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“Taking the Risk Out of Poetry”
Approx. 2,250 Words

Taking the Risk Out of Poetry

Godine Chapbook Series IV

Collections of poems by Raymond Oliver, Charles O. Hartman, William Logan, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, and Ira Sadoff
Published by David R. Godine, Publisher

In his essay “Tact and the Poet’s Force,” W. D. Snodgrass lists ways in which a poet may say something worth hearing:

First, he might have a new idea.

Second, he may have a new set of details and facts structured within old ideas.

Third, he may have a new style; that is, he may have a way of talking which symbolizes a new and different person.

Now these criteria are certainly fair, though humbling for any serious writer, if not outright daunting. Of course, it may be that William Stafford is correct in asserting that applying such standards is not the poet’s job, but the editor’s and the reader’s. If so, we shouldn’t condemn the authors of mediocre, even bad, verse for writing it. The blame belongs, instead, to the publishers who turn such writing into books.

But what of David R. Godine? Well, we can offer the excuse that the publisher seems to specialize in seeing minor books of poetry into print. But, in past series, Godine seemed fond of taking risks on writers who fulfilled one or more of Snodgrass' criteria, at least minimally. How could Godine's taste fail so badly this time?

One can only guess at the answer, but — what the hell — here's my guess. From book to book in the new Godine series we find three common qualities: first, an overriding concern for technical correctness, whether it's lavished on lockstep couplets or Southern California streetwise free verse; second, a fondness for rhetorically pumped-up, but finally blurred and often plain sloppy, metaphors and symbols; and finally, a general refusal to admit flesh and blood issues into the work, in favor of vague, slantwise intellectualizing and distance emotions. What all this adds up to, I'm afraid, is that Godine decided to play it safe this time. Perhaps having taken a beating in the marketplace before, the publisher chose books of verse so self-consciously artful that they *seem* to have value, *seem* to have substance, without the risk of putting forth their values and concerns in clear language.

Raymond Oliver is the most resolutely conformist writer in this series, but at least he understands what he is doing. Here's the initial verse from his book, *Entries*:

Discourse on Method

Not to write poems, but to state,
Like truth, the figures of my thought,
The icons that illuminate
My book of hours; to define,
With candid artifice, each line,
Each tangent, till what I have wrought
Stands clear; to fix in words my essence,

Which is the gist of all I know,
Against the subtle deliquescence
Of time—I have no more to show.
These are the motives of my soul,
The parts, to which conforms the whole.

In not writing poems he certainly succeeds. The verse above is typical of Oliver’s method, and, like the rest of his “thought,” contains not one new idea. There are not even the quirky, individualistic kinds of details that can often save such studied writing. And I think it’s clear just why we don’t find real life here: after all, Oliver complains about the poet who lets experience “bend his forms / At his own pleasure.” Any experience Oliver can’t pour into his ready-made forms is verboten; unfortunately, this aesthetic choice leaves us no reason to read his work — unless it’s the prissy pleasure some readers derive from rhetorical cleverness.

Charles O. Hartman, in *The Pigfoot Rebellion*, is also clever — though he risks free verse, which puts his cleverness to the test. He always flunks. Here’s a typical stanza, from “A Day Toward the End of Winter”:

One waits in the cold and thinks,
Waiting must end;
The bus must come, or love, the equinox.
And love or bus or equinox may come
In fact:
Not through machina of desire.

This is standard Hartman, judging by this book: trivia pumped up by wordplay. His instinct is to reach for a tone of voice at once detached and glib, which produces some silly metaphors: a python becomes “a great argyle sock,” “cows (till they’re drawn & quartered) / are big sacks of darkness,” “the pillow is like a ballistics box.”

Hartman’s restless cleverness and lack of real ideas leads him to try his hand at everything, so he treats us to a creaky “Metric Exercise,” a barefaced imitation of Ted Hughes called “The Knife’s Blade,” and these sorry lines from “Larry & Me,” in which he tries to crossbreed cummings and Bukowski:

we
called her
Loud but that was
never true she went off to
Nigeria one year & sent us
each a carved
mask two
different but
so much the same & both so very
neat in front with shiny black
paint &
red paint &
yellow paint . . .

This goes on and on and on. Elsewhere, Hartman slops the page with this sort of punk-rock, wordy mania:

Keeper key-clanks tut-tuts captives
chides: noiseless nasty children
keep kindness: chides keeper
bonecat bares crunchbone at gibbered bird

This goes on for twenty-two lines!

This blind lurching from style to style is the kind of thing one often finds in the work of very young writers — undergraduates in particular. That we find it in a book of poems by a thirty-three-year-old author of a fine book of criticism (*Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody*) is distressing.

William Logan’s *Sad-Faced Men* collects poems that have the virtue of seeming necessary to the poet, though the life they portray is attenuated by a studied ambiguity. This is surrealism brought to heel, made “respectable” by promising profundity while delivering nothing but carefully varnished surfaces. Take “Observing Whales Through Binoculars”:

Fountains in a gray field,
Whales spout off the rough beach. A gray sky
Meets the gray sea in a vague horizontal.
A black flipper scythes the water,

Beneath the gulls scattered
Through scarred lenses. No matter that
The wind registers upon a ruptured sea.
The ear records a near soundless

Tableau: only movements controlled
By the elements they move forth among.
Three blue figures watch from the white sand
And corn grass wavering

In the wavering air. Without binoculars,
We are diminished forms, figures
In a figurative scape. An orange-and-black dragger
Cuts through the short waves. The sky is an irruption

Of glamour into the material world.
We do not need language
To demonstrate the whales making their way north.
They are absorbed by their blue observers.

Any reader who doesn’t feel the hand of John Ashbery in these lines is not paying attention. The problem is, Logan doesn’t do it as well. The poem above is typical in the way it blurs experience with its language, so that finally the whales are not whales, the observers not observers, but

“figures / In a figurative scape.” And everything in *Sad-Faced Men* comes to us this way — hand-me-down ideas in hand-me-down language.

Reading Logan’s poems, the suspicion arises that he *knows* what is happening in his language but feels powerless to correct it. He’s writing because he can, not because he must.

Gjertrud Schnackenberg, whose *Portraits and Elegies* unfortunately and awkwardly clanks along in its formalistic armor, is another talented writer. Her virtue over Logan and Oliver is that she insists on letting her life in. No reader can help but be moved by her elegy for her father, even if it is called “Laughing With One Eye.” But why in the world would a writer lock herself into a formal straightjacket with such powerful emotions to tap? Even when trying to render a dream, Schnackenberg insists on the baldest rhymes:

Death makes of your abandoned face
A secret house an empty place
And I come back wanting that much
To ask you to come back I touch

The door where are you it’s so black
The taste of smoke is smoke I back
Away when creeping lines of fire
Appear and travel faster higher

Where are you beneath the floors
God turns the gas jets up and roars
The way flames roar and I should run
And blackness burning like the sun

All empty underneath my hair
I start to chuckle where oh where
My brimming eyes stupid and bland
My grin extending past my hand

This is simply embarrassing. Reading it, who can help but think that had she not saddled herself with this silly rhyme scheme Schnackenberg might have made us dream her dream with her?

However, there remains the very real and persistent fact of Schnackenberg’s verbal skill, emerging in flashes of perfected phrasing, and on occasion, whole passages of powerful verse — as in “The Paperweight”:

The scene within the paperweight is calm,
A small white house, a laughing man and wife,
Deep snow. I turn it over in my palm
And watch it snowing in another life,

Another world, and from this scene learn what
It is to stand apart: she serves him tea
Once and forever, dressed from head to foot
As she is always dressed. In this toy, history

Comes down in the dark like snow, and we
Wonder if her single deed tells much
Or little of the way she loves, and whether he
Sees shadows in the sky. Beyond our touch,

Beyond our lives, they laugh, and drink their tea.
We look at them just as the winter night
With its vast empty spaces bends to see
Our isolated little world of light,

Covered with snow, and snow in clouds above it,
And drifts and swirls too deep to understand.
Still, I must try to think a little of it,
With so much winter in my head and hand.

The poet’s step is surer here, I think, than anywhere else in the book, and with the single exception of “vast empty spaces” she is able to speak freshly, clearly, with just the right balance of natural-seeming metaphor and studied tone of voice.

The final volume in this series, Ira Sadoff’s *A Northern Calendar*, I have left to last because it is both mediocre and the best *whole book* of the group. Sadoff is the author of two previous volumes, *Settling Down* and *Palm Reading in Winter*, both of which presented poems of a familiar stripe: soft-bodied free verse with quasi-surreal accoutrements, offering the small pleasures that small skills can produce. Sadoff is a minor writer of the “Gee, let’s take this really neat idea and see if we can’t make a poem out of it” school, which includes such luminaries as Donald Justice, Greg Kuzma, Marilyn Hacker, and Mark Strand.

“The lighthouse as an image / of loneliness has its limits,” one Sadoff poem begins. “Can you miss a place you’ve never been?” he asks, and goes on to fantasize a Sweden he admits he’s never been to. “Today I did nothing,” he begins elsewhere, adding later: “I’m not proud of this, / I’m not proud of anything.” And in a poem called “The Subject Matter,” he begins: “How elusive — what we want / to speak of. . . .” All of these quotations have at least two things in common: a bland verbal texture and a palpable search for something — *anything* — to fill up a page. Sadoff is a pro and writes because he’s a writer, whether or not he has anything to say. No great sin, I think, but that is the most frustrating thing about this book.

On the other hand, daydreaming one’s way into and out of poems can produce some pleasant reading. We get it from Sadoff in poems like “Early April Morning: Fairfield, Maine”:

In our house it’s still dark,
the shapes of furniture indistinct,
but my attention drifts out the window,
I’m vaguely happy keeping vigil at the stove.

One moment the sun is shining,
the next a wet snow saturates the hills.

Dark clouds set the pack of dogs barking,
the cows start their slow ride to the barn.

Every morning, the same quick change.
I'm daydreaming of the boy shoveling manure
from the steaming barn, and my wife appears
half-dazed in her robe, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

She's been dreaming of the future: we're
living in two different countries, and in between
there's a letter lost on the surface
of the ocean. Who knows what it contains?

While we wonder what this means, the boy's
been driven off to school, the chained-up
dogs whine in his absence, and the snow's left
such a small impression: a slick, wet road.

This is familiar; it happens to most of us all the time. On mornings such as those described in this poem, my wife tells me I'm "spacey." I like finding out that people get spacey in Maine, too. Unfortunately, spacey is as high (or as low) as Sadoff seems able to go. In flat, unremarkable language, he tells us about unremarkable thoughts that drift in and out of his head.

Now the curious thing about all this is that Sadoff's is the best book of the series. Curious? It's downright obscene. Ultimately, the only virtue that saves *A Northern Calendar* is its consistency: we know Sadoff means to put down the words he puts down. That his flat-voiced, dreamy-eyed, not-so-interesting persona is firmly under his control. There's a certain satisfaction in watching him bring it off over and over, like Agatha Christie or Ken Follett — and I'm sure there are readers who will find him congenial enough, poetry being what it is these days.

No one, of course, wants to see any publisher stop publishing poetry. But the least we should expect, as readers, from publishers like Godine is poetry that tells us something worth hearing. Such poetry is never safe, never simply an exercise in rhetoric. We can only hope that Godine's next series will return to and extend the values that have been implicit in their previous year's selections.