read backward or forward: “The Birds,” in one instance,

is a rhyme, a repetition or no reason  
 a throat closes, dying of words – *Sphinx*  
 from the Greek “to strangle”  
 an ecstatic mind becomes your own worst enemy and  
 your own madness is what you see, as nature turning against you  
 an ecstatic mind becomes your own worst enemy and  
 from the Greek “to strangle”  
 a throat closes, dying of words – *Sphinx*  
 is a rhyme, a repetition or no reason

William Carlos Williams, brought forward in time from 1921, might have recognized that splintered, splattered language, fresh from his own quasi-classical *Kora in Hell*.

He would have recognized, too, the compact free verse throughout Alicia Cohen’s beautifully constructed fifth volume, *Coherer*. Cohen can do a great deal with a few syllables, as in “Fern and spore” (I present the whole poem): “this arc’d frond / mounts respiration’s / wild reprise.” She means both that the frond, almost miraculously, reproduces itself, and that plant “respiration,” taking up carbon dioxide and giving back oxygen, recaps and reverses what we do to the air. Those same three lines recur, four pages later, under the punning title “Spirit.” She acknowledges Williams directly in parody, too: “so much depends upon / inedible plastics / flooding the food chain.”

Cohen uses plenty of science, and yet she is never cold, never professedly objective. She’d rather sound amateurish, worshipful, even childish: “may each have a bike may we all have long life for a moment / right now.” Who wouldn’t subscribe to that sort of wish? who wouldn’t want to believe – with Cohen, with Williams – that “poetic transport delivers us / to the airy actual”? Who cannot read the signs or sink into the knowledge that we are living on the *Titanic* – “native of this Titanic demesne,” Cohen calls herself – liable to go down with the flooded ship? Immersing herself in, appreciating nature, Cohen wants neither to repeat her Romantic forebears exactly nor to stand apart from what she sees; instead, she tells us that she is part, but only a part, of systems whose many parts extend so subtly into so many dimensions that it’s hard to see where they end. And yet they will end:

I cannot  
 run from  
 being  
 enmeshed  
                   in all  
 these many infinities  
 leaving traces  
 of having  
 been

If you don't like this kind of writing you can call it preachy, and Cohen can certainly preach: she can even, like a great preacher, communicate heavenly visions. For every jeremiad, every barb, Cohen offers two hits of utopian pastoral:

longing is the only  
 belonging  
  
 all children wander thoughtlessly  
 into the street  
 sweet grassway  
 windstorms carry forest breath in tides over the whole earth

Like the W. S. Merwin of the 1970s, or like Elizabeth Treadwell today, Cohen sometimes writes as if her verse technique could let her cast magical spells, removing the malignity of the prosaic, commercial, technological era in which we live. In a poem called "Boys don't cry,"

spheres arise where there  
 was not you  
 in sorrow lies hiding tears  
 like turning all the people into animals  
 in sweet fur shapes or some shared childhood

And yet she is not as anti-technological, as uncivilized, as she can seem: this very poem pays homage to the "two minute thirty-five second happy / livid revolution," the "electric unprison," of the Cure single that gives Cohen her title. My favorite parts of her volume come across as both uninhibited and terse, both optimistic and angry about climate change, both devoted to wild nature and aware that most human beings will not find better lives by walk-

ing away from civilization entirely. “Humans put some of their children in pits,” and humans start fires, and humans fight wars, but humans also stargaze, and humans mourn, even “Achilles with his bloody sword,” “weeping for his friend.”

Longfellow tried to introduce Americans not only to Greek meters in English but to Finnish, Portuguese, and Anglo-Saxon forms. Haiku came later – as the new anthology *Haiku in English: The First 100 Years* (2016) suggests – and it may seem like a zone for beginners now; yet Tonya Foster’s magnificent if sometimes befuddling *A Swarm of Bees in High Court* feels like the long-delayed American apotheosis of haiku form. She does not write fully traditional haiku (freestanding, improvisational, about the seasons). Instead, almost her entire book uses haiku stanzas: syllabics of five-seven-five, or sixteen-to-eighteen-syllable monostichs, or variant syllabics of two-five-three (“Sun, you / shine; little houses / draw your blinds”). In this book Foster shares with Range the masterful stanza and the nonstandard English, with Betts the attention to difficult urban black life, with Delanty the book-length commitment to a single form, with Cohen the open tunings and the enjambment-driven acoustics, and with Grinnell the sense that any page, any poem, any stanza could stand on its own or join a larger, non-narrative unit: “As if the soul could / be singled out from the cells, / from the room’s clutter.”

Such interlocking forms fit Foster’s sense of a city in which everything is connected, pollination and gentrification and cocktail recipes and hate and love: “red as distant Red Hook bees drunk on cherry fungicide cocktails, / red as distant space mapped bought and belonging to brutish say-so.” Windows that overlook windows resemble the poet who wants to look out on everything, to be Henry James’s proverbial ideal writer on whom nothing is lost:

To see and to be  
seen is what it is to live on  
perennial blocks;

to see and to be  
seen as somehow familiar  
with all the look-backs.

Almost everything in Foster's ambiguous lingo ("blocks," for example) could be a pun – it all signifies twice. It is hard to know when you've interpreted her and when you've overinterpreted, or got her wrong, and that not-knowing is part of the point: "To know is to be a spoon in a kitchen drawer, wearing expertise. / To know is to be a spoon, bent burnt, crystalline skeins, shining held hollow." If you think you know everything you are like useless old silver, or else like somebody addicted to spoon-cooked drugs. Foster's verse units can be disassembled and reassembled like Legos – they portray a city in manifold ambiguities, rather than telling one big story. They can, however, tell small stories, two per page:

He's asleep  
after telling her about the boy  
he was, his father's fists.

He's a sleep  
she can't fall to, a nap that  
won't keep or unkink.

To move through *A Swarm of Bees* from start to finish is to watch it open out from the personal concerns of twentysomethings, from what we now call "relationships" and what young people call "adulthood," into the life of the Harlem where this onetime Houston resident has settled, in a mix of interdependent parts and voices whose closest analogy may well be Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Like Hughes, Foster knows that Harlem is both a place people live and a symbol for black America, whether or not its residents want it that way: "Harlem, she can't / get tour buses of eyes to stop / trailing through her thoughts." Like Hughes, Foster understands that economics underpin and constrain emotion, even for children who just want to play: "Blackity black girl, / at play on the court of (y)our skin – / eminent domain."

Again, everything in Foster's Harlem – standard English and the nonstandard English of "blackity," childhood, land use regulations, ownership patterns, the rhythm in a jump rope rhyme, what happens in "court" – is connected. Foster's lines limn those connections, and when it's appropriate they have fun. Sometimes it's not appropriate: the sequence "Bullet/In" examines street-level

troubles, from the public harassment of women (“They say ‘bitch’ and mean / the syllable to break her / solipsistic strides”) to the “Bodies of young men – / site-specific installations – / streets, stoops, corners, cells.” (Take that, art world.) Foster, like Betts, depicts sneakers hung outdoors, “tennis shoe pigeons”; hers become parodies of Aeolian harps, and they “eat / wind with toothless mouths.”

*A Swarm of Bees* – whose title adapts, and whose images can respond to, a painting by Max Ernst – is over 120 pages long; I wish it were longer. I also wish it did not adopt typographical devices last seen in academic publications from the 1980s – “(w)holes,” “t/his,” and the like – but Foster is not the kind of poet who will give you everything you want; instead, in *Swarm* she has something for everyone. So did Longfellow: inspiration for those who wanted homilies, sermons for readers of sermons, lyric self-doubt when he wrote for himself (not often enough), landscapes and architecture for armchair travelers, and narrative (of several lengths) for all. How much and what he could make of Foster’s Harlem, or Foster’s contractions, or Foster’s sources may be left as an exercise for her readers, who in an ideal world would be, if not as numerous as bees, as plentiful as Longfellow’s readers once were.