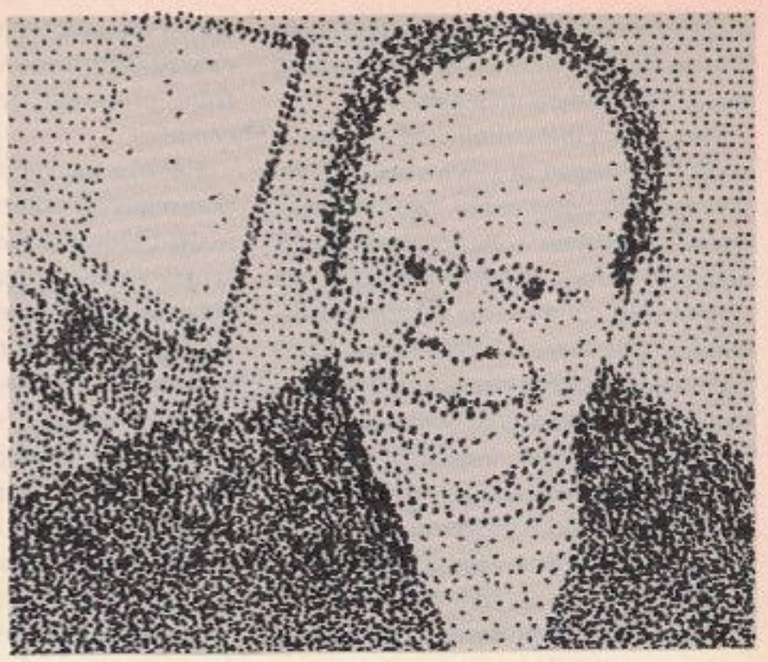
show waving, soft coral and fish that are sharply angular, even cubist. Those tableaux are softened as through the gaze of a diver's eyes, lighted as if by the pale rays of an end-of-the-day sun shining through the water. "I was a fisherman," Maya reminds me, "and I love the sea."

But Maya hasn't seen the sea for years, or flowers, or even sunsets. He has to rely on memory and photographic reminders to "think my way back to the place." "It is not a good life," he says. "It is a painful life. The sisters say, 'think about your art, don't think about the pain.' But I can't go where I want to go, and when I am angry, I cannot work." While he is patient with his visitor, retelling the story of his life, when I ask about taking his picture he says sardonically, "don't expect me to stand up."

Other patients come by to watch him paint but none has taken him up on his offer to teach them how. "Too much work," they say. These days, Semisi Maya paints every Tuesday, when a former patient comes to help him mix his paints and soak the paper. He works steadily, three hours in the morning and three hours in the afternoon. He will turn out as many as a dozen paintings in a single day, hundreds each year, thousands over the decades since the sisters put a brush between his wrists, a record of a place whose surpassing beauty has never been captured in painted images.

Maya sells his paintings for a pittance, $20 or $25 apiece, the price varying with the size, and he uses the money mostly



for paint and paper. Some of those paintings eventually find their way into otherwise forgettable hotel lobbies, where they lie wait to prize open the eyes of a passing stranger.

DAVID L. KIRP

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BOOKS

Catastrophes in the planning

WHAT IS TO BE DONE
Proposals for the Soviet Transition to the Market
Merton J. Peck and Thomas J. Richardson, eds.
Yale University Press, $12, 220 pp.

John Feffer

As it sinks further into recession, losing considerable ground to Europe and Asia, the United States still maintains a comparative advantage in one dubious category: faulty economic models. The laissez-faire school—Milton Friedman and the other progenitors of Reaganomics—exported its model to Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s with decidedly mixed results. The recent fall of communism has provided these social scientists with a vast new laboratory for experimentation. Repackaging their prescriptions as "shock therapy" and counting on the considerable assistance of Western governments and multilateral lenders, these missionaries of monetarism brought their brand of economic reform first to Poland and then to the rest of Eastern Europe.

The results have been devastating. Eastern Europe today is mired in a deepening depression complete with inflation, unemployment, and social misery. Institutions ranging from the United Nations to the investment firm of Morgan Stanley have warned of a grimmer future and consequently have urged new economic strategies for the region.

Meanwhile, somewhat further to the east, the Soviet Union has fragmented into fifteen independent states (and counting), each new nation poised to move from centralized planning to the market. With the experience of Eastern Europe so visibly negative, you might think that the post-Soviet states would steer clear of U.S. economists peddling their wares. And you might think further that U.S. economists would be revising their models in light of the manifest problems of shock therapy.

Wrong on both counts.

Boris Yeltsin and the new Russian government, for instance, have solicited the economic advice of the same U.S. economists who developed the Polish model.

And those economists, if the recent study *What Is To Be Done* is any indication, have barely altered their message.

The project that culminated in *What Is to Be Done* began in 1989 when a group of economists organized by Yale University turned its attention to the Soviet economy. Although written immediately before the August 1991 coup and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Yale report nonetheless remains characteristic of economic approaches to post-Soviet economic transition. Therefore, despite the solid credentials of the participants—Alfred Kahn, Alice Rivlin, John Williamson, and several international scholars—this consensus document disregards not only the theoretical flaws of rapid reform, but the contradictory evidence provided by reports out of Eastern Europe today.

Like the Lenin and Chernyshevsky works from which it takes its title, *What Is to Be Done* reads more like a manifesto than a sober assessment. Coming from economists, the suggestions are predictably rather dry. But the call to arms is nevertheless radical. Prices should be liberalized overnight, the document's framers insist. State enterprises must be privatized, government spending cut, the domestic economy internationalized, and last (and sadly least) the negative social impact minimized. Reform is to be instituted from above and no provisions are to be made for enlisting popular participation in reshaping the economy.

Some of the report's suggestions are eminently reasonable. The post-Soviet governments cannot, for instance, afford to continue subsidizing consumer prices. So too must these new countries adapt themselves to the world economy. Other prescriptions, however, are simply inaccurate. The notion of a "ruble overhang" —an excessive number of rubles held by the population—no longer exists. When the Soviet Union instituted mild price reforms in April 1991, most of the rubles disappeared as consumers began to draw on their savings to supplement their falling wages (a similar phenomenon occurred in Poland in 1990). Thus it is wrong to suggest that the post-Soviet population can survive another massive price increase by spending their excess rubles. To imagine that the average post-Soviet will still have some money left over to buy shares in newly privatized industries—another *What Is to Be Done* proposal—requires even greater credulity.

But like Reaganomics and the laissez-faire remedies offered to Pinochet in Chile in the 1970s, the model outlined in *What Is to Be Done* errs not so much in the details but in its overall conception of an idealized market. The government should play only a minimal role in the economy, insist the shock therapists: the market must be allowed to solve all problems. Thus do the new pundits disregard not only Keynesian insights but the very dynamics of capitalist economic development as well. It was precisely through government support that the currently successful Asian economies—Japan, Korea—developed in the postwar era. Even the United States grew economically in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by cultivating industries and agriculture behind government-established trade barriers.

The state unquestionably played a ruinous role in the Soviet economy. But this does not justify rushing blindly to the other extreme. The post-Soviet governments can and should still regulate the economy, constructing an industrial policy that allocates resources to promising industries, negotiating favorable trade terms that permit the growth of domestic producers, establishing a progressive tax structure that minimizes large inequalities in wealth, judiciously distributing foreign aid.

True, the economists involved in *What Is to Be Done* do emphasize the need for social welfare programs. But even here, they emphasize unemployment benefits and not job retraining, market-based solutions and not coordination between government and labor. Even foreign aid, so critical in avoiding widespread deprivation, is dismissed almost categorically. Much as the proponents of trickle-down insist that welfare spending is money down the drain, these economists argue that foreign aid would accentuate rather than alleviate the problems.

By presenting their version of austerity capitalism as the new orthodoxy, the economists associated with *What Is to Be Done* are priming the post-Soviet Union for a catastrophe equal to or worse than Eastern Europe's. It is a sad comment indeed if in place of Marshall Plans, we now only send Reaganomics. Perhaps there is a new economic law at work here. If it don't work, don't fix it. Export it. □

I HEAR AMERICA RHYMING

THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY 1991
Mark Strand, Editor
Collier Books, $12.95, 326 pp.

Suzanne Keen

The Best American Poetry has become one of autumn's events. Since a different poet guest-edits each annual volume, the series provides both familiar pleasures and a refreshingly individual look at "the best" of an abundant harvest. Previous volumes, edited by John Ashbery (1988), Donald Hall (1989), and Jorie Graham (1990), have given readers a look at about seventy-five poems, gleaned from the year's journals. That its publishers can claim best-seller status for the series (it makes the lists compiled from independent bookstores) suggests that Americans *do* read poetry, especially when it is intelligently selected and attractively packaged.

Mark Strand introduces the 1991 volume with a poignant essay about his parents, who did not really understand his vocation. His mother, he reports, "was not a reader of poetry." After her death, his father begins to see what poetry is *for*: "He can read my poems ... and be in possession of his loss instead of being possessed by it." Although Strand celebrates language's ability to enchant and admires poetry's evasion of final, certain meanings, he insists on its function in our lives: "The way poetry has