

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

Antisocial Network
By Timothy Gager
Redneck Press
Revere, MA
By way of Mosherville, PA
39 Pages
\$9.00

Review by Dennis Daly

Stabbing the front cover of a poetry chapbook with a butter knife, normally used to slather my toast with marmalade, is no way to start off the day. Later, as I sat in my well-padded reviewing room chanting *om-mmmmmmmmmmmmm, ommmmmmmmmmmmmm*, some anonymous soul again put this book back into my unreceptive hands and I reached for the scissors that I had hidden under the rubber mat. Another betrayal: someone had removed them.

Hours later, having, by secret techniques developed over a lifetime, reached the state of near perfect bliss, I tested myself. I took the aforementioned chapbook, turned it over to its unoffending (and blank) back cover and cracked it. I'm glad I did.

"Beep. Beep." The first poem of this book by Timothy Gager, entitled *Many Different Positions*, appears on page 38 and proves, dare I say it, you can't tell a book by its cover. At first glance the poem seems overly accessible, a surface piece that conjures up the image of a comical Chihuahua driving an automobile under the directions of a would-be driving instructor. Almost laugh-out-loud funny. But something isn't right here; beauty and love lurch off the road. Danger and possible death smile down on the scene. Here's how the poem ends,

Closing time comes quickly.

*You bark, the dog's going to kill us,
Like going over the waterfall in a barrel,
Or trapped in a theater that's on fire.*

*You never looked as lovely as when
We kiss, the car lurches onto the shoulder.*

Notice that the woman "barks," and blames the dog. Intriguing for a last poem, or in our case, dear reader, a first poem. I turn the page quickly to the penultimate piece, *Everything's Connected*. This poem exudes an interesting mixture of innocence, blueberries, and most of all eroticism. The poet does this by seemingly contrasting (lightheartedly, of course) the non-scientific Law of Attraction with its opposite, a universe of probability. Consider these lines,



Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

*All magic, illusion...
The law of Attraction
had led me to
pancakes, pie, yogurt
and last night a Blueberry ale
with fruit swirling
around like lottery balls
about to be picked*

Attraction is also a theme in About Allison. The poem deals with how we perceive others and, more importantly, how we need them to live up to our perceptions. The poet's persona wants a movie star. In fact he invents the movie. That's not what he gets. The poet says,

*I wanted a movie star, you wanted
to move back home where we
cannot take these walks,*

*and months go by
before you
call yourself an asshole,
for being out of touch,
then say, you think
of me often.*

I suspect any poet who tries to convince his audience of his cynical hard-hearted nature may in reality be an unreconstructed (albeit disappointed) romantic. Gager in his very amusing piece entitled Black Heart Candy Company makes his argument,

*My next great idea
Marketed for those
Anti-valentine's day crusaders,
The true cynics who'll
Gnaw on my little hearts,
And get me rich quick...*

In a very different piece called Unwelcomed Guest the poet confronts his addiction and its demons. He's not quite up for the fight but at least he now knows the score. He also will not back down and that is a good thing. The poet's persona details his revelations,

*you led me to drive down
a one-way the wrong way,
I blamed the Scotch,
started earlier when
it was still dusk
but then the blackness rose
up from below, I recall
I used to imagine hell's address*

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

*was somewhere between my basement
and the center of the earth
but I know now different;
Hell is something
I've ingested...*

I empathize with the image of hell geographically placed under the poet's basement. I buy the plausibility of it. I have no doubt that my hell bustles directly beneath my cellar.

A Girl In A Loft, an imagistic piece, draws a line through life and then attempts to breach that boundary with a connecting vision. One side of the line collects an eye lash, panties, an easy breeze, a young girl's cheek, and a "good morning." The other side includes a course sofa, a gritty fabric, poverty, a groan, and the phrase "shit to all that." The last sentence of the poem, "I'd like to know your name," surprises with its weight and its ability to bridge the structural gap. I really like this almost-a-painting poem.

In the poem Like Moths in the Night the poet mulls over the deaths and survivals of addicted friends. It's a serious meditation and one of the best poems in the collection. Culpability and guilt by identification enter the measures and are dealt with summarily. The poet's persona emerges ever watchful with a determination to do no harm. Here is the poem's ending,

*Tonight, the outside air is cool
I feel his noose tighten
when I breathe,
and her needle
leaving a bruise
I feel his brains*

*blown out, like mine
splattered into the universe*

*for them, why not
me? I haven't the guts.*

*I sit on a porch on a summer night
keeping the lights off
because there is nothing at all in that.*

The first poem in the book (or the last, depending on which cover you start from), Ode to Wormwood, Gager constructs as a masterwork. The lyrical tone echoes its deep and rich notes, near prophetically. The attributes of wormwood, bitterness and a concentration of real poison (think alcohol and drugs), contrast and intermix with a wonderful resiliency (think the human spirit). It is this pollution and ultimate poison that kills the addict in the ruins of his soul—a love affair of sorts. The poem begins this way,

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

*Growing on roadsides and wasted places
the wormwood braces itself against wind,
remains strong, please, there is a fierce poison
here, the water will be polluted, the
drink held in your hand, downed fast with eyes closed,
resting on the passage in the Bible...*

This is top shelf writing by a prolific and thoughtful poet. I would only humbly suggest that in the future, when he publishes his Selected Works, he takes that book's cover design in another direction.