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Preface

This anthology has been compiled at the intersection of aesthetics and history. By “history” I refer not only to literary history but also broadly to national and international history and to current events. Whether responding to the long traumatic story of race relations in the United States, to the devastating record of World War I trench warfare in France, to the unassimilable reality of the Holocaust, or to historically emergent forms of cultural and sexual practice and identity, American poets have been compelling witnesses. Their poetry responds with unique linguistic compression and metaphoric density to both national experience and international events.

The forms of historical testimony and intervention possible in poetry are consistently distinctive and sometimes incomparable. Lived time without these poems, this collection aims to prove, is impoverished time. I offer that claim in keeping with William Carlos Williams’s observation that people die every day for lack of the knowledge available in poems. But poetic witness, at its best, as readers will find, is not designed to offer ready consolation or to make life easier. Unforgettable witness can make life at once richer and more difficult. Too many other anthologies slight the difference poetry can make in historical understanding. As a result, they deny readers the full epistemological, psychological, and aesthetic resources poetry continues to provide. My goal is thus partly corrective.

Yet, to warrant rereading decade after decade poems must meet high aesthetic standards, though no comprehensive anthology of modern and contemporary poetry can do its job by hewing to only one set of aesthetic criteria. An anthologist’s job, I believe, is to combine flexible taste with sound editorial principles. The astonishing and endlessly energetic diversity of American poetry throughout much of its history is one of its strengths, but diversity alone is not a virtue in an anthology. At least for me, all these poems merit our admiration based on their quality, though the terms on which they do so vary. The canon reform movement of the 1970s and 1980s taught us to value and find pleasure in the immensely varied interplay of tradition and innovation that continues to surprise readers of American poetry to the present day. It also made us realize that aesthetic impulses can be local, embedded in particular historical and literary contexts. The challenge is to find the poems from those contexts that manage at once to honor their historical moment and speak to our own.

These are ambitious aims. Underlying them, however, is a conviction that American poetry represents a major contribution to human culture. Proving all this, of course, depends on making hundreds of individual choices about what poems to include. Sometimes I try to represent a poet’s whole career. From Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams to Gwendolyn Brooks, John Ashbery, and W. S. Merwin I offer what I hope are sufficiently generous selections to give a fair picture of those poets’ accomplishments over time. At other

times, I felt a particular period in a career—or even a single long poem or poem sequence—to be so compelling that readers would be best served by concentrating on it. The obvious consensual example is Sylvia Plath’s 1963 *Ariel* poems. But there are many more instances here—from Randall Jarrell’s World War II poems to the fusion of autobiography and history that Michael Harper achieved in the 1970s. I give maximum space to these major achievements at the expense of other fine poems throughout such poets’ careers.

The most extreme choices, however, are the cases in which I devote all or most of a poet’s space to a single text—from Gertrude Stein’s “Patriarchal Poetry,” Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree,” Melvin Tolson’s “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” Kenneth Rexroth’s “The Love Poems of Marichiko,” and Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” to Aaron Kramer’s “Denmark Vesey,” Kathleen Fraser’s “In Commemoration of the Visit of Foreign Commercial Representatives to Japan, 1947,” and Natasha Trethewey’s “Native Ground.” “Denmark Vesey” combines a dramatic narrative of a potential slave revolt with complex musical, metrical, and formal choices that make for a poem that has nothing comparable in American literary history. The integration of African and European history and culture in “Libretto for the Republic of Liberia,” combined with Tolson’s high rhetorical style has no match I know of save perhaps Derek Walcott’s layered account of Caribbean culture and Western imperialism, despite textual affinities with such diverse texts as Eliot’s *Waste Land*, Pound’s *Cantos*, and Olson’s *Maximus Poems*.

When possible, I added a few short poems to one long one, or at least prefaced a longer, more difficult poem with one that might prove more accessible. “Susie Asado” precedes “Patriarchal Poetry.” Mina Loy’s “(There is no Life or Death)” and “O Hell” come before “Songs to Joannes.” Charles Wright’s “Spider Crystal Ascension” and “Clear Night” precede his “Homage to Paul Cezanne.” Even when I try to represent a whole career, however, I am willing to grant space to longer poems—including William Carlos Williams’s “The Descent of Winter,” Theodore Roethke’s “North American Sequence,” Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” Gwendolyn Brook’s “Gay Chaps at the Bar,” Denise Levertov’s “Olga Poems,” and Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems.” With Marianne Moore I opted for two long poems, “The Octopus” and “Marriage,” because their referential divide between nature and culture makes them inescapable companion poems. I believe there are more long poems and poem sequences in this collection than in any other comprehensive anthology.

On the other hand, in a few cases a lone poem is here not to encapsulate a major career but rather to help capture the spirit of a literary movement. Herman Specter’s “Wiseguy Type,” V. J. Jerome’s “A Negro Mother to Her Child,” and Joseph Freeman’s “Our Age Has Caesars” perfectly embody the cultural commitments of 1930s proletarian poetry and thus help make possible the account of that period mentioned above. Welton Smith’s “Malcolm” is one of the most indicative products of the Black Arts Movement. I point this out here lest readers assume I am making larger claims about the contributions these writers have made to our literary history. On the other hand, Arsenius Chaleco’s “Requiem” is here because it is one of the more powerful examples of American Indian elegies to appear over several decades. What it says

about his career we can only guess, since it is the only poem by him known to have survived. And Tillie Olsen's "I Want You Women Up North to Know," a classic poem about women's work by a writer widely celebrated for her fiction and nonfiction prose, is a compelling poem reprinted here in part to challenge disciplinary notions about the transitory character of topical poetry. It should also encourage readers to think anew about the kinds of cultural and political work a poem can do, for it is unfortunately just as relevant today as it was decades ago. Indeed, given women's working conditions in Asia—and the relationship between their exploitation and those in America who buy the clothing they produce—the poem could also be revised to read "I Want You Women in the West to Know." What kind of difference, we might ask, does poetic language make to a subject like this?

The chronological table of contents is divided between the "modern" and "contemporary" volumes; it divides roughly at 1910 birth dates, but the differentiation is necessarily imperfect. Some careers—both long ones and curtailed ones—notably straddle the divide between modernity and contemporaneity. Muriel Rukeyser began in part as a 1930s poet devoted to labor issues and captured, like so many progressive writers, by the lure of antifascism and the cause of democratic Spain, but she concluded her career decades later by writing key poems speaking for contemporary feminism. Like Rukeyser, Edwin Rolfe began firmly in 1930s culture and politics, but he composed some of our most telling poems against McCarthyism in the early 1950s. As part of an effort to make the two volumes internally coherent, I made a judgment about where the main weight of a poet's reputation fell, thus assigning some poets born in 1910–1913 to the first volume and some born in 1910 to the second.

In addition to a standard chronological table, we provide a topical table of contents. Some critical topics bridge multiple categories. The long American poetic dialogue about the culturally constructed but powerful subject of race that came to a head in the nineteenth-century Abolitionist movement becomes a major feature of twentieth-century poetry. Poets of white, black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and multiple heritages reflect on that history here, interrogating both whiteness and blackness and producing searing statements to be found perhaps nowhere else in our literature—perhaps nowhere else in our culture.

None of the classifications in the topical table of contents are definitive. And there are many topics not listed. You can also read Marianne Moore, Robert Lowell, Denise Levertov, Mona Van Duyn, Gregory Corso, and Ai about marriage. You can compare poems about Helen of Troy by H.D. and Laura Riding, poems about Cassandra by Robinson Jeffers and Louise Bogan. You can gather together poems by Joseph Freeman, Kenneth Fearing, John Beecher, Joseph Kalar, Edwin Rolfe, Sol Funaroff, Muriel Rukeyser, Genevieve Taggard, and Tillie Olsen to revisit the political 1930s. You can read love poems on the list in the topical table of contents, then unsettle the category by reading Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" or Richard Siken's "A Primer for the Small Weird Loves." Importantly, poets often appear in more than one category, sometimes even contributing to both experimental and formalist traditions. While polemical claims about what constitutes either an experimental or a formalist poem abound—and certainly play a role in literary

history—they did not seem to me to have a place in the groupings here. These classifications are designed to be suggestive, inclusive, and exploratory. They are a starting place for a discussion of these categories. Thus Anthony Hecht's adaptation of traditional poetic forms shares the paragraph with the new forms Langston Hughes invented.

This effort to be receptive to different kinds of open and closed forms matches the realization that both our personal and our institutional evaluations change over time. Ten years ago I thought Joseph Kalar wrote only one important poem. Now I realize he has more than a score of them. For years I missed hearing the special music of "Denmark Vesey." Eventually I coedited Kramer's selected poems. But the material facts of history shift and evolve over time as well. Every literary history and reference work I know dates Native American poetry from the 1960s. Indian texts standing in for poems before then often amounted to transcriptions and adaptations of chants and other oral performances, not infrequently recorded by missionaries or anthropologists. But what every poetry scholar believed, wrote, and taught was not true. Native Americans worked in traditional rhymed and metered forms from the nineteenth century on—but they published them in Indian magazines that never reached the dominant culture. Enough of that stunning history has now been recovered so that I can include the work of six Native American poets who wrote prior to the 1950s. The first three authors in the modern half of the collection are Walt Whitman, Too-qua-stee, and Emily Dickinson. The newly recovered Native American poems in the book also force us to reconceive the role of poetry in Native American life, along with any assumptions we may have about what Indians were reading and thinking about in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two of the poems partly parody widely read poems by white authors, and the poems include references to events elsewhere in the world.

Some of these recovered poems, like Alexander Posey's "The Fall of the Redskin," include historical references no longer part of most Americans' cultural memory and thus benefit from annotation. The most extreme case of this is Tolson's "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia," where the poem is fundamentally inaccessible without extensive notes. We are proud to publish "Libretto" in its first fully annotated version and hope it can gain wider readership as a result. Despite occasionally worrying that a footnote might seem to narrow an allusion's implications, like most text editors I have opted to annotate. It is worth knowing, for example, that Anthony Hecht served in the army and was there when a concentration camp was liberated. That doesn't diminish the power of his Holocaust poems. Perhaps instead it reminds us both that proximity to horror can increase the necessity of witness and that distance from horror complicates our own commitment. On the other hand, on a few occasions, as with Edwin Rolfe's "June 19, 1953," I chose not to annotate the poem, thereby encouraging readers who do not recognize the reference to pause, look it up on the internet, and perhaps ask themselves why they do not already know the answer, why the knowledge has been erased from general cultural awareness.

The arrangement of each poet's work is most often chronological, but I diverge from chronology when doing so made for a more coherent selection. Thus it would

have been pointlessly disruptive to have interrupted a group of rather serious poems by Sharon Olds with her witty “The Pope’s Penis,” so I open her selection with that irreverent poem instead. One decision about how to represent a poet’s work was driven by copyright law. In the case of poems first published in 1922 or earlier, then later revised, we print the earlier version here. That results in recovering earlier and less familiar versions of poems by Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, John Crowe Ransom, E. E. Cummings, and Hart Crane. To put matters bluntly, some publishers now charge substantial reprint fees for the post-1922 versions of many poems first published earlier. Staying within budget meant making the strategic choice of opting for the pre-1923 public domain versions of several poems.

On the other hand, some poets responding to the cultural and political climate of the 1960s made public gifts of a few poems either then or in the 1970s by issuing broadsides without copyright notices. That tradition began earlier in the century with poems contributed to the labor movement, but it continued decades later with poems that contributed to the antiwar, feminist, and gay liberation movements. Even poets who copyrighted the majority of their broadsides occasionally selected poems for public domain distribution. In the early part of the century, neither Edwin Markham nor Vachel Lindsay ever copyrighted their broadsides.

The illustrated version of Markham’s “The Man with the Hoe” was first published as an insert in the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1899. Lindsay distributed his two-panel “Drink for Sale” broadside at a July 29, 1909, anti-saloon lecture in Springfield, Illinois. Decades later, Allen Ginsberg’s “Rain-wet Asphalt Heat, Garbage Curbed Cans Overflowing” would be issued as “a free poem” from Detroit’s Alternative Press, and Robert Bly’s Unicorn Broadside version of “Hearing Gary Snyder Read” would be labeled “may be reproduced without permission.” Such notices underlined the legal status of poems published without copyright notice from 1923 to 1976. “The Form Falls in on Itself” by David Ignatow (1914–1997) was one of two Ignatow broadsides with lettering by Wang Hui-Ming distributed in 1971. The following year Hui-Ming collected a series of his broadside poems by various authors in his book *The Land on the Tip of a Hair: Poems in Wood*. Hughes’s “Christ in Alabama” was illustrated by his longtime companion Zell Ingram; the illustrated version appeared in *Contempo* in 1931. Charles Henri Ford’s “Serenade to Leonor” is illustrated with paintings by Leonor Fini. Alan Halsey’s illustrated version of Gary Snyder’s “O Mother Gaia” was issued by Glenn Storhaug at Five Seasons Press. Ginsberg’s “Kraj Majales” was illustrated by Robert LaVigne, his “Moloch” by Lyn Ward. The illustrations to Lindsay’s “Drink for Sale” and “The Virginians Are Coming,” Ginsberg’s “Consulting I Ching Smoking Pot Listening to the Fugs Sing Blake” and Richard Wilbur’s “A Difference” are by the poets themselves. Everson’s “A Canticle to the Waterbirds” has a woodblock version of a heron by Daniel O. Stolpe. Except for “Christ in Alabama,” which is reproduced (in a form restored by the editor) from the copy in the rare books collection at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, all the illustrated poems come from the editor’s personal collection.

A vast amount of critical commentary and historical background for the poets and many of the poems included here can be found on the website we have been

constructing since 1999. Hundreds of poems have individual entries with extensive commentary devoted to them. Titled Modern American Poetry Site (MAPS), it was originally constructed at www.english.uiuc.edu/maps. It is now being reconstructed as a database at:

www.maps.english.illinois.edu

The website's first incarnation was designed by Matthew Hurt and edited by Cary Nelson and many other scholars. Bart Brinkman has now joined me as overall editor and designer of MAPS. The site is open to all and widely used by hundreds of thousands of poetry readers across the world. It includes scores of new essays published there for the first time, along with unique photo arrays that supplement the commentary on Angel Island, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, World War II, and the subject matter of many other poems. Detailed individual background essays for many of the individuals mentioned in particular poems can be found there as well.

My first appreciation is due Oxford University Press for offering me the opportunity to revise and update the anthology. Sincere thanks is also due the long list of poets, literary agents, and publishers who worked with us to make this edition possible. Special thanks go out to Philip Levine, without whose timely intervention on behalf of the book's uniquely progressive aims—aims Oxford University Press consistently supported—the project would quite simply have failed.

As part of its review process, Oxford solicited a number of very helpful comments about the first edition. A new set of comments arrived in response to the draft table of contents for this revised edition. My thanks to all those who took the time to offer their suggestions: [ADD NAMES]

CHANGES TO THE SECOND EDITION

As the law requires, we conclude with a brief summary of the changes to the second edition of this anthology. Forty-four named poets are new to the second edition, along with several anonymous poets who carved poems on the walls of Angel Island. We have continued the practice we established over a decade ago of including poets who will be unknown to many readers. If the little-known poets of the first edition are now better known, I expect some of the poets new to this edition will once again represent fresh discoveries for most readers. Perhaps their work will spread to other collections as a result. The first edition was the only anthology to include Edwin Rolfe in over half a century; you can now find his poetry in over twenty collections. On the other hand, we repeated our earlier decision to omit songs. A full and fair representation of American song would have required another hundred pages. Unable to do the tradition justice, I chose not to do it at all. Are there a few poets who would have a more generous selection if their publishers did not demand such exorbitant reprint fees? To be sure. As I will argue in a separate essay, modern poetry anthologies will soon become financially impossible unless escalating reprint fees are moderated. But overall I believe this anthology more than fulfills its aims. Only one poet has been dropped—because we were unable to reach the holder of rights to his

work. A remarkable ninety-one poets have had the selection of their work expanded. Over 350 poems are new to the book. The topical table of contents is a new feature as well. And the sheer fact of increased length has led us to divide the book into two volumes, modern and contemporary, though, as the topical list demonstrates, there are many fruitful comparisons and contrasts to be made between poems in the two volumes and several traditions that run through both halves of the anthology. Here, in a convenient bulleted list, are the highlights of the second edition:

- **New poets:** Too-qua-stee/Dewitt Clinton Duncan, W. E. B. Du Bois, Stephen Crane, Alexander Posey, Sara Teasdale, Elinor Wylie, Ruth Margaret Muskrat, Arsenius Chaleco, Lynn Riggs, W.H. Auden, Mary Cornelia Hartshorne, Taro Katay, Kyokusui, Oshio, Barbara Guest, Aaron Kramer, Jack Kerouac. Donald Justice, Derek Walcott, Kathleen Fraser, William Heyen, Lyn Hejinian, Thomas James, Timothy Steele, Albert Goldbarth, Charles Bernstein, Jorie Graham, Andrew Hudgins, Alberto Rios, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Li-Young Lee, Atsuro Riley, Claudia Rankine, D. A. Powell, Heid E. Erdrich, Natasha Trethewey, and Richard Siken.
- **Expanded selections by:** Emily Dickinson, Edwin Markham, Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, James Weldon Johnson, Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Wallace Stevens, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, H.D., Robinson Jeffers, Marianne Moore, T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, Dorothy Parker, Charles Reznikoff, John Wheelwright, Louise Bogan, Hart Crane, Yvor Winters, Sterling A. Brown, Laura (Riding) Jackson, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Bennett, Countee Cullen, Lorine Niedecker, John Beecher, Robert Penn Warren, Stanley Kunitz, Joseph Kalar, Theodore Roethke, George Oppen, Edwin Rolfe, Sol Funaroff, Charles Henri Ford, Charles Olson, William Everson, Robert Hayden, Weldon Kees, William Stafford, Dudley Randall, Thomas McGrath, Robert Lowell, Gwendolyn Brooks, William Bronk, Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Bob Kaufman, Maxine Kumin, Paul Blackburn, Frank O'Hara, James Wright, John Ashbery, Galway Kinnell, W. S. Merwin, Anne Sexton, Philip Levine, Adrienne Rich, Etheridge Knight, Henry Dumas, N. Scott Momaday, Mark Strand, Charles Wright, Ishmael Reed, Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, Sharon Olds, Louise Glück, Paul Violi, Adrian Louis, C. D. Wright, Carolyn Forché, Garrett Kaoru Hongo, Rita Dove, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Anita Endrezze, Ana Castillo, Mark Doty, Louise Erdrich, Thylia Moss, Patricia Smith, Marilyn Chin, Sesshu Foster, and Martin Espada.
- **Topical table of contents.**
- **New (previously unpublished) translations and an expanded selection of Angel Island poems.**
- **Previously unpublished poems by Gwendolyn Bennett.**
- **Expanded sections of illustrated poems:** new illustrated poems by Vachel Lindsay, Charles Henri Ford, Allen Ginsberg, William Everson, David Ignatow, W.S. Merwin, Gary Snyder, and Richard Wilbur.

- **New special section:** wartime poems by William Butler Yeats, Edward Thomas, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen to compare with their American counterparts.

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