

POETRY

Selected Poems

Fanny Howe

University of California Press, \$15.95
(paper)

Howe's first selected, one of the first three volumes in the University of California Press's New California Poetry series, is culled from poems published by nine different presses, fewer than half of Howe's books. In this sampling, Howe has rearranged stanzas within poems and poems within volumes to create a journey or quest narrative; the collection becomes a project in consistency. Howe writes carefully and deliberately about consciousness, informed by her contemplation and her interior experience. In *Introduction to the World*, a book-length serial poem excerpted in the book, she writes, "In my created head I don't exist." This concentrated center lends the poems incredible coherence across books, subjects, or topics, from the personal detail of the *Robeson Street* poems and *O'Clock* through "The Sea-Garden" (which shares a title with a book by H.D.) and the precision of "Lines out to Silence." The format of *Selected Poems* emphasizes common threads, even though Howe experiments with ideas and then discards them in the evolution of speech and listening that she uses to make her story: "the wind is what I believe in, / the One which moves around each form." Because Howe first clarifies her individual perceptions and then writes outward, her language doesn't explain, simplify, or complicate experience, but forms it in an original way. The unusual shape, the echo in her writing overtakes her accumulated contemporary cars and winking archaisms, querying "the eternal[s]" or immanent externals, like "you": "Rain—red rhododendron tree— / whitethorn—drumlin—you and me— / a hum of bees—tea— / ... // Inside me, the way elsewhere."

—Catherine Daly

The Selected Poems of Max Jacob

Max Jacob (edited and translated by William Kulik)

Oberlin College Press, \$14.95 (paper)

In a 1917 letter to Louis Untermeyer, Robert Frost wrote, "what I love best about man is definiteness of position." Even the unyielding Frost might bend that latitude were he to have come across Max Jacob, who just one year before had released his first collection, *Le cornet à dés*. This book heralded the start of the French prose poet's short career, in which he not only served as a conduit between Surrealists and Symbolists—he was a friend and contemporary of Cocteau, Modigliani, and others—but, most importantly, exposed the stark dualities borne of life in the unsettled, urgent era of world wars: that man can hold no firm stance, for he is always questioning his own sanity ("if I were what they call 'mad,' a madman, a real one, I wouldn't know the language of the trees"), the stability of his time ("It was like a public execution! Everyone there to witness the slaughter of art and

happiness. Some of the butchers had binoculars"), the fervor of his convictions ("Will you be here beside me when I'm dying, Mercy?"). Thus Jacob's poems are definitive only in irresolution, and all the better: the vacillation that informs these poems makes them supremely poignant and haunting. Their grip only tightens in his *Dernières poèmes*—written shortly before his death in a Nazi concentration camp—with their horrible "morgue mountain[s]," "Yellow Stars, and Jews" "fallen in the snow" on one hand, and tranquility—"I found my emerald," "Spring is the cradle of love," and "all it takes is a five-year-old in pale blue overalls drawing in a coloring book for a door to open to the light"—on the other. This is a truly moving collection, a place of "secret happiness in the midst of sorrow."

—Ethan Paquin

Carolina Ghost Woods

Judy Jordan

Louisiana State University Press, \$22.50
(cloth), \$14.95 (paper)

Judy Jordan has written a stunning collection in *Carolina Ghost Woods*, winner of the 1999 Walt Whitman Prize. Graced with an engagement of the senses that is so precise it seems otherworldly, Jordan renders the landscape of her childhood with a stylistic and thematic unity that is rare for a first book of poems. Her lines are rife with music and a strong elegiac impulse, as in "Prayers to My Mother," where she writes, "Never step on a grave, I know, / but I'm here as if there were some answer / in this field of scratched rocks and tombstones." In the title poem, switchbacks and repetitions map a path through the backwoods of Carolina, "land of ghosts and amulets, / where the bloodstain on the attic floorboards won't wash up / and locked doors fling themselves open." The physical movement in the poems mimics a mind deftly weaving metaphysical and mundane, present and past into a beautiful tapestry that nevertheless serves as the backdrop for astonishing violence and profound loss. Jordan conveys this loss, particularly the loss of her mother, with a mantic voice that lures us into places rarely visited in poetry, places haunted by the spirits of vagrants and slaves, killers and chain gangs. The landscape in *Carolina Ghost Woods* seeps into itself, burns into loam, but the act of absorbing the visions, sounds, and smells of this landscape stuns us into a heightened sense of the exact present, where we feel fortunate enough to breathe and live.

—David Roderick

New Addresses

Kenneth Koch

Alfred A. Knopf, \$23 (cloth)

"Personification and apostrophe are not used much by modern poets," Kenneth Koch observed in a 1998 book about the pleasures of poetry. "Our linguistic so-

phistication has made it hard for us even to believe in abstract words, much less start talking to them as if they were human." It is completely characteristic that after deeming the apostrophe moribund, the ever-adventurous, versatile Koch would immediately take up the challenge of talking to abstract words as if he were sitting next to them on a couch. This buoyant collection, a National Book Award finalist and the poet's sixteenth volume, reinvents the apostrophe by launching into an extended rendezvous with the form and its delightful artifice. Comprising fifty addresses to concepts, objects, and events that undergird a life—ranging from the lofty ("To Life," "To Consciousness," "To Destiny") to the mundane and unexpected ("To Marijuana," "To Orgasms," "To Kidding Around")—Koch's book is, ultimately, an unusual and inventive poetic autobiography. Rarely has Koch broached such personal subjects as his Ohio childhood, his Jewishness, or his experiences in World War II ("How many persons would I have had to kill / Even to begin to be a part of winning you?")—subjects he limns with wit, vulnerability, and disarming candor, but with a minimum of sentiment, thanks to the odd, often humorous distancing effect of the poetic device. Pondering his strange project in one poem, he asks "If all of you—concepts, objects, / Cities, panoramas, gulfs—have ears to hear with— / That is the question, whether anything not human needs words." The answer this wise and infectiously entertaining book presents is a resounding yes. Taken together, these poems form an expansive address to the forces which have always been most vital to Koch—poetry, love, sex, friendship, youth, time, and, perhaps most of all, pleasure, which Koch's exuberant, moving new poems offer in generous heaps.

—Andrew Epstein

House Made of Silver

Elizabeth Robinson

Kelsey Street Press, \$11 (paper)

Robinson's volume begins with a poem titled "Its Excess," but *House Made of Silver* makes model use of the lean, exact line. There is no room at all for excess; instead, the book's sparseness permits meditation to overtake language. In much the same way, white space overwhelms the presence of words on each page, but the words themselves achieve a balance with white space—they are absolutely essential and quietly introduce the spiritual realm. But "quietly" is a misleading word to use in relation to Robinson's vision of the spiritual world, where we find "limbs of miracles," "the cathedral's groin," a "Lord of skin and clashing pattern," and a "ripe Lord folded four times in two drawers." The spiritual element, while contained in lines with the effect of quietude, is neither passive nor soothing, but strange and almost fierce in its focused insistence. Also evident in Robinson's vision, as in the lines above, is the spiritual world's undeniable conjunction with the physical, sometimes grotesquely sexual world. In an echo of Dickinson's sensibility, Robinson focuses closely on the domestic world, allowing it to become "the brick floor from which the kingdom of God extends."

Her successful mingling of these worlds simultaneously draws the reader in with the familiar and maintains an elusive distance with the unknown. On its own, each line is clear and contained, yet the combination of lines does not lead to an epiphanic, and therefore digestible, end. In keeping with their concern with the "other" world, these poems resist conclusion, thereby preserving mystery. Perhaps the most successful of these multi-section meditations are "Return" and "Term," and the book truly reaches culmination with the mingled vehemence and restraint of the book's last poem, "Emitted Adoration."

—Laura Sims

Feast

Tomaž Šalamun (edited by Charles Simic)

Harcourt, \$22 (cloth)

This is the third major selection of Tomaž Šalamun's 26 collections to be published in America since a *Selected Poems*, edited and translated by Charles Simic, introduced his work here in 1988. The most celebrated Slovenian poet of his generation, Šalamun possesses, in addition to much that is deeply Eastern European, a marked affinity with writing from this country. In the manner of a Zagajewski or Ristovic, his poems manifest a wry, deprecatory humor, alternately acerbic and playful; a gift for remarkable images and detail, both surreal and quotidian; and an acute sensitivity to the astounding variety of the world and of history. Yet they also disclose an American sensibility that smacks of O'Hara and Whitman: at the core of these poems is a self-dramatist, in love with his own dailyness, who is at the same time a visionary, lawmaker, daredevil, omnivore. Thus binatured, poems such as "Words" shuttle between temporal and spatial frames of reference while continually generating a throbbing center, a speaker like a dynamo: "Will tundra / suffer cyclically? Will the ice roar // when the little balls jet into the heart / of the Romanovs, like steam? The knight / combs his hair. He woke up lost in thought." Yet with so many diverse influences and deriving from such a broad period of time—Simic's selections span Šalamun's production—the poems in *Feast* do not so much articulate one evolved aesthetic stance as arrive at unique, individual combinations. Aphorism, sprawling catalogue, dry, formally controlled observation, and syllabic crypticism all rub shoulders in these pages—as if to better illustrate what seems to be Šalamun's underlying position: a mutability and multiplicity like Ovid's.

—Monica Ferrell

Plasticville

David Trinidad

Turtle Point Press, \$14.99 (paper)

Reading Plasticville is like watching a sculptor shape a pieta out of butter. Chockfull of expertly crafted poems on the ephemera and drivel of American life, the book begins with an epigraph from Stephen Fenichell that serves, it seems, as a description of Trinidad's