Introduction

For the editing of this anthology—the first since George Bradley's version of the anthology, which ended at 1998, just as W. S. Merwin had been selected as the new judge for the series—I gave myself two guidelines, each with its potential for controversy. First, I decided that each poet would be represented by the same number of poems—three. It has been said, over the years, though not everyone is in agreement about it, that the caliber of the volumes in the Yale Series of Younger Poets was generally mediocre until Yale University Press decided to have a working, prominent poet serve as the judge, beginning in 1932 with Stephen Vincent Benét, whose selections included first books by James Agee, Muriel Rukeyser, and Margaret Walker. Overall, I agree about the caliber of earlier volumes in the series. But as I read through those volumes, so many of them by poets who had only recently graduated from college, and so many having been affected either by actual combat in World War I or by having come of age in the psychological wake of that war, it occurred to me that these poets were writing the only poems they could, in the best ways they knew how. My own sense of the poetry of that period, which pre-dates the innovations of the Modernists, is that there was not only more acceptance of sentimentality and nostalgia, but often a preference for those things, in poetry at least. One can always point to exceptions, but overall the poetry of that period seems to long for a time of innocence, which of course always comes with naïveté, as well. I don't think all of the earlier Yale poets were necessarily naive, but my sense is that they didn't yet have available to them the ways of expressing interiority, or of situating the self in relationship to such large external factors as war—also identity, also language itself—that would come later, with Modernism, confessional poetry, and such pivotal events as the Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement, the Stonewall riots, to name but a few. The early poets in the Yale series are nevertheless writing poems of their own time. They are part of the record, not just of the landscape of American poetry, but of the Yale series itself. And as such, I felt it was important that they be represented equally with other poets in the series who went on to become some of the major poets of our time.

My second decision was to select the poems I most admired by each poet. This shouldn't be controversial, given that any anthology is at some level a reflection of the editor's taste and sensibility. I suspect, though, that some readers will wonder why certain poems of John Ashbery, say, or of Adrienne Rich—poems that have since been among the most often anthologized, of those two poets—don't appear in this volume. To them I would say that popularity rarely coincides, for me, with unequivocal excellence, whatever that might be. Plus, in reading through all of these volumes, I was quite surprised by the number of wonderful poems that had *not* been anthologized. My hope is that, in encountering selections by some of the more well-known poets here, readers will discover something new, something surprising from an author whose work they thought they already knew well. As in poetry itself, surprise is among the rarest things to encounter in anthologies, I have found. I have sought here to offer a possible exception.

Having established those criteria, in terms of selections for the anthology, and having made the selections, I wondered what I might add, by way of an introduction, that might be helpful. In his introduction, Bradley provided readers with an eloquent and fairly exhaustive history of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. I refer readers to that introduction for such information as how Margaret Walker's book, *For My People*, got selected not in either of the years when Walker actually submitted a manuscript, but in the year when she decided not to send, thinking the readers for the prize simply weren't interested in the poems of an African American woman; how the rules for the prize evolved from having several Yale graduates, chosen by Yale faculty, as the winners each year to having a single winner chosen by an outside judge who had to be established enough to garner attention for the prize; how it came to be that Joan Murray's book, *Poems*, won the prize five years after her death; the uproar that arose when Olga Broumas came to Yale to read from her winning volume *Beginning with O*, with its unabashed reveling in same-sex eros; and much more. Along the way, Bradley also presented incisive portraits of the judges for the Yale prize across the years. My challenge, then, has been to determine what has happened since 1998, in terms of the judges, the prize, and even American poetry itself, as reflected in the various winners.

Besides Merwin, there have been only two subsequent judges since 1998, Louise Glück and me. Glück is the first woman to have served as judge;

I am not only the first African American, but also the only person of color at all to have served as judge. So there has been an attention to diversity—in terms of race and gender—in the selection of judges, and, as it turns out, this has resulted in increased diversity among the winners; I say "as it turns out" because it's not necessarily the case that a judge of color, say, will select a manuscript by a person of color. To put it another way, that might be an expectation of a judge of color—likewise, that a woman might select more women—but an expectation is not a requirement, nor should it be. The issue is much more complicated than that.

I'll begin by noting that there had been some diversity—not much, but some—in terms of race and gender, in the Yale series prior to 1998. Women appear fairly regularly as winners, beginning with Viola C. White's collection, *Horizons*, in 1920. Not so much can be said for racial diversity, the only two winners of color up to 1998 having been Margaret Walker, with *For My People*, and the Asian American Cathy Song, for her volume *Picture Bride* in 1982. And although there are a few volumes by openly queer writers—by which I mean openly queer at the time of publication—among them Ashbery's *Some Trees* and Daniel Hall's *Hermit with Landscape*, only Broumas's *Beginning with O* has queerness as one of its actual subjects.

How much does diversity have to do with the judges? Being a straight white man did not prevent Stephen Vincent Benét from selecting Margaret Walker as the winner in 1941, or Richard Hugo from selecting Cathy Song. Admittedly, though, these are the exceptions; the racial diversity really doesn't improve much until the two most recent judges. I believe this does have something to do with those particular judges, but it is also inextricably connected to the cultural conversation at any given time. With that in mind, I'll point to a watershed moment for the landscape of American poetry: the founding, in 1996, of Cave Canem, a writers' retreat designed exclusively for African American poets. I would argue that this is the pivotal moment at which the landscape of American poetry begins to change in the late twentieth century. There have been African American poets for centuries in this country, of course. But, even acknowledging the Harlem Renaissance and, later, the Black Arts Movement, I point to Cave Canem as the first official organization whose purpose was not only to bring black writers together but to foster a community of mutually supportive individuals. Cave Canem made it possible for a black writer to have a sense of belonging to something

larger, to confirm that she wasn't writing alone; Cave Canem has also proved an opportunity for black writers to recognize the great aesthetic diversity of writing from within their community. One of the chief results has been that, through the confidence gained by sheer numbers, black poets began interrogating the poetry establishment, and specifically began insisting on the right to have their voices heard in journals that earlier had not represented them. At the same time, for many publishers of journals, Cave Canem became a resource, a place to turn if they wanted to know who some of the up-and-coming black writers might be. It seems worth mentioning, as well, that Cave Canem began only a couple of years after the Internet became available to the general public. This has meant at least two things: that there is more opportunity to discover other voices by people of color; and that there are more opportunities for people of color to publish online (and indeed to create their own publications) as an alternative to many of the print journals that had ignored racial diversity. Simply put, there's more opportunity to spread the word.

The year 2004 saw the founding of Kundiman, a similar retreat, this one for Asian American poets, and in 2009 CantoMundo, a retreat for Latinx poets, was established. These and Cave Canem have opened up poetry in the United States in exciting ways, in crucial ways, effecting positive change not just in terms of what we read in journals and what books are more readily available, but also changing, challenging, and complicating the conversation at university writing programs and at organizations ranging from the National Book Foundation to the Academy of American Poets. In addition, these organizations have deepened and enriched the pool of manuscripts available for publication. My sense is that the change in conversation had a lot to do with Yale University Press eventually choosing the first female judge and, afterward, the first African American judge. And even as the pool of manuscripts in the United States has been getting increasingly diverse, I believe the fact of diversity, at the level of the judge, has inspired more diversity among the entries. The work may be out there, but something has to get the poet to send it to this particular contest, and the identity of the judge can surely help, as it can also sometimes hinder (again, there's the example of Walker deciding to give up entering the contest, because she saw no proof that there was interest in writing by a black woman, no visible proof in the form of an earlier winner of color, or in the form of a judge of color).

What can be said, generally and in particular with respect to diversity, about the Yale Series of Younger Poets since 1998? Perhaps it's easiest, following in Bradley's footsteps, to go judge by judge. Merwin controversially chose no winner the first year he was judge, claiming not to have seen a manuscript that was worthy. While I don't doubt that Merwin didn't like any of the manuscripts he saw, I cannot believe that there wasn't a worthy winner among the submissions; I think he simply chose to look at a very limited number of them. But Merwin did go on to select five winners in the years that followed: Craig Arnold, Davis McCombs, Maurice Manning, Sean Singer, and Loren Goodman. All are men, and to my knowledge all are white (Singer was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, but I have not known him to identify as Latinx). But even though Merwin's choices don't move significantly beyond the history of racial or gender diversity, they are consistent with the wide aesthetic range the prize has presented since the time of Benét, who was the first outsider to become a judge. Although each has a decidedly distinct voice, what I find most interesting about Merwin's choices is what several of them have in common. *Ultima Thule* (McCombs) and *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions* (Manning) are both examples of what has come to be called the "project" book, by which is meant a book of poems that cohere around—or are written *in order to* cohere around—a particular theme, often a narrative one; for McCombs, there are two narratives of life in and around Mammoth Cave, in the 1800s and 1990s, respectively, the narratives grounded in an examination of the cave's history; Manning gives us a speaker who may be real, may be allegorical, who takes us on what *Library Journal* called "a postmodernist journey through the rural Kentucky landscape of the 1970s." *Famous Americans* (Goodman) is less narrative, but it also has a project in mind, namely, to take on a wide variety of Americans, famous and otherwise, as a way of investigating fame and its relationship to the self and reality. I remember wondering, at the time, if Merwin had a penchant for this type of book-length project, but I sometimes think this kind of book was simply beginning to be more popular among young poets (not that the idea was new to the twentieth century even then, given Glück's *Ararat*, Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*, or, for that matter, Berryman's *The Dream Songs*). In any event, in the time since Merwin's choices, whether coincidentally or because of them, this has become the most common type of book I encounter in American poetry.

Louise Glück served eight years as judge. Only three of the eight winners are women, which takes me back to how the identity of the judge is not an easy gauge of what she will be drawn to. Glück's choices do, however, include some significant firsts in terms of racial diversity, specifically Fady Joudah (*The Earth in the Attic*), who, as a Palestinian American, is the first winner of Arabic descent, and Ken Chen (*Juvenilia*), who is Asian American. She also chose Richard Siken's *Crush*, which is easily the most overtly queer book of poems to appear since Broumas won the prize. Again, hard to say how much these choices have to do with the racial and gender identity of the judge, or with her aesthetic proclivities, or of what she had to choose from to begin with. Which brings up again the question of the extent to which some of these manuscripts were entered only because the entrant felt that Glück might be particularly receptive to the work (though this last point is tricky, because knowing a judge's own poetry is no more a gauge of what she likes to read than is her identity). But one new factor does come into play with the arrival of Glück as judge: she is the first to have screeners outside of Yale University Press. Which is to say, from 1933, when Benét became the first external judge, until 2003, when Glück became judge, readers at the press pretty much determined which manuscripts to pass on to the judge, the number of manuscripts varying according to how many the judge was willing to read. To this extent, the judge's decision is reflective of her taste, yes, but only of what appealed to her taste out of a limited number of manuscripts that she might or might not have chosen in the first place. Another way to see it is that the decision is also reflective of the screeners' tastes. This makes it crucial, to my mind, to give some thought to the choice of screeners.

I don't know, with one exception, who Glück's screeners were, but when I took on the position of judge, and after Glück advised me to choose my screeners with care, I made a point of choosing those who represented a wide range of aesthetics and reflected how diverse poetry has become in terms of gender, sexual orientation, and race. At this point I have eight screeners, who are variously white, African American, Native American, Latinx, and Asian American. Only one is a straight male. Six of the eight are women. At least three screeners are queer, to my knowledge. I do think that this range of screeners (each of whom selects the best six or seven manuscripts to give me) has led to my having a diverse pool to choose from. My first choice, *Slow Lightning*, by Eduardo Corral, who is queer and Chicano

American, was easy. But I had to have a screener who put that manuscript in front of me in the first place. Interestingly enough, though, the screener who passed Corral's manuscript along is a straight white woman. Just as interesting is that my next two picks, Will Schutt and Eryn Green, are both straight white men, but their manuscripts were passed on to me by, respectively, a straight white woman and a queer black woman.

What all this means is hard to say, but what it has equaled during my tenure has been a steady increase in the racial diversity of the prize. Corral was the first Latinx winner, Duy Doan and Yanyi are only the second and third Asian American winners, Yanyi is the first trans winner, and Airea D. Matthews is only the second African American winner in the history of the Yale series. One thing that surprised me, as I considered all of my picks for this introduction, is that only two have been women—two out of eight. It just now occurs to me that I've in fact chosen three women for the prize, but in one of the years the first selection (by a woman) turned out to have been taken for another prize, so I went to my next choice, which happened to be by a man. In any event, I hope the ratio will be more balanced by the time of my final selection in 2020.

Our awareness, as a society, of all kinds of diversity and of a need to be more inclusive has evolved considerably since the 1950s, and that evolution has been especially swift in the last fifteen years. The Yale Series of Younger Poets has, I think, become increasingly reflective of that inclusivity. The value of diversity, for American poetry, should be obvious, I hope: we are a diverse country, and anything that wants to call itself American poetry must be reflective of that diversity—how call it American, if it represents only one voice in a choir of voices? The effect of diversity is another, subtler, and ultimately more revolutionary matter. A shared aspect of the majority of poetry written by historically marginalized people is that the poems often interrogate and trouble their relationship to a language and prosody that have been handed down by a primarily white, male, English tradition. We see this in Rich's attempt (in work subsequent to her Yale volume) to find a "common language" across genders, and in Corral's use of Spanish as, in part, a refusal to accept English as the default language. And this overall restlessness with a tradition assumed to be the "norm" has helped make American poetry less complacent, inasmuch as it challenges easy assumptions; such challenges can only be good, ultimately, for the growth of the art.

In addition, the restlessness with tradition has gotten poets of color, in particular, to come up with greater innovation, in their quest to find a language and form that speaks for them—which is to say, racial diversity often coincides with prosodic diversity, and as this diversity becomes increasingly part of the American poetry landscape, it puts a pressure on poetry to keep evolving: surely this is the ultimate responsibility of the poet, to master traditions, and at the same time to keep pushing those traditions usefully forward in such a way that tradition remains at once a relevant touchstone and an exciting point from which to leap forward into new definitions not just of how to write a poem, but of poetry itself. It comes back to inclusivity, I believe, and a desire to include more voices and more kinds of voices.

Two more recent changes in the history of the prize have made it possible to be even more inclusive. In 2015 the press decided that the series would no longer have an age limit of forty, nor would it require U.S. citizenship for eligibility. Again, these changes came about in large part as the result of changes in the cultural conversation. In the same year, the poets Javier Zamora, Christopher Soto, and Marcelo Hernandez Castillo—acting as the Undocupoets—circulated a petition to various presses and organizations, asking them to lift several contest restrictions, in particular to open the contests to those "in the U.S. with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status or Temporary Protected Status (TPS)" (*Poets & Writers*, July/August 2015). Yale University Press agreed to this, and at the same time lifted the age restriction (although the series remains, oddly enough, the Yale Series of Younger Poets). This latter decision may or may not have been spurred on by another concern that had started to arise around the subject of first-book contests: what exactly constitutes an emerging writer? To what extent is emerging necessarily connected with youth? And, for the purposes of the Yale prize, does emerging stop happening at forty?

That Airea D. Matthews was the first winner of the prize after the age limit had been lifted—she was forty-three at the time—is proof enough that exciting voices don't necessarily emerge before forty; some poets have been raising families, others have full-time jobs (Matthews was doing both), and not everyone has the luxury of time to focus exclusively on writing. Perhaps more to the point, it's my belief that any writer worth reading is continuing to surprise herself, to find new ways of deploying language and different

reasons for doing so; in this sense, the committed artist is always emerging into something new. To quote one of the judges of the series, Stanley Kunitz,

> Though I lack the art
> to decipher it,
> no doubt the next chapter
> in my book of transformations
> is already written.
> I am not done with my changes.

I watched Kunitz read those lines (from "The Layers") at a celebration of his one hundredth birthday; he read them with a conviction that suggested he meant every word, even at one hundred.

What I've aimed for as a judge is what Glück, too, seems to have wanted: selections that have no clear or easy point of commonality—with my work or with each other's. My only instructions to the screeners have been to choose what they feel are the best manuscripts—however they define that—and not to choose what they think I might like. For myself, the chief criterion has been surprise in how the material, whatever its subject, gets handled. This might be at the formal level, though more often it has been in terms of sensibility. I want to feel as if I've been asked to see the world through a strange lens, to hear a voice whose confidence comes in part from how unaware it is of its own strangenesses—think Dickinson, think Hopkins. Their sheer weirdness. And yet that weirdness can come in the form of restraint and understatement, too.

What does the prize mean at this point, and where might it be headed? Toward the end of his introduction from 1998, Bradley offered this assessment of the state of the art:

> Twentieth-century American verse has conducted several variations on the age-old dispute between Apollonian and Dionysian notions of inspiration, between the poetry of intellect and the poetry of emotion. (The debate finally presents a false choice, but it has been prosecuted with vigor nonetheless.) During the period when Auden and Fitts were Yale editors, both credos were well represented among the nation's poets. The argument is pretty much over now,

> at least for the time being, and a balance has been lost. With the triumph of unmediated emotion in the latter half of the century, formalism has suffered neglect. The lack of instruction, approval, and practice has had a cumulative effect, and if it is deemed worthwhile to recover the skill level of a Merrill or an Auden, it is going to take a sustained movement to effect recuperation. In the meantime, a resource has gone out of our art. [xcv]

The implication seems to be that it will be more difficult to find manuscripts that offer the combination of intellect and emotion and prosodic skill that was somehow once more abundant. I disagree. Or I suppose I would argue with any fixed definition of prosody. I have not encountered manuscripts that are strictly formal—that is, employ metrical regularity, rhyme schemes, and so on. But what I've encountered instead are poets who have mastered those particular prosodic traditions, and are pushing them forward in ways that range from Matthews deciding that tweets and text messages can be turned into prosodic tools, to the restrained, muscular sentence that Yanyi deploys in his prose poems, to the code-switching by which Spanish and Vietnamese become part of a poem's prosody, in the work of Corral and Doan, respectively. What the Yale winners since 1998 have especially shown is that the possibilities for poetry have opened up, concomitant with an opening of the conversation to allow those voices that were silenced earlier to be heard now. And what those voices most often seem to be asking is: Who decided, finally, what a poem is? Who decides who gets to write one? Meanwhile, to return to Bradley's comments, why does emotion have to lead to a lack of formal rigor, and since when is formal rigor the unmistakable mark of intellect?

The prize's history of evolution—the longest history of any existing poetry prize in the United States—toward increased inclusivity, of identity but also of content, the decision to have a female judge and, afterward, an African American judge, the flexibility that Yale University Press has shown in its ability to accommodate shifting ideas of what is meant by terms like "emerging" or "American"—these all convince me that the Yale poetry prize is not only one of the most distinctive prizes, still, but also likely to be one of the most enduring. The prize has never been a guarantee of a distinguished and lengthy career—not all winners have gone on to be Adrienne Rich, for

example. But many factors go into a career. Or more exactly, a combination of many factors goes into, variously, the making or breaking or stalling or cutting forever short or immovably consolidating (as if the canon were a fixed planet markable by a flag of conquest) of a career; luck is not the least of those shifting, unpredictable factors. But the Yale prize makes a new voice known, often for the first time, and widely. That's a huge gift, as I have found it a huge gift to have the opportunity to provide that new voice its bit of time and space. The rest, as each voice included here found out, or will eventually, is anyone's guess.

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It would be difficult to overestimate the debt I owe to George Bradley, for the model he provided me with his editorship of the previous iteration of *The Yale Younger Poets Anthology* (1998). Bradley's introduction to that anthology is exhaustive, a wealth of information and often very amusing anecdotes about the early history of the series. Of particular value to me was the information he was able to compile regarding the various poets' biographies. I have relied heavily on these biographical notes, adding what I could, often just rewording a bit. Other sources of information include the usual Internet sites, including Google, Wikipedia, obituaries in local papers of long ago.

I especially wish to thank Sarah Miller and Ash Lago at Yale University Press for their patience, for their unflagging energy and attention to the project, and for their assistance not only with fact finding but with the final shape of my introduction and, indeed, of the anthology overall. I am deeply grateful.

Readers will note the absence here of Michael Casey's spirited, iconoclastic poems that so unflinchingly examined the brutalities of the conflict in Vietnam. I did select poems for inclusion, but Casey, who owns the copyright to his poems, was unwilling to give permission for those selections to be included here. I regret their absence, and direct interested readers to Casey's Yale volume, *Obscenities*, from 1971. Born in 1947 in Lowell, Massachusetts, Michael Casey was drafted upon graduation from the Lowell Institute of Technology in 1968 and served as a military policeman in Vietnam. He returned to study at the State University of New York, Buffalo. He has written five books of poetry, including *There It Is: New and Selected Poems* (2017).

Two other winners of the prize had to be omitted, because the press, after several attempts, was unable to secure permission to reprint in time for production. One of these is Joy Davidman, whose *Letter to a Comrade* was the 1937 winner of the Yale prize. Joy Davidman (1915–1960) was born in New York City and studied at Hunter College and Columbia University. A Jew by birth, she became an atheist and a communist, then later converted to Christianity and wrote one of her best-known works, *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (1954). That book's preface was written by C. S. Lewis, whom Davidman eventually married. Davidman continued to write poetry, as well as novels and screenplays. Her marriage to Lewis was the subject of the movie *Shadowlands* (1993).

Jeremy Ingalls (1911–2000) won the 1940 Yale prize for *The Metaphysical Sword.* Born Mildred Dodge Ingalls in Gloucester, Massachusetts, she was renamed Jeremy in childhood to commemorate an ancestor. She studied at Tufts University and the University of Chicago, and became a professor of Asian studies at Rockford College in Illinois. A translator of Chinese and Japanese, Ingalls was also the author of scholarly essays, short stories, a verse play, and four subsequent volumes of poetry. Her awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Ford Foundation Fellowship.

100 Years of Yale Younger Poets

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