The New Criterion

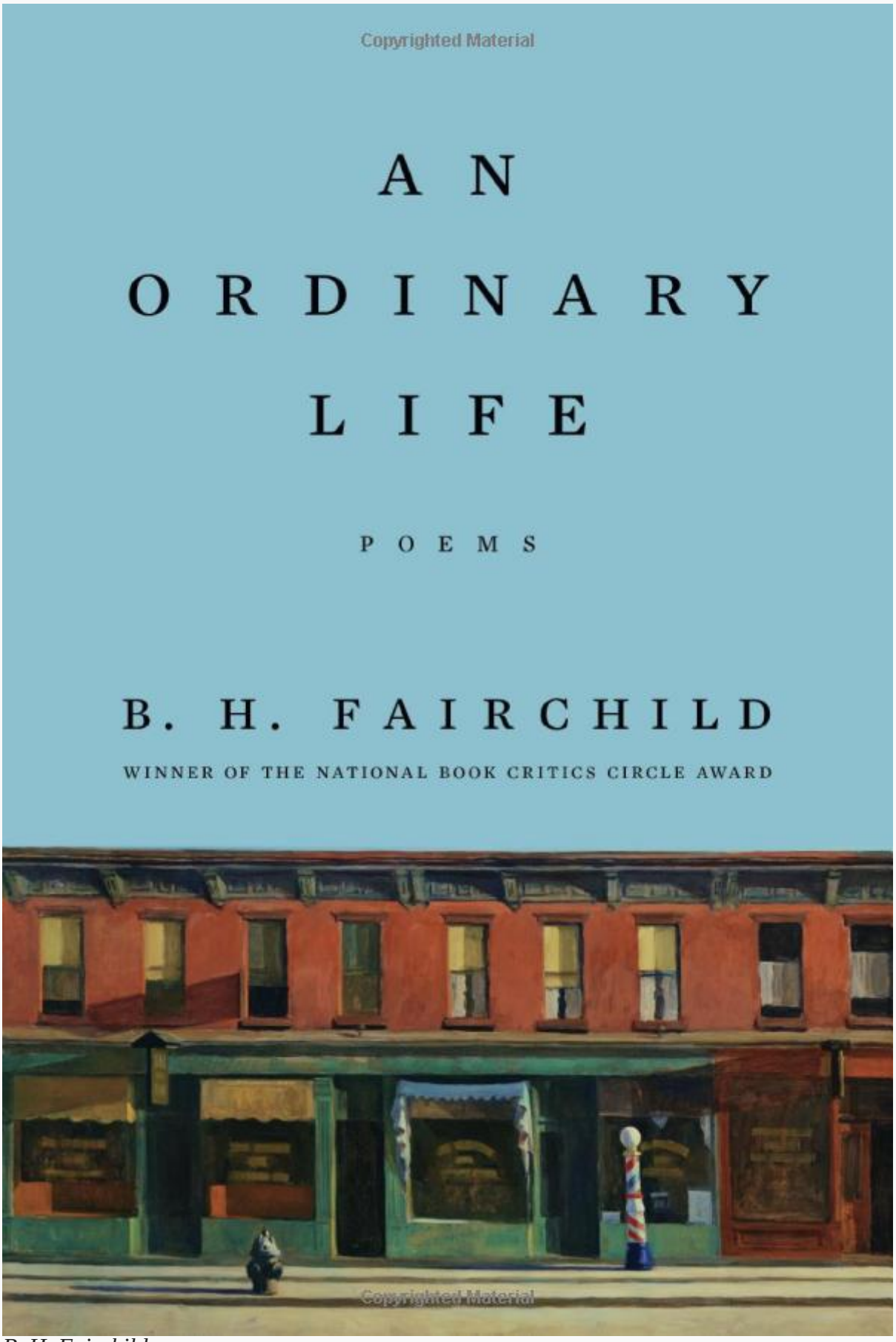
Verse Chronicle June 2023

Down on the corner

by *William Logan*

On new poetry by B. H. Fairchild, Devin Johnston, Sharon Olds, Robin Coste Lewis, Thomas Kinsella & Ada Limón.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



B. H. Fairchild

An Ordinary Life

W. W. Norton, 72 pages, $26.95

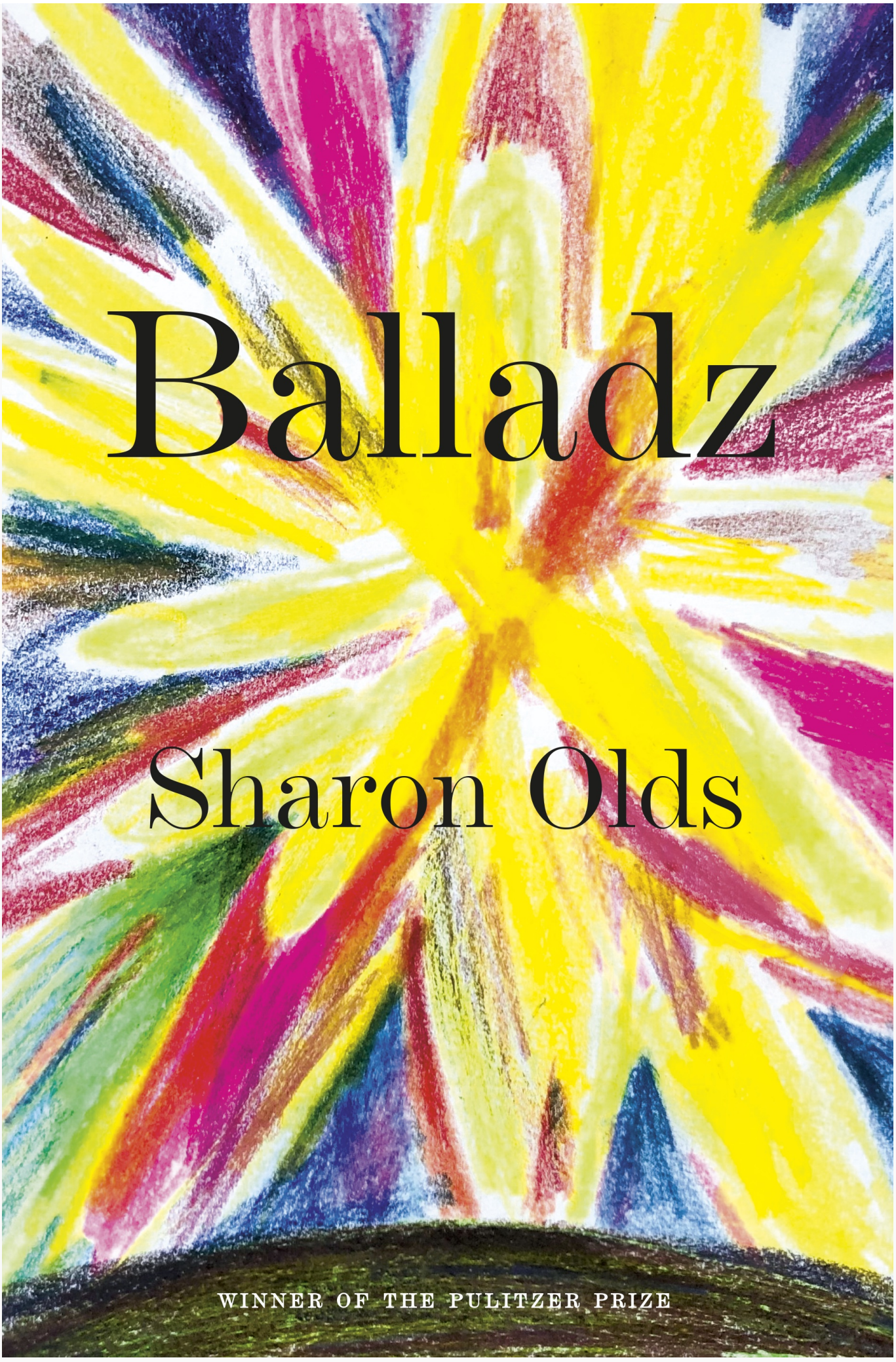
Dragons

POEMS / DEVIN JOHNSTON

Devin Johnston

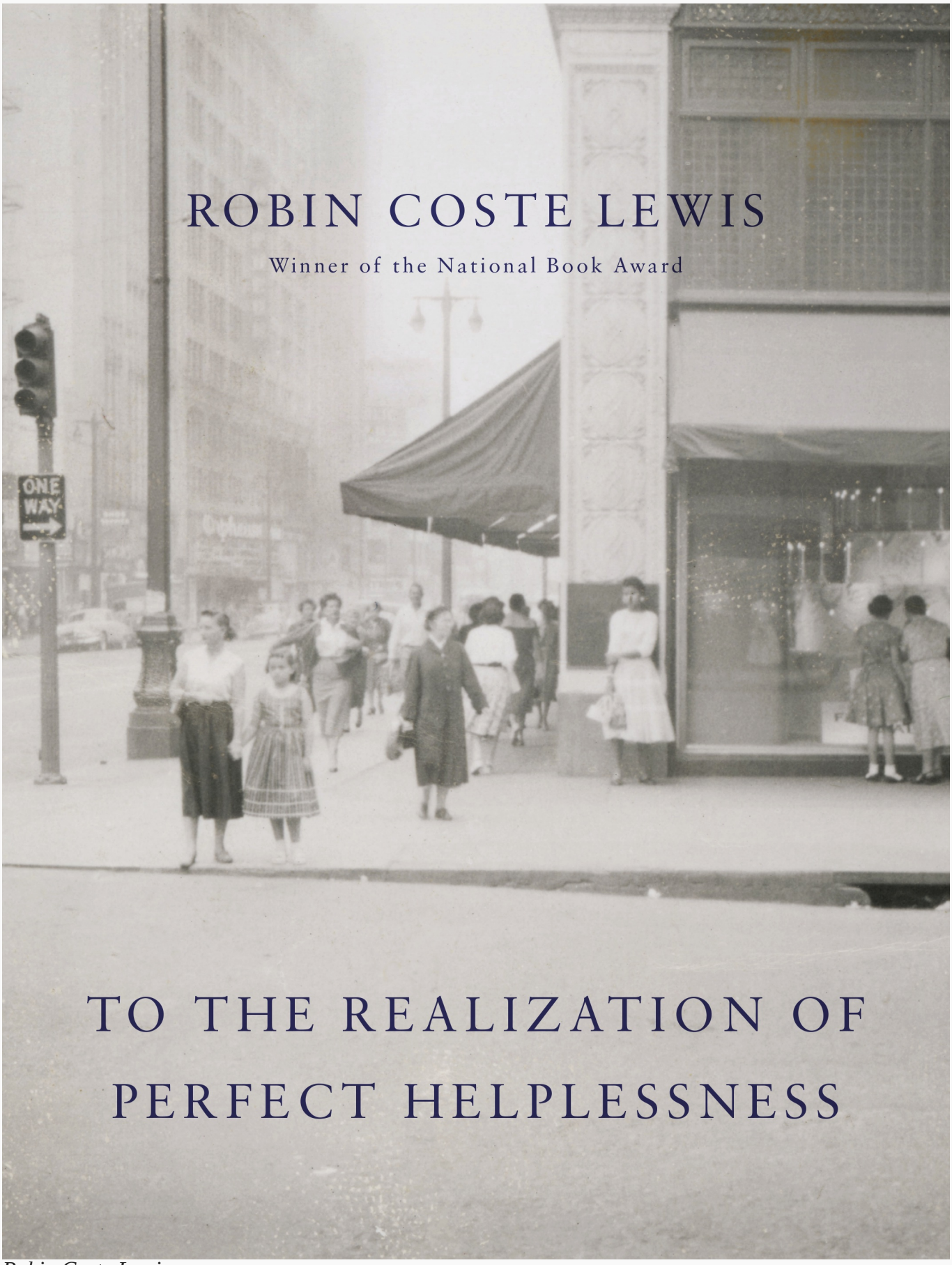
Dragons

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 85 pages, $26.00


Balladz
Sharon Olds
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

Sharon Olds
Balladz

Knopf, 175 pages, $30.00



Robin Coste Lewis

To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness

Knopf, 384 pages, $35.00

CARCANET POETRY

LAST POEMS

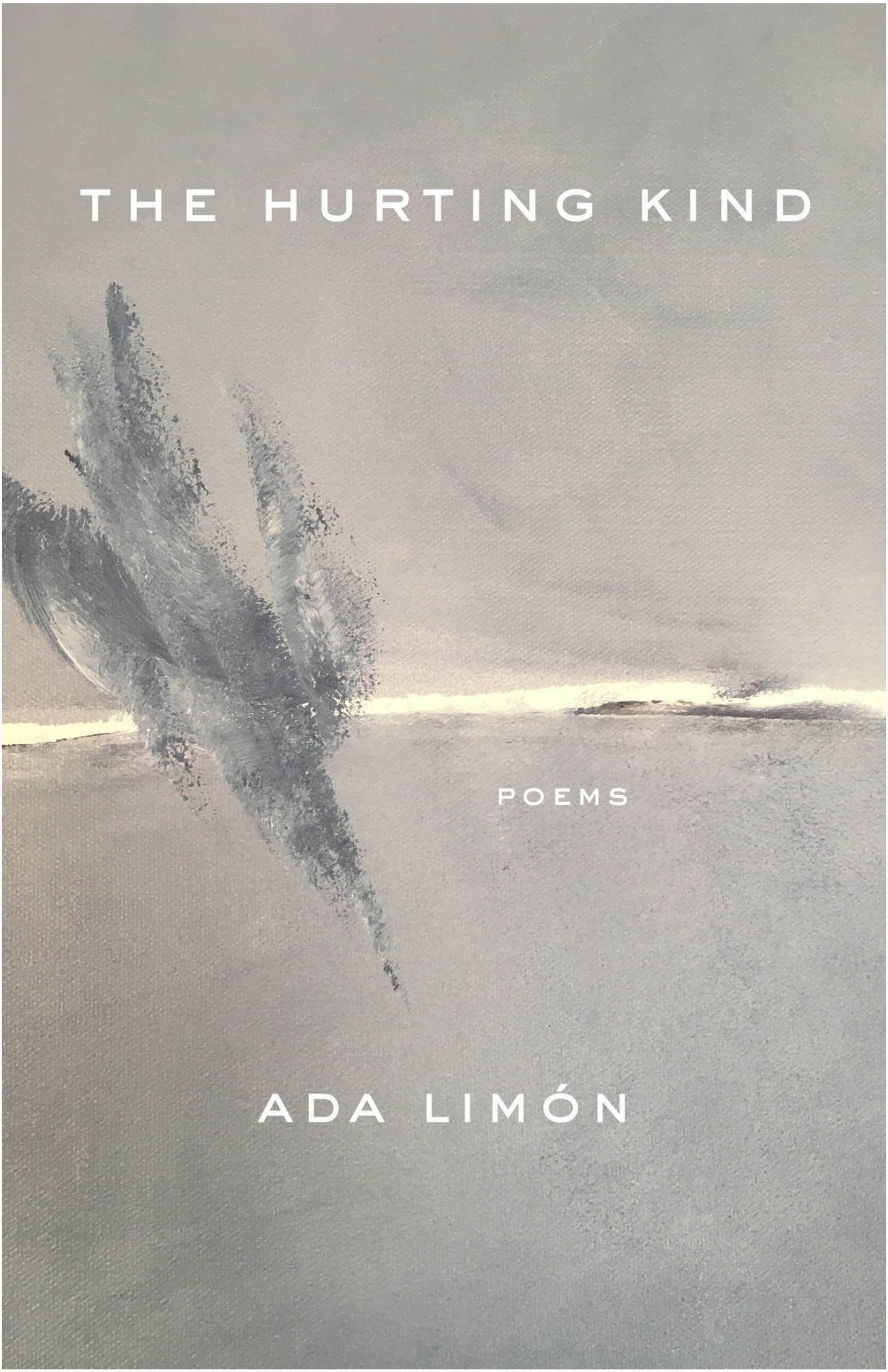
THOMAS KINSELLA

Thomas Kinsella

Last Poems

Carcanet Poetry, 136 pages, $18.99

THE HURTING KIND



POEMS

ADA LIMÓN

Ada Limón
The Hurting Kind

Milkweed Editions, 107 pages, $24.00

As a poet, B. H. Fairchild feels most at home in shabby Midwestern towns past their prime as well as their sell-by dates. Many of the poems in An Ordinary Life could have been set between the Great Depression and the fall of the Berlin Wall—if you want to find a computer or cellphone there, good luck.1 Even when he wanders into the present, Fairchild remains obsessed with the past:

I stand in the Punk Rock aisle of Rhino Records

mindlessly watching an old video of a Supremes

concert, trying not to think of anything, really,

giving myself to sounds from fifty years ago

that celebrate nothing now except my own youth.

This goes on for a while, like some overlong elevator pitch. There's an encounter with a stranger, a sad revelation, a moment of mortality—and that's that, except, as so often in these poems, the poet ends in tears, or something so near tears the reader still gets drenched.

The message for the "hopeful before the world disappoints them," is that

it all seems like some awful rowing toward God

in a hard rain, one wave, one lie, after another, and

they are so tired, the oars so heavy, that they slowly

open their hands and pray and lean into the dark.

The poet rarely suppresses this almost religious lugubriousness, though it kills poem after poem stone-dead. The use of Anne Sexton's melodramatic title doesn't help. The prosy lines and hatchet strokes of enjambment belong to a man of the people, one who doesn't allow any poetic pretense and can't tolerate the proprieties of rhyme and meter. (In the rare poems that welcome such wickedness, he's not half bad.) He's an Average Joe, and an Average Joe can't do those things without losing his Average Joe membership badge.

Fairchild is addicted to Midwestern landscapes, to dirt farmers driven to poverty and perdition by the Dust Bowl, the scouring wind, the ravaging locust. His descriptions are taut with disappointment, tightly engraved with the intimating line of Hollar or Goltzius: "In that small town, alliances with death/ were everywhere: cattle standing in rank,/ toxic feedlots; a well-tended graveyard/ that expanded in proportion to demand." Those towns are still vanishing—I've driven through rural Iowa and Texas and seen the boarded-up shops and empty streets, as if one night all the townsfolk just upped and walked away. Poems so profoundly backward looking can't be coated in sentiment and shellac.

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The poet's hard-bitten, ingrained irony rises unbidden to the surface, only to be washed away by the freshets of tears. I think of the photographers to whom he's indebted—Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, James Delano—artists who held at bay the sentimental regard that's Fairchild's legal tender. The folk he recalls led, Spoon River–style, lives that deserve attention, as well as, Thoreau-style, lives of quiet desperation—"*please remember Caroline Henderson*,/ who farmed wheat and taught Caesar's Latin/ after evening chores, and German, to her only/ child that she might one day study medicine." The woman dies—and, wouldn't you know it, (spoiler alert) her daughter does study medicine; and in the last line an M.D. trots behind her name.

Fairchild's decaying landscapes and mournful scenes, as marked as those vanished lives, require more than the bathetic endings toward which nearly every poem grinds like a bearing that wants grease. Poets who portrayed lives equally sad, like James Wright and Philip Levine, didn't beg for the red-rimmed eyes—their poems allowed emotion instead of demanding it. Not trawling for tears is a sign of respect. When Fairchild isn't calling for more handkerchiefs, he's ranting at the decay that is the world:

So here I am in the Wichita walmart,

mourning broken farms, dying small towns,

the collapse of Jefferson's democracy,

the cheap, foreign, and properly shelved

goods of Black Friday.

He stands there, he admits, reading a copy of Mandelstam filched from one of the bargain bins. What a blow against capitalism!

The epigraph of one poem is drawn from John Cheever's preface to his collected stories. Fairchild is the Cheever of the Midwest, though not so wry or restrained. When the poet wants to be

heartbreaking, he wields a sledgehammer. Amid all the small-town hayrides and hysterics, however, there's a lovely poem on Brassaï's photograph of a Paris watchmaker, a photo treated like a Vermeer—but having made the past beautiful once more, without any extra added ingredients or trans fat, Fairchild rounds things off back in America with sentimental guff and, for good measure, two ominous, bottom-shelf symbols—"It is dark outside. The highway is empty." He just can't help it.

In the title poem of Dragons, Devin Johnston takes a dull, generic scene and adds dribs and drabs of information that don't make sense until you remember the title.2 A crowd awaits a migration that happens every seven years—locusts, perhaps? (I hadn't bothered to read the title, obviously.) Only at the end did I realize that "dragon" is not Southern colloquial for, say, a lubber grasshopper. No, Johnston's dragons are real: "Sunlight flashed on windshields// and caught along the riverbank/ a cloudy, keeled scale/ about the size of a dinner plate." The language is plain or plainish, but the reader lags a bit behind, where a reader ought to be, embedded in mystery until mystery dissolves.

You'd pay for Johnston's severe acts of attention—intimate, strange, capable of rupturing proprieties of vision by making your damnable eye seem ordinary. That so few other poems in the book are equally successful is puzzling, though a couple good poems per book is better than most poets achieve. Sometimes there's not much beneath the saying to justify the long prelude. Other poems are predictable once you've read the title, another reason never to read titles.

Johnston has a taste for rhyme and meter while rarely using them with conviction. The occasional swerve of his imagination is perfect for rhyme, as in the lone couplet of "Common Yarrow": "In hard times, across bewildered lawns:/ A weed to staunch the wounds of Myrmidons." (Botanists argue that yarrow, which can clot blood, was the magical herb Achilles used on his injured men in the *Iliad*.) The rhymes elsewhere often lack danger or grit or longing, sometimes setting a pattern only to break it—the poet rhymes *mood*/*rude* and *door*/*abhor* but follows with *gall*/*animal*, as if true rhyme were simply too hard to bear.

The map of Johnston's meter is similarly jarring—he can clip along, plodding like a metronome:

A long way from the Tuileries,

where swans patrol a standing pool

in calligraphic harmony,

you turn on Chouteau Avenue.

No stranger to desuetude,

you know each symptom of neglect.

Having committed to this nail-pounding tetrameter, however, he tosses in that line of trimeter. ("Desuetude" is pronounced des-wi-tood, not de-soo-i-tood.) The more you're aware of the meter, the more jangly and disruptive such stopgaps seem, with their odd variations, extra feet, and off-accent rhyme: *feces/bees* or *tenderness/harness*, anyone? Why put up the net if you're not going to play tennis?

Meter rarely brings out Johnston's best work. Even when he slides into conformity, he's so wary of the traditional variations the songs become sing-song. Out walking his dog, he lets the beast speak:

Here we find a cage of seed and suet

suspended from a branch, and here a bluet

in bloom beside a pale blue plaster Mary.

I'm on the road, I got no time to tarry.

That's the owner breaking in at the end. The poet occasionally slips alexandrines into the pentameter, a variation not unwelcome even in Shakespeare; but in Johnston's poems, however charming, they're ungainly makeshifts: "This morning, all things bark—pneumatic brakes, a sneeze—/ no sentiments unsung in Tang anthologies." When Johnston does things well, you're delighted; when he does them badly, you're surprised he dares do them at all. Even so, I'm chuffed that dogs still read the Tang poets.

The poet doesn't feel he has to tell the reader every little thing, and his more original work remembers that. (Many contemporary poems could be much shorter. You don't need an epic for the point a couplet could make.) I'm drawn to his incomplete poems, not the generic work with first act, second, and for good measure a third. The phrases stamped with his mark ("the ruckus of cowcumber leaves," say) make the reader read on. Johnston remains a limited poet, comfortable in his chosen realm, rarely venturing outside it. There are poorly imagined pieces spoken by an imprisoned drug-dealer estranged from her children; a few poems reduced to shattered phrases; and then, just around the corner, poems of restrained elegance:

Cloud piles on cloud; keel scrapes sand.

Coal dust drifts from a rusty barge,

the river full of silt, field soldered to field,

even the light heavy.

A little later, a "floodplain streaked with rills/ condenses the leaden light." Few contemporaries can write imagery to such exacting, precise effect.

Such moments redeem more humdrum, mannered pieces with lines (like "each parrot an olive-green Pierrot") that must have escaped from a Paul Muldoon poem. Muldoon's style is so tempting, so much easier to do than to do well, even by Muldoon, that you can forgive Johnston—poets can repeat their mistakes but rarely their successes. Many poems in *Dragons* are patchy, pitched in a minor key, the poetry gorgeous in parts if slightly down-at-heels as wholes. When Johnston writes beautifully of ocean waves that "always never quite arrived," the line must haunt him.

Sharon Olds has grabbed many of the brass rings an American poet could ever desire; but it's hard to imagine that, half a century from now, her driven, repetitive, obsessive work will still captivate a large audience, if poetry has any audience at all. Her work is prosy in the approved way—she stands naked before the reader, showing everything and revealing nothing. She knows little about suggestion, the strongest form of poetic intimacy. In her new book, Balladz, she blathers through her life like a third-string reporter for the Oskaloosa Herald, paid to write a sex diary instead of a fishing column.3

Much of Olds's work has been devoted to sex, though hardly the full range of the *Kama Sutra*. Her last few books have become the chronicle of her aging body, as if the lines were tattooed upon her back:

the *parea*

clinging to my staggering thighs—and in rivulet snakes, down over the breasts,

my hair, which will dry to silver ripples,

Meanwhile, tottering on titanium femur-knobs, I'm

glistening, within and without.

Olds is perhaps the first poet whose work will go from cradle to grave. The poems about her mother's breasts might have been composed when Olds was in swaddling clothes; and I expect she'll still be scribbling when the undertaker wheels up his three gallons of formaldehyde. Olds turned eighty last year, rarely a high-water mark in a poet's career—if the poet doesn't lie in the mortuary by then, the poetry usually does.

Even so, Olds continues to write on any subject that occurs to her (some, alas, occur over and over and over). In a poem set just before her father's death, she says goodbye to the dead beasts he bore to the dining-room table: "Goodbye/ to carving the ham, the way the slice/ falls away in rosy suppleness,/ and carving the goose, ripping off the leg,/ reaching deep into the cavity to scoop out the stuffing." Leave it to Olds to stage an elegy requiring knives. These memories, because there she can't escape the shadow of her own mortality, are touching, her mannerisms suppressed, her Orphic auto-play obsession with the body ignored. Earlier she sings a long paean to liverwurst. She also has a poem some fifty lines long on Elizabeth Hardwick's need of a hankie.

The most deeply moving elegy is for her childhood best friend, who died aged nine from lead poisoning (closed garage, mother frosting a Christmas tree with lead spray-paint). Death brings out the best in the poet, softening the hard edges of exposure. What's left when the shallow form of exhibitionism falls away is an Olds more vulnerable. The poet's great-grandfather, who raised pigs, can't just die of swine flu, say; no, he hangs himself with a hog rope when, flat broke, he can't face having an eighth child to support. She has an understandable obsession with the last days of her second husband, who suffered a prolonged death from cancer:

the fine, worn man almost hori-

zontal a couple of feet above

the layers of carpets, the home-hewn floor,

the cellar ceiling, yards above

the basement porch, another yard

above the complex dirt of the earth.

With her eye on others, she's no longer as self-absorbed as a mollusc, though in some poems expiation seems more like vengeance. You can forgive all the poems on the decrepitude and lumpish collapse of her body, forgive poems that give the prosaic a bad name, forgive slipshod lines and contrived enjambments ("hori-" is meant to rhyme with "floor"), forgive poems where you know what you'll get a mile before you get it.

In this tediously overlong book, Olds offers ten poems in Emily Dickinson's style about visiting her house in Amherst. (For $300, as the poet fails to mention, you can now spend an hour alone in the bedroom where Dickinson wrote many of her poems.) This attempt at a style antithetical to Olds's own is about the only comedy on offer. Consider "Let us Play - Yesterday -/ I a Girl - sent East -/ Pacific to Atlantic -/ Chicago - Betweenst" or "In the Dark Morning/ Not here to See/ Open - Acorns -/ Above the Wet Street." Trying to translate Dickinson for a second-grade reader could produce nothing worse. Olds can't keep the four-three measure of common meter and treats the rhymes as if exact rhyme were optional. Emily broke form and toyed with rhyme, to be sure; but she was never embarrassing. Even more excruciating are the poems self-consciously socially conscious, especially those using that overused word "privilege" ("advantage" would be more neutral). She has nothing to add to the arguments over black lives, climate change, or the Gulf War.

The private brutality in Olds's poetry lies concealed by her open manner, the confessions of the confessional.

The private brutality in Olds's poetry lies concealed by her open manner, the confessions of the confessional. Half a century after this daughter of Lowell and Plath started dragging private trauma into poetry, trauma

reigns supreme, however superficial, however intent on using poetry as a prophylactic purgative of the sorrows of the past. Many victims suffer the muck of despair and depression all their lives; but Olds's revelations, except in the elegies, often remain an uncashed check. Despite all her agitated dramatics, the forensic accounts of her aging body, the twice- or thrice-regurgitated memories of beatings her mother gave her during the Truman administration, her work is often pedestrian, deliberate but dull, poetry for which the term obsessive-compulsive was invented. There's Grand Guignol around every corner; but, when Olds opens the floodgates in *Balladz*, out pours not blood but gruel.

Robin Coste Lewis's debut, Voyage of the Sable Venus (2015), won the National Book Award in Poetry, the first debut to win the award in forty years. Her follow-up, To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness, is an ambitious and potentially brilliant conception she has difficulty bringing to life.4 Her books are ideas foremost, the poems just an afterthought. Anne Carson is a rara avis of that sort, and her ideas are successful once in a handful. Lewis's new poems react to hundreds of photographs her grandmother stuffed into a suitcase, an archive of perhaps a century of black life. Though some of the photographs were tintypes, which would date them from the 1860s to the turn of the century, none was included—nearly all the photos here were taken between the Thirties and the Sixties.

These photographs form the residue of the black diaspora from the South, the migration of millions of former slaves in the decades after the Civil War, which proved, as she says, the "Big Black Bang." Photographs and poems have been printed on glossy photographic paper so heavy that, dropped from the Empire State Building, the book would crush a Yellow Cab or two.

The poet has considerable problems making this work an artistic whole. Of the some two hundred photographs, very few have artistic merit. The photos of Virginia Maier, recently rediscovered, show what can be done by an amateur with a candid eye—that is, remake our way of seeing. I'm a devotee of snapshots; but Lewis's trove consists of flash-in-the-pan candids families keep because they show family. The poet provides no context for them, neither places nor dates. Deep in the acknowledgments, she has hidden away the names of the people she could identify. The subterfuge was obviously intentional—as apparently was the decision not to give us a family tree that would reveal the relations of these folks to Lewis herself.

Isolating the pictures is a grave error, or perhaps just a misguided attempt to leave these black people in the shadows of anonymity, an unfortunate choice, given that blacks have all too often lost their identities to time. Lewis's family moved from Louisiana to Los Angeles in the years after the Great Depression, so the photos record only a small part of the Great Migration. Much of this brave journey was with "segregated suitcases on a segregated train." Though eventually southern California became home to a large number of Southern-born blacks, between the end of the Civil War and 1940 migrants tended to go to New York, Philadelphia, or Chicago, the fertile crescent of Northern black culture.

The really disastrous problem, however, is Lewis's poems, presented *en face* except in a middle section of two-score pages on white paper. Rather than reacting directly to particular photos, Lewis offers woozy, pseudo-profound lines weighed down by abstraction and gassy immensities that never make the absences whole or provide presence for what is missing. It would have been far better to locate the pictures within their past, a past of ancestors enslaved and ripped from their continent, then of descendants forced by hatred and poverty to leave the home that generations had known. The photos are absences the poems do nothing to restore. The subjects who have lost their names join the great crowd of the anonymous with which history is burdened.

The vague, shallow lines of the poems undercut the charged meaning of the best photos, including a striking and much thumbed snapshot of a Los Angeles street corner, *circa* 1955. Lewis's poems live for banality ("every feeling/ has a trillion eyes"), the pithy but silly ("The only language/ I have is/ Language"), the incomprehensible ("Visible// Fate, free will, fore-/ Knowledge absolute. Form/ And dialect/ Edifying as philosophy"), and loopy New Age science:

Quantum entanglement.

Something female inside me knows

that she is revolutionarily expected

to wake up in the middle of the night

and stare through the dark. And wonder.

The sequence in the middle section addresses Matthew Henson, who joined Admiral Peary on seven expeditions to the Arctic, beginning in 1908. Henson learned Inuit as well as how to drive a dogsled, and like Peary he took a "country wife" who bore him a son. (The poems ignore this last scrap of biography.) Lewis may be fixated on Henson, who was black, because he made long, dangerous journeys through a barren land of whiteness, not knowing if he'd return. Henson is too complicated to be a mere symbol. Even here, in the most well-conceived, surprising section of the book, the poems would sometimes humiliate a romance novelist, as in this *mise-en-scène* between the poet and a sidewalk map-seller:

> His eyes look into mine more deeply now. For one quick second, we make love, the way strangers who are not really strangers—they just have never met before—touch each other deep inside with their eyes.

Lewis has the excuse that she's trying to piece together a shattered history; but her taste for helium-filled abstractions and well-stuffed generalizations, as well as for the occasional excruciating pun ("Before the birth of stars—live black matter"), destroys the quiet magnificence of these visual remnants of the past. There were many ways to make this book good, and a few that might have made it great; but Lewis would have had to write better poetry for that. She has squandered a magnificent opportunity, and black poetry will be the poorer for it.

Thomas Kinsella died a little over a year ago at the age of ninety-three. He was at once the consummate insider and outsider. During his life, his poems were influential without being overread, most published in brief pamphlets by Peppercanister Press, the small press he founded for that purpose. Few poets have been so hands-on since Whitman carried his drafts down to the local printer, who ran them off so Walt could revise them. When Kinsella was not raging against humanity, his flat tone revealed his early career as an Irish civil servant, just as Kafka's manner reminds us that he was an insurance adjuster. Last Poems draws together the final five pamphlets, adding later poems and a few revisions of earlier ones, as well as student pieces never republished and a clutch of poems left unfinished.5 This Irish stew, in that hapless way common to posthumous collections, might more than any individual work bring long-earned attention to one of the best Irish poets of the past century.

Very different from the quiet ingratiations of Seamus Heaney or the remnants of mania that pursued Robert Lowell, Kinsella's best poems seem to greet the reader by waving around a grubby beer-mat. Significant things are mentioned matter of factly, implying a previous intimacy less obsequious than cunning. His poems are much like his encounter with a stranger in a bar—"After a few remarks, exchanged as though/ I had been gone only a while,/ he started talking." As the poet says earlier, before winding the story back to its beginning, like a gabbler who doesn't mind telling a story forward and backward,

there was no one else left

who had known all the major figures.

And I had learned to stand near

in case there was something he hadn't said before.

And sometimes there was someone new starting to listen.

As I was that first night.

An old hand at this, Kinsella possessed an old tongue. His presence is riveting in its quiet way, like the dead man seen, his coffin safely in the ground, "his thick back moving off/ familiar among the others." Whether those others are mourners or the dead remains unresolved.

The poet's late work shows how far he had come from the stiff-collared style he was born to. The new poems and tacked-on fragments may frustrate the reader who demands from poems some measure of certainty. Despite Kinsella's artfulness, the beautifully hammered sentences rarely finish what they start. If this rejects what often makes reading pleasurable, that may be the point.

The weakness of the Irishman's work lies in the preachy and semi-philosophical guff to which he was also addicted:

That the life-form as we have it

is inadequate in itself; but that

having discovered the compensatory devices

of Love and the creative and religious imaginations

we should gather in each generation

all the good we can from the past.

This goes on for another dozen lines drier than a scorching day on the Gobi Desert. A longish poem on Marcus Aurelius seems merely a ragbag of rough notes from a lost treatise on citizenship and empire. Such pieces are prosaic without being proof of the dullness (or sullenness) that often attaches to politics when politics infiltrates poetry, old rivals warring over common ground. That poets are almost never politicians or politicians, poets, might prove the case. Byron's rare orations before the House of Lords, especially his maiden speech defending the Luddites, show that he'd never have written like this:

Called upon for decisive positive action,

at which he was more than averagely effective;

but preferring to spend his time in abstract inquiry,

for which he was essentially ungifted;

he kept a private journal, in Greek, for which

he is best remembered.

If this portrait is even close to the emperor, old Verissimus was before his time, as it might serve equally for Sir Humphrey from *Yes, Minister*—but then the musty air of ministerial offices would choke a Caesar.

Though Kinsella's memorable lines are often surrounded by local tar-pits, the language that freshens his best poems is rarely absent for long. When he says, "a raping angel with a playful name/ wipes his wings above a bowl of flame," or "Fate took shape among them as a great queen,/ ravenous and with black wings," the muscular parboiled lines dominate the way only Yeatsian lines can. The detachment of these poems is far more open to horror than to the finer passions. His rendering of the aftermath of a naval battle is made more terrifying by its frigid neutrality:

Then the tidying,

clearing the site, the two sides—by agreement—

collecting their sodden bodies from the tide.

The remaining ships homing among the wreckage.

Groups of prisoners, taken through the day,

put to death—part of the tidying;

the fact recorded without emphasis.

No mention is made of time or place, another mark of ice-bound reserve.

Kinsella's last poems live among the sadness that attends endings, the knowledge that death leads to nothing but death. If the poems seem at times those of a Biblical patriarch, they were the work of a furious stiff-necked modern, not ponderous so much as sometimes marble outside and marble in.

A poet can do very little about voice. Tone, vocabulary, and pacing may be altered after a struggle; but poets must bear with what time and circumstance, even taste, have saddled them. Part of Elizabeth Bishop's charm is that she speaks like a woman you already know. Marianne Moore rattles on about the world like a librarian or biology teacher. Between Williams's folksiness; Pound's burly brusqueness and bluster; and Eliot's pince-nez, high-church manner (or his earlier knockabout humor, eager squalidness, and low-church growl), there was little such poets could do about their voices but succumb. Voice is the helpless expression of personality. Young poets worry about "finding" their voice, but usually the voice is already holding them for ransom.

Ada Limón, appointed poet laureate last year, comes to her poems casually, as if they'd just occurred to her. (It must take more than a little labor to make them sound that way.) Many in *The Hurting Kind* are prosy and more are sheer prose, as poems often are these days; but Limón's gently confiding delivery goes a long way toward making lines ease into the subconscious, where poems work best.[6]

I thought it was the neighbor's cat, back

to clean the clock of the fledgling robins low

in their nest stuck in the dense hedge by the house,

but what came was much stranger, a liquidity

moving, all muscle and bristle: a groundhog

slippery and waddle-thieving my tomatoes, still

green in the morning's shade.

The poet expresses her amusement at what Darwin called the "entangled bank" in the striking language she has made her own: "Clean the clock of the fledgling robins"? "A groundhog/ . . .

waddle-thieving my tomatoes"? Soon after, she gets to the suffering, where she doesn't linger. Her lines end the way they would in a newspaper column, hanging onto a word that by right belongs to the following phrase. She rarely summons the ambiguity and surprise of that foundation text for enjambment, *Paradise Lost*. Instead, she settles for chopped prose.

Limón often starts a poem *in medias res* and ends there, too. It's a tactic that becomes a strategy, but not one that suffers from the repetition, as dropping in on strangers does, at least for the strangers. Poetry keeps these snippets of life from sounding like outtakes from *The New York Times*'s "Metropolitan Diary," which New Yorkers read to remind themselves of their fondest delusion, that New York is just a village; and which villagers read in disappointment that New York is no better than one.

If the poems are often scatty in organization, her voice makes them conversation intensified, the way we hoover up the world in scraps and make structure of it. Though her endings can be casual, they sound like the idea of order. One poem starts, as her best often do, with something that seems just to have occurred to her:

Past the strip malls and the power plants,

out of the holler, past Gun Bottom Road

and Brassfield and before Red Lick Creek,

there's a stream called Drowning Creek where

I saw the prettiest bird I'd seen all year.

She can't wait to tell you, so she tells you. (I know, I know, a poet's casualness is a gesture, and gestures are willy-nilly tactics in disguise; but Limón sells them better than any Fuller Brush salesman or Avon Lady.) The place-names, as commonly in the South, are their own poem. Limón does not prove immune to endings made for endings—the poem closes, "There is a solitude in this world/ I cannot pierce. I would die for it."

The book warms on second look, where the silences fill with meaning.

Her ability over and over to catch the reader off-guard makes her worth close attention. She refers to the "need . . ./ to go on living," and elsewhere, shyly, slyly, to other things held back. The book warms on second look, where the silences fill with meaning. A lovely poem about her stepfather's unexpected kindness makes the case for the triumph of the unspoken. Everywhere there's evidence of the poet's delight in language, from "The wild pansy shoves its persistent face beneath/ the hackberry's shade" to "I'd sit cross-legged/ in the civil twilight's crawl// and wait for the pallid

bats" to "the world walking in, ready to be ravaged, open for business."

Limón is a naturalist in love with the naturalist's world, and countless poems here make plants and animals (minerals, not so much) beings nearly conscious. She's a noticer, as Moore and Bishop were; when she writes, "Bottlebrush trees attract/ the nectar lovers, and we/ capture, capture, capture," that last line is a cunning reference to Bishop's famous triplet in "The Fish." If she can't yet do what Frost did in "The Exposed Nest" and "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," well, who could?

At times I wish Limón would go more frequently beyond observation, wish that she had dropped a dozen or more poems that don't do very much with very much—too many plants stay just plants. There are later poems too dry and flat, mere notations of an hour or a day, taking her pulse without revealing a thing. Still, I'll wander blithely through such lines only to be brought up short by an ending like "I thought suffering kept things interesting. How funny/ that I called it love and the whole time it was pain." If *The Hurting Kind* doesn't reach the depths or breadth of her previous book, *The Carrying* (2018), it's like hating the hawk for not being a condor.

1. _ *An Ordinary Life*, by B. H. Fairchild; W. W. Norton, 72 pages, $26.95.
2. _ *Dragons*, by Devin Johnston; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 85 pages, $26.
3. _ *Balladz*, by Sharon Olds; Knopf, 175 pages, $30.
4. _ *To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness*, by Robin Coste Lewis; Knopf, 384 pages, $35.
5. _ *Last Poems*, by Thomas Kinsella; Carcanet Poetry, 136 pages, $18.99.
6. _ *The Hurting Kind*, by Ada Limón; Milkweed Editions, 107 pages, $24.

William Logan's latest collection of criticism, *Broken Ground: Poetry and the Demon of History*, was published in spring 2021 by Columbia University Press.

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