

# The Best American Poetry

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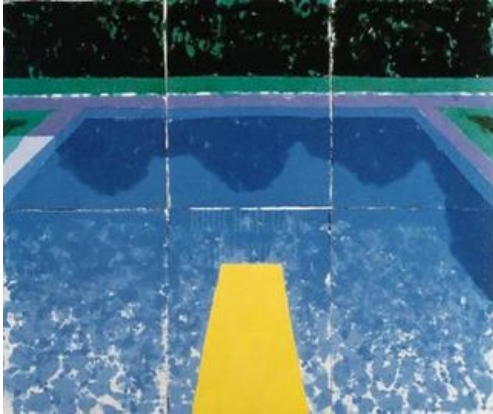
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## American Pool or Canadian Lake: Molly Peacock on Poets' Approaches



Can I put my finger on the difference between the Canadian and the American approach to writing a poem? Let's try a water analogy. Think of poetry as a swimming pool. The Canadian poet has no trouble getting in at the shallow end and taking a reader with her, has no trouble assuming the reader will wade into this unknown pool with him. Poet and reader go in together. They take their time. Finally they hit the place where their feet leave the bottom, and then they will swim, experiencing something they both know is over their heads. (That is what poetry feels like to me, trying to stay afloat in an element in which you might sink, and which is surely over your head.)

As a result the Canadian poem tends to be longer than the American poem (there are two poems over ten pages each in [The Best Canadian Poems in English 2008](#)); it tends to wind along to more places, to be more interested in the side track, be more familiar with its reader, to assume its reader might be a cousin, or even a friend, swimming along together. It is possible these qualities are a result of the Canadian poet feeling supported, both by grants and by the government as well as by a populace who actually looks to its poets to define what it is to be Canadian. Or simply the result of a generalized feeling on the part of poets who sense that their culture is responsive to them, or that they are necessary to how the country defines itself. Small-audience art that it is, poetry is necessary to Canada.

But the American poet, who generally feels much more extraneous to American culture (except for last Inauguration week) is strictly a deep end diver. She mounts the diving board. He walks to the end. She flips upwards into the air. He soars, curving, and splashes down into the depths. All of this happens in the first five lines. Forget the shallow end. Forget the journey. Forget the feeling of writer and reader in an exploration together. Sign up for being an audience, because the American poet requires being watched. The poet has practiced that amazing dive, and it is thrilling. You know from the first line that the poem is about to explode with experience, perception, language. But the companionship of the adventure together can be missing.

The American poem is compact and immediately surprising. The Canadian poem is lankier and discovers its surprise. Perhaps that swimming pool analogy needs adjustment. Let the American stay with the swimming pool, because there's a sense with an American poem that the poet is leaping off a high board. But let the Canadian get in at the shallow end of a lake, and take the reader along, feet cut by a few stones, goose-bumped, sea-weedy, out to the middle that requires some strong side-by-side swimming.

Here's a poem by [A.F. Moritz](#) from the anthology that requires this tandem writer-reader companionship. A reader simply must have the faith and time to follow the writer through his associative journal and its consequent emotional connections. (I'll post Moritz's clarifying note tomorrow. Meanwhile, enjoy the swim.)

### Odds and Ends

An evil swamp meadow, burnt and sawed.  
Invisibly small lives hum and rummage in fearful humidity. Among the stumps  
lean six pine saplings, the bare slender trunks  
tipped with cone-shaped tufts of needled twigs:  
greenery arrowheads. What made these arrow-trees  
fall here notch first and sink their feathers  
under the lava flow of golden weed --

what, beyond some whim and power of nature  
and ideal of the painter, inexpressible in words?

I was glad as always to leave the museum  
and regain the town and again be living  
in a picture, restored to our nature as pilgrims  
for the ideal law. But when the walk did not turn  
and open on the sea, as map misreading had told me,  
my eyes settled on a fallen rhododendron flower.  
Its petals, intact and perfect, were in fact  
not petals but five rays of a single disc,  
shadowy rose, with a circular hole at center.  
It was a skirt for a dead Romantic waist:  
the upturned, golden, hammer-headed pistil  
had fit there, with its garden of ten stamens waving  
ovular flecks, and these remained above  
on their bush withering, while the shed pink dirndl  
was put away in the grass.

O clothes she wore  
and we put them away for her to wear again  
someday, and today they lie there still.

A. F. Moritz

from *The Best Canadian Poetry in English, 2008*

published by Tighrope Books

(*Illustration: David Hockney, Day Pool with Three Blues*)

Posted by [Molly Peacock](#) on January 27, 2009 at 05:00 AM in [Canada](#), [Guest Bloggers](#) | [Permalink](#)

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