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EDITOR’S NOTE

Issue #75 finds the HPR still attentive to its mission of discovering America’s undiscovered poets. Two people who have sustained this mission, Caitlin Adams and Matt Margo, are saying goodbye to the HPR. The slush pile will miss them. While our readers and submitters are the lifeblood of this review, Caitlin and Matt have served as the Mind of this venture during their tenure. Believe me, O Slush Pile—you will miss them. Hopefully, we will see their like again.

Back to the mission. This issue evinces our taste for the avant-garde and good ol’ fashioned poetry. In short, we have a set of aesthetics built to stand alongside the poetry our digital age. Thus, we have fun with the high-minded task of reading and selecting poems that reward readers.

Thanks for reading.

Willard Greenwood
Editor, HPR
Nina Sokol

Time, According to a Star-Crossed Lover

She was still a physical attraction without him. That much she knew. A long spiral in space, a brain resting miraculously on top of glistening vertebrae hanging like a string of stars pulsating in small mathematical cubes the astro-physicists say keep everything in-line and afloat in relation to one another but she knew differently as she recalled their first meeting. Because they no longer met.
S. Husain Mehdi

Disappearing Days

A few days, I suspect three,
completely vanished from my life.
Holding hands with night, the days disappeared.
Allocated benevolently by Al the Mighty they were
I searched high and I searched low.
No sign of the nights or indeed of the days.
Canadian Tire flashlights of little use really:
can’t see the days in the day of course
and nights disappeared in the light of the light.

My friends and children normally bright
suggested as a theory
a fleeter flight of time,
a faster fugiting of tempus
had caused shrinkage: 72 hours to just minutes or moments.
Not possible, really, I said until the rotations,
The rotations per diem, that is, went way up.
Consult with god, they said earnestly
And so I called god’s office,
number from the fridge magnet,
Also found in public washrooms: 1-800-GOD-SUCKS
They went into a huddle, god’s people,
and reported nothing amiss.

Did you check the calendar? they asked officiously.
Perhaps these were days you did not care for,
or appointments you wanted missed.
God’s office drops no balls, they said.
The planets, after all, are still afloat.
Too bad they said about your shortened life.

Kicked up a fuss I did, to get the 72 hours back.
Gave up smoking, avoided stress and ate fat free.
Exercised several hours a week, stairs instead of lifts.
All of no avail, I am afraid, I did die a few days ahead of time
My estimate of three days was a bit low and god’s team,
In the end gloatingly asked: A bit short were you, Husain?
Arthur D. Mattews Jr.

Getting It In

There is the riddle!
    There is the quiz!
There is show biz and here I is!
I’m committed to this thing this little thing
and I be getting it in!
Get in where you fit in!
    Or whatever works I’m lusty
for me no other than big busty
Patty has a heck of a set!
    What a set to get wet!
I’ve often watched Patty work out
I know I can surely make her
sweat, with my thing, ding a ling a ling
the property she has makes it sing
at 9, a quarter to 10, 11, 12, and back
again I be getting it in, Patty
proved more than a mere friend as
most of my life was spent needless
to say with Daniel in the Lion's Den
truly is that the proper place for
lusty men?
Whenever Patty decides to
open ’em wide and let me in I
say: Ah! It feels to good in
there! This love story we share
is no nightmare this thing I
hate to drag it! As often I say Patty I
don’t mean to brag it Baby I will
cast out my line for you to snag it
because the awesome man is not
a faggot so to end,
    besides a world full of sin my
    skin my thing and personal
    writing pen
    I be getting it in I find
I’m continuously getting it in.
Arthur D. Mattews Jr.

Unknown Soldier

Time be the father…
Or father be the time
One to 99 or sunshine
What on earth be the true time?
Father earth
Mothers give birth to birth
Self-worth and all
High or low or where it’ll
Never, ever show thoughts flow
grow continuously grow

Father to father, we never know?
So go with flow now, smile
While you can alone or un-shown
Father, father need I reply
First alive then a death to
Surely die, what isn’t known
Will be in time!
Father now, before me future
Time are…Living, dying
Multiplying, father, father
May I? Be free to let my light
So shine, father of time, father of
Mine one of a kind, blind in mind
Like that…A bat of sort father to
Father sport to sport, report, or no
Report father, father of mine
As be, I’m now blind as with all rest
Of mankind, to the format before
Times door before, my father came to be
All the more, I’m sore father I am
Peycho Kanev

Manifesto

I grew up in Communism. My grandmother and I were sitting in the living room, in front of the TV, watching the speech of the Chairman of The Communist Party, with the rest of the country. The teeth of my grandma were grinding. I asked: ”What’s the matter, granny?” She sat there, quiet for a while, and then she said: “This man should die. I just hope someone to kill him!”, and after a few noiseless minutes she told me: “If you, my boy, tell someone what I’ve just told you, I will kill you!” Then she smiled with her bad teeth, but I noticed something in her eyes, that made me silent, until now.
Jeffrey C. Alfier

Walking Before Dark on the Last Good Day of Summer

Camphor leaves run before me up the street,
whispers tumbling through bright realtor flags

strung from a sign at an open house no one
came to today, the deepening sky rinsing itself

of contrails and a few unnamable birds aloft
in the late light-scatter, the realtor taking

the flags down now as they resist him
in on-shore wind, and in that wide silence

I drift for mere seconds back to a childhood
flaring with kites, returned to the present

by the falling sun knifing shoals of thinning
clouds to fire upper branches of camphors

and the glass eye of my attic window, the house
without a buyer tilting under the blaze.
Jonathan Greenhause

Edward’s Indecisiveness

Edward was born into:
   a) a strict Orthodox family,
   b) a sect worshipping small winged animals,
   c) a family of punch-loving born-again somethings,

but from the time he was:
   a) little more than a fetus,
   b) immersed in his quarter-life crisis,
   c) recovering from a gender-change operation,

he was aware he’d become:
   a) a reoccurring Tibetan Buddhist,
   b) a game-show host tired of playing games,
   c) a snake-charmer afraid of snakes,

& so he searched for meaning by:
   a) dismantling Grandfather clocks & prewar aircraft.
   b) abstaining from half of his sexual activities.
   c) studying the lost art of commercial Mad-Libbing.

As a result, Edward knew:
   a) how long it takes for objects to fall 100 meters,
   b) the importance of seeming smart,
   c) that he was trapped inside this particular poem,

& with this knowledge, he could:
   a) unify general relativity & quantum mechanics,
   b) sing bass at the Metropolitan Opera House,
   c) make pancakes on a street corner in Bangkok,

but time passed, & Edward could never:
   a) incorporate metaphors into his rhyme schemes,
   b) turn down mediocre literary prizes,
   c) tie everything together at the end of this poem,

or maybe he could.
Bruce Pratt

In A Japanese Woman’s Photos of Paris.

I will appear three times in a Japanese woman’s photos of Paris:

on the train from Charles De Gaulle airport where she snapped pictures of a friend sharing a seat with my wife and me,

in front of the fountain at St. Michel as we exited from the Metro and collectively waited for our eyes to adjust to the light,

at La Conciergerie where I heard her friend say the name of an actor for whom I was often mistaken when we were both young.

. Perhaps she was remembering The Goodbye Girl, or Close Encounters of the Third Kind, though I thought that she seemed too young to have immersed herself in those films.

Then I thought that she might have meant the greatly wronged Frenchman buried in Montparnasse Cemetery for whom Zola cried J’Accuse, but he wore no beard.

Surely not for Clouseau’s predecessor, the one he called “The Idiot Dreyfus.”
Llyn Clague

The Checkout Girl

The checkout girl at Costco – perhaps an immigrant from Moscow, either Russia or Idaho, or a native Aleut or Arapaho – whatever, it doesn’t matter. Watch, as she keeps up Costco’s bullshit patter in what she hopes is a friendly manner while she runs a cartload of items over the scanner, trying to sell a heard-it-all-before customer on an upgrade, or this week’s “special offer” (“buy a hundred postage stamps, save a quarter”), while processing forty customers an hour.

All you can see of her recurring nightmares – money worries, health insurance, her son’s child care, fear of that ultimate disaster, losing her job and becoming a speck in a homeless mob – are circles under her naturally dark eyes that a layer of powder doesn’t quite disguise.

And what you see of her grit as she (wistfully?) checks the price of your imported chocolate – that her son and daughter will go to college, that two jobs plus cleaning houses are part of her personal pledge, that, maybe like your parents or grandparents but not you, her life is only meant to make a better life for her kids – that depends on you. On what your comprehension is, or how nuanced it can become, of a checkout girl at Costco. Come, come! As her Costco thank-you trails you to the door, do you yet have a clue where she’s from?
Richard A. Pauli

After

A damp dusk in late November.
A whitetail buck, its hindquarters looped in rust-flecked chain,
dangles, head down, from a rafter,
dripping reluctant blood
into a galvanized steel washtub.
The hinged wooden doors
of the double-bay cinder block
garage are accordioned open
so the cars parked tightly together
on the tamped dirt drive, like
a sleek pack of blunt-nosed predators, can add their lights
to that of the single, improvised worklamp slung, like the buck,
over a center beam.
In the harsh light,
men in heavy, mud-crusted workboots, frayed orange vests,
and furred hats with
ear flaps and chin straps
cluster soundlessly,
intent on their work.
Too young to have been invited,
old enough not to be shooed,
I watch as these men--my father,
the fathers of my friends and
neighbors--execute their
evening's chore with the
same capable hands
that have routinely coaxed
back to life
some recalcitrant piece of
machinery that others had
left for dead.
But there's no coaxing tonight.
This baby's never gonna
run again.
So they salvage what parts they can,
against their day of need.
Christine Graf

Party Girl

I want to confirm your worst fears about me;
when I dance at the window in my black lace undies
and strapless bra that the angels buttress,
wear the camisole that flaunts string and ribbon
in the light of a gibbous moon.

I want you to look across the way
at this bad babe who swirls and sways
to Frank and Ella and at my indecent
exposure of skin and belly.
I heat up February in the city,
with my sassy rump, and sashaying romps.

I want you to report me to the authorities
while I bray like a banshee,
shake my bootie, boogie my giddy hips.
I want you to tell the neighbors
that I’m a horny broad
while men at the deli across the street applaud
my daily dalliances.

I want to squander my dance lust
to the walls, into the avenue,
get arrested for being bad and old,
big and bold, for having too much fun
and too many parties by myself.
Matthew Dulany

Yes

Always there’s a station where the gas
  is pennies cheaper, where the air is free,
where tractor trailers whirring past
  appeal to thoughts of temporality.

Always the pike led to the turnpike,
always that abandoned ferry’s rusting shell lay off to the right,
beached on the Raritan’s unclean bank –
the ghost ferry, I called it.
Hello, Ghost Ferry.

Up on the left the oil refinery’s puzzling aspect arose,
  Batmanesque – the smoky city,
the kids called it, that vast rat’s nest,
  scorched forest, wild steel welter.
Hello, Smoky City.

And beyond the shifting bridges lay the city
  I am ever further from,
the city I cannot hate but love,
  as natives are wont to taunt,
more than it will ever love me –

somewhere in that whist distance I was once a boy,
where now the old man lay dying.
Hello, Old Man.
With unsustainable effort his sunken eyes
  pressed me. He needed me

  to tell him where we go when we go.
  But how in the world should I know?
He wanted me to tell him it would be okay.
Holding his hand in mine
  yes I said it will be.
At eighty-four in the basement he slogged through old boxes in which he had stashed his life: letters, photos, some documents, but reading them made his experience seem different than he remembered, yet he still believed that somewhere in the boxes something would surely make sense, so he slaved on under the light of the basement's naked bulb, rummaging—old bound diaries, the glue loosening in their backs—they ought to remind him of what was significant, and he read and remembered this and that and the sense things made at the time and he began to get sleepy and he dozed off and the light seemed dim, inadequate, and off in a shadow a mouse waited to get at the glue.
Dear Neruda

Unlike poems I’ve read in the past, this time your verse was scattered. Your words became pebbles, your questions—open beaks of stone statues. What does it matter how long a man lives, but rather, how he lived? In the end it comes down to sex: fornicators, exhausted and smiling.

My professor says you had whores brought to you—that you must have had an understanding with your wife. She understood perfectly well—you were never fed enough as a child. Your cravings multiplied for more huevos rancheros, bottled ships, maidenheads, pink nipples, brown nipples. And the lyric “a slow fuck in the afternoon” became water—necessary to live, necessary to taste.

In my closet a red pair of shoes wait; my toes are painted too. What if my hunger matches yours; can I order a whore on my deathbed? Would my imaginary husband understand? If I can’t be a poet with whores of my own, what are my options? Here’s a better question, Pablo: What if I’m not the whore, or wife?
Moonrise, how did you know when to send
my friends, strolling along with gelato,
so that they'd see my back and call
my name in the minutes-old dusk,
and my fears of being out alone in
the medieval European street in the
dark, the only dark-skinned woman
in town, would flick away, like shadows do
when someone flips on the light-switch?
Light-switch, what circuit in my heart
made me leave my hotel room and
lock its door behind me with a
heavy metal key so that I could
intersect with the moonrise, just
brushing the tops of the pines on the
other side of the valley from where
my friends and I would just arrive
at the other side of the town square
from the old stone bridge? Which of you
timed the gelato to last until our stroll
led us to the frog's bridge, wooden one
that was built crooked-wise, to confuse
demons, but tonight lures us across
the river under minutes-old moonlight
and the last arcs of the sun's retreat?
**Stephen Brown**

40. Centro de Cultura SMR

40.1 Monolithic Billboard Cokemachine Totaltheatre

Out in on it somewhere in behind the baroque *where the staged afternoon* took stage, and the place we were placed *they misplaced*, or staged, and *the secondhand* artisan earth ware it was staged simulacra in *miniature*, *but the brochure couldn't* ensure that *for sure*, nor were the cultural center business hours clearly staged, *nor* decoded, *so afterhours* we poached the alameda patio brick *quebrados*

Which *looks legitimate* to on-lookers looking it over
And is, *appropriate for apparitions*, cultural centre

40.1.1

*Out in on it somewhere in behind the baroque,*
Doing time incandescent in random parks on pills,
Pocketing random shards of pottery from pre-Columbian Parking lot patio brick, *my feet in the jelly of the room.*
Bracketed by neo-pagan wall poem graffiti billboards, Incandescent at random over random city projects *Bracketed-in*, tethered to and semi-conscious of.
Making it look legitimate to on-lookers looking on.
Walking around at random *to see what happens,*
Bobbing paper lanterns on billboard lake water,
**Take the west bound metro car downtown on pills,**
Get off where they tell me to, *see what happens.*
Pie chart building bar graphs on a jellied rock cobble
*Out in on it somewhere in behind the baroque.*

Shanty town mausoleum of sheet metal breeze block,
Where crossing the threshold-in you die a little inside.
Take the west bound metro car **downtown on pills,**
With some colourless white woman in business slacks,

With loose hair looking over her shoulder unsure of herself.
*Get off where they tell us to, see what happens.*
Flowers on iron work, fix me a fix, if we gel we can drift
**Walking around at random in random parks on pills**

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Do not stand in the window nor in the doorway but drift, in-between the between in-between them.
Anti-Loser Spectacle Trauma in the Cult of Culture

The hot sun like yellowcake, if we gel we can drift, but the buildings were just a backdrop w/ unfinished concrete posts of exposed rebar and where they'd subpeona'd the grass the neighboring building garden became a place between 2 buildings, which was an error in syntax in the streetsign subtext, & they kept the orifices open to a scenario of work no one wanted, a scenario of life no one wants.

Mind the gap, in-between the between in-between them. Walking around at random to see what happens

40.4.2

The revolution never ends where the past is present, Recurring overagain against the grain in time, Which looks legitimate to onlookers looking it over, Bracketed by neo-pagan wall poem graffiti billboards. My alias alienates itself in coke machine totaltheatre Standing there doing time, to the charms of church Music on cathedral megaphone on the corner Part of a converted atrium in a sunlit colonnade. What was once spectacle is now everyday totaltheatre. Botched ironwork fire-escape staircases, alias's; Walking around at random to see what happens Doing time incandescing in random parks on pills. An anti-loser on the loose with megaphone tinnitus, Out in on it somewhere in behind the baroque

Bracketed, by education, metro wall-panelling, cars; While your alias gets alienated in the small print subtext. Standing there doing time in the doorway, where The door was, would-have-been, tethered-to, semi-

Conscious-of, suspecting the suspicious who suspect The alias in you of having an alias, side-by-side inside in you. You were, site-specific, in a white-washed white cube Of a room with no window and a palimpsest paint job,

High on oxycontin, beside girls carrying tin gardens of guayaba and oxycotton and dying a little inside, which was an error in syntax in the brochure subtext.
Richard Kostelanetz

Excerpt from AN EPIC POEM FOR THE 21st CENTURY

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Shatter my ugly red beating pumping full, open scarred (very) angry, sinful radiant holding on green growly, sexy fitting kind, mean startling now, now, fast (so fast) heart. (my hope is that you'll understand eventually and this will blow over like cat feet fog, solo on the bay with the purring being the preferred ending, my one, my one, my dear) (my fear is that you'll understand it at once and this becomes a thing like dog shit clumps, multiple on our shoes with scraping being the preferred removal method my one, my one, my love)
In my dream we sit around a campfire
You, me, some others.
Our legs bare,
our ankles barely touch—I worry someone
will notice.

Your toenail is ridged and uneven.
I think about it
all week long
the way I think about the imperfect
skin of your cheek, the slack in your neck.

After four days of frantic hiking
my big toenail turns black—
smashing against the boot uphill and down,
driven by visions

of your toe
and the darkness outside the fire
where I search for you and come up empty.
I stumble down a rocky trail. Let's be honest:
Your big toe turns me on.
John Walser

VALEDICTION: A LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP

Watermarked, telephone line creased,
this late September daybreak grey:

a crow’s bark crumbled through heavy branch maple leaves
only to reform and bounce hard
off the stormpacked rootdirt.

And the tracts just north of the Illinois River
just north of Starved Rock
are black as starlings –
flocks joining flocks joining flocks –
the ground rich furrowed
with tilled and feathered clods.

Is there a name for that moment of separation,
of parting, ten minutes old now,
of following behind her car
as she goes to Monday work and I start my four-hour drive home?

And please, no one answer with gold to airy thinness beat
or stiff twin compasses
or the need of the world of men for me.

Because I can say:
after the shuddering light of a sparrow night
sitting on her back porch,
at three-thirty this morning
the taste of midnight
talk and wine on her tongue,
in the chalk of that electrical storm
our bodies veered together

and, in those plashes, trees lost
their depth, their texture
thunder dragged and scored the ground

and the night’s screen was as blank
as a blind cat’s eye.

Because in December
when I make this drive down again and again
the blue shadows
from the windfarm along the expressway
will carve and gutter ridges
into fields lavender with snow and dusk

and by the mile markers I will know
the minute I get to see her.

Because in March
when I still drive down
every other weekend
but not on this,
at one in the morning,
this cold alternate Saturday morning,
I will sit lonely in the window
of a loud, crowded, dark Main Street bar,
drinking a glass of wine,
reading by streetlight as thin as condensation
a paperback of Gogol or Kafka,
while she sleeps alone in her bed
232 miles away

and the snow falls in swarms
like lakeflies in July,
in waves of summer moths,

and, although every piece here
should feel decent for me,
later, a little beyond slightly drunk,
taking side streets home,
I will say aloud, “Tonight, the moon is the bent blade
that a man behind the counter at a trout farm
flashes to slit throats
before wrist-twisting off head after head after fish head
and throwing them like heartache
into a bucket.”

Because, every time I take this exit,
the turn that points me north,
I wonder if this is the last time,
if the phone will ring next Wednesday –
for her, the thinness, a perforation in the gold;
the loosened joint, loosening the radius –
I wonder if next early October, still with its tenacity of green,
when the grasshopper sparrows head south,
if I will watch them in clouds
that stretch and dissipate,
undulate and darken for miles
over river, railroad trestles and bluffs.
“Fresh News, Marjorie Maddox’s New Book of Poems.”

T. S. Eliot tells us in BURNT NORTON that we spend too much of our time “distracted from distraction by distraction.” He’s right, of course. Most of us will do anything to keep from an unbearable reality: our teetering mortality, our prevailing sins and weaknesses, and the cross which gives both meaning. Marjorie Maddox, thankfully, writes beautifully about all three—and then moves beyond them—in her new book of poems, LOCAL NEWS FROM SOMEPLACE ELSE (Wipf & Stock). Here we read through our misplaced fascination with mass media and large-scale destruction into a more personal version of what passes. Finally we are encouraged to come face to face with the grace and courage we show in the face of the above by actually choosing to reproduce.

Our children are our greatest act of hope, and it is that fact which lifts us up. We will die, yes. And we fail much too often. But we believe too.

It is our belief which saves us.

Our plight is real, yes, and disturbing, but it so often hides beneath the bland happiness we want: drinks under sunglasses and umbrellas. We try and la-la our way through our lives. But the world, in the end, will not bend to meet us. Both people we know and people we don’t die, often horribly. All we can do it hold up a face, our drink, some kind of pose. We try to “turn/away from the echo of a knock/back into” our lives, but we cannot.

The echo sounds a note we do not want to hear: we must live with the whole of things, with life and death, joy and suffering, not just with the parts that make us feel good.

The lies we stubbornly cling to result in complacency, and we pay. We watch TV to try and escape, get absorbed in a lurid reality which does not involve our bodies. And so we become separated from our humanity, from our lives.

So where can we turn to reclaim ourselves, some integrity?

Whom can we trust

when a smiling anchor
prophetizes the utmost danger
around the corner

or tomorrow?
The stream of horrible imagery keeps us from ourselves, yet punishes us with what we’ve become, especially when the disasters are grand enough in scope to point out how far we all are from where we should be. All our alienation disappears then, and we’re met with a gulf, the want we embody because the death we see is ours.

There are the smaller disasters too, of course: the small-town murdered child. Who could believe those parents were among us? In fact, who knows who is among us.

We stare nightly at neighbors
walking too close to nursery window,
too close to the woods
where the girl was found. . .

Sin and mortality always come back to claim us—because we need to feel truly real. We need to feel who we are. This becomes especially apparent during the biggest disasters. When they happen the whole country becomes consumed, feels indicted. (After 911, if you remember, church attendance went way up everywhere—for a time.)

In Maddox’s poem on flight 93, “Pennsylvania September: the Witnesses,” we get the whole process of this book played out in microcosm. The day was “ordinary,” filled with “the routine of our lives”; and then a private horror became pressingly public. Cell phones relay the truths we cannot escape: Edward Felt calls a 911 Dispatcher: “We were the 21st century messengers/of still more, our coiled cells crackling out confusion . . . to both coasts.”

Who of us was not caught up in that “Let’s roll” courage? Who does not remember where he or she was? In the poem we share the horror as experienced by service stations attendants. Kids, too, get caught up, chase down the tragedy on their bikes. Even a photographer has to see

In the trees, what was left
of metal and flesh.
Beyond the wood, the scorched crater
swallowing who I was.

Death will not be kept out, our sin either, try though we do to exclude them. Our lives themselves seem to try to help us cover the threat in offering us boring days, but in the end even that fails. “Such an ugly thing to happen/in this lovely place,” a woman says a year later.

The irony is not lost on the reader.

So this is our plight, to be called to the edge until we learn to carry all we are with us. And finally, we do, especially if we are parents. Each scraped knee, panicked rush to the emergency makes diversion impossible. And Maddox shows us as much in the beautifully lyrical
third part of her book.

But before she does so, we are permitted to feel, even more personally, the individual truth of our lives. “Cancer Diagnosis” brings us face to face with our own death, one we will not be able to avoid, no matter what our exercise regimen. Memento mori. The Shakespearean poem starts with the “O” we respond with when our breath is, for the first time, taken from us: “Words cage heart and breath, irregular in trepidation.” We will go, and as the great ones in the past have told us, it’s best to stay conscious of that fact.

The sections of the poem continue, fittingly enough: “II. that this too too sullied flesh,” “III. would melt, thaw,” “IV. and resolve itself into a dew.” And while all flesh does “melt,” of course, in most cases it takes its time. As we age, we expect the process, live it, even anticipate it as Maddox mentions in “Meteorology”: “All day the skies pour, then threaten, then pour again, making good their promise of gloom.” The antidote is, of course, love, what we find in each other, in “Anniversary Coffee”:

On this side of plate glass,
the Pennsylvania sky threatens

no one, calms us with what we aren’t,
such perfect summer squall the calm

we love in morning
coffee and split croissant.

What’s wonderful about all these poems, besides the craftsmanship, is the courage. Maddox sees clearly, but does not flinch, not really. It’s a quality her poetry has always had, though the verse is not Yeats’ “stony face” either. Maddox can get downright giddy, for example, when she foregrounds a necessary leisure.

Extra Towels

are what we want,

* * * * *

And newspapers
sprawled provocatively across clean sheets.

Give us beer
for the can opener in the bathroom. . .

The sane orderliness, or her perspective, comes across most clearly when she finishes, taking us toward hope, our children.
A mature mom wants that small joy, that baby, in spades—and she wants it healthy (“Plea to an Embryo”).

Stay put.
Wait till the apron strings are cut
for you, We’ll give
you the car keys,
when you’re ready;
let you vroom-vroom across the country
in a properly-inspected, reputable car.

Maddox’s view of life, despite its sorrows, if finally comic. So, joyfully, like hope, humor is never very far away. The girl child can have pierced ears when she grows up, okay, but “your nose and navel” are “non-negotiable.” As our kids grow, we experience all the doubts, sorrow, mortality all over again, but deeper. It’s called growing up. And we are thankful for it. Our kids shape us, even as we mold them; they teach us how to see hope, how to play again. They teach us what matters—life, the very thing itself.

In a late poem “After Having Children, We Reintroduce Ourselves to Bicycles,” we get the lyricism of that play, all of us made better for it.

Bent-double,
almost sniffing asphalt,
we’ll let your spinning fins propel us;
push to pursue
what’s just beyond
sight and folly.

Behind us, our children’s tandem laughter pedals smoothly,
speeding us so easily

after happily.
The publishing house McSweeney's dedication to printed media cannot be denied. In an age when there are no shortage of articles, blog posts, Facebook status updates, and tweets, coming from disheartened readers, those feeling forsaken by the future of book publishing, McSweeney's is printing books—lots of books. It seems that while companies and administrations are pushing for access to screens in every classroom (heck, every room in every building everywhere), and options for news, media, and artful writing is flourishing via digital tablets, free apps, kickstarters, online journals, and EBooks, many people still crave access to traditional books. Books! Books that sit on shelves. Books with covers and pages. Books that a person can touch and handle. The tangible book, to hold and to cherish. It is true that even these books cannot be held forever. Over time they crumble into dust. Many books that are cherished by one owner end up at the Salvation Army or the landfill. The library at Alexandria burned, for instance. But, losing a book in this way seems different to the vulnerability of words fostered by the ephemeral nature of the digital. A website can disappear. The link is broken, and bye, bye. Nice knowing you, high-definition heir of Thomas Hardy, H.L. Hix, A.E. Houseman, or Fanny Howe…

While McSweeney's has a significant digital presence, its publishing arm seems capable of almost single handedly putting the fears of the loss of traditional books to rest.

Okay, maybe not all the fears. Readers want books, but not just any books. They want good books.

Though McSweeney's has been printing lots of books, the quality of what they have published has been disputed. With a liberal sense of imprimatur, or let it be printed, the book publishing arm has provoked debate concerning the staying power of the works selected. Now that McSweeney's has ventured forthrightly into the world of poetry, one must investigate. How developed is McSweeney's taste? What is hype, and what has the potential to be serious literature?

In 2007, McSweeney's took its first chance on poetry, publishing 100 poems by fifty poets in a collection titled, The McSweeney's Book of Poets Picking Poets. The book functions on an interesting concept: a poet picks a poem of her or his own, pairing it with a poem by another poet. That poet, in turn, picks a poem of her or his own to pair with another, and so on. Charles Simic, John Ashbery, C.D. Wright, and many
wonderful contemporary poets participated. It was nifty way of compiling an anthology, yet it was four more years before McSweeney’s took the real poetry plunge, beginning its poetry book series. At present, the series stands at six volumes of original poetry, and three anthologies.

x (2013) by Dan Chelotti, a first book by its author, is one of those books in the McSweeney’s series. x stands out on the shelf. The first printing is a hardcover without a dust jacket, and the look, the size of it, seems different from volumes of poetry available from other houses. There is a trendy, hipster-like, aesthetic. Jill Singer writing for PrintMag.com in 2007 called McSweeney’s style, “self-contained, indie Victorian.” That description seems apt, even if the cover of x evokes more of a 1960s advertising man vibe, and less of a Queen Victoria or Lord Shaftesbury effect.

If the physical design of the book doesn’t catch your attention, the most noticeable detail might be the blurb on the back cover. It’s not from a poet or a critic, but a novelist! Name recognition goes to Gary Shteyngart who recently modeled Google Glass for The New Yorker, and who has published well received novels (and presently is making the book circuit rounds with his newly written memoir). Of Chelotti’s book, or at least of Chelotti himself, Shteyngart states, “O Madonna mia! This poetry it makes me to laugh! Dan Chelotti, I heart you!”

Rather than assuring the reader of the quality of the book, the publisher’s choice of putting Shteyngart’s statement in larger font than the other blurbs (those poets who peculiarly all have connections to Chelotti’s graduate program at University of Massachusetts, Amherst), might raise an eyebrow or two, especially amongst those sticklers for scholastic insight and not propaganda. One might reason, that while Shteyngart’s work has been well accepted, what does he know about poetry? Choosing Shteyngart seems easy fodder for those critics at zines such as n+1 and The New Republic that have criticized McSweeney’s for publishing works that are too sentimental, and more or less, trying to evoke the transcendent out of inferior efforts.

This means that just because Chelotti’s book is published by McSweeney’s, and just because it features, rather prominently, a quote by a novelist, instead of a poet or critic, a reader with a sense of McSweeney’s reputation and an academic background, might well be suspicious of the book’s contents. This distrust comes without reading a single line of the contents.

In this way, the book creates a conundrum postmodern in nature: if a work is accessible and fun, essentially hype-worthy, is it by nature trivial? In other words, can it be fun to read and also worthwhile? This relates somewhat to the primary book review question: Should a reader check it out?

Is it flimflam or is it sublime?

To remove any suspense, yes, absolutely: check out x. It is fun
to read, and it is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in reading first books. Along with reading important poetry reviews, first books are essential to discovering the state of poetry today.

But back to this most important question dealing with accessibility versus triviality. Poets who have broad audience appeal receive a lot of attention. Their students love them. Their colleagues praise them. They get to appear with Garrison Keillor. They get to be U.S. Poet Laureate. One could go on.

Poets formal, classical, and perhaps, obscure, tend to have a lesser audience.

It is not difficult to conclude that Chelotti is of the first camp. Lots of people might end up liking his books for many years to come. But is it possible to heart a writer, as Shteyngart puts it, while still accessing the values and flaws of her or his book?

After multiple readings of x, one comes to appreciate Chelotti’s mature sense of observations comic and irregular. A lot of the poems in x start with a significant moment or situation, then trip merrily along, noting instances of burlesque and jest, to no grand conclusion—the object apparently to point out that significance appears in what is often insignificant. Other times, Chelotti reveals gloom only to conclude that there is not so much gloom after all. Many of these poems are riddled with issues and questions that reach religious significance, yet theological debate is dropped quickly. Solutions to problems of the soul are found in the natural world (as with an omen from a bird) or the constant grind of contemporary life and its technologies (for instance, a food court or a fax machine).

Furthermore, reconciling the significance in some of these poems is challenging. For example, in “The Man in Me,” one might wonder, what is the connection between the “little Pavarotti” inside the soul of the speaker and the speaker as she or he reads about baseball on the internet?

I have a little Pavarotti inside me.
Noticed him while I was brushing
my teeth this evening.
Noticed how I pull apart
my heart’s true desires
to spite him.
This was upsetting.
What is the matter
with the world? I ask,
and know the question
itself is false. The little Pavarotti
smoking anisette cigars in my soul
gestures and says, Don't worry, kiddo.
No one really gives a shit
anyway. And because
for a moment there
is nothing more truthful at hand,
I do not enjoy reading
about baseball on the internet.

Imagining a little Pavarotti smoking anisette cigars in a person’s soul is strikingly affecting, and fun. Yet, a question as serious as what is wrong with the world is both, false, as Chelotti puts it, and the kind of question that one might agree, no one gives a shit about (though there are likely very many people actually giving a shit out there. Maybe only poets have grown so jaded that they don’t give a shit?). The real question becomes, what does a statement like not enjoying reading about baseball on the internet add to this poem? It may be true, but what does it add? It is not as affecting or as fun as a little Pavarotti, so why not stop with no one really gives a shit about the world?

It might be fashionable in certain circles to denigrate a writer (especially a new one) for reveling in pop culture references, Chelotti’s choices (and he has many), such as the cult classic, Legend, are often a pleasure to discover. In the 1985 film, Legend, Tim Curry appears as The Lord of the Darkness. In x, Curry is mentioned in the poem, “Hell.” Legend, a fairy-tale mash up so deadly serious it becomes comical, falls into the category of movies that are so bad that they become in some unintended way, good. In Chelotti’s poem, the Lord of Darkness joins the motif of darkness, wishing to “consume everything.” Unfortunately, pop culture references sometimes consume the reader, causing unsought for connections. Curry, one might note, also makes an appearance in the film The Shadow (1994), starring Alec Baldwin, based on the old radio plays. The Shadow is kindred spirit to Legend because it is another film so bad that it is good. So Chelotti’s readers might find themselves wishing that Chelotti mention Curry again in “Hell,” (or another poem) this time with a reference to The Shadow. A shadow is, by the way, another form of darkness. And why not mention Alec Baldwin! He’s great. He should be in a poem too. You see, these dialogs devolve very quickly.

The problem with pop culture references extends to current technologies. They don’t resonate stably. This occurs in the poem, “Idée Fixe,” when “a distant blast from a turbine/ begins like a fax/ from God.” When is the last time anybody heard a fax? Ten years ago, the simile might have sounded truer than it does today. As of now, you might as well say that deity was in the words of traffic control as it whistled over the speaker like a telegram carrier at the front door on Armistice Day…

There is no denying, however, that the poems in x are witty, and the speakers therein demonstrate a strong sense of irony. Still there is nothing overtly rigid or fatal in these lines. This might be a fault, but perhaps readers do not need more existential direness. They need more humor. Yet comedy in Chelotti’s future works might be improved by
tightening the skits, and by having fewer poems wherein subjects fall on the false sword. For one gets the sense the author is strategizing to avoid deliberate or direct analysis. In other words, when Chelotti changes stride, one can only wonder where the initial direction would have led. It is impossible to say: mundanity, mediocrity, manslaughter? Or perhaps, even greater meaningfulness.

To these ends, might Chelotti grow bolder?

Just as it seems hasty to form prejudice against the author’s writing based on his publisher or the blurb chosen for the back cover, it seems too swift a judgment to accuse the poems in his book as too whimsical or bordering on shtick. It also appears to be a rushed reaction to worry that Chelotti is preoccupied with misdirecting the reader in an effort to surprise her or him with poems that end unpredictably and therefore with greater gravity. Because maybe Chelotti is showing us something significant about the way one finds meaning. The unforeseen changes in direction. The lack of consistency in life. The nature of omens in a world absent of crystal balls. The counterargument must be that nothing of consequence is lost in an about-face in subject matter. So what if there are fluctuations? Maybe there is a relationship that only the idiom chosen can render and decide. Maybe too much attention to the midstream obscures the entry and emptying points. Does it not signify inner debate and the randomness thereof?

Furthermore, does the poem work?

Much of what Chelotti does in x is working. He too is at an entry point: that of a career. It is perhaps more difficult to review the work of such a poet, a young poet, rather than a poet nearing the end. Naturally there are many variables looking forward and less fixed, factual information. Enthusiasm or negativity, as these are issues of the heart, must be tempered. x, the title of the book, is also the title of the final poem in it. If it is an example of Chelotti’s future as a poet, it seems to be leaning into strong territory. In it, he writes, “I look for God, scratch your grave with thumbnail,/ and there is another cave to paint.” With a debut as good as x, whatever cave Chelotti chooses will be of interest. It also appears that if McSweeney’s poetry series keeps giving poetry readers titles by writers like Chelotti, the publishing house should be able to provide attention-grabbing books for years to come.
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Most recently, she has received a grant from the Danish Art's Council to translate several modern Danish plays from Danish to English. Her poems have received honorable in The Emily Dickinson Award for Poetry many years ago, and have appeared in the anthology “The Write Stuff” and most recently in “Ardent: A Journal of Poetry and Art,” “Nite Writers International Literary Arts Journal,” “Convergence” and “Eye on Life Magazine.”


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