

Poetry from the Northeast Region

By Guest Editor, Judith Arcana

I'm happy to introduce the first set of poems *Persimmon Tree* is publishing from an open call (it's fair to say the phrase "by popular demand" is appropriate here). The editors decided to make regional poetry calls, asked me to be their first guest editor, told me to choose 10-12 poems, and called for work from women poets over sixty in the Northeastern U.S. (New England + New Jersey, New York, Delaware and Pennsylvania). This first time is, by definition, experimental; plans for other guest editors and regions have been made.

The call period was May 1 to June 15, 2008. In the first few days, I received about forty poems; by the end of the call period, I'd gotten a few hundred. One of the most striking things about the work was its diversity of theme, attitude, and state of mind, its variety of speakers and tones. There were classical allusions and contemporary politics; there were personal revelations and *personae*—characters definitively not the poet herself. There were poems with passages or stanzas or single lines that made me love them instantly, and there were poems that made me sigh—ahhh—when I read them aloud. Just like people, some I loved for their charm, some for their craft, some for the struggle they'd engaged. And once I'd chosen a dozen, finding connections and relationships among the poems—putting them together as a small internal chapbook for the magazine—turned out to be the best part of my job.

(Note: Three good poems came close to the final cut; I want you to know about them: from New York, Felice Aull's "After Chemotherapy" with its poignant, evocative metaphors; from New Jersey, Staajabu's "Old School" with its wit and bluesy riffing; and from Massachusetts, Pat Collins' "Distress Signals" with its meld of gender politics and lyricism.)

Soon after I signed on as guest editor, *Persimmon Tree* received a gift of cash, designated to foster poetry: a grand thing! The editors decided \$500 could go to this issue, and asked me to decide how to use it. Frosting on an editor's cake, I think, to be able to give money to poets! So \$250 (each) goes to Susan Donnelly and Minnie Bruce Pratt, who both have two poems in this set. I've been reading Minnie Bruce's poetry for decades, and know her well. I've never met Susan, and her fine work was all good news when it turned up in my email box. I like that contrast, and the contrast between their two sets of poems as well.

So—here they are: poets' photographs, poets' bios, and the poems (including one of mine; each guest editor will offer a poem). The poets, the editors, and I hope you enjoy what we've done.

Minnie Bruce Pratt

Making a Phone Call

She says her name is Daisy but it's really Meena,
and I'm in New Jersey and she's in Delhi or Mumbai.
Or I'm in Alabama and she's in Albuquerque inside
sand-tinted concrete that blends in with the desert.
One room, one thousand three hundred fifty people,
mostly women, each sitting in her place, the one chair,
a desk with stuffed animals, a flag, a photo frame open
like a book to show off the children, easy to pack up
when they lay her off. But, any day now, her green vine
creeping along the divider will reach the window if
sales are good, if she's lucky. Outside, desert. Beyond,
the blue mountains. Eight and a half hours a day, minus
ten minutes, minus thirty, minus ten, for breaks and lunch.
She takes orders for clothes, she checks on my mother's
health insurance, she doesn't make a thing, it's a service,

not the steel mill blasting production, the slag, coal, ore, fire,
twenty thousand people, mostly men, two-story machines.
But Milt says: *If she works on any thing, touches anywhere,
she creates the wealth of the world. What comes back to her?*

Today my one conversation is Rhonda, office supplies,
she says the truck is on the way, traffic on the Turnpike.
How does she know? The radio? Satellite tracking the driver?
I tell her I can see out my front window the trucks and cars
backed up, the waiting line to enter the Tunnel, the traffic
a metal wall around the city. I just needed to talk to someone.
Everyone stuck for hours, cell phones scorching their ears.

The call centers, now they make them like assembly lines,
they say leave your mind at home, tighten the bolt. But no one
stops thinking. We think all the time: *Why am I doing this?*
The college fund or the rent, but it isn't the money, really,
she says, the best part is the people, you're with them all day,
you get to know them, you forget sometimes you're doing it
for someone else. She has to stand up if she wants to see
another person, her braid swings, she pulls her sari past
the blinking blue screen, next thing she knows, the chairs
are gone, the cubicles are being broken down and stacked,
to be sent elsewhere, turn-key ready for cheaper wages, while
money pours in electronic waves through satellite dishes, back
to the company from fifty-plus countries where it does business.

She opens her desk drawer, she takes out her keys and her folding altar,
something to hold in her hand as she and the other women walk out the door,
in her palm, small as a notepad, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Shakti, wisdom, wealth, the source.

Making Another Phone Call

She says her job is awful, awful, the hours,
some days nothing at all, then it's come in
at 11 a.m or 9 p.m., then nothing again.
The money is bad, and it's so boring. Boring.
All she does is annoy people, calls them up
and annoys them. How does she get rid
of that thing standing between her and what
she wants? She asked God to show her.
But how much more does she need to see?
Does someone need to pull her chest open

and show us a ruined life, like a movie?
The heart all bloody. Is that how we change?
Except for waitressing, this is the longest job
she's ever held. Her husband reminded her
the other night, she says, the longest job.

Lynnel Jones

Cassandra Said *Enough*

when he put her out on the corner
of Queen Lane and Wayne
where she'd have to dodge cops,
pose by a pole, under FOR RENT.
Not enough he'd stripped the take,
safe between her breasts after
their wedding, snatched the cash
from her regular tricks, holed up
in the Old Home, flush with
Social Security and V.A. checks,
taken folded tens from slick men
who'd slipped the sermon for
the thick bush outside where
hell fire ate past cracked stained glass,
the ashes settling on Cassandra,
kneeling or bent in service.

Elizabeth Lara

In April: Letter to Millay

To what purpose, Vincent, do I accost your spirit?
Envy is not enough.
I can no longer calm myself with a dose
Of Prozac slipping scratchily
Down my throat.
You know what I know.
Sweat breaks out on my forehead as I sip

a bitter cup of *mate*.
The smell of earth startles me.
It appears that I may be dead.
But why do I ask you the meaning of these things?
Not only do mountain climbers
Fall precipitously to their deaths.
You suggested it yourself,
“Go take a hike.”
Is it not enough, Vincent, that I daily push up the hill a
Megalith,
Only to watch it roll down again, ripping up trees and tearing fences?

Judith Arcana

You May Have Heard About My Situation

We don't know how it happened: I started
growing, couldn't stop, couldn't stop
even though I wanted to. Even though I wanted
to stop, I grew right out of all my clothes, grew
out of my clothes, stopped trying to get new ones.
I stopped trying to get new ones and stayed
in the house. I stayed in the house and watched tv.
I watched tv on the living room sofa; I couldn't
fit into the chairs, even Poppa's Lazyboy rocker.
Even Poppa's Lazyboy rocker got too small
if I bent my elbows, they touched both arms
of the sofa when I sat square in the middle.
I sat square in the middle of the sofa every day
watching whatever was on tv, even all the static.
I sat still, trying to hush my body, hoping
to stop. But it kept on and pretty soon my hips
touched the sofa's arms when I centered myself
my head was not far from the ceiling and oh!
people, the sofa frame started to creak! It creaked
so loud I could not hear what Katie Couric said
about cancer, smiling. I could not hear what
Letterman said to Beyoncé, Lorraine Bracco
said to James Gandolfini, or the hyenas snuffling
at the zebra carcass on the Discovery channel.
The Discovery channel called me; they wanted
to do a feature on what they called my *situation*.
What they called my *situation* was serious.
Think about it, people. I could hardly squeeze
through the halls of my own house sideways
and stooping. Sideways and stooping I slid out
one night when there was no moon; there was

no moon and I had no clothes, just a red tablecloth
pulled off the dining room table. I wrapped that
red cloth all around me, got right out to the woods.
My stride was long, my tracks were deep, and
standing straight up, I saw way past the antenna.
People, I can tell you this: there's nothing up there
no bird's nest, no lost kite. No tangled balloon string
is causing that static. I'm as puzzled as you are.
Really. There's no explanation for that, either.

Annette Basalyga

Illustration for Rumpelstiltskin

This is the picture my ex-husband
painted, framed, and gave me
for our seventh anniversary:

A little man with both feet off the ground,
he's dancing, jumping for joy.
Even his shoes pointed at the toes,
curl in pleasure at what she doesn't know .
The stick in his left hand
is nothing dangerous, a crutch,
or an accessory, it doesn't matter.
In his line knowledge is power;
he doesn't need a club.

But times are hard.
The ring and necklace are long gone.
The shack in the left corner
is hardly real estate. The fire in the clearing,
fixed with split sticks for a kettle,
has no kettle. The skinny dwarf in rags
has had to improvise, blackmail that's inside out,
a princess for a pension plan. Meanwhile, behind a tree
the palace spy is satisfied to wait.
His hat and trenchcoat show he's everybody's
henchman. He keeps warm, works on a salary,
names names dispassionately.

For years it has been autumn,
or the end of summer, cold and Saturday.
The smoke drifts out of sight.

The scheme will never work. It's late
for guessing games, and later still,
the dwarf will doubt his own identity.

This is the best that he will ever get.
The flowers in the foreground
are out of season. They stretch back
to the almost leafless trees and bloom
like dividends. Hunger keeps him on his toes;
spite keeps him going, keeps him alone,
saying his name over and over.

Tom, he says Dick. Harry.

Jacqueline Lapidus

Odyssey

In this version Penelope has died before her time
and Odysseus, having brought up their boys
to be peaceloving guys, is still working
on his boat. It sits between house
and garage, its hull bright-painted, promising
ocean voyages. Odysseus dreams of distant lands,
desires the sirens' embrace, but everything
that matters in his life is right here;
Calypso lives just up the road admiring his garden
and the war that's actually going on is not
worth leaving for. Though he
strayed years ago, there's no blood on his hands
today. When he goes to sea
it's to save the creatures that lesser men
hunted for fat and baleen.

In this version it's the sons who have left home,
adventuring among people speaking strange tongues.
Odysseus, alert in the Zodiac's bow,
watches the horizon for a spout Suddenly
the whale breaches, trailing green line from her mouth
He readies his harpoon to put a tracker on her,
buoys to slow her down.

In this version Nausicaa travels the long road
clogged with weekend traffic to find herself
stunned by desire on the beach. She
knows Odysseus will forget her, like all the others.

Sondra Zeidenstein

Secret Life

How studied I was in my adultery,
so much purpose in the hour I had
after the children left for school
and my husband for work,
transforming myself for my lover.
The big thing, when I showered,
my pin curls guarded by an ample cap,
was not to wet my hair.
Legs shaved smooth and muscle-glossy.
Fine silk garter belt, half slip, unpadded bra.
Well shaped feet in supple pumps.
Ah! Five feet eight.
The children by now at PS 122,
I concentrate on deodorant,
the wash of toner and base,
eyebrows examined for strays,
mascara, eyeliner, careful now!
to spread long lashes without clotting.
Shiny tube of lipstick in manicured fingers.
Gold hoops, always the hoops,
to look provocative. Breath held
in the narrow bathroom, I release
each bobby pin from its skull-denting hold,
and feel myself slide out of everyday life,
as now I do, picking raspberries in October
after frost:

*Don't lose one soft, plump, purply,
almost sweet fruit from between the fingers,
loud, sluggish, autumn bees alerting me
to guard my reach.*

Brushing it then,
my hair, the part exactly straight, out and under,

trying for a page boy, smooth,
like the underside of a cresting wave
that will be dashed by the time I come back home,
key in the lock, will be lank and straight,
sweat-damp at the neck, as I sit with my daughter
for cookies and milk.

So far away that time,
the secret my week circled. Now, often,
before dawn, my skin drawing heat
from my husband's like a furnace, so intense,
I lie awake grieving how lost one of us
will be forever from the other, one day.

Becky Dennison Sakellariou

I Can Do Snow

She asked me to write a poem
about snow.
But, I cried,
I am not done with autumn, yet,
the crows that still course
through my blood
when they shriek across the sky,
the sudden wind
that takes me up like a lover, seizing
the breath from my ribs.
And the leaves,
shimmering wet
along the paths, on my stoop,
layering the fields, making mulch
for the coming frost.

But, I see you in snow, she says,
and leans her body into
an imaginary white landscape,
light and cold.
I do know snow, I confess.
Snow wrote my stories, snow
was my father's song, soggy
mittens, soaking boots,

frozen toes, silver flakes caught
on the soft down
of my mother's face, the dog
chewing and chewing
the caked balls of ice
off her paws.
Alright, I will write snow.

Barbara Crooker

Surfer Girl

I'm walking on the beach this brisk November morning,
the bleached sea grass bending in the wind, when there,
up ahead, in the pewter waves, I see a surfer in his wet suit,
sleek as a seal, cutting in and out of the curl, shining in the light.
I'm on the far side of sixty, athletic as a sofa, but this is where
the longing starts, the yearning for another life, the one
where I'm lithe and long-limbed, tanned California gold,
short tousled hair full of sunshine. The life where I shoulder my board,
stride into the waves, dive under the breakers, and rise; my head shaking
off water like a golden retriever. I am waiting for that perfect wave to come,
so I can crouch up and catch it, my arms out like wings, slicing back
and forth in the froth, wind at my back, sea's slick metal polished
before me. Nothing more important now than this balance between
water and air, the rhythm of in and out, staying ahead of the break,
choosing my line like I choose these words, writing my name
on water, writing my name on air.

Alicia Ostriker

April Sunday

The sycamores are leafing out
on west fourth street and I am weirdly old
yet their pale iridescence pleases me

as I emerge from the subway into traffic
and trash and patchouli gusts – now that I can read
between the lines of my tangled life

pleasure frequently visits me – I have less
interfering with my gaze now
what I see I see clearly

and with less grievance and anger than before
and less desire: it is not that I have conquered these passions
they have worn themselves out

and if I smile admiring four Brazilian men
playing handball on a sunny concrete court
shouting in Portuguese

thin gloves protecting their hands from the sting of the flying ball
their backs like sinewy roots, gold flashing on their necks
if I watch them samba with their shadows

torqued like my father fifty years ago
when sons of immigrant Jews
played fierce handball in Manhattan playgrounds

– if I think these men are the essence of the city
it is because of their beauty
since I have learned to be a fool for beauty

Susan Donnelly

Girl At A Window

I look up. Two seats in front of me,
on the Amtrak train to New York,
van Eyck has placed one of his
sallow-faced young models,
her slightly bent head reflected
on the window as we move
past the coves and small causeways

around Stonington. A strand
of that Flemish-red hair
falls across her cheek. She looks
secretive, meek, as the pregnant bride
in the parlor. Her long, pointed nose
and egg-shaped face are plain,
even in the light that crowns her,
yet I puzzle, across centuries,
-- as she plugs in her iPod --
what beauty is exactly, if not this.

Home Movies

These days my remaining aunts
tend to phone each other mornings
to talk over their girlhoods.
The eldest keeps to her bed.
The next, whisper-voiced,
is bent with Parkinson's.
The youngest props the receiver
in knobby, arthritic hands.

that's what Mama would say!
yes, and Papa would always answer

that time you forgot
when I wore -- they are laughing --
when that boy, what was his name

From a room in assisted living,
a magazine-heaped bed,
a small house eyed for a tear-down,
they re-enter the home movies:

drying their hair on a porch step,
preening up Chestnut Hill Avenue at Easter,
watching the youngest, the athlete,
throw her football across the front lawn,
run to retrieve it, toss it back again.