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Zoland Poetry: An Annual of Poems, Translations & Interviews

Roland Pease, editor
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Far too much provocative thought flies under the radar of English-language readers; here's a new radar station, registering worldwide movement. Pease, best known for publishing Ha Jin's Flannery O'Connor Award winner *Under the Red Flag*, has stepped down as publisher of Zoland Books and redirected his efforts to presenting this broad spectrum of poets. Thirty-seven contribute one hundred thirty-two poems. A pair of interviews is included in the mix, but the centerpiece of this new annual is its translated poems, drawn from ten languages. The American poets selected represent several styles, but the Language School, with its emphasis on intentional opacity of meaning, holds a plurality of the page count. The most immediately appealing pieces, coincidentally, are not those with identifiable subjects and points of view. Four-time National Poetry Slam champion Patricia Smith finds herself in barreling down the Autobahn, praying to maintain control in "Waiting for a Title in German": "Fighting for a / clear signal on the one station we sometimes / understand, we cheer as Sam Cooke twists his / plaintive tenor to beg Jesus for several favors. / We'll just get in line behind him."

The translations defy block generalization. They range from spare seaside idylls originating in Icelandic to newspaper-like accounts of Roumanian ghost towns. The poems of sisters Ilona & Henia Karmel, rendered from Polish by Fanny Howe, were smuggled out of a concentration camp, sewn into the writers' skirts. All the more precious for being contraband, they speak of hot bread with caraway seeds, the abrupt end of childhood, scavenging fruit, and maintaining the will to continue. Amelia Roselli's work passes through Jennifer Scappettone's hands and comes out sliced, diced and julienned. It may have been so in Italian as well: "What ails my heart who beats so suavely / & hee disconsoles & ese / soldier soundings? you Those / drains I'mprinted there fore I / self-plagued so / ferociously, all have forsaken it! O you're m-y / rampant rabbithearted peri-nerves."

One of the issues intermittently debated is what poetry's function should be. Ilya Bernstein addresses the fact that verse is crafted to win an audience with thought regarding either appearance or sound: "I know the written word and the spoken word. / They grind against each other like cement and steel." Thomas Sayers Ellis in "No Easy Task" sends up a flare against traditional forms and fires another shot over the bow of the New York School, as typified by Ashbery. Ange Mlinko, somewhat of a New York Schooler herself, contributes lively, image-rich pieces on Morocco. *Zoland Poetry* is all over the map, literally and figuratively. Pease surely has favorites, but readers who fail to connect with any given poem need only flip the page to find something entirely different.
TODD MERCER (April 10, 2007)

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