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# CALLAHAN COUNTY STAR SPOTLIGHT

## WRITERS SHOWCASE

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### Poetry Media Service


**CHOICE WORDS**  
Poet Peter Cole carefully navigates the abstract and timeless.  
*By Daisy Fried*  
*Poetry Media Service*  
Things on Which I've Stumbled, by Peter Cole. New Directions. \$14.95.  
Peter Cole, an American MacArthur Fellow who lives in Jerusalem, deals in matters that come with capital letters. Truth, Morality, Jewishness, Art and Art's Responsibility, Love, Zionism v. Palestinian Nationhood. On the last of these, a subject that dominates this book, Cole is not easy to pin down. Certainly if poets were the acknowledged legislators of the world, AIPAC would have sicced itself on him long since. He told one interviewer he lives in Jerusalem not for religious reasons but because "I had a sense that my own poetry was going to come out of a Hebrew tradition, and that, in order to really explore that fully and properly, I had to learn Hebrew, and to learn Hebrew I had to come here." Cole, also a translator of Hebrew and Arabic poetry, founded Ibis Editions, which publishes both Hebrew and Arabic literature in translation with the express intention of having the two literatures considered side by side. And he's clearly deeply disturbed by Israel's aggression against Palestine. Here are all four lines of "Israel Is," which first appeared earlier this year in the Nation:  
Israel is he, or she, who wrestles  
with God—call him what you will,  
not some goon (with a rabbi and gun)  
in a pre-fab home on a biblical hill.  
Cole's "Palestine: A Sestina" begins with a reference to the late left-wing Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said's book The Question of Palestine, and two of its end-words are "Palestine" and "pain." Most modern sestinas read like workshop exercises and go on about five stanzas too long. Not Cole's. His music is too strange. The sestina begins in the passive voice, and relies mostly, though not exclusively, on abstractions:  
Hackles are raised at the mere mention of Palestine,  
let alone The Question of—who owns the pain?  
Often it seems the real victims here are the hills—  
those pulsing ridges, whose folds and tender fuzz of green  
kill with softness. On earth, it's true, we're only guests,  
but people live in places, and stake out claims to land.  
The itchy diction, working its way through the repetitive, circular, interweaving form,

comes rather triumphantly to mirror the tortuous, intractable, complex nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.  
Cole's interest in Israel and things Hebraic is not limited to contemporary politics. Quotations from Hebrew texts—sacred, poetic, philosophical, profane—interspersed with Cole's own commentary, make up much of the title poem, "Things on Which I've Stumbled." "Poetry and all that garbage," the poem begins, and proceeds through a magpie's nest of textual scraps through which we see glimmers of humanity's urges and longings and wonderings. "Tell me, what is man / if not dirt and a worm," goes one scrap; "the gold brocade is very pretty / but not what I wanted exactly," goes another. The material "Things on Which I've Stumbled" is based on comes from the Genizah Research Unit in Cambridge, England. A geniza, Cole explains in a fascinating footnote, is a storeroom for old and discarded sacred Hebrew texts; according to Jewish law, these cannot be thrown out, but must be given ritual burial. The Cambridge geniza contains not only sacred texts but poems, personal letters, contracts, and shopping lists, and was almost burned as being "nothing of any interest or value." Cole ends his expansive collage/retrieval project of a poem with the words "These are things on which I've stumbled." In a further footnote he adds a quote from the Bahir, an ancient, anonymous, mystical work of Midrash: "This refers to things that a person cannot grasp unless they cause him to stumble."  
Stumbling to get steady, misunderstanding as a way toward understanding: these themes underlie the austere and rigorously pleasurable "Notes on Bewilderment," fifty semi-aphoristic speculations which add up to a kind of moral, literary, and political mindscape. The "Notes" are five more-or-less tetrameter lines each, with a regular rhyme scheme. Ranging in his references (Spinoza, Rothko, Machado, dead Jews, dead Palestinians) and dealing with Big Questions, Cole's mind is continually not made up:  
The bereaved speakers droned on and on about "humanity," entitled by their grief.  
Not having to suspend anything in the way of disbelief, I sat listening  
but left with the faint hope I'd brought in doubt.  
—"xxv"  
There's a lot of close-

**April's A Lovely Dream**  
Tra la la, April's a lovely dream  
Praise her name and be glad she came  
The nearby slopes awake aflame  
With skillful use of each springtime rain  
She resurrects with fabled scheme  
Tra la la, April's a lovely dream  
Praise her name and be glad she came.  
April designs such sweet and pristine  
Etchings down expressive scenic lanes  
Seeding each meadow her eager game  
Winking blinking each petal a gleam  
Tra la la, April's a lovely dream  
Praise her name and be glad she came.  
Weldon L. Smith  
Eastland, Texas  
reading fun to be had here, but what's particularly striking is the last line's deliberate fuzzing of whether hope or doubt wins out. Did he leave with the same faint hope he brought, doubtfully, with him? Did he leave doubting even that faint hope? Did he leave hoping that he'd introduced doubt to the speakers? Cole, determinedly unfunny, is very witty.  
There's something admirable, and oddly charming, in Cole's old-fashioned impulse toward synthesis. Yet for Cole, everything is always also falling apart. This isn't poetry that makes you go "ahhh." It makes you think, and think hard. Cole's immersion in unclarity is idealistic, and clarifying.  
Guggenheim Fellow Daisy Fried lives in Philadelphia; her latest book, My Brother Is Getting Arrested Again, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. This article originally appeared in Poetry magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at poetryfoundation.org.  
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**--WANTED--**  
20 lines,  
double spaced or less  
Poetry  
Fiction or Non  
**Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or liable material.**  
**Growing Up**  
**You used to have only one best friend**  
**And now you just have several friends**  
**Your parents used to know every single thing about you**  
**And now you hide things from them**  
**You used to see your family more than friends**  
**And now it is the exact opposite**  
**You had no major decisions**  
**And now you have to make choices that could change your life**  
**No one judged anyone else**  
**And now they pick out every flaw**  
**Which stage of life is the most grown up?**  
**-Kallie Pruet**  
**Baird, Texas**

### American Life In Poetry

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006  
My father was the manager of a store in which chairs were strategically placed for those dutiful souls waiting and waiting and waiting for shoppers. Such patience is the most exhausting work there is, or so it seems at the time. This poem by Joseph O. Legaspi perfectly captures one of those scenes.  
**At the Bridal Shop**  
The gowns and dresses hang like fleece in their glaring whiteness, sheepskin-softness, the ruffled matrimonial love in which the brides-in-waiting dance around, expectantly, hummingbirds to tulips. I was dragged here: David's Bridal, off the concrete-gray arterial highways of a naval town. I sink into the flush bachelors' couch, along with other men sprinkled throughout the shop, as my friend and her female compatriots parade taffeta dresses in monstrous shades of pastels--persimmons, lilacs, periwinkles--the colors of weddings and religious holidays. Trains drag on the floor, sleeves drape like limp, pressed sheets of candied fruits, ribbons fluttering like pale leaves. I watch families gathered together: the women, like worshippers, circling around the smiling brides-to-be, as if they were the anointed ones. The men, in turn, submerge deeper into couches, into sleep, while the haloed, veiled women cannot contain their joy, they flash their winning smiles, and they are beautiful.  
American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation ([www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)), publisher of Poetry magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Poem copyright (c)2007 by Joseph O. Legaspi, whose most recent book of poems is "Imago," Cavankerry Press, 2007. Poem reprinted from "Crab Orchard Review," Vol. 12, no. 2, 2007, by permission of Joseph O. Legaspi. Introduction copyright (c) 2009 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.  
  
**It's a nice day for a bike ride. Photo by Patrick Ready**  
**Words You Can Use:**  
Palmus: When you twitch, as a result of learning a new word, or some other crisis, you have one of these.  
Quindecagon: In geometry, this is a fifteen sided figure. Can you remember the last time you saw one?  
Sciophilous: Actually this is not a disease, but it does refer to plants that love shade. This is the time of the year when you prepare these.  
Tellurian: You should know that you are one of these. It denotes something that is a dweller on the planet Earth.  
Uredo: This refers to a burning sensation of the skin. Some people in Washington, D. C. may be having more frequent instances of this.