

# *Do You Write Poetry?*

ENTER TO WIN

## *The WLT Poetry Contest*

The Student Advisory Board and editors of *World Literature Today*, OU's award-winning magazine of international literature and culture, are sponsoring a poetry contest in conjunction with the upcoming visit of Gerald Stern and Anne Marie Macari.

On November 16, the three winners will read their poems in front of Stern, Macari, and a public audience.

### h o w t o e n t e r

- Open to currently enrolled OU students pursuing any major, graduate or undergraduate
- Must be able to attend the public reading on November 16, 3-5pm, in Old Science Hall
- Ask your professor for the PDF packet of poems by Stern and Macari.
- Write up to five poems inspired by their work – imagery, use of language, theme, voice, etc.
- Type your poems in a Word document, one poem per page; be sure to include your name, phone number, and email address.
- By **November 9**, send your submission via email attachment to Kayley Gillespie, vice president of the *WLT* Student Advisory Board: **Kayley.M.Gillespie-1@ou.edu**.

A committee of students, in consultation with *WLT*'s editor in chief, will select a shortlist of finalists, and the winners will be chosen by Mr. Stern and Ms. Macari. Winners will be notified by November 12.

### d e a d l i n e

**5pm**

**November 9, 2012**

### p r i z e s

- 1st place – \$200
- 2nd place – \$100
- 3rd place – \$50

### p u b l i c r e a d i n g

3-5pm

November 16, 2012

Lab Theatre

Old Science Hall 200

### Questions?

Daniel Simon, Editor in Chief

*World Literature Today*

325-0317 | Monnet 102

[www.worldliteraturetoday.com](http://www.worldliteraturetoday.com)

The University of Oklahoma welcomes to the Norman campus

**Anne Marie Macari**  
and  
**Gerald Stern**

*Thursday, November 15, 2012*

**7-9pm – Poetry Reading and Reception**  
Performing Arts Studio | Norman Depot

*Friday, November 16, 2012*

**3-5pm – A Conversation with the Authors**  
Lab Theatre | Old Science Hall 200

*No pre-registration required – seating available on a first-come, first-served basis*

*Sponsors*

President David L. Boren  
The Mark Allen Everett Poetry Series  
The FOCAS Distinguished Lecture Series (Friends of the College of Arts & Sciences)  
Barbara B. and William G. Paul Enrichment Fund \* James H. and Joann H. Holden Enrichment Fund  
The Judaic & Israel Studies Program  
The Department of Modern Languages, Literatures & Linguistics  
South Central MLA  
*World Literature Today*

For more information, contact the offices of *WLT* at 405-325-4531.  
All events are free and open to the public.

## About the Authors

### Gerald Stern

Gerald Stern was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1925. His recent books of poetry include *Early Collected Poems: 1965–1992* (W. W. Norton, 2010), *Save the Last Dance: Poems* (2008); *Everything Is Burning* (2005); *American Sonnets* (2002); *Last Blue: Poems* (2000); *This Time: New and Selected Poems* (1998), which won the National Book Award; *Odd Mercy* (1995); and *Bread Without Sugar* (1992), winner of the Paterson Poetry Prize.

His other books include *Leaving Another Kingdom: Selected Poems* (1990); *Two Long Poems* (1990); *Lovesick* (1987); *Paradise Poems* (1984); *The Red Coal* (1981), which received the Melville Caine Award from the Poetry Society of America; *Lucky Life*, the 1977 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets, which was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award; and *Rejoicings* (1973).

About his work, the poet Toi Derricotte has said, “Gerald Stern has made an immense contribution to American poetry. His poems are not only great poems, memorable ones, but ones that get into your heart and stay there. Their lyrical ecstasies take you up for that moment so that your vision is changed, you are changed. The voice is intimate, someone unafraid to be imperfect. Stern’s poems sing in praise of the natural world, and in outrage of whatever is antihuman.”

His honors include the *Paris Review*’s Bernard F. Connors Award, the Bess Hokin Award from Poetry, the Ruth Lilly Prize, four National Endowment for the Arts grants, the Pennsylvania Governor’s Award for Excellence in the Arts, the Jerome J. Shestack Poetry Prize from *American Poetry Review*, and fellowships from the

Academy of American Poets, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. In 2005 Stern was selected to receive the Wallace Stevens Award for mastery in the art of poetry.

Stern was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2006. For many years a teacher at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop, Stern now lives in Lambertville, New Jersey. ([www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org))

### Anne Marie Macari

Anne Marie Macari was educated at Oberlin College (BA, 1977) and Sarah Lawrence College (MFA, 1999). Her most recent book of poems, *She Heads Into the Wilderness* (Autumn House, 2008) was preceded by *Gloryland* (Alice James, 2005) and *Ivory Cradle*, which won the 2000 APR/Honickman first book prize. She is also the recipient of the James Dickey Award for poetry from *Five Points* magazine. Macari’s poetry and essays have been published in many magazines and anthologies, including the *Iowa Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *American Poetry Review*, and *Field*, and she has coedited with Carey Salerno the forthcoming anthology, *Lit from Inside: Forty Years of Poetry from Alice James Books*.

Macari founded, directed, and taught in the Drew University MFA Program in Poetry and Poetry in Translation from 2008 to 2012. She has been a member of the cooperative board of Alice James Books for over eight years (two years as president of the board), and she started an initiative at YouthBuild in Trenton, New Jersey, to bring poetry and poets to the underserved community.

ALSO BY GERALD STERN

Odd Mercy

Bread Without Sugar

Leaving Another Kingdom: Selected Poems

Two Long Poems

Lovesick

Paradise Poems

The Red Coal

Lucky Life

Rejoicings

# This Time

New  
and  
Selected  
Poems

Gerald Stern



W · W · Norton & Company

New York London

## *Behaving Like a Jew*

When I got there the dead opossum looked like  
an enormous baby sleeping on the road.  
It took me only a few seconds—just  
seeing him there—with the hole in his back  
and the wind blowing through his hair  
to get back again into my animal sorrow.  
I am sick of the country, the bloodstained  
bumpers, the stiff hairs sticking out of the grilles,  
the slimy highways, the heavy birds  
refusing to move;  
I am sick of the spirit of Lindbergh over everything,  
that joy in death, that philosophical  
understanding of carnage, that  
concentration on the species.  
—I am going to be unappeased at the opossum's death.  
I am going to behave like a Jew  
and touch his face, and stare into his eyes,  
and pull him off the road.  
I am not going to stand in a wet ditch  
with the Toyotas and the Chevies passing over me  
at sixty miles an hour  
and praise the beauty and the balance  
and lose myself in the immortal lifestream  
when my hands are still a little shaky  
from his stiffness and his bulk  
and my eyes are still weak and misty  
from his round belly and his curved fingers  
and his black whiskers and his little dancing feet.

## *Straus Park*

If you know about the Babylonian Jews  
coming back to their stone houses in Jerusalem,  
and if you know how Ben Franklin fretted  
after the fire on Arch Street,  
and if you yourself go crazy when you walk through the old shell  
on Stout's Valley Road,  
then you must know how I felt when I saw Stanley's Cafeteria  
boarded up and the sale sign out;  
and if you yourself mourned when you saw the back wall settling  
and the first floor gone and the stairway gutted  
then you must know how I felt when I saw the iron fence  
and the scaffold and the plastic sheets in the windows.

—Don't go to California yet!

Come with me to Stanley's and spend your life  
weeping in the small park on 106th Street.  
Stay with me all night! I will give you  
breast of lamb with the fat dripping over the edges;  
I will give you the prophet of Baal  
making the blood come.

Don't go to California with its big rotting sun  
and its oleanders;

I will give you Sappho  
preparing herself for the wind;

I will give you Mussolini  
sleeping in his chair;

I will give you Voltaire  
walking in the snow.

—This is the dark green bench  
where I read Yeats,

and that is the fountain where the Deuteronomist sat  
with his eyes on the nymph's stomach.

I want you to come here one more time  
before you go to California;

I want you to see the Hotel Regent again  
and the Edison Theater  
and the Cleopatra Fruit Market.  
Take the iron fence with you  
when you go into the desert.  
Take Voltaire and the Deuteronomist  
and the luscious nymph.  
Do not burn again for nothing.  
Do not cry out again in clumsiness and shame.

*Blue Skies, White Breasts, Green Trees*

What I took to be a man in a white beard  
turned out to be a woman in a silk babushka  
weeping in the front seat of her car;  
and what I took to be a seven-branched candelabrum  
with the wax dripping over the edges  
turned out to be a horse's skull  
with its teeth sticking out of the sockets.  
It was my brain fooling me,  
sending me false images,  
turning crows into leaves  
and corpses into bottles,  
and it was my brain that betrayed me completely,  
sending me entirely uncoded material,  
for what I thought was a soggy newspaper  
turned out to be the first Book of Concealment, written in English,  
and what I thought was a grasshopper on the windshield  
turned out to be the Faithful Shepherd chewing blood,  
and what I thought was, finally, the real hand of God  
turned out to be only a guy wire and a  
pair of broken sunglasses.  
I used to believe the brain did its work  
through faithful charges and I lived in sweet surroundings for the brain.  
I thought it needed blue skies, white breasts, green trees,  
to excite and absorb it,  
and I wandered through the golf courses dreaming of pleasure  
and struggled through the pool dreaming of happiness.  
Now if I close my eyes I can see the uncontrolled waves  
closing and opening of their own accord  
and I can see the pins sticking out in unbelievable places,  
and I can see the two lobes floating like two old barrels on the Hudson.  
I am ready to reverse everything now  
for the sake of the brain.  
I am ready to take the woman with the white scarf

in my arms and stop her moaning,  
and I am ready to light the horse's teeth,  
and I am ready to stroke the dry leaves.  
For it was kisses, and only kisses,  
and not a stone knife in the neck that ruined me,  
and it was my right arm, full of power and judgment,  
and not my left arm twisted backwards to express vagrancy,  
and it was the separation that I made,  
and not the rain on the window  
or the pubic hairs sticking out of my mouth,  
and it was not really New York falling into the sea,  
and it was not Nietzsche choking on an ice-cream cone,  
and it was not the president lying dead again on the floor,  
and it was not the sand covering me up to my chin,  
and it was not my thick arms ripping apart an old floor,  
and it was not my charm, breaking up an entire room.  
It was my delicacy, my stupid delicacy,  
and my sorrow.  
It was my ghost, my old exhausted ghost,  
that I dressed in white, and sent across the river,  
weeping and weeping and weeping  
inside his torn sheet.

## *Lucky Life*

Lucky life isn't one long string of horrors  
and there are moments of peace, and pleasure, as I lie in between the blows.  
Lucky I don't have to wake up in Phillipsburg, New Jersey,  
on the hill overlooking Union Square or the hill overlooking  
Kuebler Brewery or the hill overlooking SS. Philip and James  
but have my own hills and my own vistas to come back to.

Each year I go down to the island I add  
one more year to the darkness;  
and though I sit up with my dear friends  
trying to separate the one year from the other,  
this one from the last, that one from the former,  
another from another,  
after a while they all get lumped together,  
the year we walked to Holgate,  
the year our shoes got washed away,  
the year it rained,  
the year my tooth brought misery to us all.

This year was a crisis. I knew it when we pulled  
the car onto the sand and looked for the key.  
I knew it when we walked up the outside steps  
and opened the hot icebox and began the struggle  
with swollen drawers and I knew it when we laid out  
the sheets and separated the clothes into piles  
and I knew it when we made our first rush onto  
the beach and I knew it when we finally sat  
on the porch with coffee cups shaking in our hands.

My dream is I'm walking through Phillipsburg, New Jersey,  
and I'm lost on South Main Street. I am trying to tell,  
by memory, which statue of Christopher Columbus  
I have to look for, the one with him slumped over

and lost in weariness or the one with him  
vaguely guiding the way with a cross and globe in  
one hand and a compass in the other.  
My dream is I'm in the Eagle Hotel on Chamber Street  
sitting at the oak bar, listening to two  
obese veterans discussing Hawaii in 1942,  
and reading the funny signs over the bottles.  
My dream is I sleep upstairs over the honey locust  
and sit on the side porch overlooking the stone culvert  
with a whole new set of friends, mostly old and humorless.

Dear waves, what will you do for me this year?  
Will you drown out my scream?  
Will you let me rise through the fog?  
Will you fill me with that old salt feeling?  
Will you let me take my long steps in the cold sand?  
Will you let me lie on the white bedspread and study  
the black clouds with the blue holes in them?  
Will you let me see the rusty trees and the old monoplane one more year?  
Will you still let me draw my sacred figures  
and move the kites and the birds around with my dark mind?

Lucky life is like this. Lucky there is an ocean to come to.  
Lucky you can judge yourself in this water.  
Lucky you can be purified over and over again.  
Lucky there is the same cleanliness for everyone.  
Lucky life is like that. Lucky life. Oh lucky life.  
Oh lucky lucky life. Lucky life.

## *Morning Harvest*

Pennsylvania spiders  
not only stretch their silk between the limbs  
of our great trees but hang between our houses  
and pull their sheets across the frantic eyes  
of cats and the soft chests of men.  
Some are so huge they move around like mammals,  
waddling slowly over the rough cement  
and into the bushes to nurse their young or feed  
on berries and crunch on bones.  
But it is the ones that live on the iron bridge  
going across to Riegelsville, New Jersey,  
that are the most artistic and luxurious.  
They make their webs between the iron uprights  
and hang them out in the dew above the river  
like a series of new designs on display,  
waiting for you to choose the one most delicate,  
waiting for you just to touch the sticky threads  
as you look at their soft silk, as you love them.

If your mind is already on business,  
even if your mind is still into your dream,  
you will be shocked by their beauty and you will sit there  
two minutes, two hours, a half a century you will sit there  
until the guards begin to shout, until they rush up in confusion  
and bang on your window and look at you in fear.  
You will point with your left finger at the sun  
and draw a tracery in the cold air,  
a dragline from door handle to door handle,  
foundation lines inside the windows,  
long radials from the panel to the headrest  
and gluey spirals turning on the radials;  
and you will sit in the center of your web  
like a rolled-up leaf or a piece of silent dirt,

pulling gently on your loose trapline.  
They will scream in your ear,  
they will tear desperately at the sheets,  
they will beg for air  
before you finally relieve them by starting your engine  
and moving reluctantly over the small bridge.

Do not regret your little bout with life in the morning.  
If you drive slowly you can have almost one minute  
to study the drops of silver hanging in the sun  
before you turn the corner past the gatehouse  
and down the road beside the railroad cars  
and finally over the tracks and up the hill  
to the morning that lies in front of you like one more design.  
It is the morning I live in and travel through,  
the morning of children standing in the driveways,  
of mothers wrapping their quilted coats around them  
and yellow buses flashing their lights like berserk police cars.  
It is lights that save us, lights that light the way,  
blue lights rushing in to help the wretched,  
red lights carrying twenty pounds of oxygen down the highway,  
white lights entering the old Phoenician channels  
bringing language and mathematics and religion into the darkness.

## *The Dancing*

In all these rotten shops, in all this broken furniture  
and wrinkled ties and baseball trophies and coffee pots  
I have never seen a postwar Philco  
with the automatic eye  
nor heard Ravel's "Bolero" the way I did  
in 1945 in that tiny living room  
on Beechwood Boulevard, nor danced as I did  
then, my knives all flashing, my hair all streaming,  
my mother red with laughter, my father cupping  
his left hand under his armpit, doing the dance  
of old Ukraine, the sound of his skin half drum,  
half fart, the world at last a meadow,  
the three of us whirling and singing, the three of us  
screaming and falling, as if we were dying,  
as if we could never stop—in 1945—  
in Pittsburgh, beautiful filthy Pittsburgh, home  
of the evil Mellons, 5,000 miles away  
from the other dancing—in Poland and Germany—  
oh God of mercy, oh wild God.

## *Another Insane Devotion*

This was gruesome—fighting over a ham sandwich with one of the tiny cats of Rome, he leaped on my arm and half hung on to the food and half hung on to my shirt and coat. I tore it apart and let him have his portion, I think I lifted him down, sandwich and all, on the sidewalk and sat with my own sandwich beside him, maybe I petted his bony head and felt him shiver. I have told this story over and over; some things root in the mind; his boldness, of course, was frightening and unexpected—his stubbornness—though hunger drove him mad. It was the breaking of boundaries, the sudden invasion, but not only that, it was the sharing of food and the sharing of space; he didn't run into an alley or into a cellar, he sat beside me, eating, and I didn't run into a trattoria, say, shaking, with food on my lips and blood on my cheek, sobbing; but not only that, I had gone there to eat and wait for someone. I had maybe an hour before she would come and I was full of hope and excitement. I have resisted for years interpreting this, but now I think I was given a clue, or I was giving myself a clue, across the street from the glass sandwich shop. That was my last night with her, the next day I would leave on the train for Paris and she would meet her husband. Thirty-five years ago I ate my sandwich and moaned in her arms, we were dying together; we never met again although she was pregnant when I left her—I have a daughter or son somewhere, darling grandchildren in Norwich, Connecticut, or Canton, Ohio.

Every five years I think about her again and plan on looking her up. The last time I was sitting in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and heard that her husband was teaching at Princeton, if she was still married, or still alive, and tried calling. I went that far. We lived in Florence and Rome. We rowed in the bay of Naples and floated, naked, on the boards. I started to think of her again today. I still am horrified by the cat's hunger. I still am puzzled by the connection. This is another insane devotion, there must be hundreds, although it isn't just that, there is no pain, and the thought is fleeting and sweet. I think it's my own dumb boyhood, walking around with Slavic cheeks and burning stupid eyes. I think I gave the cat half of my sandwich to buy my life, I think I broke it in half as a decent sacrifice. It was this I bought, the red coleus, the split rocking chair, the silk lampshade. Happiness. I watched him with pleasure. I bought memory. I could have lost it. How crazy it sounds. His face twisted with cunning. The wind blowing through his hair. His jaws working.

Glory

Gloryland

land

Anne Marie Macari

ALICE JAMES BOOKS  
FARMINGTON, MAINE

## Annunciation

When I asked her how the world began  
my mother's face went blank.

I was very young, trying for the first time  
to see the universe as endless.

All I saw was darkness swirling into itself.  
How could anything be endless?

But how could it be contained? By what? All cosmos  
held in the crook of an elbow?

There were no answers, though I thought the clouds  
were great wings trying

to help me, and thought my blood changed  
directions. What could I be

but an echo? Stranded here while the universe  
grows like a belly dense

with stars. And I thought we were all orbiting inside  
that belly, and light could pass

through me but I wouldn't feel it. Years later,  
my son told me how

he was conceived. He said he stood in a cloud  
and pointed at me: *I want her,*

then put down his bow and arrow and came  
when my back was turned

and entered through my shoulder blades.  
What I don't know

is everything: stars, sand, salt, dust,  
molecules and atoms,

and how they come scudding through the door  
full of news from distances

I can't imagine. Some day I'll tell my sons  
the truth, that I knew

they were coming. Nothing I could see or even  
feel but a sense sometimes

that I was permeable, the cells inside me  
gathering and spreading.

I hate to think of galaxy after galaxy. All matter  
burning up and shucked off.

The endless signs of demise and change.  
I still can't grasp

how anything at all can exist and what made  
the maker. And sometimes I'm choked

with love and forget my own ignorance.  
Maybe just at that moment

light is pressing through a tree and reaching  
my window, and I am

satisfied, joyful, though I know there's  
nothing there, just light,

announcing itself, coming through.

## Palace of Longing

How many minute doors  
in the body? Valves and  
pinched places. Eyelids,  
the many drums. And did

the artist think of them when  
he painted the corpse, bent  
over like a mourner,  
his face, color of the strange

sky above? I'm all  
mixed up, lost in this  
last room of the exhibit  
the painting on the wall

so large that the exit door  
looks like a mouse hole,  
and the shuffling feet seem  
to come from inside me.

And painted near an angel's  
wing is the artist himself  
looking so much like the man  
I loved so long who

didn't in return, humbled  
above the dead man, yet  
larger than he should be,  
as if he knew I'd be here

reading the captions, mute  
and so close, still not painted  
into the scene, remembering  
when I wanted to be

the brush in his hand,  
the pigment he ground.  
In the hollow of my neck,  
in the holes behind

my eyes, at all the gates  
of being where I once  
waited, a ghost haunting  
myself, I finally passed

*into* myself, wanting  
to live. In the painting  
there's a woman behind  
the artist, her weeping face

half-covered. I don't know  
how I stopped leaning  
into his absence, how I  
stepped through the door—

left the palace of longing—  
hands unclenched, even  
the wild crown  
of the head

dilated.

## Still Life with Magnolia and Dove

She says she wants to leave except her bones  
are dissolving in her back so she can't

even walk; I know she's not writing  
these phone numbers down.

It's her own story, I have no business,  
but when she says *I haven't*

*told anyone*, I move the receiver  
from my ear, already knowing

what she'll say as she describes her husband's  
forearm-block-of-wood slamming

her head while outside the magnolia opens  
flower by flower, each branch

bouncing when the petals spring apart.

Near my window, the dove turns toward  
the sun and the pink streak

on its neck surprises me, I'm touched from all  
angles by pink radiation—

heartsick. And just because I once thought  
*I'd* die, it's not the same. If I ate

my own cocoon to get out, swallowed my fetid  
corset till I stank of newness,

why should she care, trapped in her bed, dreaming  
of dying, sky pouring

over the tree and the tree still opening.  
Maybe in time the lost iris

of the eyes of Solomon will pluck our orbs  
from their delirious cradles,

or maybe we need a madness we can cling to.  
What we learn is never learned

enough, which I know when every window in my body  
hurts to be opened and when I have said

too much. What I learn is never learned  
enough no matter how close I sleep

to the sky, no matter what bird bends over me.  
It's taken my whole life to get here,

a kind of safety she'll have to find somewhere  
in the cup of occipital bone.

She cannot see my bird scratching the dirt, the flowers  
breaking apart in the light,

she has her own story, she's living to tell it.

## Elegy for a Girl Singer

My third secret was wanting to sing  
in the voice of the chanteuse from a year  
before I was born, to be a girl  
whose beauty chimed in her mouth  
and glistened her, the long throat  
of song somehow born to be shaped  
by her tongue and teeth while the waters  
of saxophone rose around her. She had  
a voice I'd follow anywhere, knowing  
all the words, each song a story I needed.  
They called them girl singers  
but she knew husbands, hospitals, pills;  
she knew the last husky song when the lungs  
are no more than debris the music  
left behind, some old love song  
when the body's craving—the torch  
of its emptiness—reveals a pelvic  
atmosphere so vast no lover  
will ever fill it, music skulking at  
the body's doors, smoke in  
the arteries or curled in the throat like  
one last riff of black notes hooked  
on the tongue. When she backs me  
in my car I sing out, neck arched,  
driving the extra miles just  
to keep singing, till I'm erased  
and she's just a note vibrating,  
less than waterdrop or shadow,  
till she's mounting the dash  
and windshield, her note set

free, giving **out breathsong**  
and agony, I **mean dying**,  
I mean not **one more** chorus  
unless you **count memory**,  
a woman's **voice lifting**,  
leaving her **mouth** one last time.

## Drenched

Ocean is the first noise of wilderness, a slapping and  
rolling of internal thunder or

hissing which is everywhere even under the cement of cities.  
It's the drenching of the lightless that lifts

to absorb you no matter how one man learned to kick  
the sharks' heads and stupefy them

or how he could swim five miles in the cold sea, swells and all,  
and his title was *Rescue*; even so,

someone was always singing that same song—*Walking the  
Edge*—and almost no one

heard it, not until they were drenched did it *all become clear*,  
as they say, but clarity is the other side

of whatever I've tasted though I've had a drop or two  
in my time and it was so sweet

so absolute I had to lose it over and over it was a drop  
of water in the mind's pool and for

an instant it hovered holding perfect light then fell  
and I could feel it inside me, floodlit,

and I could have that clarity for a cost, for a moment, for  
blood, like seeing into the meaning of a leaf,

or of mist, the meaning of meaning, where love, as a force,  
becomes inevitable, not the ruin I thought

I made, not the desolation I thought I knew but a clarity that  
was there all the time, brilliant,

metallic, its taste down my back a ringing of sorts,  
just a drop that ended in

the wilderness of mind and was lost like all the others.

## Gloryland

*I've got a home in Gloryland that outshines the sun*

—African-American spiritual

I thought about the dead and the myriad  
as if they perched on my shoulder all the time  
talking in my ear—though I can't hear them,  
stuck here in the ghetto of the living. Well then, let  
the comfort of Gloryland and angels like cats of different  
sizes with their fierce wings and purring blow  
some semblance of faith back to me. And what  
of my brother, dead, who clowning  
held a gun to his head and blew himself  
into the nebula sac while someone cried  
come back . . . where in the name of dust  
has he risen, what star claims him?

Tonight, under the bare bulb, no wind through  
the dusty curtain, only the memory of the woman  
on the silver bus clutching packages on her lap  
who turned to me and said *In the next world*

*I won't have to carry anything,*

and I almost added, *Or wash my hair. And my feet  
will be straight again, and point forward.*

I should have said, *I want to love better.*

Or I should have turned to her so we  
could rock together, shoulder to shoulder,  
mute but full of the same desire to be  
unburdened, redone as flint or air. And

I wanted to say what I sometimes remembered when  
I was rich in remembering, how even the pitted bricks  
on the buildings seemed brimming with love,  
and how long it had been since I felt such things.

I wanted to tell her it was the light this side

of everything and no matter what happened  
there would always be humming, a thin melody  
of divine bees, rotting wood, the buzz of those  
we no longer hear. Or I should have run  
home and begged you to stay with me  
in the city of the living, under star-ash,  
under the roar of angels laughing and their  
fingers long as rivers, with my bags of salt  
and your eyes like trees drawing down  
the light, since your name is more than  
half-written and mine is traced in chalk,  
and I could have told you what the dead know—  
how failed I am in love, how much I've forgotten—  
though I never again want to know the future  
and I think it's fine if the dead stay dead no matter  
how much I miss them or all I never  
risked for them, and I saw my hand  
lifting into air as my hand passing through  
a hundred worlds at once because the dead  
are better at forgiveness, and now that I live  
by a river I should get wet every day,  
and if I want to feel how the dead move,  
I should take up rowing.

## What Will You Feed Them?

Scraping corn till its milk covers  
my hands. Silky pile of husks. Tomato,  
rosemary, chives from the garden.  
Dreaming back far into the flesh of the plant.

How we are plants grown awkward and strange.

We saw the tail hanging from the hawk's  
beak as it flew off, an apple protruding  
from the mouth of the deer.

I whisked and pounded, sifted  
and sliced. It was mortar  
for their bones. It was what  
we found in the woods.  
The egg that fit so well in my palm  
and what came out of it.

Fire. Blood. Fungus.  
Muscle. Marrow. Greens.  
Nuts and garlic, wild carrot.

It's the food inside the food,  
the invisible heart of the berry,  
how it goes on beating  
in the hallways of the body.

When the Complete comes to find me  
the one question will be, *What did  
you feed them?* As if I could  
remember the colors arranged

just so, the balance, a lifetime  
of salt thrown into the pot  
and whirling there. As if each  
bite was language broken  
down in the mouth, each word

tasting of its sour its bitter  
its sweet, to stem the craving.  
What we swallowed all those years—

platter of distress, bowl  
of hope. What I chewed—my own  
fingers and lip. *What did you feed them?*

I fed them love. *What did you feed them?*  
Love and bones, gristle,  
sermons, air, mercy,

rain, ice, terror and soup, anger and dandelion  
and love. *What did*

*you feed them?* Go to sleep  
in the straw and when you wake up  
I will give you something warm in a cup,

I will mix it myself, and when the Complete  
finally comes for me I'll have water  
hot on the stove, the tea

just right, I'll say I've sucked  
the bread of this life  
but I'm never full, I'll go  
with my mouth open—

XXVI (In the Beginning Was the Animal)

Anne Marie Macari

In the beginning was the animal  
of space licking earth to life, the night sky

lit with great herds of stars, and the paths of planets  
growing radiant rubbing each other.

Heaven's thrust and caress upon us,  
green and fertile in the cracks, poultice of dust,

spore, pollen and ash. Creation's luminous  
mouth. In the beginning all that was made

was good because it was made, and what was  
made and not-made knew each other, and it

was good. The stars in unending intercourse.  
Heaven an amnio sac, the slopping

salty center, from there all the swimmers  
breast stroking, diving, all night long, toward earth.

from *She Heads into the Wilderness*, 2008

## Demystification

Gerald Stern

I believe firmly in demystification. With true demystification it is not even necessary to have anarchy. Furthermore, true demystification does away with hierarchy. Demystification also leads to natural aristocracy. In fact, in demystification no one takes his hat off to anyone, unless it be in true appreciation of a poem or a song or a speech, or a field of flowers or a plate of spaghetti. It's not that spaghetti or a painting of Caravaggio's are the same or that there is the same mystery or *creation* in the two—it's just that one is not holier than the other, a colonel is not holier than a private, a pope is not holier than a parish priest, for we are all vicars. The shammes (the sexton) is one of the community of ten (the minyan), a nobody—like the rest—for the rest are also nobodies. (Dentist to lawyer, pointing to shammes: look who's being a "nobody.") And it's beautiful that women can now be nobodies.

Oh, I'd rather be a private  
than a colonel in the army.  
A private has more fun  
when his day's work is done.

On all his hikes,  
every town he strikes,  
girls discover him  
and just smother him  
with things he likes –

(*slow*) But when the colonel passes by,  
the girlies act so shy,  
he holds his head so high  
with dignity,  
sooooo

Would you rather be a colonel with an eagle on your  
shoulder  
or a private with a chicken on your knee?  
– *World War I song*

It's hard to explain it in prose and make it convincing or  
even understandable. I want to say that all great art is antihierarchical

but I'm not sure. Certainly the more realistic the details and the more painful the suffering, the more the myth was, is, believable. One almost believes Adam and Eve were exiled when you walk into the church of Santa Maria del Carmine and see the Masaccio. These are two humans, more earthy than ever before, mourning inconsolably the life they lost and the unknown empty one that lies ahead. Critics refer to the *technique* of the artist, his craft, and where it might have come from and how it developed; but what about the painter's heart—and mind? Did one cause the other or the other the one, or are they one and the same? We don't care about the Jewish Book of Origin, called Genesis, and we stop for a minute the argument between the priests and the anthropologists and archaeologists, who are standing themselves in wonder staring at the painting, tears coming down their own stricken faces, their hands covering their genitals, all mystification gone. One thinks of the cave art that Anne Marie is writing about, the animals—those horses and deer—so perfectly reimagined, so amazingly crafted, that anyone's breath is caught short. They are locked in mystery but are, at the same time, demystified. They are what they are and the wonder of it is endless, but the animals, and the artists, neither inflict, cajole, nor attribute. We can't paint like that, Picasso is said to have said; that is, we can't imagine—perhaps we can't experience—life like that, life as

they did; the eagerness, the liveliness, the *holiness*, caught by those amazing hands, and minds. We have probably lost it forever.

I'm going crazy now over the Gilgamesh epic. I'm reading and rereading. There are huge tablets on my walls. My backyard is covered in indecipherable stones. I have a finger and I have a wand. I am chanting in Sumerian. I stroke Humbaba's poor head. He is weeping over his lost neck. I say the names of the gods. I suddenly realize why Yahweh doesn't want his secret name pronounced. It is too foreign, too long, too unpronounceable. Rappers call him "Yo." I call him God because I speak English now. But not God with the middle letter cast out. That's for the rabbis in Princeton and West Oak Lane. They like mystification. Certainly there is obscurantism and confusion in the Gilgamesh narrative. It could be because pieces are missing or that the minds then were different than now, though I doubt it; and there's plenty of talking to one or another of the gods, and concealment and magic and secret power, not to mention oppression, privilege, and violence; but the core feeling, the heart of the epic, is grief, as it was in "The Expulsion" and as it will be in the epics to come, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *Job*, *Finnegans Wake*. It is—in *Gilgamesh*—that grief, grief over the loss of a beloved companion and grief over the inevitability of death and grief at human loss from stupidity and forgetfulness that comes to dominate,

a grief that is unbearable, as it will be in *Lear* and, as in *Lear*, tied to an otherwise sensational, or flimsy, narrative. We are left with basic human loneliness—nakedness—and nothing in the way of sophistry, obscurity, or concealment works in the face of that. The president in his oval office, G-d on his mountain, a movie star or millionaire dying—how could they compare? There's nothing left but heresy and ungodliness. In our literatures, Kafka—and Beckett. I think it's in *Malone Dies* that Beckett's creature is in a kind of prison or hospital. As I recall, he is visited twice a day, slop brought in and slop taken out. He has a stub of a pencil, a bit of paper. And he asks questions, ten, seven, I don't remember. "Why am I here?" "What day is it?" The last one, no. 10 maybe, says "Number your answers." That is not just desperation and clinging to something called "reason"—by his fingertips—that is humanity, shit-smear, hopeless, and mad humanity—in the face of all denial. Our work is about that. My work.

Baruch Spinoza was surrounded by "friends" who were shocked that he didn't believe in Jesus's resurrection or Lazarus's awakening. His tongue was sharp and what he hated most were "the shackled minds of zealots." When they talked to him about miracles, this is what he said: "This I believe is the reason why Christians are distinguished from other people not by faith, nor charity, nor the

other fruits of the Holy Spirit, but solely by an opinion they hold, namely because, as they all do, they rest their case simply on miracles, that is, on ignorance, which is the source of all wickedness." Spinoza also rejected claims to Jesus's supernaturalism. "As to the additional teaching of certain doctrines, that God took upon himself human nature [in Christ], I have expressly indicated that I do not understand what they say. Indeed, to tell the truth, they seem to me to speak no less absurdly than one who might tell me that a circle has taken on the nature of a square." Unquestionably he was thinking of his own excommunication in Amsterdam in 1656, "for not believing in angels, the immortality of the soul, and the divine inspiration of the Torah; and other not-named abominable heresies practiced and taught by him; and for committing monstrous acts" (unnamed source). There was anathema and cursing and someone played with the lights—for mystification's sake. As to his resort to "reason" and his "intellectual love of God," he was, in his demystifying mode, letting a thousand dogs loose, not housing them. I love using my college textbook *History of Philosophy*—after sixty-five years—in Frank Thilly's translation. I guess Spinoza believed that God is everything and everything is God, only he used the word *God* for convenience' sake since there's no other word for it. Certainly he didn't believe God was a person or there was a person called God

who, for example, punished or rewarded you according to your behavior or for behaving in a certain way, say leaning more to the left or to the right. God had—God has—no consciousness, as humans understand that word. Prayer may be useful psychologically—it is—but it is useless otherwise. It is surely useless, he might say, geometrically. In his letters, Spinoza rejects the identification of God with nature, whatever he meant by nature, but he did say that God and the universe are one; and the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* emphasizes nature as being the same as “God” when it discusses Spinoza’s metaphysics and his theology. I could see how one could argue that Spinoza replaces one mystification with another, given his unusual radical nouveau system, but he is not interested in using it or having it be used to force, or persuade, anyone to do or not do anything. One may see a certain coldness or heartlessness in his approach or even a naïveté in his trust of the intellect and his presumed expectation of its fairly widespread use, but that’s an optimistic sin, or a sin of optimism, and anyhow it’s “determined” or, as the Presbyters say, predetermined, or as the modern philos say, necessitarian. I am touched by his mode of living, an enviable “attribute” of simplicity and dignity that almost looks like wisdom. He ate only porridge, with a few dried grapes, twice a day, and probably would have slept on the floor if it didn’t cause too much

attention. What excites me about him is not his devotion to reason (seventeenth century) or even his love of the spirit (nineteenth century), but his vision of interconnectedness, infinity, and unity, which shows an anticipation of twentieth-century thought—in physics and elsewhere—as well as an echo of the medieval mystics, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, a connection with Kabbalah, a reflection of the thinking of Maimonides as well as Averroes, and an amazing connection to—a parallel thinking with—the Vedas. He who would have fixed my watch with his enlarged eye so perfectly attuned to his crystal mind, my watch that fell who knows when, dislodging the perfect innard and jarring the circular outer, so that it wouldn’t stay and I had to bring it back to my jeweler who restored it for me and charged thirty-two dollars.

I believe human beings should pay very close attention to each other. They should reach out beyond the family and help the oppressed, the trapped, and the sick. They should insist on security for and from the larger society. They should pay attention to the past, live with grief, make charity personal, teach without end, share food, listen patiently to the young and honor their music, turn their backs on corporations, advertising, and public lying, hate liars, undermine bullies, love June 21, and, on that day, kiss every plant and tree they see. They should love two-lane highways, old cars and

old songs. They should eat with relish, and study insects. They should never stop raising children. They should fight for schoolteachers, *pay them*, give them tenure, let *them* make the rules. As Coca-Cola does. They should insist that no one be paid more than ten times anyone else, no matter what or where. They should make fun of war, flags, uniforms, weapons, pulpits, oval offices, square ones, oblong ones, circular ones; and robes, and titles, especially the titles of “Dr.” given to education degree holders in state colleges who address each other as “Doctor.” They should respect all dogs, love one breed intensely, eat fruit, eat root vegetables, read *Lear*

From *Stealing History* (Trinity University Press, 2012)

endlessly, and be suspicious of Gertrude Stein—with the exception of her war plays. They should love New York, know two foreign languages, practice both regret and remorse, love their own cities, forgive but not forget, live in at least three countries, work in a gas station, lift boxes, eat pears, learn a trade, respect pitch pines, believe in the soul. They should stop throwing rubbish out the window, they should sit on park benches, marry young, marry late, love seals, love cows, talk to apes, weep for tigrans, cheer on the carp, encourage the salmon and the shad, and read twenty books a year. They should talk to their neighbors and eat herring and boiled potatoes.

*night of December 17, 2009, 1 a.m.*