

Poetry — it's alive and well in U.S.

April is National Poetry Month. The diversity of these poets and their recent collections attests to the quantity and quality of poetry being published by independent imprints and university presses.

Dave Oliphant's wandering narratives in "**The Cowtown Circle**" (Alamo Bay, \$15.95) rummage through the underbrush of seemingly trivial mem-



ories until readers trip on a significant epiphany or wise turn hidden in these brief three or four line stanzas. His cleverly sub-

dued style allows making almost anything into a poem. Those on music are most fascinating because they are evocatively characterized, while a roving eye observes details that display a confidence and a caring. The same is true of the "Maria" poems — a mixture of the love, charm and soft comedy that long marriages can reveal.

B.V. Olguín's "**Red Leather Gloves**" (Hansen Group, \$12.95) emerges authentically from his perspective as an undefeated amateur boxer, exam-



ining the seedy side of machismo. The gritty narratives express what it means to train for coaches in a gym, to be hungry since you had

to run on fight day to make weight, and to overcome real fear and pain. Exploring boxing terminology as titles and themes — knockout, gladiator, killer instinct, the sweet science, pound for pound — Olguín counterpunches clichés into human reality. Most portraits are of losers, has-beens, or liars, but odes to Muhammad Ali, Ray Mancini, Ronnie Shields and Emile Griffith, as well as poems on the jab and double right cross, are enlightening.

Tad Cornell's resourceful

imagist poems from **In Whom Is My Delight** (Juggling Teacups, \$18.95) are often satirical and laced with insight and playfulness. The way into this poetry is one's delight in writing a way through thinking. Five sequences are seamlessly



fused into one grand book by variations of a witty voice. The first narrates incarnation, reflecting Chesterton's views. The second is a

social worker's monologue of ethical crisis. "Today I am an 'on call' worker, and so/the phone may ring, and I be majestically shot/into my own denial before the cock's crow ... /All this before my foot even touched the floor./Go figure. He also serves who doesn't care." The third peers into the brain of poetry, where he has "staked my life/on an obsolete craft," discovering that "It's only when you can't find the last thread that clarity/and mystery can occupy the same space at the same time." "Suite" sings as confessional poetics in the fourth: "Compelling as/masterful origami, the point is fragile, elegant pointlessness." The last recalls Shakespeare in sonnets to the body: "The garden of the moon is utter gift/like heart to heart and spousal loin to loin/or sighting land when all you had was drift." Cornell's drifting and musing images are unforgettable.



Judy Hogan's epic love poem, "**This River**" (Wild Embers, \$14), reveals the ecology of the muddy Haw River in North Carolina, which flows like the

Volga in Russia, where her unrequited love resides, and with whom they created a sister-city exchange. "We are working/together beside our two rivers which, though six thousand miles apart,/rush toward the same ocean." Poets

have imagined rivers of time, yet she asks, "What is ocean but the river that holds/the world in place and reminds it of eternity?" Hogan personalizes rivers in natural, unforced imagery. "This river has two/incarnations. She is the Volga at night/not letting me sleep; making me listen/to the urgent message her moonlit water/carried me as I stood, half awake/my heart's door swung open ..."

Jerry Bradley's funny, conversational verses in "**Crownfeathers and Effigies**"

(Lamar University, \$15) are typified by "Subject-Verb-Complement": "Consider the oddity of love's grammar:/The first person gives way to a familiar

second,/Conjugating in time another he or she ... /he single lover made plural, two become one./No wonder we are confused./When I say I love you,/The compliment is resisted,/And no matter how hard I try to verb you,/I end up speaking always in a passive voice."

David Bowles' first book of poems, "**Shattering and Bricolage**" (Ink Brush, \$15.95),

draws on varied sources — spiritual imagery from old Mexico, the Far East, India, ancient Greece, the Texas borderlands — turning all into original collages. "Emptiness" reveals useful poetics: "Thus taught the master:/Constant practice. Learn all forms./ Once they are mastered, empty yourself of technique/of desire to control./Then, when the time comes,/art itself will move your hands/spontaneously,/your body a conduit/for universe's will." Every aspiring artist should follow this advice.

Sybil Pittman Estes' "**Like That**" (Alamo Bay, \$15.95) includes a hefty selection from four volumes, plus excellent

new poems of directness and honesty. The title poem narrates a remembered tale: "One pea-



cock in full color:/a kaleidoscope./That's Christ, all right, returning/to us: unexpectedly, with serendipity,/wonder, and

brilliant struts./ His ever relenting/grace." Her previous collections, including "Seeing the Desert Green" and "Candled in January Sun," feature personal poems of vulnerability and contrarian verses that do not flinch from their viewpoints.

Alan Gann's "**Adventures of the Clumsy Juggler**" (Ink Brush, \$15) keeps a busy life in balance, and his talking verses are funny. Most are not as dead-



pan as "On Becoming the Best Poet in the Room": "After shooting Billy Collins/I took his last cannoli/out of the oven/and left it to cool/by an open window/while wondering/what to do about Mary Oliver?" — but they are often entertaining in this first book.

Dede Fox's "**Postcards Home**" (Ink Brush, \$15) is a second book of precisely crafted poems that reveal a deep melancholic empathy for all, even her betrayers. Of "Poetry" she



writes: "Wrapped in cellophane,/ Some poems are understood/In a single glance./ Others offer a glimpse of meaning,/As if seen through diaphanous layers/A soaring ballerina's skirt." The last stanza reads: "Long for that/gift of clarity,/moment of grace,/ perfect gem,/millisecond of connection,/antidote to pain."

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