

and have earned him international literary prizes. *Les tablettes d'Oxford* is his second novel. Indeed, the enigmatic life of Romulus Augustulus has attracted attention: Friedrich Dürrenmatt's 1950 play, *Romulus the Great*; a 2007 movie, *The Last Legion*; and the Marvel Comics character known as Tyrannus. Wauthier chose to keep Romulus alive long past the traditional life span attributed to him by historians. Both spoof and roman à clef, his novel is a dazzling tour de force.

Alice-Catherine Carls

University of Tennessee at Martin

Alejandro Zambra. **Mis documentos.** Barcelona. Anagrama. 2014. ISBN 9788433997715

If “publish or perish” is an academic creed, Alejandro Zambra abides by “polish or perish.” The eleven narratives included under an ingenious title, which alludes to whatever notion of archive one adheres to, have been published as fiction, as parts of essays or critical notes. Now organized into three sections, each with a common thread, the character studies within each tale also have a cumulative power that makes *Mis documentos* perhaps the best short-story collection of the last two decades.

In “Larga distancia,” the writer-protagonist’s incipient woes (while he works part-time at a call center) challenge our sympathies, and such imprecise moral ambiguity reminds us that we do not live in a clear moral universe. From the title story to others like “Instituto Nacional” (both the most akin to “autobiografiction”), digital millennial culture is omnipresent, as are hyperarticulate dialogs and concomitant rapid-fire cursing, allusions, and word-play. Haphazard episodes, flights of fancy, quasi-philosophical musings,

and aesthetic digressions, some as humorous extrapolations of millennial generational angst, ultimately lend suspense to each story.

Some reductionist critical expectations hold that today’s Chilean literature needs to at least nod to the obnoxiousness of living after Pinochet, in a nanny state; Zambra does so subtly in “Camilo” and “El hombre más chileno del mundo,” showing that the present is much more complicated, that intergenerational mobility is steady, and that insisting that anything is an icon of a political system is immature. There are also no archetypes, cliffhangers, or preposterous plotting, and when the default surprise ending of traditional narrative is present, it is never overdetermined.

Some episodes and secret histories echo one another, relaying the feeling that unapologetic logic and reason have little place in an era obsessed with ambivalence and popular culture (“Verdadero o falso” and “Yo fumaba muy bien”). This approach is abetted by some lyrical depictions, as in “Hacer memoria.” To paraphrase Churchill, these stories can be a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is generally watching the author calibrate what appear to be his aesthetic commandments rather than a particular goal for each story.

This superb collection belies assumptions that Zambra, his generation’s lightning rod, is a minimalist. This is because the interlocking element is the literary world into which most of the characters wander, within a larger metafictional frame with no user’s manual for dealing with learning and teaching, maturing, compulsions, soccer, a globalized world, minor secrets and vices, sex, or “the literature of the parents,” whether their elders’ or old literary masters’.

For Zambra, genre boundaries are not impervious, and the devil is in the details of how he tweaks them by using the contemporary aesthetic values in which he is embedded, without making them appear as a symbol of unconventionality or capitulating to older aesthetics. He is brilliant in achieving that goal without loopy obsessions or by letting regional settings restrict the relentless joy he manifests in every story.

Will H. Corral

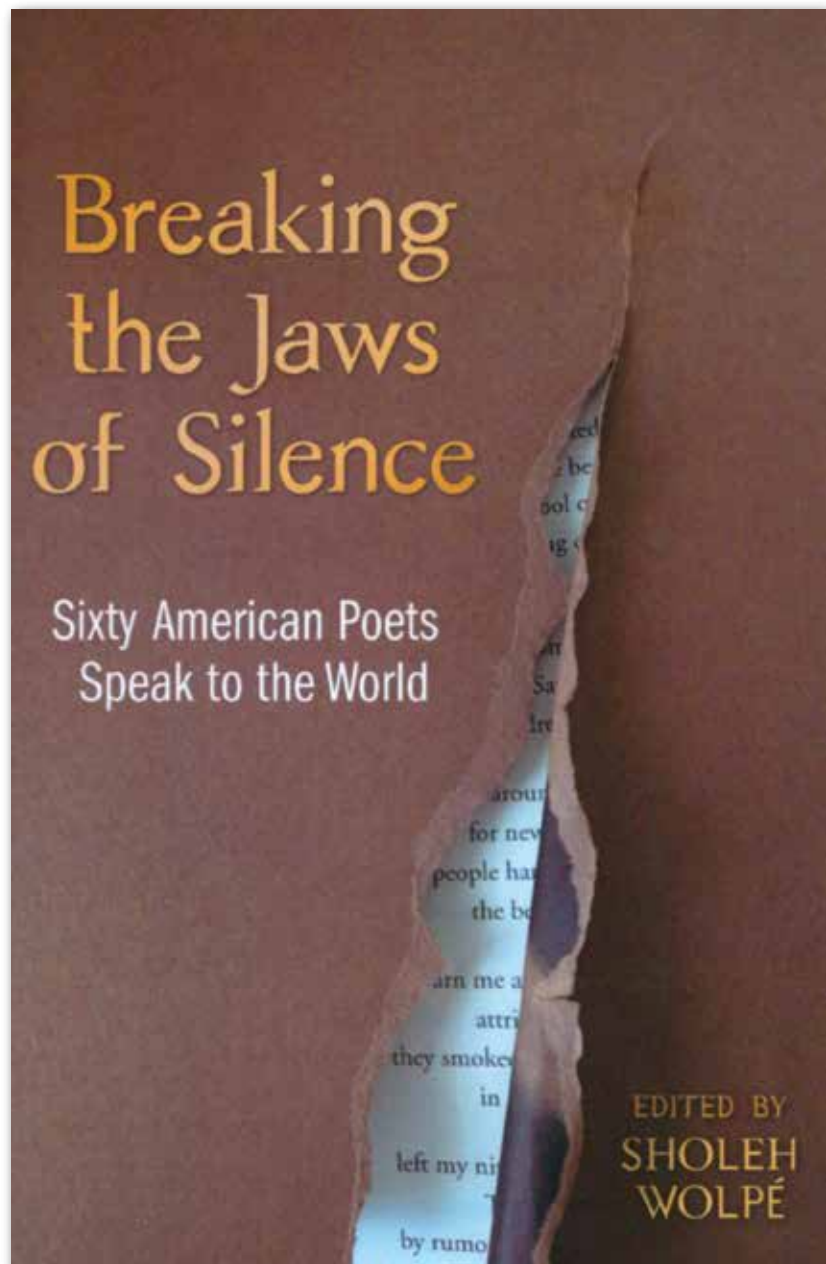
San Francisco

## Verse

**Breaking the Jaws of Silence: Sixty American Poets Speak to the World.** Sholeh Wolpé, ed. Fayetteville. University of Arkansas Press. 2013. ISBN 9781557286291

This collection transforms the motto *e pluribus unum* into verse. Iranian American poet Sholeh Wolpé brought together sixty American poets in the poetic tradition of protest. Like a crystal hanging in the sun, they reflect and refract the principles of freedom and human rights in myriad directions. Furthermore, each of these poems is offered as a gift; the proceeds from this anthology will benefit PEN Center USA’s Freedom to Write program.

Wolpé has established her own work as a fearless poet in three collections, including *Rooftops of Tehran*. Both her aversion to oppression and her ability to juxtapose the dark and wondrous are reflected in this anthology and also in her dedication to PEN Center USA. PEN International is dedicated to human rights and campaigns on behalf of writers who have been censored and imprisoned around the world. This poetry responds by bearing witness to oppression.



Every piece in this anthology situates the poet in a world at war with its citizens throughout history and around the globe. They seek to expose both tyranny and tarnished examples of liberty: the bloodied, ill-fitting coat of General Washington, the “stained cheeks” and “weathered plumage” of Lady Liberty who wanders the streets of New York, the ghosts of Tiananmen Square, and the protesters in white shirts “on the other side of the world.”

However, these poems also explore the ambivalence of American

responses to brutality. It includes poets like Kim Addonizio, who is skeptical of America’s ability to sympathize with and support international struggles for human rights. She juxtaposes her ride to the gym with newspaper headlines about genocide around the world, forcing readers to consider their own reactions to collections like *Breaking the Jaws of Silence*.

Wolpé wraps up the collection with an afterword: “I Didn’t Ask for My Parents.” She examines the accident of our birth and the role it plays

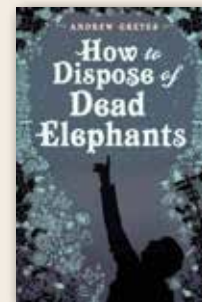
## Nota Bene



*Das Gedicht* Chapbook: German Poetry Now (vol. 1)

*Pegasus & Rosinante: When Poets Travel*  
Anton G. Leitner, publisher and ed.

*Pegasus & Rosinante* presents a selection of German poems and essays translated into English. Emerging and already established writers are revealed in this sleek volume. Inspired by its predecessor of twenty-one years (*Das Gedicht*), this first English edition showcases a rare and living assortment of voices writing in the German language.



Andrew Gretes

*How to Dispose of Dead Elephants*  
Sandstone Press

In a hilariously modern coming-of-age tale, Stubb Marakas attempts to find his place in the world by embarking on a journey with his swashbuckling Korean adoptee best friend, Mark Conner. They must face battles such as Stubb’s fight against severe epilepsy, Mark’s search for the truth of his origins, and the failing health of an old mentor.

in our political and religious alliances. Her poem highlights the arbitrary nature of the affinities and rivalries that shape the world. She concludes with the provocative question: “Who has salvation / when we all claim it?” *Breaking the Jaws of Silence* is a chorus of American voices speaking out against a dark world with the power of verse.

Abigail Heiniger  
Wayne State University

Patrizia Cavalli. **My Poems Won't Change the World: Selected Poems.** Gini Alhadeff, ed. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 2013. ISBN 9780374217440

*My Poems Won't Change the World* opens with poetry almost haiku-like in its concision and simplicity, proving Patrizia Cavalli a master of minimalism. And yet the very white space on her pages can function ironically: in the eponymous poem, a bemused and knowing silence follows the poet's affirmation: “yes of course / my poems / won't change the world.” The arch “of course” casts a shadow over the silence that follows, casting doubt on this overly deprecatory—or ironically self-aggrandizing—statement. Her readers are left to play out possibilities.

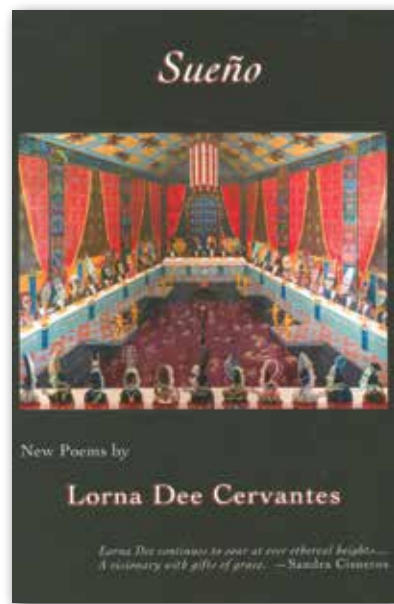
There is another well-known poet who enjoys such play with tone and self-assessment: Wisława Szymborska, the Polish Nobelist, would have understood Cavalli's poetic personality. Both speak with voices that are modest and pretend to a simplicity that is as illusory as it is disarming: to call a poem simple is to imply easy comprehension and quick gratification. For both poets, this would be incorrect. Both are attracted to the idea that a poem can function as a puzzle, not to create bewilderment



but to amuse and bemuse. An element of playfulness informs their work, helping to create the sense of a poetic persona. In Cavalli's case, this persona can appear emotional yet never maudlin, romantic yet not conventional, perceptive but not hard-edged. Her speaker, like Szymborska's, appears gentle. She does not seek to shock or awe. Perhaps this helps to account for Cavalli's popularity: the twentieth century has produced plenty of shock artists, and it is good to be reminded that wit does not always vaunt itself, and that the element of surprise is distinct from that of shock.

Cavalli lives in her body and writes frequently about the complexity of love, often figuratively, though we are never sure. “Don't count on my imagination,” she writes. The corporeal reality of the present moment takes precedence over acts of memory or hypothetical projections, and the language of everyday life pushes away preciousness and poeticism.

This facing-page translation is a gift for English-language readers who are curious about the poems'



original sound effects. Readers have noted that her work lends itself well to translation, and these translations—completed by many illustrious hands—give immense pleasure, yet it is also rewarding to note the occasional rhymes or deft enjambment of the original Italian. This is a book to linger with that will delight readers in both languages.

Magdalena Kay  
University of Victoria, B.C.

Lorna Dee Cervantes. **Sueño: New Poems.** San Antonio, Texas: Wings Press (IPG, distr.). 2013. ISBN 9781609403102

In *Sueño: New Poems*, Lorna Dee Cervantes invokes the song of storytelling, both in a literal lyrical sense and also through the unconscious, cerebral act of dreaming. It is through dreams that the elevated metaphorical truths are rooted out. The same can be said for Cervantes's latest collection of poetry, which derives from a mighty river of personal and culturally collected memories. She builds her poems with blue-collar