

Celebrating the *Best American Poetry* 2018 at Villanova

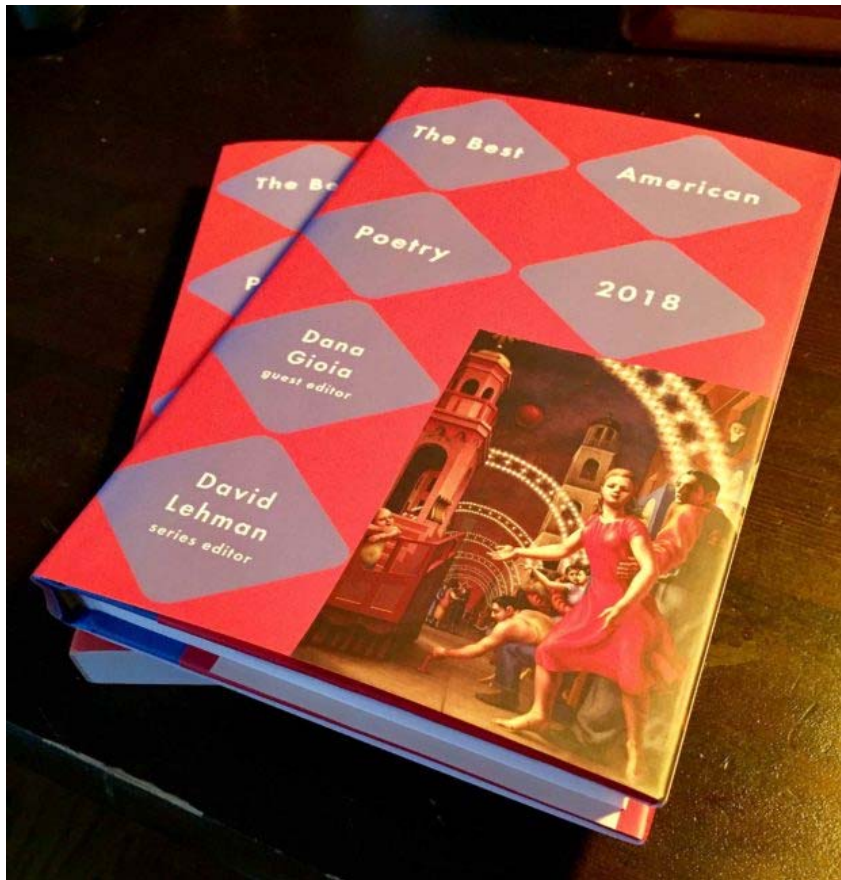
February 6, 2019

5:00 Connelly Center Cinema

6:15 (St. David's Room) Reception and Book Signing

Villanova University is honored to host the regional launch of the thirtieth anniversary edition of *The Best American Poetry*, guest edited by Dana Gioia, David Lehman, general editor.

For three decades, the *Best American Poetry* has served as an annual occasion to recognize new work by American authors; inclusion is one of the great honors established and emerging poets may receive.



The anthology was officially launched at New York University, in September 2018, but Villanova now brings together six of the anthology's authors, along with David Lehman, for an evening of reading, discussion, and fellowship on our campus.

David Lehman will chair the event, which will feature short readings from six poets: Maryann Corbett, Ernest Hilbert, Mary Jo Salter, Adrienne Su, Ryan Wilson, and Villanova's own James Matthew Wilson.

The public is warmly invited to this special evening to celebrate the achievement of contemporary letters and to join us for food and conversation afterwards.

This event is sponsored by the Honors Program, the Villanova Center for Liberal Education, the Department of English, and the Department of Humanities.

For more information, contact James Matthew Wilson, at james.m.wilson@villanova.edu

About the poets

Maryann Corbett was born in Washington, DC, and grew up in northern Virginia. She earned a BA from the College of William and Mary and an MA and PhD from the University of Minnesota. She has published three books of poetry: *Breath Control* (2012); *Credo for the Checkout Line in Winter* (2013), which was a finalist for the Able Muse Book Prize; and *Mid Evil* (2014), the winner of the Richard Wilbur Award. In 2009, Corbett was the co-winner of the Willis Barnstone Translation Award. She lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Ernest Hilbert's debut poetry collection *Sixty Sonnets* (2009) was described by X.J. Kennedy as "maybe the most arresting sequence we have had since John Berryman checked out of America." His second collection, *All of You on the Good Earth* (2013), has been hailed as a "wonder of a book," "original and essential," an example of "sheer mastery of poetic form," containing "some of the most elegant poems in American literature since the loss of Anthony Hecht." His third collection, *Caligulan* (2015), has been called "brutal yet beautiful," defined by "pleasure, clarity, and discipline," "tough-minded and precise," filled with a "stern, witty, and often poignant music," "a page-turner in a way most poetry books can never be," and "an honest book for dishonest times." *Caligulan* was selected as the winner of the 2017 Poets' Prize.

David Lehman was born in New York City in 1948. He was educated at Columbia University, spent two years in England as a Kellett Fellow at Cambridge University, and worked as Lionel Trilling's research assistant upon his return to New York. Lehman initiated *The Best American Poetry* series in 1988. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and an award in literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is the author of several collections of poems, including *Poems in the Manner Of* (Scribner, forthcoming March, 2017); *New and Selected Poems* (Scribner, 2013); *Yeshiva Boys* (Scribner, 2009), *When a Woman Loves a Man* (Scribner, 2005); *Jim and Dave Defeat the Masked Man*, written collaboratively with James Cummins (Soft Skull Press, 2005); *The Evening Sun: A Journal in Poetry* (Scribner, 2002); *The Daily Mirror: A Journal in Poetry* (Scribner, 2000); *Valentine Place* (Scribner, 1996); *Operation Memory* (Princeton University Press, 1990); and *An Alternative to Speech* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

Mary Jo Salter is the author of eight books of poetry, most recently *The Surveyors*. A frequent reviewer and essayist, she is also a lyricist whose song cycle "Rooms of Light," with music by Fred Hersch, premiered at Lincoln Center in 2007. Her children's book *The Moon Comes Home* appeared in 1989; her play *Falling Bodies* premiered in 2004. She is also co-editor, with Margaret Ferguson and Jon Stallworthy, of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (4th edition, 1996; 5th edition, 2005).

Adrienne Su was raised in Atlanta, Georgia, earned a BA from Radcliffe College of Harvard University and an MFA from the University of Virginia. She is the author of the poetry collections *Middle Kingdom* (1997), *Sanctuary* (2006), *Having None of It* (2009), and *Living Quarters* (2015). Her awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and residencies at the Fine Arts Works Center and The Frost Place.

James Matthew Wilson is Associate Professor of Religion and Literature in the Department of Humanities and Augustinian Traditions at Villanova University. He has published eight books, including *The Hanging God* (Angelico), *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition* (CUA, 2017); the major critical study, *The Fortunes of Poetry in an Age of Unmaking* (Wiseblood, 2015); a collection of poems, *Some Permanent Things*; and a monograph, *The Catholic Imagination in Modern American Poetry* (both Wiseblood Books, 2014). Wilson is the Poetry Editor of *Modern Age* magazine and the series editor of Colosseum Books. In 2017, he received the Hiatt Prize from the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture.

Ryan Wilson was born in Griffin, Georgia, and raised in nearby Macon, Georgia. He graduated from Tattnell Square Academy in 2000. He earned his Bachelor of Arts at The University of Georgia in 2004, his Master of Fine Arts from The Writing Seminars at The Johns Hopkins University in 2007, and a second Master's degree from Boston University in 2008. Wilson's poems, translations, and criticism appear widely, in periodicals such as *First Things*, *Five Points*, *The Hopkins Review*, *The New Criterion*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Yale Review*. Wilson's first book of poems, *The Stranger World*, won the 2017 Donald Justice Poetry Prize.

Apophatic

O absent Mind, blank where I fire this prayer,
tongue-tangled Word my neurons flash into flesh
because they must, might you be this: a brash-
ness of Terrible Two whose wild career
of sheer will muddles all my mother-care?
whose not-a-care heaves flood and avalanche?
lets blocky Towers tippy-topple and crash?
giggles delight while crackhead comets steer
headlong at little worlds? Might you be this:
all pink-checked lovable but not yet master
at seeing your lovely patterns as disaster?
so rapt up in unwinding fiddle-ferns
you think death changes nothing?

No. This is

all error. But it helps me come to terms.

Maryann Corbett

First published in *Rattle*. Included in *Mid Evil*.

Haircut, with Vision of My Father's Ashes

Millimeter snips
of my clipped hair slip, sifting
from the scissor-edge
to my arms, my lap
where their dappled black-and-gray
lets a brain-switch flip
to some inner eye,
flashing back: his cigarette
ashes. Weightless waste
of spent Chesterfields,
Winstons, Camels, Lucky Strikes,
sour in the ashtrays
flanking his wing chair,
sodden in highball glasses,
stubbed in bathroom sinks
where the Barbasol's
faux-menthol was powerless
to perfume the stink.
What was ash to him?
Decades of *film noir* explain
how he dreamed himself—
pure Forties Bogart,
dinner-jacket suave, a cool
hand gesturing smoke,

a smolder censing
rooms thick with urbanity.
Struck from the film script:

his wife, his daughters
cleaning bathrooms, tasting ash.
Daydreams luffed away

the tobacco's sludge,
shipyard's sweat, and fatherhood's
pained bewilderment—

What? Oh, the mirror:
Done. So much reflection pours
ashes on my head:

Even while tea-rose
breathings of salon chatter
gust away his ghost,

I, too, turn to ash
cigarette-wise, my loose ends
cinder-swept away.

Maryann Corbett

First published in *Crab Orchard Review*. Appears in *Street View*.

State Fair Fireworks, Labor Day

Look up: blazing chrysanthemums in rose
shriek into bloom above the Tilt-a-Whirls,
hang for a blink, then die in smoky swirls.
They scream revolt at what the body knows:
All reveals end. We clap and sigh. Then, no—
another rose! another peony! break,
flame, roar, as though by roaring they might make
the rides whirl *in perpetuum*. As though
we need not finally, wearily turn, to plow
back through the crush of bodies, the lank air,
to buses that inch us, sweating, across town.
As though we were not dropped in silence there
to trudge the last blocks home, the streetlamps low,
the crickets counting summer's seconds down.

Maryann Corbett

First published in *Measure*. Finalist, Howard Nemerov Sonnet Competition.
Appears in *Street View* and at *American Life in Poetry* and The Poetry Foundation.

“Prophetic Outlook,” by Ernest Hilbert

Crooks run the whole world, and the Dow just fell.
Crap rules the airwaves. All your best plans stall.
The air is dirty, and you don't feel well.
Your wife won't listen. Friends no longer call.
Sad songs from youth no longer cast a spell.
Cancer research has run into a wall.
Some inflated hack just won the Nobel.
You witness clear signs of decline and fall.
The neighbors are cold, and your house won't sell.
Your cat has bad teeth. Your paychecks feel small.
Maybe you're really sick. It's hard to tell.
Up ahead, traffic has slowed to a crawl.
The world didn't just start going to hell.
You just noticed for the first time, that's all.

From the book *Sixty Sonnets* (2009)

“Cover to Cover” by Ernest Hilbert

Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders
on the chaos of memories. — Walter Benjamin

I don't collect them. They just accumulate,
Tower higher into shoddy columns,
Climbing weirdly like crystal formations
Or pillars of coral. The thought of their weight
Crushes, their coarse traffic of wars I've thumbed
Through, their long summers and snow. They weigh tons.
They slide onto the stove, under the fridge,
Into the tub. They prop open windows,
Serve as coasters. They have traveled with me
And slept beside me. They fashion a bridge
To vanished rooms, sorrows, and suns. Lord knows
Why I haul them from city to city.
I slip them together like bricks. They become a wall,
My greed, my fears, everything, nothing at all.

From the book *All of You on the Good Earth* (2013)

“Barnegat Light” by Ernest Hilbert

The gull pulls bags from trash and drags them clear.

He’s big as a cat, a blur of snow and soot.

He pokes until debris spills down the pier.

He’s clumsy, and somehow he’s lost a foot.

Chewed off? A winter fishing line? Wedged in boards?

The stump’s a small sharp spear that stings the bird

If ground is touched. He soars to foggy scree,

Alights but flaps to halfway hang in air, spurred

By pain to perform endless pirouettes.

The bay’s warm surge troubles the cooler sea.

The fishing fleet returns as silhouettes.

These hours are small escapes, reprieves, rewards,

Summer the center we try to pretend

Will keep us strong, like love, and never end.

WELCOME TO HIROSHIMA

is what you first see, stepping off the train:
a billboard brought to you in living English
by Toshiba Electric. While a channel
silent in the TV of the brain

projects those flickering re-runs of a cloud
that brims its risen columnful like beer
and, spilling over, hangs its foamy head,
you feel a thirst for history: what year

it started to be safe to breathe the air,
and when to drink the blood and scum afloat
on the Ohta River. But no, the water's clear,
they pour it for your morning cup of tea

in one of the countless sunny coffee shops
whose plastic dioramas advertise
mutations of cuisine behind the glass:
a pancake sandwich; a pizza someone tops

with a maraschino cherry. Passing by
the Peace Park's floral hypocenter (where
how bravely or with what ~~mistaken cheer~~
humanity erased its own erasure).

you enter the memorial museum
and through more glass are served, as on a dish
of blistered grass, three mannequins. Like gloves
a mother clips to coatsleeves, strings of flesh

hang from their fingertips; or as if tied
to recall a duty for us, *Reverence*
the dead whose mourners too shall soon be dead,
but all commemoration's swallowed up

in questions of bad taste, how re-created
horror mocks the grim original,
and thinking at last *They should have left it all*
you stop. This is the wristwatch of a child.

Jammed on the moment's impact, resolute
to communicate some message, although mute,
it gestures with its hands at eight-fifteen
and eight-fifteen and eight-fifteen again

while tables of statistics on the wall
update the news by calling on a roll
of tape, death gummed on death, and in the case
adjacent, an exhibit under glass

is glass itself: a shard the bomb slammed in
a woman's arm at eight-fifteen, but some
three decades on—as if to make it plain
hope's only as renewable as pain,

and as if all the unsung
debasements of the past may one day come
rising to the surface once again—
worked its filthy way out like a tongue.

-Mary Jo Salter

GOODBYE, TRAIN

I'm stepping off the train behind a pair
of thirtysomethings with their baby daughter.

The father will stay fit for years, I think,
though here and there, his hair's a little thin;

the mother's confident in new blue jeans
she knows are sexy—but carefully, tastefully so.

Seeing them floods me at once—I can't say why—
with solicitude. Delight, and envy. Pain.

"Goodbye, train," the mother says, and then,
"Say 'goodbye, train,' 'bye bye.'" She waves her hand

theatrically, the way we often will
with children, so that nobody can find us

guilty, ourselves, of any silliness—
of joy in the trainman's cap, his ticket-punch.

The little girl is propped on her father's hip
and pointing vaguely at a world of things

she's just come to know, and which now must go away.
How grave she seems!—a toothless oracle.

I see too how I look, if anyone's looking:
a weathered niceness, a trudging competence.

That's how I follow, twenty years ahead
of the parents, as I lug my bags behind them,

vowing to keep a stranger's proper distance—
as I did from those two lovesick teenagers

clinging in tears some stations back, when he
prepared himself to be left there on the platform

by a girl who swore it wasn't possible,
and both were stunned to discover that it was.

I think what luck it is, to be one who says
goodbye to trains instead of other people.

-Mary Jo Salter

Adrienne Su

Consommé

would have routed me
in the spelling bee

if the other
killer speller

in seventh grade
hadn't had a grenade

lobbed at him,
too. I've forgotten

his word but still feel
the shifting floor of betrayal

by this one, which
assumed fine French

restaurants or a mother
with the leisure

to delve into Julia Child
or a father who required

broth clear enough
to read through,

never mind how much flesh
became garbage.

Who among us
was building rafts

in stockpots out of meat,
egg whites, and leeks

purely for transparency?
Why were they asking me?

In 1979, broth was canned.
I was beginning to understand

why strangers were taking to sea
in crowded dinghies.

During dinner each night,
good Walter Cronkite

told stories of the saved,
their faces far away

and near, the connection
between my Campbell's Chicken

Noodle and their hunger
unclear, but a certain danger.

To waste no food was a given,
whatever its origin.

Reading was permissible
even at midnight, even at table.

Thus I could spell almost anything
but not a word of haute cuisine.

Adrienne Su

After the Dinner Party

Dropping napkins, corks, and non-compostables into the trash, I see that friends have mistaken my everyday chopsticks for disposables,

helpfully discarding them alongside inedibles: pork bones, shrimp shells, bitter melon. Among napkins and corks, they do look compostable:

off-white, wooden, warped from continual washing - no lacquer, no ornament. But anyone who thinks these chopsticks are disposable

doesn't live with chopsticks in the comfortable way of a favorite robe, oversized, a bit broken.

Thin paper napkins, plastic forks, and non-compostable takeout boxes constitute the chopstick's natural habitat, to many I hold dear. With family or alone, I'll maintain that chopsticks aren't disposable,

but if I can make peace with the loss of utensils when breaking *hao* with guests, I'll be one of them, not digging in the napkins and corks. Compostable chopsticks are the answer: everyday *and* disposable.

Heorot

Nov., 2016

It is creeping across
Where grim fogs graze hills
the hollows that hug
it lurches through thickets,
It strips the bronze stalks
the frisking of the flock
In a ditch by our fence
The balefires burn.
Groped by our grief,
we have shrieked lamentations,
to punish the predator
All the high councils
and still it stands
cruel as winter,
The nightly news
our Facebook friends
It shakes its iron
it rattles its wrench
in the darkness outside
and will not wander
the monstrous changeling,

For a Dog

You'd wake us up—that shrill, insistent bark
Driving away whatever dreams had fogged
Our vision—and we'd rise in the true dark,
Wandering just what exactly, catalogued
By canine instinct under 'THREAT', was there,
What jogger, cat, or dog it was that dogged
You from your drowse beside the easy chair
And summoned your yapped pandemium.
Nine times in ten it was just empty air,
Some ghosted scent you sniffed. Dumb—you were dumb,
Like all dogs, snuffing up to snakes, afraid
Of mice. When we said 'come, you wouldn't come;
You cowered when commanded to play dead,
And when we wanted most to be alone
You'd offer up that imbecilic head
Until we crowned your pity with a bone.
Our lives took on the shape you spun from need,
The harried rondure of routine. You gone,
The house is quieter, and we've been freed
Forever from the never-ending chores
Your tail entailed, the scrubbing where you peed,
The hunting stain-removers down in stores.
What's hardest are the peaceful hours we wanted
So much when you were scratching up the doors
And howling at some phantom thing that haunted
The world without, some threat we couldn't see
That you were desperate to have confronted.
Now you're part of that present unity
Of absences the living move among,
In which what was, what will, and what can't be
Dance in a ring to a triumphant song
We don't have ears to hear, or heart to see,
Who sleep now perfectly, and much too long.

- Ryan Wilson

- Ryan Wilson

THE MISHAWAKA CRUISERS

All airy and cavern-chested, voices
Of rubber bands and spokes off bicycles,
The boys out late on West McKinley Ave.
Are waiting, talking, searching through the dark.

Their midnight-blue mesh jerseys are the fields
On which blank luminous 15s appear
In answer to the strokes of passing headlights.
A line of weekend cruisers, mufflers loose

And loud with bragging, makes its measured circuit
Along three blocks of neon fast-food chains,
The darkened panes of auto dealerships,
The Checks-Cashed, and the boarded Dollar Store.

A high-perched floodlight bathes in blinding milk
A fleet of new sedans and minivans
Beyond the cyclone fence. It's summer now
And light lives leaping in conic clouds of gnats.

Three boys follow my car as it gets trapped
Within the caravan, eyes settling for
My mute impatience in lieu of the hope
Of spying an unknown batch of girls with beer.

Their betters park mud-speckled muscle cars
And perch blunt, certain bodies on the hoods,
But these three wait with long legs, hairless, stretching,
Poked between high-tops and frayed, cutoff denim.

Above, the sky gives way to sweeping plains
That neither field nor parking lot, nor lights
Studded along the row of burning signs
Could penetrate or prettify; the sky

Is just an empty clearing for the heat,
And though these boys' hearts pound with want and weakness,
And though cars fill the street with chrome and order,
I catch the vacant boredom just beneath.

Just then, a gap forms as two girls hop out
From a green pickup's cab to join the crowd,
And I escape, turn right off the main drag.
Their eyes pursue my fenders, then turn back

In search of something worth the endless waiting.
I have a place to go, someone to meet,
But in their restless still-becoming rests
My own dread of the bare, the incomplete.

-James Matthew Wilson

AUTUMN ROAD

I follow the clean-edged macadam north
To catch the train, the maples hanging forth
On either side, their leaves of brilliant reds,
Oranges, and umbers that will make their beds
Soon in the unmown grass that lines my street,
And crumble at the weight of passing feet.
The people who just moved in three doors down
Have ringed their banisters in black and brown
And hung a skeletal child from a swing,
Its eyes stare a dark and menacing
Reminder to pray for the dead and of those
Horrors the coming darkness may disclose.
We haven't met the tenants yet, and don't
Want to. A glance into their yard has sown
Nightmares already in my children's sleep,
Shaking them teared and screaming from its deep.
We've heard them crush their beer cans, out to smoke
Late at night, and guffaw at some crude joke.
A few doors farther on, the lawn is spiked
With signs for candidates I've long disliked.
Just seeing their names induces in me fear
Less supernatural but much more near
At hand than those that haunt the children's dreams.
But then, I see that stone foundations, beams
Of smooth pine pitched high in the sun, where two
Homes now are rising, promise something new;
And hear St. Monica's bell in her tower
Govern our hillside as it tolls the hour,
Chastening us that though our time seems dire,
Much has endured through beating rains and fire,
And good can still be made in this dark season.
I read a book last week that says our reason
No longer sees the world as from God's eyes;
Where the ancient mind saw signs, ours now denies
To it all but the most material meaning.
I'm not so sure. It seems that thoughts are leaning
Up against every fence post, and the earth,
Scared at, stares back and quietly brings to birth
Between us morals, words, and promises

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Which we might overlook but can't dismiss.
I worry, as a father, that the year
Ahead will bear out omens all too clear
Such that my children, grown, will only know
The clash of good and evil's fiery glow.
I stop to let the speeding traffic pass.
The gutter's tiled with tins and broken glass.
Across the way, the Veteran's Memorial
With polished granite, stirring flags, and aureole
Of silver guards the entrance to the station.
Its plaque says, *These gave their lives for our nation.*
I wait, clutching my ticket in my hand,
For what the rough voiced future will demand.

-James Matthew Wilson

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