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## Featured Poet

### Peter Johnson

#### 3 poems from *Eduardo & "I"*

Entropic Eduardo and I mulling over epitaphs, searching for *le mot juste*. A catchy phrase like “Be happy!” or just the one word “Jingjang”—something to make them laugh out loud. A cloudless day as I jog through the cemetery, gripping Eddie’s leash. “Ruff, ruff,” he growls, drawing attention from local lovelosters and necrophiliacs. Enough of this game, so we lunch near the dead, extended Edwardian family until a cemetery guard taps us with his wooden club. He’s a retired cop with an anxiety disorder. “Can’t sit still,” he says, and we imagine this mantra engraved on his tombstone in boring Garamond. “Dig the irony, Eduardo?” I say, placing my half-eaten bologna sandwich into a mayonnaise-stained paper bag. “Ruff, ruff,” Eddie growls. Which is why I never wish him dead; he’s always ready for a good prank, always ready to “play the game”—a phrase we decide to chuck for its obscurity. Dead means dead here. That’s the real problem, whereas we like the Valhallic version where we’re reborn every evening to share a salty pig with the likes of Odin. But try to explain this to the security guard, who keeps chattering, “Move on, you perverts, move on . . .”

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“There’s an electricity that’s hard to describe,” my pony-tailed waiter explains. It’s Eduardo—a tattoo of a half moon on his forehead, a huge sapphire pendant around his neck. But I’m barely listening, scanning the dessert menu, taking notes. They’re out of cheesecake, carrot cake, mudpie, too, and Eduardo swears he can heal with his hands. “Oh, the night, the night,” he croons, “when the wind full of welkin feeds our faces.” He’s been to The Other Side, slept with a girl whose brother’s ex-girlfriend went down on Elvis. Such proximity to the Great One is dizzying. “It’s like he’s in the room,” he says. But not even a chocolate croissant in this place, so I pocket my pen, drape my raincoat over my head, dodge raindrops the size of crickets. Tonight, we’ll listen to “Heartbreak Hotel,” picture Elvis soiling himself on stage, firing two 45s into the ceiling and television—his favorite book the *Physician’s Desk Reference*, his favorite expression, “Better to be unconscious than miserable.” But for now, our socks are wet, our stomachs hurt—only the green lights of the gay coffee shop between us and home. Curiosity leads us on.

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To hang upside down from the top of the Biltmore at 4 a.m. with no possibility of applause. That’s what Eduardo wants, then to work his way toward prime time, 5 p.m., when a crowd colonizes and is hungry for a happening, perhaps remove his black silk blindfold and shout obscenities, drop cat-eyed marbles onto the crowd, spin with arms outstretched in mock crucifixion. “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,” he’ll say, knowing someone’s already said that, knowing everything’s already been said. But he’s not dismayed. He’s wearing his lucky underwear, hanging upside down from the top of the Biltmore. A great day ahead of him! A great life!

## Love Story

We broke down in a little seaside town where soap made from whale sperm went for ten dollars a bar. The car mechanic bragged his TV had only three channels and that everyone’s house smelled like meatloaf. While he fixed the car, we lunched on the beach, desperately needing to

create a “moment” to remember when our yet-to-be-born children would hate us, when we were too exhausted to turn back the sheets. I stroked her hair, told her the human brain was like a shower nozzle; she compared it to a skunk, but neither of us could explain the grounds of likeness. It was the Death-of-Metaphor Decade. You could say a car looked like a tropical fish and no one got it. Walking the beach, we discovered a worn leather glove and debated its history, then took a chilling tour of a local winery. When we paid the mechanic, he said that if every living chicken were lined up, they’d circle the earth eight times—a sad and troubling fact—but it was time to leave, the town disappearing behind us as if it had never existed.

Peter Johnson has received an NEA in poetry, and his second book of prose poems *Miracles & Mortifications* was given the 2001 James Laughlin Award from The Academy of American Poets. His new book of prose poems *Eduardo & “I”* will be published in 2006 by White Pine Press.

**from *Poet’s Bookshelf: Contemporary Poets On Books That Shaped Their Art***

*poet Peter Johnson*

Kim Addonizio, *Tell Me*

*The Poetry of Catullus*, trans. G.H. Sisson

Stephen Dobyns, *Cemetery Nights*

Russell Edson, *The Reason Why the Closet Man is Never Sad*

Max Jacob, *The Dice Cup: Selected Prose Poems*, ed. Michael Brownstein

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Nicanor Parra, *Antipoems: New and Selected*, ed. David Unger

Charles Simic, *The World Doesn’t End*

Bruce Smith, *The Other Lover*

## MY FAVORITE BOOKS (AT LEAST FOR THIS WEEK)

Poets always complain about how difficult it is to publish books of poetry, yet hundreds appear every year, and many major poets seem to publish a new book every other year. Why? Partly because publishers will print anything they write; partly because they have jobs with little or no teaching, which frees up a tremendous amount of time. I mean, if you're getting paid a lot of money to teach one or two days a week, you better be writing something. The literary scene is indeed manic, as if whoever publishes the most poems is the best poet. Consequently, most books are thin at best, and if you leaf through the last three books of your favorite poet—books probably published within a four or five year period—you'll realize that if your favorite poet had been patient and chosen the best poems from his last three books, he would have written one of those volumes poets call their "favorite" books—ones they return to over and over again for solace, for inspiration, even for entertainment. Many of my favorite books, ones that continue to influence my own poetry and fiction, are classics such as Ovid's *Amores*, anything by Sappho or Shakespeare, Andreas Capellanus' *The Art of Courtly Love*, Voltaire's *Candide*, *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and Novalis' and Kafka's short prose. But in compiling this list, except for one classical author, I decided to privilege some contemporary books I often reread whenever I'm bored or unable to write. Although I can think of at least ten more books, I'll stick with these for now—in alphabetical order:

*Tell Me*: No fluff here. Poem after poem rocks with cruelty and compassion. It's very easy to become self-indulgent or oversentimental when dealing with her subject matter. So easy to romanticize and idealize drunks and drug addicts, or to feel sorry for oneself or one's personal history or past mistakes. Yet, with dark irony, Addonizio embraces her own and everyone else's bumps and bruises. "I am going to stop thinking about my losses now," the narrator of the title poem says, "and listen to yours. I'm so sick of dragging them / with me wherever I go, like children up too late / who should be curled in their own beds."

*The Poetry of Catullus*: Whatever happened to invective—the fine art of skewering someone? Every night we're assaulted by the unreality of Reality TV, and every morning we're greeted by another stupid war, while our poets unashamedly hawk their poems like insurance salesmen or traveling medicine men. It's certainly time for another Catullus. "Thallus, you pansy, softer than rabbit's wool / The down of a goose or the lobe of an ear, / Softer than an old man's penis and the cobwebs hanging from it / . . . Give me back my cloak, you stole it . . ." Enough said.

*Cemetery Nights*: Probably my favorite contemporary book of verse poetry. A making of new myths and a wacky retelling of old ones, played out in a world overseen by a God wearing blinders. Yet amidst the absurdity and horror, optimism and compassion lurk. Consider

this from the opening of “Cemetery Nights”: “sweet dreams, sweet memories, sweet taste of earth: / here’s how the dead pretend they’re still alive, / one drags up a chair, a lamp, unwraps / the newspaper from somebody’s garbage, / then sits holding the paper up to his face. / No matter if the lamp is busted and his eyes / have fallen out . . .” A contemporary classic.

*The Reason Why the Closet Man Is Never Sad*: When I first began writing and submitting prose poems, rejection slips came back, suggesting my poems were cheap imitations of Russell Edson’s. Considering I had never heard of Edson, I was a bit shocked, yet believing you should at least read the authors you’re influenced by, I bought *The Reason Why the Closet Man Is Never Sad*. I admire all of Edson’s work—its apparent and seductive simplicity, its logical zaniness, its comic-book texture—but this particular book is his best. It’s comic, for sure, but also characterized by what he calls the “dark uncomfortable metaphor,” suggested by the “closet man” himself, who tries, hopelessly, of course, to control his life.

*The Dice Cup: Selected Prose Poems*: Edited and with an Introduction by Michael Brownstein, this is a book I never tire of. Constantly inventive and surprising, Jacob would have made a great stand-up comedian. He does with words what the Cubists did with paint, his greatest virtue being that he never took himself too seriously.

*Lolita*: How does one make us want to listen to a pedophile, or even like him? Unreliable narrators are scattered throughout my prose poetry and fiction, and Nabokov’s book taught me how to keep them from becoming caricatures. Humbert Humbert sings, and we are seduced by his language while simultaneously questioning his erotic outbursts and lack of self-knowledge. “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.” Whoof!

*Antipoems: New and Selected*: “Maximum content, minimum words,” Parra said. “Economy of language, no metaphors, no literary figures.” Funny, angry, self-deprecating, politically savvy, skeptical of grand narratives, all the necessary talents to be a poet in our absurd times. Who else, after years of taunting us, would apologize for his poetry, ask us to burn his book, then say, “I take back everything I said”?

*The World Doesn’t End*: This book of prose poems received a Pulitzer Prize in 1990, much to the dismay of many formalist poets, who were outraged that a book of prose poems could win such a prestigious award. I think it’s Simic’s best book, and I wish he would write more prose poems. The genre has always welcomed comic juxtapositions and the merging of different genres, making it a fertile place for Simic’s prodigious imagination. The simplicity of this book still astounds me.

*The Other Lover*: A book that was up for a National Book Award the same year as Addonizio’s *Tell Me*. All of Smith’s talents come together here. Equally adept at formal patterns or the prose poem, he’s a troubadour of lost love, a social critic, a blues-and-jazz man, both learned and hip. A very American book, with poems full of loss and love, all held together by wisdom and compassion.

Tate's *Selected Poems*: Constantly surprising, Tate is a comic genius. Marjorie Perloff argued that Rimbaud's "multiplicity of meaning gives way to a strange new literalism." Ditto for Tate. Reading his poems, I often feel as if I'm visiting another planet, governed by a philosopher king wielding a poo-poo cushion instead of Ex Caliber. Tate should be given an honorary Nobel Prize for his titles alone: "Same Tits," "Goodtime Jesus," "Teaching the Ape to Write Poems."

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