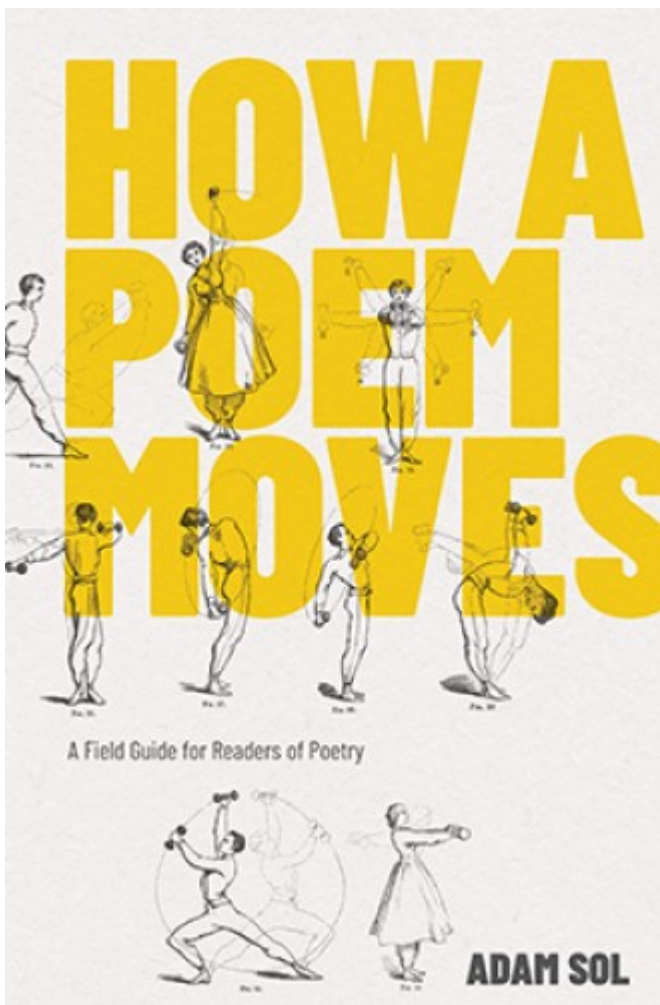


An invitation to walk with poetry

Two books offer entrance points for the intimidated.

by [Jeffrey L. Johnson](#) in the [May 6, 2020](#) issue

In Review



How a Poem Moves

A Field Guide for Readers of Poetry

By Adam Sol
misFit Books



The Best American Poetry 2019

Edited by Major Jackson (Series editor David Lehman)
Scribner

At a ministerial meeting I attended last fall, a pastor shared with the group that he'd used his summer vacation to read through the back issues of the *Christian Century* that were stacked in a pile on his desk. He reported that in his discipline of reading each issue from cover to cover he'd felt "surrounded by the communion of saints." He said he'd read every word—except the poems. The conversation moved on, and the pastor never explained why he skipped the poems.

In his introduction to *How a Poem Moves*, Adam Sol writes that he has known many enthusiastic readers of fiction and nonfiction who are "afraid of poetry," meaning

that “they fear they don’t get it.” An editor and blogger, Sol invites readers to approach a poem as they might approach a painting or a dance performance: as a work of art. Then questions of meaning will be subsumed in receptive enjoyment, allowing for emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic reaction to the poem.

Sol believes that anyone who tackles challenging essays, articles, and interviews is well equipped to appreciate the verbal art of poems. His goal is modest: to encourage the kind of readers who dive into articles in their fields of interest, or plow through novels, to take a moment to enjoy a poem.

In his effort to provide this kind of encouragement, Sol adopts the conceit of a naturalist guide. As a park ranger directs hikers’ attention to the shapes and colors of plants and trees, to the sounds and motion of birds and animals along a trail, Sol points out the shape, sound, and flow of 36 selected poems. Each of his short essays bears a suggestive title that connects poetry to a significant human action or purpose: “How a Poem Evokes Wonder,” “How a Poem Invites Us to Praise,” “How a Poem Reaches for Transcendence.”

His essay on a poem by Joy Harjo, current poet laureate of the United States, is titled “How a Poem Transforms a Stroll into a Ceremony.” The poem, titled “Walk,” appears to name objects noticed while on a walk: “Dead umbrella—broken wings / Carryout Styrofoam—chicken grease.” Sol points out how the rhythm of half lines separated by em dashes feels to him like footsteps. The poem moves along with pairs of phrases playing off each other, until the tone changes and the observation turns inward: “Crisp holly with red berries—we are holy with hope. / Another dead umbrella—we are getting wet.”

And then the poem turns inward even further. The paired pattern is interrupted, as if the walker has stopped in an introspective moment. Three reflective sentences close the poem, one of them in italics, suggesting singing or liturgy: “All this walking and I’m not getting far. / *Water, spirit, feeling . . . around my head—* / Where will I go when I’m dead?” Sol notes: “The delight is following the speaker’s back and forth between the profound and the self-deprecatingly practical.”

Sol doesn’t argue with those who believe poems lack logic or the intellectual substance of well-written prose. He states simply that poetry matters to those who write poems, and it matters to him.

If *How a Poem Moves* is an introductory stroll designed to awaken the senses to poems as living works of art, *The Best American Poetry 2019* is a visit to a garden of inspired and accomplished examples of excellence. Major Jackson, in his introduction to the anthology, draws on the work of cultural critic Sven Birkerts to explain why readers may be hesitant to visit such a garden.

According to Birkerts, Americans are constantly seeking balanced footing against waves of information rolling in from screens. We're forced to be an outward-facing people, with no choice but to stand before innovative technology, receive the information it delivers, and try to sort and judge it.

In contrast, poetry turns us inward. Most of us, through no fault of our own, have little time or attention, let alone sympathy of heart, for what Jackson calls "the simple pleasure of language outside normal usage, and the chance to discover the stark voice of a sole individual."

Nobel laureate poet Czesław Miłosz believed that in the age of modern science, explanations of the world through laws and equations became the unassailable language of reality. Consequently, poets lost their place as guides through the changes of life. No longer were poets society's life-singers and mystery-tellers, tasked with creating images and metaphors for the whole human family. ("The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" "In my father's house are many rooms.") Poets became solitary artists, singing songs of themselves.

As he put together *The Best American Poetry 2019*, Jackson chose poems that reacquainted him "with the spectacular spirit of the human, that which is fundamentally elusive to algorithms, artificial intelligence, behavioral science, and genetic research." Sifting through mountains of poems, he used humane and healing criteria to select the best of the year. "I sought poems that braved human connection; poems that battled the inertia of our daily routines and fixed modes of thinking; poems that shaded in the outlines of contemporary life . . . poems that overpowered the indifference we exhibit toward each other."

The poems in the anthology include confessions, rants, jokes, songs of joy, sly packages of lies, and commentaries on visual art. They're written by poets who were angry, confused, ecstatic, haughty, worried, amused, and content. Biographical notes at the back of the book tell the poets' stories, and statements by the poets

give glimpses of the situations and states of mind that led to their poetic compositions.

Massachusetts poet Gail Mazur's "At Land's End" is a garden poem and a coastal poem. It's a poem of loss and hope, in which concern for humanity's problems grows out of the pleasant labor of tending plants. The poem ends with words of local praise and the desire to assist unknown others: "as if here at land's end, here on the coast, urgent / together we'd have energies to do battle forever. / As if we could rescue the guttering world."

Those who pass over poetry may be bothered by the fact that poems can begin anywhere, with a speck or a peep of life, with a fragment of consciousness or a quiz-zical thought. Jane Hirshfield's "Ledger" begins: "Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* is 3,592 measures." Fleda Brown's "Afternoon at the Lake" begins: "I would rather be trapped in an attic with rats than play Monopoly."

There are no rules for how a poem should begin or how it should play out, for what it should contain or how it should end. Almost any bit of human experience, condensed onto a page by a gifted poet, could become a poem. This is the maddening difficulty as well as the essential usefulness of a form of art that might open our hearts to the minds and experiences of other human beings.