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All Occasions, and: A Cracked River (review)

Stephen C. Behrendt

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couple in a tennis match, resonates later in the piece when Stu is away on business and the author is walking the path alone, lost in her reverie.

“I walk farther than I planned to in this world where Time seems to stand still, and when I turn, the sky has darkened. A rumble comes up, still far away, but I sprint, my heart beating fast, waiting for lightning that doesn’t come.”

Schwartz’s words describe the simple scene around her, but the walk signifies life itself, the darkening skies portend a storm, something ominous ahead. Schwartz makes her way home through giant raindrops, contemplating her husband’s return, then imagining a possible delay in his return, and finally, she thinks the unthinkable: if her husband were never to return. Her final note about walking the towpath is both elegiac and hopeful: “I vow, as my shadow lengthens into dusk, I’d still come here.”

Like the other essays in this charming book, the story that on the surface appears to be a meditation on the ritual of walking, underneath contemplates a more serious subject: the passage of bodies from one stage of life – one’s “prime” in this piece – into whatever lies beyond. Yet in spite of the challenges and vicissitudes of this couple’s shared life over four decades, Schwartz remains upbeat, her attitude imbued with the survivor’s instinct and forward-looking determination that she witnessed in her father, that she admires in her husband, that she nurtured in her children, and that she hopes for her soon-to-be-born first grandchild, whose spirit she imagines in the final essay:

“I can picture my grandchild on the tiny beach, playing with a small, blue pail left by someone. It is filled with sea shells, and she is lifting them out, one by one, as her curled toes dig into warm sand until she flings them as far as she can, assuming they will float back. And if not, she – or he – won’t care. The circles widening across the glassy surface stretching toward Mount Kearsage will be enough.”

Walt McDonald, *All Occasions*, University of Notre Dame Press  
Norbert Hirschhorn, *A Cracked River*, Slow Dancer Press

*Reviewed by Stephen C. Behrendt*

A new collection from Walt McDonald is always an occasion to celebrate. This has never been more true than with *All Occasions*, a remarkable retrospective collection that records a lifetime in poetry, from childhood through manhood, marriage, wars, children, baseball, ranching, and open heart surgery. Quite an array – quite a life, a life that presses forward with all the vigor and insight that has always characterized McDonald’s poetry. And here again, too, is that singular artistry with image and word – with the sheer music of language – that we have grown accustomed to

in previous collections like *Blessings the Body Gave* and *Where Skies Are Not Cloudy*. Listen to the ending of the Vietnam poem, “When Rockets Fell like Stars,” in which the military buddies have tried to numb war’s horror with beer, when “[n]othing beat / being drunk enough to die when bar girls screamed / and rockets fell like stars”:

Roaring tunes  
with country and western words in Saigon,  
trying to ignore all falling fire, we staggered  
back to sandbagged bunkers, daring the blare  
of sirens to kill us, swearing we didn’t care.

The more one looks and listens, the more impressive become both the complex play of McDonald’s language – its intricate rhymes and echoes – and the interplay within his constellation of imagery. Again and again in *All Occasions*, one is struck by the technical brilliance that has long distinguished McDonald’s work.

But there is far more here than just a brilliant surface. What lies beneath, within, is no less masterful, no less moving. Perhaps it is the reader’s recognition that the collection really *is* a “lifetime in poetry” that lends the particular emotional and psychological depth to the poems it contains. Each seems to illuminate and enrich all the others, so that a baseball poem like “Batting Practice at Sixty,” which appears in the volume’s first section, functions both thematically and symbolically, both as an emblem of other poems’ signs of aging and perseverance, of the toughness that ages without diminishing, and an antiphon that is answered in the fourth section (of five) by “Reading *Ecclesiastes* at Sixty.” The first loops effortlessly to include memories of practices past – practices with children, before Vietnam, before Desert Storm – of the Yankees of Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, and Whitey Ford, and of kids’ summer leagues within a sage meditation on sport, age, and maturity. The wry humor that sneaks up on us in other poems appears here, too, in lines like these:

My turn to chase somebody’s flies,  
so I trot to third and flip the padded hat,  
  
hoping for grounders, ready to scoop  
and throw out my arm across the mound  
to first.

That “out my arm” phrase nearly slips by unnoticed, but it is key to what McDonald is doing here and elsewhere, producing at once humor and pathos, playing with the rules of the game and the unsporting havoc that aging wreaks on our poor old bodies.

Indeed, *All Occasions* is filled not just with wisdom but with something more precious that has no formal name but that we might call “wiseness,” a larger quality altogether, an indwelling ethos that shapes and informs everything and that we absorb and share merely by being in its presence.

Such is the heft, for instance, of what seem at first glance to be nature poems and that suddenly turn into something very different. This opening, for example:

Slopes with elk and sheep fall below us  
 when we climb over tundra past the snow  
 onto cliffs that mean no harm to climbers  
 or even mountain goats that fall,  
 or jet aircraft that crash.

(“Search and Rescue in the Mountains”)

Like the poems about ranching, camping, and flying (whether jet fighters or attack helicopters), the nature-based poems reveal always larger issues, directing us toward the often unsuspected links among natural objects, human artifacts, and the painfully fallible intelligence that operates upon both.

In many respects, *All Occasions* (whose title comes from one of John Donne’s Christmas sermons, from 1624) is about what survives and sustains in the face of the great truth that Percy Bysshe Shelley had in mind when he wrote nearly two centuries ago, that “All things that move and breathe with toil and sound / Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell” (“Mont Blanc”). In McDonald’s artistic vision, what sustains, preserves, and ennobles is, finally, love, the astonishing restorative power of human relationships, perhaps best epitomized here by McDonald’s portrayals of his lovely gray-haired wife (in some of the finest contemporary love poems in print), his children, his old friends and military colleagues across several wars. This deep passion accounts for the explosive, haunting fury in “I Still Can’t Say the Word,” the startlingly brilliant poem on the death of a son at the hands of a drunk driver, a poem that gnaws at the consciousness long after one has read it, not just because the event is so disturbingly common today, but also because the emotional pain is made so terribly real to a reader.

This is also why poems like “Watching Parades in the Game Room,” which document the premature loss of war buddies and the dissolution of others into age and enfeeblement, carry a poignancy and power that somehow transcend the ravages of time, an effect wholly different from the mere sentimentality into which such poems so easily could – and indeed *would* – degenerate under less skillful hands. One poem in this vein, “Killing Nothing but Time,” resonates with echoes of another famous “old warriors” poem. Back in Texas, rancher, father, and neighbor once again, McDonald wears his ancestors (his Vietnam dog tags stored in the attic, he wears those of his uncle who died on Okinawa) and shares the aging ranchers’ life with “other vets back from the jungles.” Here is the conclusion:

Maybe something came back to them  
 last night, wart-faced and haunting, nothing else

on these wide plains like Vietnam. But here together  
 we're safe, brave enough in boots and Stetsons, men  
 of the sunburned eyeballs, riding high over rattlers,  
 taking turns yelling jokes and shouting with laughter,  
 twisting and creaking in saddles, killing nothing  
 but time, riding home to our wives after dark.

Here, transplanted to the plains of west Texas, is the post-war restiveness to which Tennyson's great poem, "Ulysses," spoke insightfully more than a century and a half ago, the world of the war veteran who finds a world curiously – even uncomfortably – domesticated and who has recourse to the raucous company of aging compeers who have endured great struggles, great sufferings, and lived to tell about it. In the case of *All Occasions*, the telling is profound and eloquent. This is, indeed, a book – and a life – to celebrate.

In *A Cracked River*, a different sort of collection entirely, Norbert Hirschhorn sounds some comparable notes of mature and seasoned vision. Like *All Occasions*, *A Cracked River* favors the occasional fable, the enigma, and the mediation in exploring experience and aging. While Hirschhorn is also interested in the play of language, his verbal textures are less lush, less finely detailed, and less resonant than McDonald's (with the exception of a remarkable single-sentence poem of forty-eight lines, "He Sweeps the Kitchen Floor"). Instead, he provides sharp, often strident statements and unusual visual and typographic arrangements, whose (presumably intentional) rhetorical and visual disruptions reflect deeper disruptions within the narrator's tales. These tales run the gamut from observations on marital happiness and weariness, to reflections on his Jewishness and his now dead elders, and to both the victims of the Holocaust and those who, in escaping death, could not avoid the burden of all that horror. Hence it comes as no surprise that some of the poems also speak with a curious detachment that undoubtedly reflects Hirschhorn's international scientific perspective (he is a physician and acclaimed activist for health care in Third World nations), and that several others – like "Pupil Wei-Min Answers A Riddle" take the form of Zen-like parables.

The poems in this, Hirschhorn's first book-length collection, range widely over the author's experiences – perhaps too widely, since the volume seems more a "gathering" of discrete poems than a fully articulated and tightly-integrated fabric (a weakness that is exacerbated by the publisher's decision to reproduce Hirschhorn's numbered section headings only in the table of contents and not within the body of the book itself, where it more logically needs to be). Still, there are many compelling poems, the best of which discover the common threads among the seemingly very different lives and experiences of their subjects and the poet who relates them. A good illustration comes in the final section of "Cam-

bodians Celebrate The Buddhist New Year Once Again," where the following effectively detailed scene unfolds in Phnom Penh:

Whole families glide on single bikes; children  
 clasped together like still-warm  
 slices of bread. Young women –  
 side-saddle, coal-black hair loose  
 to the waist or pinned by chrysanthemums –  
 Barely touch the thighs and shoulders of young men.

I wish I could remember the High Holy Days,  
 when daughters of Jerusalem danced barefoot in groves  
 of figs, arbors of grapes, lilies in their hair,  
 in linen robes that spun up at their ankles,  
 singing out to the young men of Nazareth,  
 of Bethlehem. They danced after the sheep  
 was slaughtered, burnt whole and offered – a sacrifice

The Bible names The Holocaust, "all consumed."

Here and elsewhere in *A Cracked River* Hirschhorn's abidingly humane vision graces a mature and philosophical poetry that gazes squarely into the inescapable trauma of modern humanity and refuses to blink.

Dan Chaon, **Among the Missing**, Ballantine

*Reviewed by Anna Leahy*

In Dan Chaon's "I Demand to Know Where You're Taking Me," the second story in his new collection, we are introduced to a woman, Cheryl, whose brother-in-law has been convicted of committing three rapes. It's possible the brother-in-law, Wendell, is innocent of the crimes, according to his brother, Tobe, and it's also possible Wendell has indeed committed six rapes. The seemingly sensational, pivotal character of Wendell, however, is absent, technically speaking, from the story. Certainly, we know some of the details of the crimes: "The assaulted women had been attacked in their homes, blindfolded, a knife pressed against their skin. The first thing the attacker did was to force the women to kneel down and lick his bare feet." But the story is not about Wendell and whether he actually committed the rapes, though that question lingers in various ways for the reader and for Cheryl. Instead of writing directly about Wendell, Chaon writes about Cheryl and the parrot who mimics the absent Wendell's voice. The story is one of deflection, and that is the literary art at which Chaon excels in *Among the Missing*, a National Book Award finalist.

Chaon, a Nebraska native, now lives in Cleveland Heights and teaches at Oberlin College. His first collection of stories, *Fitting Ends*, appeared in