

"I have a heart pierced by a rib. /
Fragments of glass float through my
blood / and clouds hidden behind
white cells."

For Nikola Madzirov, to separate from one's self, to be alone—in order to commit oneself to air, fire, stars, and angels—means the return home, to earth, to those ancient habitats that preserve the remnants of bygone ages.

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Ashley Anna McHugh. **Into These Knots**. Lanham, Maryland. Ivan R. Dee. 2010. 68 pages. \$22.50. ISBN 978-1-56663-878-4

The New Criterion Poetry Prize was established in 1999 to recognize "manuscripts that pay close attention to form." Ashley Anna McHugh's *Into These Knots*, the 2009 winning manuscript, pays close attention not only to form but also to depth of emotion and complex metaphor. McHugh makes good use of several poetic forms in this collection, among them the sonnet, ses-

tina, and rhymed quatrain. Rather than allowing prosody to dictate her poetics, McHugh makes the forms bend to her purposes. Moreover, the poet does so (in most instances) with subtlety and grace. McHugh's mastery of form rarely falters, and when it does, one wonders if perhaps the failure is intentional. For instance, in the pantoum "Sure Enough," the rhymes are predictable and the rhythm pedestrian—a major departure from the subtlety of the rest of the book. However, since "Sure Enough" is both a drinking song and a lost-love lament, perhaps the country-music rhyme scheme is appropriate after all.

Another delight these poems offer is that the poet's word choice and syntax are lush and rich; every word seems necessary and exact. While all these virtues might be expected of a formalist in command of her art, what is less expected is the range of events, characters, and circumstances to which she applies her impressive gift of versification. The collection includes several challenges and responses to religious feeling written in a contemporary voice but with a tone familiar to those who read the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century (although McHugh often quotes Dante). There are poems that express, from the inside, the struggle against mental illness and the lure of suicide. A father's hunting accident is treated in three separate poems, each one less desperately searching for answers than the last; the unconnected series moves emotionally from shock, to prayer and disbelief, to a profound acceptance of mortality.

The most compelling section of the book is an interrelated series of sonnets and couplets entitled "Cairns." "Cairns" folds together

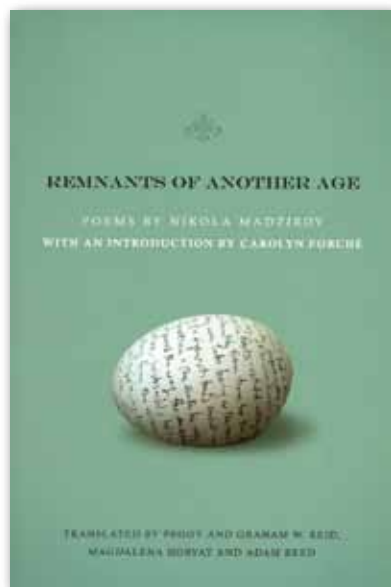
a hike on the Monongahela Trail, cairns that mark both land mines and forks in the trail, and a son's burden of guilt for his father's death. It is impossible here to fully describe the powerful intertwining of trails taken and not taken, choices and their repercussions, that McHugh binds together in this series; nevertheless it is possible to recommend reading the collection again and again. *Into These Knots* is a remarkable book, even more remarkable because it is Ashley Anna McHugh's first full-length volume. It should put to rest any lingering question of whether formal poetry is adequate to express contemporary thought and emotion.

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Ene Mihkelson. **Torn**. Mari Kaljuste, ill. Tallinn, Estonia. Varrak. 2010. 102 pages. €11.25. ISBN 978-9985-3-2091-4

Second only to the late Jaan Kross and alongside Mats Traat, the creator of a lengthy rural series, Ene Mihkelson (b. 1944) is the most prominent contemporary Estonian novelist. Mihkelson's eleven collections of free-verse poetry and six tensely interwoven novels constitute a new, Mihkelsonian high literature.

Last year, Mihkelson received the Baltic Assembly literary prize for *Torn* (The tower). Her collection of poems amounts to a poetic coda, a "tetrastic" following her novel-triptych *Nime Vaev* (The torment of a name), *Ahaveruse uni* (The sleep of Ahasuerus), and *Katkuhaud* (The plague grave; see *WLT*, July 2008, 67). *Torn* displays the same serious attitude, anguish, and sorrow to which rich experience gives rise, and offers harsh criticism of contemporary life. But unlike the rather dark



introspection that lies at the heart of Mihkelson's previous work, *Torn* evokes a stimulating openness to the world.

Mihkelson's poems are crystalized outlines of prose narratives concerned with pressing social issues: a constant worry about the persistence of national identity and moral memory, the enduring, looming danger of a cultural holocaust: "Only we keep speaking a strange worn out / language when one should say directly Put yourself in prison / Establish censorship Do not cheer before evening / The Night of the Long Knives may come again" (from "Retreat into tower"). Those who ignore the torments of bygone totalitarianism are at risk of losing their soul: "But we must speak of pain to cut off / the glorification of victimhood" (from "When General Laidoner ordered the opening of borders").

Mihkelson's poetics resembles the technique of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli*: the more distance to hit music, the closer to a symphony. Her texts are not metrical yet are composed with utmost precision. Each and every phrase is important in its analytic difference, displaying distinct pauses and stresses. She makes frequent use of enjambment: a regular transmission between two verses as well as semantic crossovers inside single lines—the internal enjambment. With its style of dignified thought units, *Torn* is like the poetic hadron accelerator of CERN (to which she refers in her book), creating collisions of motives and phrases on its magnetic memory field: some of the particles will be torn apart, others infused with hope.

"The initial idea was the impossibility of closure," the poet revealed

in an interview. The final cycle of the book bears the title "Caspar Hauser"—a reference to the satire by Jakob Wassermann (1908) about an autistic foundling with his private language who had spent his entire childhood in a dark prison tower before the "humane" society decided to "civilize" him. On behalf of herself and her homeland, Mihkelson poses sarcastic questions, such as: "How to grow out / from the cocoon of being a victim and to say that it was / wrong to spare my life" (from "To the feinschmeckers"). Though her poetic persona expresses concern that "My voice has no bearing No echo / Who observes me in reality" (from "Short circuit"), her message resonates well among her readers in Estonia.

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MISCELLANEOUS

Elizabeth Bishop and *The New Yorker*: The Complete Correspondence.

Joelle Biele, ed. New York. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 2011. lxii + 421 pages + 8 plates. \$35. ISBN 978-0-374-28138-0

While admired during her lifetime, Elizabeth Bishop is now considered to be one of the most important American poets of the twentieth century—in the words of John Ashbery, "the writer's writer's writer" (WLT, Winter 1977, 8). Much of this well-deserved reshuffling of the pecking order has taken place in the last few decades and at the expense of other poets, including Robert Lowell, her mercurial friend and advocate. Yet the image of Bishop as an outsider is difficult to shed. She moved around a lot, especially up and down the Eastern Seaboard, and spent fifteen-

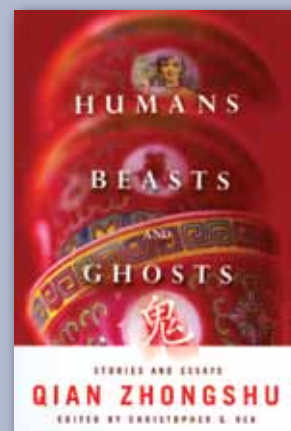
Nota Bene



Ena Lucía Portela
One Hundred Bottles

University of Texas Press

Cuban writer Portela delivers a personalized account of the Cuban crisis of the 1990s through her unique protagonist, Z. The author employs a creative blending of genres, the allegorical facet of the novel intersecting with the mysterious and dramatic; this careful combination results in a novel that José Manuel Prieto calls "full of imagination and narrative power."



Qian Zhongshu
Human Beasts and Ghosts

Columbia University Press

Bringing together the greatest works of twentieth-century Chinese writer Qian Zhongshu, this collection finally allows English-speaking readers to enjoy the writer's famous wit. Ron Egan praised the stories' numerous translators when he called the collection "among the most significant renderings from Chinese."