

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/2

Review by Pam Rosenblatt

the Ed Galing Propaganda Press Series

Diner (Propaganda Press, Alternating Current, P.O. Box 398058, Cambridge, MA 02139) alt-current.com

By Ed Galing

Bargain Basement and other selected poems (Propaganda Press, Alternating Current, P.O. Box 398058, Cambridge, MA 02139) alt-current.com

By Ed Galing

Out On A Limb (Propaganda Press, Alternating Current, P.O. Box 398058, Cambridge, MA 02139) alt-current.com

By Ed Galing

Shadows on the Wall (Propaganda Press, Alternating Current, P.O. Box 398058, Cambridge, MA 02139) alt-current.com

By Ed Galing

Chasing The World never catching up (Propaganda Press, Alternating Current, P.O. Box 398058, Cambridge, MA 02139) alt-current.com

By Ed Galing

Five of Ed Galing chapbooks have been reprinted by Propaganda Press in 2008: Diner (Peerless Press, 1999), Bargain Basement (Peerless Press, 2001), Out On A Limb (Peerless Press, 2002), and Shadows on the Wall (Peerless Press, 2006) and Chasing The World never catching up (Propaganda Press, 2008).

In each of these chapbooks, Ed Galing reveals poetry that is down-to-earth, concrete, and filled with wit. The typical reader probably thinks he can create poems just as wonderful as Galing writes. But, most likely, the

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reader turned poet is wrong. Galing's poetry isn't easy to recreate. Galing makes everything he writes look easy. Even the designs of his five chapbooks are plain and simple: 8 ½" x 11" standard white paper with a muted colored covers folded in half and held together with two regular sized staples along with no tables of contents pages or page numbers. Even the chapbooks' titles are down to earth. Each title is developed from a poem within each of the chapbook, except for *Chasing The World never catching up*, a collection of poems first published by Spare Change. The titles' simplicity make the reader wonder why Galing has chosen these particular titles, these particular poems. While *Chasing The World never catching up*, is a more complicated title to go with a more difficult read, *Shadows on the Wall* really has some controversial, difficult poems. Yet, Galing is an ordinary, no-show-off type of person. What you read is what you get. Or is it?

In life, Ed Galing is not your everyday type of guy writer, though he writes about life's everyday happenings and progressions. He is a renowned 91 year old poet who was Poet Laureate of Hatboro, Pennsylvania in 1978; was nominated for the Pushcart Prize twice; has written over 23 books; published his works in over 400 magazines including *RATTLE*, *POESY*, *MAIN STREET*, *QUERCUS*, and *IBBETSON STREET*. He loves to play the harmonica and enjoys dining out, especially at diners. He was married for over sixty years, and has two sons, two grandchildren, and a great-grandchild.

In the chapbooks, Galing discusses things like diners, diner employees and customers who frequent diners, Pennsylvania, poverty, homelessness, home, mental illness, the Jewish holocaust, Jewish lifestyles and customs, old age and it's implications, the 'simple' life, music and musicians and burlesque, dancing, the Twin Towers bombing, and family.

A lot of different themes run throughout Galing's chapbooks, but the one we will write about today is Galing's "home", as in where home is, and how he keeps finding home in the various places he frequents. Many of the poems seem to be autobiographical.

In *Diner*, Galing writes about "diners, and those who work them", the

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“restrooms”, the “counter work”, the “cashier”, “customer blues”, and a “diner”. After reading these poems, the reader gets the sense that diners are a friendly, surrogate family world to the speaker. Galing mentions the word “home” in “diner”, which is the title poem of this chapbook, and the reader understands that the diner is a place where the speaker feels comfortable enough to call “home”, a place where he has laid down roots, in a sense.

diner

it's only a diner.
i eat there a lot.
people are nice here...
friendly...
waitresses smile
and make you feel
at home...
it's only a diner...
yeah... but it's more than
that...
it's the place where
i feel like i'm with a family
feel less lonely
feel happier
knowing that other people
eating in their own little
booths
feel the same way too...
it's only a diner...
but the men and women who
work here spend almost all their
lives
doing a hard day's work and night's work
and some of them call it
home, too...
just the way i do...
it's only a diner...
it's only a diner...

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Through simple description, sentence structure, word usage, and repetition, Galing has conveyed his philosophy that home isn't necessarily found in a square building structure with four walls, windows, a front door, a doorbell, and green lawn in the suburbs, but it is simply where you feel like you fit in, as Galing writes, "it's the place where/i feel like i'm with a family/feel less lonely/feel happier/knowing that other people/eating in their own little/booths/feel the same way too..."

Galing's chapbook, *Bargain Basement*, deals a lot with "home" and where home is, as can be viewed in the first poem, which is once again the chapbook's title poem, "Bargain Basement":

bargain basement

one of the best things
about Horn and Hardarts
was the way they
treated me;
like a gentleman,

even when i was down
and out, not
a nickel in my pocket...
i could always get a cup
of hot water,
and help myself
to the ketchup...
made the best tomato soup in town...

and even the napkins
were free.

In "bargain basement", again, Galing has journeyed outside the traditional view that a real house is what a person should call home. Here Galing describes a restaurant, which is in a "bargain basement", to be like "home" to the speaker who is probably homeless and receives "a cup/of hot water", "ketchup", "the best tomato soup in town" free of

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charge. The speaker says, "Horn and Hardarts/...treated me:/like a gentleman," Such a warm and friendly environment makes the speaker, who may be Galing himself, feel at "home".

Galing actually writes about a disruption in his family home life in the poem, "farewell to paradise", also found in Bargain Basement:

farewell to paradise

the day my father
left and didn't
come back
i was sixteen

i remember
walking into
a room as quiet
as a tomb,

my mother sober
faced standing near
the mantle
told me she had
news for me,

and when she told me,
i listened but
felt like dying,

and inside my heart
drummed a death song
and i watched my
mother dying too,

and i wanted to
take her in my arms
and tell her that
everything would still

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be all right,

but i didn't do it...
instead i walked out the door,
went across the street
to the small park

and it was cold and
i sat down on a bench
and i cried my

fucking eyes out

In a progressively sad and then suddenly angry tone, Galing writes about a very personal experience, an experience that had a traumatic affect on him. He was so distraught that he "...sat down on a bench/and (he) cried (his)//fucking eyes out" His once perfect family structure had broken. In "farewell to paradise", Galing's speaker says goodbye to the home life he once knew.

Through lower case the entire poem, including the first person, "i", Galing has gently eased the reader into his life, though the ending line, "fucking eyes out" reveals

the speaker is not happy. Galing tells the reader things as they are. Simply put. No jargon attached. And it's a relief for the reader to understand concretely where the poet is coming from.

Galing reveals more about his early home years in "GOOD DAYS AND BAD":

GOOD DAYS AND BAD

we had our good days
and our
bad days
just like
anyone else...

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people think when
you live in
south philly
you're bound to
be different
cause maybe you
don't have a
lot of money
and you live in
a row house
in a small
street

and sometimes
the garbage
and rubbish
is all mixed up
and scattered
everywhere
and the cars get
snowed in so
deep in the
winter
sometimes you're
wishing you were a
million miles away...
but hey,
when you live in
south philly
you're special

Obviously, Galing's speaker identifies "south philly" with the place where Galing himself lived, the place where "we had our good days/and our/bad days". Galing seems to write autobiographically about his poverty as a child living in South Philadelphia, as when the speaker explains, "cause maybe you/don't have a/lot of money/and you live in/a row house/in a small/street/and sometimes/the garbage/and rubbish/is all mixed up/and scattered/everywhere".

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The speaker has been subjected to South Philly's poverty, which isn't such a pleasant memory, but Galing ends the poem on a positive note, writing that "when you live in/south philly/you're special". The speaker may have lived in the impoverished city of South Philly, but he knew it was his home, the place where he had roots.

In Galing's "FAREWELL, SOUTH PHILLY", the speaker again autobiographically talks about his mother. The whole poem is about "home" and identity, and about how

...These are the real south Philadelphians...

my mother was one of those.
long after I had left the old neighborhood
to get married
she remained behind
living poor in the third floor front apartment
where I had left her

taking care of the outside marble steps,
sweeping the street;
always cheerful and happy,
hardly any money, being on welfare.
she loved her surroundings at fourth and

Tasker,
and always looked out the third floor window
waiting for my return visit...

Galing writes how the speaker's mother has found "home", especially revealed

when he describes her "taking care of the outside marble steps,/sweeping
the street,/

always cheerful and happy, hardly any money, being on welfare./she

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loved her surroundings at fourth and Tasker,..." She had found permanence, while Galing's speaker has left this solid place for somewhere else. The speaker returns to the building site after a long time, long after his mother's death. The speaker admits, "And I never cried so long, or so hard, in all my life." The speaker has closure on the place where he was raised, where his mother was "at the window where my mother used to wave to me so many times/when I returned to see her.../I could swear that I saw her face looking down/at me, now, and waving,/and suddenly I smiled and waved back,/and whispered, goodbye, Mom..." Again, Galing has revealed a sense of "home" in Bargain Basement. Although his mother has died, the speaker still has a sense of belonging to a place which holds many memories for him.

Galing writes about "home" quite often in the five chapbooks mentioned in this review. But the strongest sense of "home" and permanence that Galing conveys is in "Because You Asked" in *Chasing The World* never catching up when writing about his relationship with his wife:

Because You Asked

For my wife, R.I.P.

are we dead?
she asks me

no, i say
we are still
alive,

but we are
old, she says,
we have to die

some day, i tell
her gently,
not yet...

but when you're

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old you die
my wife says,

don't you know that?
we all die, i agree,
but even the very young
die,
the rich die,
the poor die,
the homeless die,
the soldiers die, too;
unless an accident happens
when we will die,
let's not rush it,
it will come soon enough...
do we live here?
she ask again, as
if she forgot we have
lived in our home for
fifty years,
of course we live here,
i reassure her softly,
you and me... we live here,
where are our children?
she wants to know
they have long gone away,
i reply,
it's just you and me.
we hug each other
eighty-eight isn't
easy.
neither is alzheimers.

Galing has composed a wonderful poem about his wife and his kind, and gentle caring for one another. The poem flows from line to line, enjambment after enjambment. And, once again, the concept of "home" is discussed, this time Galing uses the words, "our home", to show that the speaker, Ed Galing, knows what a strength there is in having a real

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home, family, and wife, as read when he writes, "do we live here?/she asks again, as/if she forgot we have/lived in our home for fifty years/of course we live here, i reassure her softly,/you and me...we live here,..."

Galing has written about the different stages and kinds of "homes" he as speaker

has encountered throughout his life, ranging from diners to bargain basements to south philly to the home his mother and he lived in during his early years to the home he and his wife raised their family in.

Diner, Bargain Basement , Out On A Limb, and Shadows on the Wall , and Chasing The World never catching up all poetically describe Galing's journey to find "home" whenever and wherever he can.

These short and sweet chapbooks are excellent reads for people who want a down-to-earth, gentle, often humorous, and sometimes eye-opening as well as mind-opening, reading experience.

Hopefully, these chapbooks will make the permanent move to a shelf in your bookcase.

Pam Rosenblatt/ Ibbetson Update