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Scorn Not the Chapbook

Gil Fagiani, Serfs of Psychiatry
Finishing Line Press, 2012. 32 pages; \$12,

and

Michael T. Young, Living in the Counterpoint
Finishing Line Press, 2012. 32 pages; \$12.

Review by George Held

Reading *Serfs of Psychiatry* made me think of the current GOP candidates for President—no, not because they need a shrink (who doesn't?), but because they are so white and clean and innocent of the dirty violent world Gil Fagiani depicts in his new poetry chapbook, his fifth collection. This world, which Fagiani knows from working in a Bronx "loony bin," is shaped not only by head cases, many of whom act out in feral ways, but by the anomie and spite of a demoralized staff. Even Miss Hunter, an aide who has learned the ropes of survival during 43 years in "one asylum or another," can't retire as planned, for she dies shortly after buying a Cadillac to join her mother in "Noccalulu Falls, Alabama." The "serfs" of the title thus applies to both inmates and their caregivers.

When Fagiani begins "Charges," "Betty was one of my sixty charges . . . // She tossed her baby in the furnace / when she was fourteen," his matter-of-fact tone conveys years of hardening his senses to the routine outrages he had to face at Bronx State. Of course, the speaker is a younger, innocent version of the poet, and this naïve narrator serves Fagiani well: the poems in *Serfs of Psychiatry* relate a progression from innocence to sad experience tinged with irony and sometimes humor, as when he must learn to "protect my jewels" from Yvonne's grasping hands, yet falls prey to "her hand closing in on my manhood" while he helplessly carries a stack of trays over his head.

The twenty poems here are rough-hewn in a variety of stanzas and free-verse arrangements, and they sound authentic to Fagiani's experience. The reader won't forget Betty and Miss Hunter and Yvonne and the other serfs Fagiani depicts so memorably in this chapbook.

Also recently released by Finishing Line Press is Michael T. Young's *Living in the Counterpoint*, his third poetry collection. Like *Serfs of Psychiatry*, it contains twenty poems but of a more formal nature. Young writes like a young poet in love with the sound of poetry, maybe a devotee of Wallace Stevens, but Young is not an imitator. His voice is original for being touched with tradition while being entirely contemporary. He is, believe it or not, devoted to poetic beauty, as he implies in "The Beautiful Moment of Being Lost" and states as a kind of *ars poetica* in "Slug," in which the poet observes that lowly invertebrate:

*What I noticed was his strange beauty and slow power,
and what, in me, refuses to be rushed,*

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*doing one things at a time, carefully, . . .
writing the same poem over and over,
till every word is the right word, the right word.*

Here Young shows that he knows himself and endorses his own deliberate pace, which results in his work's own "strange beauty and slow power."

Typically Young achieves beauty and power in his poems through the use of exceptionally long sentences; a Young poem often ends with a sentence effortlessly sustained over ten or more long lines and ending with a euphonic string of phrases, as in "Writ in Water": "something seen through the current of a fast stream, / its beauty seductive as the sea, or shells / lifted from the surf that has worn them smooth."

Young is also a poet of light, that word appearing about a dozen times and in almost half these poems. "Light" fuses the thematic strands of "Keeping Time," in which Young finds the beauty of light in such an unimposing structure as the Pulaski Skyway, with its "girders / bolted and tarred."

So strong and beautiful is Living in the Counterpoint that the collection as a whole has no apologies to make to most of the full-length collections, even by brand-name poets, that often contain enough filler to weaken their overall effect. Like Fagiani, Young has fashioned a memorable collection of about twenty pages, which Finishing Line Press has turned into a work of art that justifies the value of the poetry chapbook.