

No Time For Death By Harris Gardner
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Review by Dennis Daly

“Oh death, where is thy sting?” 1 Corinthians had it right. So does Harris Gardner in his affecting affirmation of life, fittingly entitled *No Time for Death*. Slicing through humanity’s Gordian knot of denial, Gardner confronts mortality with memory and poetic craft, assisted by a large dose of wit. His stratagems are nothing if not down-to-earth and sensible. The collection’s three subtitles convey Gardner’s personified logic: *An Argument with Time, Contemplating Mortality Instead of My Navel, and Negotiating for an Afterlife*.

The third poem in this collection, the title poem *No Time for Death*, sets the tone. Gardner lays out the human condition earnestly, both what we know and what we don’t know. Like most of us the poet exhibits frustration at the inexorable nature of things. His sober and practical take on time leads to spurts of anger as he plots his possibilities of escape or delay. Although the poet’s impassioned will may not triumph in walking-around reality, it does assert itself in this poem. Here’s a bit of Gardner’s poetic discontent,

*When we shatter the fragile hours,
Nothing remains in the bone-man’s sack.
We cannot choose to refuse the invitation.
We can only walk the walk on the streets of the dead.
We can offer up prayers for life on some prefab plane
Where the CFO keeps the brittle book of our days.*

*Maybe the weights will balance in our favor.
Maybe we shall come back to clean up loose ends.
Maybe the sentence gets upended, gets suspended.
Seven, six, five, four, three, two—
Will you stop for one forsaken minute!*

In his poem entitled *Inconvenient Baggage* Gardiner delves into the essence of time, a phenomenon that won’t quit. Time’s didacticism stamps its emblems on even new beginnings (or, as Gardner describes them, bruised suitcases). The present only enables momentary pauses before the past lurches ahead toward a future of flawed promise or false prophecies. The poet details the problem in his opening stanzas,

*The was was awhile ago.
It was not a happy was
Because no one wanted
To be taught by was. They thought
Will be, a promise, more or less.*



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*Was was neglected, abused.
First drafts, tomes, and bridges
Fueled bonfires. Fuming was for naught.
These postcards for posterity
Were a banquet for flames.*

Rather than overcoming poverty the poet's persona confronts it, stares it down and finds another way to accomplish what must be accomplished. Until the Last Recorded Dime, Gardner's impressive villanelle variation, guides the reader through the process of finding worth and parenting creation out of the depths of impoverishment. The lines meld together perfectly as a good villanelle should. The rhyme and repetition of "dime" and "time" acts as the poem's insistent knell that offers hope for hard work. Consider this stoic and elevating conclusion,

*You can't stop the hands, the clock tolls the chime,
So you grin and concoct a mask of cheer
When you have been broke a very long time.*

*Your efforts ease you into the sublime.
You move to the beat only you can hear.
You adapt when you live from dime to dime.*

*Each day you wash away more of the grime.
Your mind is full, but your focus is clear.
You manage to manage after a time.
No more holding your breath from dime to dime.*

Expanding the MRI medical procedure to a Hollywood movie production, and then even further to a metaphoric take on man's mortality makes absolute sense to me (since I had one of those damn things myself). Gardner's poem *So You Want to Be in Films* does this and does it well. Human powerlessness in the face of mortality takes center stage in this performance. The culprit, a heart murmur, cannot be separated from the protagonist, their relationship being one of utter dependency. Luckily for the poet's persona, the short-term prognosis requires no drastic action. Long term it's another story, as it is for all breathing creatures. As the street corner prophet proclaims, "the end is nigh." Here, scripted in a mechanical channel between life and death, is the heart of the poem,

*The MRI- The camera covers all
The angles: close-ups and long shots.
My heart is a ham. It performs
An unscripted dance.*

*A cocoon immerses me in Mozart's music.
A tunnel floods with light;
Still, I want to dream.*

*The technician keeps me alert.
"Breathe, exhale, hold your breath."
I am drowning in light.*

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Another well-wrought villanelle, entitled Cemetery Visit, appears late in the collection. Overcome by guilt, the narrator addresses his long dead father, a father who monopolizes his prayers. Not surprising, since many petitioners see their earthly father's face as the face of God. Procrastination, rebellion, and letting-go are the issues to be faced within the poet's art, not emotionally, but in a quasi-logical, rhythmic way. Gardner negotiates with himself and nears a conclusion,

*All our lives are merely on loan.
I rebel and demand to know why.
I write, rather than visit, to atone.*

*When grindstone struggle compels a groan,
I imagine his face in cloud framed sky.
Years have passed since we've seen our father's stone.*

*It's simple to observe that we are prone
To procrastinate when we should stop by.
I write, instead of visit, to atone.*

Gardner's dry-eyed, masterly meditations throughout this collection border on the metaphysical, that is, before stoicism intervenes. Over and over this poet's understated inventions portend a new world and a concomitant genesis of acceptance and healing. Amen. Yes, amen to that.