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State of the Union: 50 Political Poems
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Beckman and Zapruder have tackled perhaps the largest taboo in American letters: the political poem. This genre is often dismissed as didactic or worse, un-poetic, but *State of the Union* proves just how good political poems can be. This project began as a collection of poems about President George W. Bush. In the end, however, *State of the Union* attempts to answer the much broader question of what constitutes an American political poem. Indeed, President Bush is only mentioned directly a few times.

Nonetheless, there's no dearth of specific names—Dick Cheney, Saddam Hussein, Wolf Blitzer—or places—Darfur, Egypt, New Orleans. Poems like "Forgiveness" by Mathias Svalina are not only shocking in their specificity—they are shockingly moving. The best of these poems do not preach to the choir; rather, they *are* the choir, filled with the same messages as the sermons but more powerful because they are sung. These poems may be called "Brave New Work" by the book's tagline, but they evoke an ancient pleasure of verse: its ability to stir. Some of the included pieces do feel moralizing while some feel hesitant, but those in the middle are getting the job done. And within this range, the breadth of current American poetry is evident.

The editors have assembled a satisfying variety of poets and poems within their self-imposed limit of fifty works. From James Tate to John Ashbery (staying with the titans for a moment), a definition of American political poetry, or American poetry in general, is slippery. In "Kidney: a sort or kind especially in regards to temperament," newcomer Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi writes, "Imagine an entire country knowing exactly what you mean when you say yesterday riots broke out in Hungary and I dreamt of Tehran exploding and my kidney blew up." *State of the Union* reaches after just such a collective imagination.

Erica Wright