Carolyln Forché’s reputation rests largely on her second book, The Country Between Us (1981), which dragged El Salvador’s dirty civil-war into poetry. The problem with political poetry has long been that, if the politics don’t overwhelm the art, art overwhelms the politics. Forché demonstrated, most skillfully in her best-known poem, “The Colonel,” a way into the political that made shock the unbreathable atmosphere. In the Lateness of the World returns to that political register at a time when the West—post-9/11, post-Iraq, pre-endgame Afghanistan, and now mid-pandemic—has become increasingly deaf to the rest of the world.1

Forché’s skill was to take a faux-naïf speaker (or, if you believe her recent memoir, What You Have Heard Is True [2019], one embarrassing in her lack of guile), and expose her like a photographic plate to monstrous cruelty and violence. Her new poems are a record of voices, hers and others, speaking in crisis:

Leave, yes, we’ll obey the leaflets, but go where?
To the sea to be eaten, to the shores of Europe to be caged?
To camp misery and camp remain here. I ask you then, where?
You tell me you are a poet. If so, our destination is the same.
I find myself now the boatman, driving a taxi at the end of the world.
I will see that you arrive safely, my friend, I will get you there.

Here the poet becomes part of the indictment. If, as Auden claimed, “Poetry makes nothing happen,” that nothing, too, is political. Unfortunately, her final lines too often turn toward a reassuring comfort out of kilter with the savage scenes she portrays. That unwelcome sentiment,
which also disfigured the end of “The Colonel,” shows the interference of artfulness in the face of horror. The uncensored scene is always more terrifying, in photographs of the Civil War dead or footage of Cossacks being executed by Bolsheviks.

These poems, which soon turn to family history and elegy, have been written in clean and supple prose, but prose with little interior. As the poems grow longer in language that demands a naked response, too much effort is spent courting the picturesque:

Moonlight taps on the puppet maker’s hut, the tip of a brush

touching hide, light falling into water from an egret’s wings

like tears on glass. Stones dusted with ash. Taps as if someone were there,

attempting to wake us up. A bell ringing in a tomb of cloud.

Rich in image but too precious by half, the poems drawn from the poet’s life seem miniature fables in a world starved of adjectives. It’s gilding, not refìnèd gold, but recycled cardboard. The only way forward in many of these poems is through a thicket of lists seen through a lens smeared with tears:

The city of your childhood rises between steppe and sea, wheat and light,

white with the dust of cockleshells, stargazers, and bones of pipefish,

city of limestone soft enough to cut with a hatchet, where the sea

unfurls and acacias brought by Greeks on their ships

turn white in summer. So yes, you remember, this is the city you lost,

city of smugglers and violinists, chess players and monkeys,

and on the shopping list goes. Her lists may be aide-mémoire, but they stop the poems cold.

Despite a taste for the “poetic,” Forché’s poems oddly lack intimacy, no matter the subject—she speaks in the voice of a documentary narrator, approaching scenes in a hazmat suit. A voice issuing from the blank margins of history textbooks is fine if you’re a history textbook; but many of the poems suffer from jellied passivity. A poem in which she details her collection of objets d’art—monk’s scroll, hand-woven rug, one-armed statue of St. Dominic, piled up like the inventory of a curiosity shop—has a chilly detachment and an uplifting ending (“the souls of others, who glimmer beside us/ for an instant, here by chance and radiant with significance”) that places the poem between a collector’s humble-brags and an outtake from Antiques Roadshow.

Forché’s faith in the downtrodden—in her sympathies as well as acts of witness—makes her closer
to a thirties writer like Dos Passos than to Auden or Eliot, whose political art still has much to say, where the poems of *In the Lateness of the World* (with that typical hint of apocalypse and belatedness) had their say before they were written. In the haze of neural language, however, in the dreamy, floaty world of reports of rumors and rumors of reports, the reader is a few times jarred awake by lines like “a tongue/ understood by children who make bulletproof vests out of cardboard” or “Even the clocks have run out of time.” More rarely, a poem—say, “The Ghost of Heaven”—pays off despite the grandstanding, despite the prosy clatter, despite the soulful ending, and perhaps even because of the vacancy of personality. It pays off because Forché is still able to shock as she lives among the ghosts.

Classicist at Oxford, granddaughter of an earl, Alice Oswald didn’t publish her first collection until she was forty. Her second, *Dart* (2002), followed the path of the eponymous river from source to sea, winning the T. S. Eliot prize, the British equivalent of the Pulitzer. The most striking of her later books, *Memorial* (2011), was a shrunken version of the Iliad, all the palaver boiled off, leaving only heroic similes and scores of the dead. Oswald is now the Oxford professor of poetry, inheriting the position held by Paul Muldoon, Geoffrey Hill, and W. H. Auden.

In *Nobody: A Rhapsody to Homer*, she returns to epic with her version of the *Odyssey*. (You could say that she also returns to water, if she ever left.) Her fitful, exhausting, sometimes arresting and sometimes infuriating performance is an assemblage of fragments, stuck together with fish glue, now woozily in one voice, now in another. The witty premise comes from lines in *Odyssey* 3, where, after Agamemnon’s departure for Troy, a hapless poet who failed to protect Clytemnestra from being seduced is marooned on a desert island.

These lines give Oswald all the license she needs for her shape-shifting poem—that every poet is an island may be the burden. In a time of declining readership, when young poets prefer to write in the present tense because they’ve lost a mastery of tenses, the poet might as well write for gannets and seagulls. Poets are isolated—marooned, even—by the terms of their art, which at its highest levels requires a degree of training in the quarrels and settlements of English syntax.

*Noboby* is wind scoured, the phrases feathered into sentences, or distant cousins of sentences, the punctuation blown clear like sand from a miner’s gold dust.

With crooked elbows walking and small steps

she hops to these hollow limestone caves

where the seals breathing out the sea’s bad breath

snuffle about all afternoon in sleeping bags.

You might say the whole poem is a rumor—as if the poet had taken to heart the etymology of “rhapsody,” in ancient Greek the reciting or composing of epic. *Nobody* might be thought a degraded form of the original, from which much has been lost or forgotten, just as Homer’s
description of the Mycenaean Age shows almost no knowledge of a culture half a millennium gone.

If you embrace the sea as your element, you must be prepared to drown in it. Oswald’s speakers are as shifty and hard to grasp as Proteus, who appears with Odysseus, Athena, Poseidon, and more of the usual suspects. They are sometimes identified in a whispery, ear-to-the-seashell way; but often enough the reader senses the change in speaker like the change in direction of a fall breeze. They all speak alike, as if epic characters were fragments of an unbroken whole. Randall Jarrell said of Robert Lowell’s *Mills of the Kavanaughs*, “You can’t tell David from Bathsheba without a program: they both (like the majority of Mr. Lowell’s characters) talk just like Mr. Lowell.” Ditto, Ms. Oswald.

The poet has no intention of producing anything like the *Odyssey*—she’s merely composing an intelligent, often stunning variation upon it.

There are said to be microscopic insects in the eye who speak Greek and these invisible ambassadors of vision never see themselves but fly at flat surfaces and back again with pigment caught in their shivering hair-like receptors and this is how the weather gets taken to and fro and the waves pass each other from one colour to the next.

“Who says such things?,” you might well ask. Who cares? Oswald indulges in the same fearless anachronism that made Christopher Logue’s descants on the *Iliad* fizz with jarring unworldliness. (Oswald tours a Mediterraneaen that offers silverware, contrails, polystyrene, and white-collar workers—you know, just the way Odysseus left it.) You must be willing to succumb to the force of the poetry, much though the literal mind may resist. One of the reasons I admire her style is that it’s not housebroken.

The more quickly you read Oswald, the more insubstantial and featherweight she seems, like an endless batt of fiberglass insulation. If you read her that way, you don’t risk being seduced by the music of purpose and can’t embrace the splendid visual imagination and spatial sensibility—she uses the broken line better than most of the avant-garde. You’ll also miss the sidewarding notions that fall into the poem: “the sun sinking through bladderwrack,” “a boat appears full of rat-eyed sailors/ squinting from watching too much sea-film,” “a permanent rain-cloud crizzling the sea,” or “this is only the water/ talking to us in the voice of amnesia.” It’s the kind of book that makes you want to keep quoting.
The structural gravity of Oswald’s books is never enough to draw the parts, however gorgeous or uncanny, into more than superficial relation. The poem, as crafty as Odysseus himself, sails through interminable fog, where here and there, before you’re gobbled up by Scylla, you can make out figures that sometimes prove human and sometimes just more fog. Oswald’s only misstep is to translate the Nekyia passage from *Odyssey* 11:

> Then we went down to the sea to our black boat
first we dragged the boat into the lively water
and set up mast and sails and drove the sheep on board
then climbed in ourselves depressed crying lukewarm tears.

Accurate enough, it offers no challenge to Pound’s translation, which opened *The Cantos*:

> And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas.

You don’t go up against giants unless, like Odysseus, you have a trick up your tunic—in his case, falsely confessing that your name is “Nobody,” which led to the greatest joke in ancient literature. That does not diminish this beautiful, frustrating, fever dream of a book.

Hannah Sullivan also made a late start as a poet, also trained in Classics at Oxbridge, and also won the T. S. Eliot Prize, a starry thing for a first book. Her Three Poems made a big splash in Britain when it appeared two years ago. Late starts can be fast starts—think of A Boy’s Will and North of Boston, published when Frost was thirty-nine and forty; or Harmonium, when Stevens was forty-three. Sullivan’s opening poem, “You, Very Young in New York,” might be called a Bildungsgedicht, though it’s unlikely to cause the suicides laid at the doorstep of Goethe’s roman, and not just because late eighteenth-century Europe is not twenty-first-century New York:

> Lying awake in the fat pulse of November rain, as the bond market falls
And the art market gets nervous, starts to freeze up, and hipsters
Keep on trying to sell huckleberry jam from Brooklyn and novelists
Keep on going to Starbucks to craft their sagas, adjusting their schemas,
Picking like pigeons at the tail of the morning croissant.

The poet has been praised as an urban anthropologist, and admittedly her Brooklyn hipsters are hilarious. The poem, however, is often a topless tower of lists, the way Homer’s sagas were once considered a bunch of stitched-together folk songs.

Sullivan’s darkly amusing view of the manners and mores of Manhattan can’t carry the burden of style imposed by such long, prosaic lines. It makes things no better when she has a go at rhyming: “Checking the cricket scores on his computer, reading Thoreau, Wondering what New York looks like at night, in snow. // He is applying to Columbia, nyu Stern, and Stanford gsb.// He thinks of going abroad as an attempt to live deliberately.” The lines are not cast into fourteeners, but they’re reminiscent of the clunkiest passages in Chapman’s *Iliads*—for instance, “‘But some Greeke bosome it shall take, and make him give his ghost.’/ This bragge the Grecians stomackt much, but Telamonius most.”

Sullivan is halfway between Bukowski and Proust as a social observer, not as cheerfully blowsy as the former, revealing none of the slow-burning emotion of the latter. Her poems are devoted to the way we live now (without Trollope’s salvation of plot), which already seems the way we lived then—what yesterday was up to is now food for footnotes. The poem might provide a novelist with background color, but what’s the point of collecting bits and bobs if all you end up with are jars of pickled minutiae in mini-storage? Sullivan’s roving eye has some of the panache of young Auden: “Negronis at weddings, gin and tonics on first dates, Manhattans before/ Moving upstairs”; “you go in a cab to the Bohemian Beer Garden/ And eat pink, flayed kielbasa, penile and artery-hardening.” There’s a tingle of pleasure in every detail, but after three hundred lines you feel you’ve been needled to death by hipster mosquitos.

“Repeat Until Time,” the middle poem, may be variations on fragments of Heraclitus with a numbering borrowed from Wittgenstein, but mostly it’s a scrappy meditation on the most famous Heraclitean proposition, often translated as “You can’t step into the same river twice.”

The horse chestnut gets on tediously with its leaves,
Provides spiked toys, diets middle-aged in winter,
Gets low-carb skeletal, squash lean, only to
Have another go with the old Cool Whip come spring.

*Cool Whip!* That superb description of spring’s spume of blossoms shows what the style in this wayward, wandering book might become, if she could get out of her own way.

Sullivan is a collector, a magpie happy with any shiny thing; but she scarcely seems to know why
she’s collecting, she puts the beer-can rings, bashed pennies, and gumball-machine baubles to so little use. Her descriptions ramble on, no longer for the sake of the poem, just for the sake of looking, looking, looking:

The pollarded tree is subtler, its season a fungal autumn.

The branches that were husbanded will never grow clean.

But stunted they stay, an old woman’s cobbled knees,

Thick legs beneath a butterball skirt, a green flare,

Her skirts lifted high as she dances to wedding music.

Her chief virtue is that she’s willing to swallow whole, like the Leviathan, whatever sea wrack or unlucky prophet comes along, not caring whether it’s poetic or not. Her vice is that there’s too much decoration, not enough cake.

“The Sandpit after Rain,” her final poem, plays her pregnancy against the death of her father; but the moments where she might dive beneath the surface of flotsam and jetsam are another excuse for flaunting language just for show: “There was that larval froth in the morning in the garden,/ Bubbles of spit on the black rosemary sticks,/ And in the afternoon the forelocks of a crocus.” It’s gorgeous, but you wonder why she hasn’t learned the lesson of Marianne Moore or Amy Clampitt (another late starter), our best poets of the visual—that all the sights in the world are nothing if they don’t lead somewhere.

Much of life is trivial—but so is the way most people speak, and the novelist or poet can give only an artful simulacrum if the reader isn’t to run screaming from the room. My holiday snaps are mementi imbued with meaning, yours an unspeakable bore. There are places where Sullivan realizes this, stray passages that suggest an interior life of terrors, secrets, and consolations. She cannot remain a Pepys or Boswell of trifles.

The Edward Hirsch who emerges in his poems is helpful, courteous, kind, brave, clean, and a little guilt-ridden—in other words, a Boy Scout mensch with some tragedy in him. Stranger by Night takes a retrospective view of a life nearing seventy, the gaze of a poet reaching the age of descent.

When you write the story

of being a father

don’t leave out the joy

of romping up and down
the stairs together
or curving a wiffle ball
across the hallway
or sneaking
past the poor dog
who has fallen asleep
under the grand piano.

A grand piano, eh? Not in our two-bedroom ranch. The problem isn’t the piano but the studied blandness of a scene in characterless prose, fresh copy for a Pampers advertisement. Hirsch mistakes plain speech for universality, the way sunstruck pioneers mistook the haze of the Great American Desert for the Rockies.

Hirsch’s poems insist on the purity of the artless. There’s scarcely an anecdote here whose homespun nattering isn’t flattened to a drone. Even when the poem comes calling with a measure of observation and care, the result is blanched of vividness:

My friends don’t get buried
in cemeteries anymore, their wives
can’t stand the sadness
of funerals, the spectacle
of wreaths and prayers, tear-soaked
speeches delivered from the altar,
all those lies and encomiums,
the suffocating smell of flowers
filling everything.

Memories ought to possess some pungency or richness (even short lives have that), but here instead of life enacted we’ve been handed a building inspector’s report. Hirsch knows how to put a poem together, more or less; but he goes out of his way never to find a captivating verb or adjective. Such prose is as dull as only empty gestures of art can be. It’s not clear if those unburied friends are laid out in tombs on the family estate or simply cremated. Shortly afterward, Hirsch
manages to have two poems with burials in them.

Poets in their last decades often turn to elegy. Lowell, Heaney, Walcott, and many another found in the death of old friends and lovers the grist of art. Memory is always memorializing, by nature if not necessity—poetry rarely reaches any depth, confined to the present tense. Yet as Hirsch pays his respects at the passing of literary friends (William Meredith, Mark Strand, Philip Levine) there’s little in this back-of-the-napkin work to say who these men were, their lives as poets going almost unmentioned, or what they meant to Hirsch. The homage to Levine in a series on Hirsch’s teenage jobs—garbage collector, railyard shift-worker, forklift driver, the lives narrowly missed—has none of the Detroit poet’s investment in the melancholy of working-class labor. Levine’s dark authority of feeling has been denatured and erased.

Only the poems about Hirsch’s brief days teaching schoolchildren in the coal-mining stratum of Pennsylvania attack the carapace of manners that conceals so much here.

I drove along Stony Creek
past the coal piles
and the abandoned mine land
to a little company town
without a company,
a community
where I parked the car
in front of a church
in foreclosure.

Soon “it was time/ to drive home again.” Surely there was more to teaching the children of the poor and forgotten. These sketches are muted, half-abandoned stories stopped midway through. Hirsch might have written a memoir about that place, those thwarted children; but if he can’t make fading snapshots memorable in the close quarters of a poem there’s no reason they’d fare better in prose.

Instead of dredging the shallows of his poems, or finding the bearable unbearable, Hirsch all too often maunders along for a dozen or two short phrasal lines, then finishes with a little poetic twirl: “a god, a father/ in an open cage/ sailing across the sky,” “O spirit of poetry,/ souls of those I have loved,/ come back to teach me again,” “we could stand there/ together under the stars,/ alone with the abyss.” This is less the icing on the cake than the surrey with the fringe on top.

Hirsch has a bemedaled résumé: MacArthur fellow, chancellor of the Academy of American Poets,
winner of a prize or two, and for the last two decades president of the Guggenheim Foundation. If poetry has an Establishment, he’s a leading member. Yet his poems have lost whatever traction and personality they had four decades ago. If that’s the price of success, it’s too high.

Callimachus, the drippingly clever, at times confounding poet who lived and breathed artifice when Egypt still possessed an empire, was born a decade or so after the death of Alexander the Great. Though under the Ptolemies the poet held an appointment at the Library of Alexandria, most of his apparently extensive work has been lost. Only half-a-dozen hymns and a few dozen epigrams survive more or less intact, along with a dusty pile of fragments sifted from the rubbish heaps of Oxyrhynchus.

Stephanie Burt, the poet and Harvard professor, has translated and radically adapted the ancient poet in *After Callimachus*. She has enough ancient Greek to get by—but not enough, she admits, to understand on her own, much less translate, a poet so difficult. Burt has relied on a little help from her friends, never bad things for a translator to have. Largely employing the old Loeb editions, she pulls and pushes Callimachus like a batch of saltwater taffy. I see, not least in her Imitator’s Note, a vigorous head nod toward Robert Lowell’s *Imitations*, and evidence elsewhere that she has taken to heart the violent translations of Ezra Pound and Christopher Logue.

The sad thing is that after years of effort so many of the translations sound like this:

Apollo has come to our house party, and Aphrodite,

    and also karaoke.

Whoever stays up till dawn

    goes home with the panettone,

or anything else left over, or anyone,

    provided he or she or they want to go home.

Karaoke is a nice touch, and there are similarly giddy touches throughout this exhausting book. They’re overwhelmed, however, by long stretches of leaden prose trying to pass for translation.

The next two

    adult women in the temple,

the planners of next year’s procession, were Katia,

    granddaughter of Cydippe, from Milesia,

and Yana from Myus. They came
holding maps, only slowly meeting each other’s gaze.

protected by winter blankets that doubled as cloaks.

Imagine what Pound would have done with that, and you’ll see the difference between earnestness and genius. This is still a far cry from Burt at her silliest: “I am a superhero with mask, gloves, and boots on,/ an action figure who comes with a burger and fries,” lines translated by A. W. Mair in 1921 as “I, a Hero, am set by the doors of Eëtion of Amphipolis—a small statue by a small vestibule, with coiling snake and a sword—no more.” The Callimachus certainly needs jazzing up, if you like jazzing up; but the best choice for replacement might not have been a plastic collectible from McDonald’s.

Burt makes Callimachus’s joky little *Epigram* 8 a diatribe: “The fuckers renamed an airport for a tyrant/ who wouldn’t stop lying, and couldn’t stand people like me.” (Burt is transgender.) The modern perhaps goes too far in refurbishing the ancient Greek, but then she started with an epigram that might be rendered as:

A boy brought flowers to his stepmother’s grave,

Hoping death had changed her.

As he knelt down, her gravestone crushed him.

Once a stepmother, always a stepmother.

Burt’s transformations ought to have given Callimachus a lot of snap and pizzazz; but, after *lip gloss, pill splitter, shaggy-dog stories, NBD, tween, emo,* and *Tumblr* wandered through, I began to wonder if her commitment was too much or not enough. (What works for Oswald seems desperate, and a little despondent, in Burt.) Many of the poems, often far longer than the originals, have been inflated by a tire pump—and her more-or-less literal translations remain fiercely at odds with those that drag the poet into the future by the scruff of the neck. Worse, though she says, “I . . . tried to make metrical patterns in English that do some of the work I hear in the Greek,” those rhythms prove inaudible, the prose having harrowed them out. Though spatchcocked rhymes have been slapped on here and there, the poems plod on without any of the lightness of bearing necessary to bring the ancient past within hailing distance. There are only traces of a sense of humor, and the jokes cracked are rarely worth oiling the nutcracker.

Yet every time I almost gave up on her Herculean labors, Burt surprised me with some witty turn: “in his youth he spent too much time pining/ for girls who would rather be trees” or “I want to go home, paint my nails until they iridesce,/ clamp on my headphones, and pray to Taylor Swift.” Such moments are not enough, but they show what this book might have been.

It’s hard to dislike Robert Hass’s poems—the laid-back manner with a hint of goofiness; the handling of even thorny subjects without affectation, as if the poem had just eased into a warm
bath; even the irritating charm and good cheer. His poems would be impossible to imitate unless you were Robert Hass—substitute the names of most American poets and it wouldn’t be true. Yet in many of his books, which don’t come frequently, there are poems that look lazy and half-baked, as if he’d lost interest partway through or pursued something not worth pursuing.

*Summer Snow*, the former poet laureate’s first collection of new poems in thirteen years, acknowledges that, had his editor not used a cattle prod, Hass might never have gotten round to bundling them up. (It’s not as if a man in his eightieth year has a lot of time to waste fiddling.) He’s not exactly a tortoise, but he’s more tortoise than hare. *Summer Snow* is a delightfully ramshackle collection of odds and sods, thrown together more than calculated. Some poems seem worked up from notes, without bothering to sift them—you feel you might just be reading rough drafts of rough drafts. Yet when Hass goes on too long, you think, “Oh, that’s just his way”—and he does go on too long, and it’s difficult not to forgive him.

There are poems here that no one else could write, and poems no one else would write—and sometimes it’s not easy to tell the difference. In a sequence about death—“Death in Childhood,” “Death in Adolescence,” and so on—despite the titles, he allows the deaths to sneak up on you. The most heartbreaking describes a little boy on a beach, fascinated by shells. The boy carefully explains to the poet, while intently looking at a particular shell, “that the successive ridges on the curvature/ were the stages of its growth, and what form/ of carbon calcium was, and how evolution/ had worked its way up to invertebrates.” Having mentioned the death only obliquely, Hass ends:

> He had to have been a very avid listener.

It seemed to me to mean that he’d been loved,

and wanted to be like his father, which was why

it was so delicious to him to be talking

to almost any adult about all there is to know.

The reader not moved by that won’t be moved by anything—and yet it’s a peculiar thing to be moved by, not the death, but the wasted will to knowledge. Hass’s poems often have curious points to make, but they never seem curious once he makes them. He can draw nature like one of those Dutch specialists in flowers, water droplets, lizards, and insects—but the poems are never really about flowers, even when they are about flowers: “There were lots of them. A bright white yarrow,/ And the fireweed was the brilliant magenta/ Some women put on their lips for summer evenings.” The limpid style, measured to its effects, never struggles. If the poems don’t try very hard, it would be tough to reproduce them without the effects seeming forced.

One very droll piece has the poet giving Eugenio Montale a raft of misinformation about America. The best poems, however, are less predictable, just the happenstance of life twisted into poetry.
“An Argument about Poetics” (the title goes on at length), for instance, has a ludicrous premise—and about all you can say is that formally the poem starts in one place and ends in another. You might learn from Hass everything you should not do in a poem, and equally everything you should. Even when his work rambles on, or shatters in the middle or at both ends, you read him because of the way he thinks. Hass could make the phone book sound like War and Peace. Beneath the aw-shucks manner, there’s a deep sea of learning he rarely visits.

Hass should probably have set fire to the last sections of this overlong book (made longer by starting every poem on a recto page, leaving two dozen versos blank). There’s a stone-faced diatribe against war, two poems (one at a protest march against drones, another at a conference on peace, where at least he has the sense to say, “The power of art to communicate among peoples,/ Blah, blah, blah”) that seem to have started in diaries and should have stayed there. Worse, there are a pair of mediocre translations from Anglo-Saxon and a witless survey of the subjects of modernist poems. Even so, toward the end there’s a poem about a writer talking about writing, an unpromising notion Hass manages to make indelible. You have to forgive him for a lot; but there, and in “Death in Childhood,” “Harvest: Those Who Die Early in Their Middle Years,” “An Argument About Poetics,” “Smoking in Heaven,” “Three Dreams About Buildings,” and a few others, Hass shows how good, even how astonishing, he can be. There are few poets as intelligent in the best of times, and we are now among the worst.

1 In the Lateness of the World, by Carolyn Forché; Penguin, 77 pages, $24.

2 Nobody: A Rhapsody to Homer, by Alice Oswald; W. W. Norton, 78 pages, $25.95.


4 Stranger by Night, by Edward Hirsch; Alfred A. Knopf, 65 pages, $27.

5 After Callimachus, by Stephanie Burt; Princeton University Press, 175 pages, $24.95.

6 Summer Snow, by Robert Hass; Ecco, 178 pages, $27.99.

William Logan’s new collection of criticism, Broken Ground: Poetry and the Demon of History, will be published next month by Columbia University Press.

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