

Preface

On Wednesday mornings in the spring of 2010, I taught a seminar titled *New York, Paris, Baghdad: Poetry of the City*. Before class, we would meet in the Two Naked Guys Café at Cornell's Johnson Museum of Art, where Kathy Straight cheerfully plied us with coffee, tea, and pastries as we began our conversations about that week's poet and city. We discussed Adonis, Baudelaire, Cavafy, Lorca, Whitman, and many others to discover how these poets have read the city, how they have written it, and how other poets have responded.

One week, we hatched the idea of producing a class anthology of New York poetry—based on our readings and our sensibilities. Each of us selected four or five pieces for possible inclusion, and on two subsequently animated Wednesdays we refined our corpus to fifty-four poems. A conversation with then-director of the Johnson Museum, Frank Robinson, led to the idea of exhibiting some of those poems together with pieces from the museum's collections. Guided by curator Nancy Green, and with input from the students, I selected poems and artwork. Thus was born the exhibit *New York, New York . . . It's a Hell of a Town*, featuring twenty-four poems and twenty-four pieces of art.¹ The aim was to have the juxtapositions give readers and visitors new ways of thinking about both the words and the images.

The poetry and artwork were not distributed around the exhibit chronologically or alphabetically but aesthetically—in ways that allowed the poems and paintings and photographs to

interact in the space. The exhibit gave me the idea of producing an anthology proper, notably one in which poems might similarly interact. While pondering how to accomplish this, I came upon Lisa Russ Spaar's wonderful collection, *All That Mighty Heart: London Poems*, which she organizes according to the four elements: Water, Earth, Fire, and Air. I reread the poems from the exhibit to see if there was a principle I could similarly apply, and I noticed that many, if not most, poems could be situated at specific points in a New York day: dawn (McKay), 5 o'clock (Cummings), evening (Wiese), night (Rich), midnight (Dylan), and so on. This is how I settled on Morning, Day, Evening, and Night.

In choosing material, I let myself be guided neither by the need to be representative (whatever that might in fact mean) nor by the need to be inclusive—there are already many comprehensive collections (see the list of further reading at the end of the volume). Nevertheless, like the exhibit, this anthology tries to range widely—and I hope deeply—and yet the goal has not been to seek out individual poets or specific poems. It is true that at times a particular poem seemed to want to find a way in, but I would decide it did not quite belong; at other times I wanted to include a personal favorite, but I resisted. Although I set almost every such poem aside, I did keep two: Valzyhna Mort's magical "New York," which I have placed at the beginning as an invitation into the collection and into New York; and Robert Clairmont's plaintive "These Ever Just So Six Million Hearts and Dorothy," which I have placed at the end as an envoi and as an invitation to return—both to the city and to the anthology. Ultimately, I did not choose poems because they fit one of the four rubrics, but because they were, to my mind, good poems, strong poems.

Many canonical New York poets are not represented in these pages, figures such as John Ashbery or David Lehman, but other avowedly New York poets missed by other anthologies are here: Luis Cabalquinto, Jessica Hagedorn, and Anna Margolin, for example. I also paid special attention to up-and-coming voices, such as Shokry Eldaly and Purvi Shah. The lyrics of New Yorker

Paul Simon and of Bob Dylan also find a natural place in this collection. I also thought it essential to include New York poems by world poets, such as Mahmoud Darwish and Nicanor Parra, Derek Walcott and Tomas Tranströmer. This orchestra of local, immigrant, and foreign voices is, it seems to me, apposite and fitting.

A small measure of the new ground this collection breaks, then, is that of the 149 poems (or extracts) in its most immediate predecessor, Stephen Wolf's *I Speak of the City: Poems of New York* (2007), only twenty appear here.² Of the 128 poems in the other major recent collection, Elizabeth Schmidt's *Poems of New York* (2002), only five appear here.³ When it comes to poets, the numbers are admittedly higher: thirty-one out of the 138 poets in Wolf's anthology are included, as are twenty-three out of the eighty-four poets in Schmidt's. This higher degree of poet overlap is not surprising, as those who have sung New York have done so in ways that are hard to ignore. Song is partly why I chose a phrase from Sinatra's (properly, Kander and Ebb's) "New York, New York" as the collection's title—*The City That Never Sleeps*. But a more important reason is the fact that a great number of poets long to be awake while everyone else is asleep and are inspired by the New York night and its early morning light.⁴ Senghor calls out, "Nights of insomnia, O Nights of Manhattan!"

Stephen Wolf and Elizabeth Schmidt will I trust forgive me for saying that their earlier collections are nostalgic, reverential, even patriotic.⁵ Wolf says of his anthology,

All the poems in this book speak of New York, and many poems are intrinsically American as well. . . . New York remains a symbol to the world of both this nation and the modern cosmopolis. . . . *I Speak of the City* is a testament to the city's spirit, preserved and newly created in the most ennobling expression of the human heart.⁶

Schmidt writes of hers,

The poems collected in this anthology . . . all share a desire to record the fleeting, shifting, “parti-colored” essences of New York life in their own particular form and diction. . . . Poets who have written about New York are masters at preserving, and allowing us to cherish, moments of life in this theater of chance and change.⁷

To be sure, *The City That Never Sleeps* tries to capture New York City in its many moods and expressions—but it also tries to avoid being adulatory. Besides giving the reader the opportunity to experience twenty-four hours in New York through poetry, it tries to put poems and poets in new conversation with each other, in debate, even on occasion in conflict. And it attempts to illustrate some of the ways in which poetry has given imaginative reality to the city, just as much as urban changes have in turn transformed the poetic text.⁸

Not every poet loves New York, but each and every one is mesmerized by it. Maybe it is because, as John Hollander has put it, “there is something to remind us that cities—each one configured differently—can seem to be figures for poetry itself.”⁹ There is evidently also something about *poems*—each one configuring differently—that seems to make them figures for the city. E. B. White recognized this sixty-five years ago in *Here Is New York* (1949): “The city is like poetry: it compresses all life, all races and breeds, into a small island and adds music and the accompaniment of internal engines.”¹⁰ When I first visited New York some twenty years after White wrote those lines, I was only four, but my most vivid memories are in fact of vibrant sounds—horns, engines, shouts, sirens, laughter, music . . . Paris, where I lived at the time, and London before that, were not as loud or brash or lively; Hong Kong, Singapore, Philadelphia, Cairo, Delhi, where I lived after, simply did not—do not—quite have what Lisa Russ

Spaar has described as New York's "operatic bravado."¹¹ It is my earnest hope that *The City That Never Sleeps* captures some of that, some of the city's tumult, its arias, its rhythms.

—Shawkat M. Toorawa
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Notes

1. See <http://cornellsun.com/node/46845> (accessed 12 January 2014).
2. *I Speak of the City: Poems of New York*, selected and edited by Stephen Wolf (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
3. *Poems of New York*, selected and edited by Elizabeth Schmidt (New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).
4. I am grateful to the press's outside reader for pointing this out. See, in this connection, *Acquainted with the Night: Insomnia Poems*, edited by Lisa Russ Spaar (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
5. See *Poems of New York*, ed. Schmidt, 19, and *I Speak of the City: Poems of New York*, ed. Wolf, xxx, respectively, for further characterizations of the editors' motivations in producing their anthologies.
6. *I Speak of the City: Poems of New York*, ed. Wolf, xxx, xxxi.
7. *Poems of New York*, ed. Schmidt, 18–19, 20.
8. To paraphrase Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xv.
9. John Hollander, Foreword, in *I Speak of the City: Poems of New York*, ed. Wolf, xv.
10. E. B. White, *Here Is New York* (New York: Harper, 1949), 29.
11. *All That Mighty Heart: London Poems*, edited by Lisa Russ Spaar (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 6.