

Love the Twenty-First Century” are quickly dismissed, the sort of thing a music critic would unhesitatingly call album filler. “Here” and “The Delirium Waltz” are interesting technically (the latter is a variation on the pantoum) but thin on substance.

That said, there are poems here that have to be ranked among Strand’s very best. One of these is “The Philosopher’s Conquest,” an exquisite villanelle based on Giorgio de Chirico’s 1914 painting of the same name. Strand deftly evokes De Chirico’s troubling cityscape, but he also offers context and interpretation: “Somewhere to the south a Duke is slain, / A war is won. Here, it is too late. / This melancholy moment will remain.” “Morning, Noon, and Night” is one of Strand’s most densely woven poems, its grand cadences and rich imagery as haunting as the sense of failure dogging its speaker, who dreams of drifting “forgotten / On a midnight sea where every thousand years a ship is sighted, or a swan, / Or a drowned swimmer whose imagination has outlived his fate, and who swims / To prove, to no one in particular, how false his life had been.” A half dozen or so poems are equally remarkable, including “In Memory of Joseph Brodsky,” “Five Dogs,” “A Suite of Appearances,” and “The Next Time.”

That last-mentioned poem declares that “Life should be more / Than the body’s weight working itself from room to room.” One thing Strand argues in *The Weather of Words*, his first collection of literary essays, is that poetry is essential to a full, meaningful life. Consider this passage from his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1991*:

The way poetry has of setting our internal house in order, of formalizing emotion difficult to articulate, is one of the reasons we still depend on it in moments of crisis and during those times when it is important that we know, in so many words, what we are going through . . . Without poetry, we would have either silence or banality, the former leaving us to our own inadequate devices for experiencing illumination, the latter cheapening with generalization what we wished to have for ourselves alone, turning our experience into impoverishment, our sense of ourselves into embarrassment.

And this from “On Becoming a Poet”:

A poem is a place where the conditions of beyondness and withinness are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be. It allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living. Even more paradoxically, poetry permits us to live in ourselves as if we were just out of reach of ourselves.

Strand made his reputation early, with poems evoking paranoid fantasies and horrifying dream-visions; who could have foreseen him evolving into such a romantic? Yet it is easy to read his recent work, including much

of the best of *Blizzard of One*, in terms of these ideas. He’s arguably becoming a more Stevensian poet, and his essays likewise often echo Stevens; it should be said, however, that Strand is by far the better prose writer.

A winning aspect of *The Weather of Words* is its sense of humor. In addition to the wit often on display in the essays, there are wry “creative” pieces – chief among them “Workshop Miracle,” a miniature drama satirizing university creative writing classes. The book offers something rare: meditations on poetry that are thoughtful and authoritative, but also highly *engaging*.

Mixing Cement.

Peter Tomassi.

Thunder Rain Publishing, Louisiana, 2000.

62 pages. \$11.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Zoë Francesca

This gritty, sweet first book divides into four sections: “Cement,” “Sand,” “Water,” “Lime.” In them, a father teaches his son masonry, building humble foundations we take for granted:

Rows of gray, dark gray, gray,
Mortar, block, mortar, block, mortar . . .

A subsequent poem articulates accomplishments:

He framed in boxes: patios, front porches, stone planters.
It was great, he would say, clutching a trowel
As Zeus might have . . .

I expected at least one poem to explore the symbolic qualities or functions of cement, sand, water and lime – a sort of “Masonry 101.” Instead, I was left to wonder whether the poems in each section correlated more to the properties of Lime than to other unifying factors. Reading on, however, my attention was taken by the masonry metaphor itself. What begins as “The Trade” in the first section becomes “The Art” in the last. The Art is clearly writing. The poems give the reader a sense that the father’s trade is a foundation for the son’s different artistry. A tension locates in the young, working class, Italian American writer coming of age, splitting off from the patriarchal limb:

Trunk, branch, fruit:
We’re still family aren’t we?

The poems, boxed, sit solidly in even stanzas, often six stanzas to a poem, like the unobtrusive planters they describe. That said, Tomassi randomly deviates from this structure, as evidenced in uneven line counts, spo-

radic indentations and digressions from his initial capitalization convention. One suspects Tomassi is verging on a more conscious experimentation with form.

Readers will learn to look for Tomassi's profane lexicon: lightning, cigars, coffee, Italy, sweat, and bleach – signposts through a maze of wistful relatives and neighbors. My favorite poems are "Milestone," about making one's name in history, "Amalia," about a forgotten relative, "Boy and Girl," for its long, lean form on the page, "Mortar," for its brevity, "Fetch," about a knowing dog, "Backyard Orpheus," a tale of a strange deformity, and the humorous "Rear View." The book's poems show a diversity of subject and narrative power that should enlist many fans for Tomassi.

Lightning!
What I thought were my hands
Are a pair of mason's trowels.

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At Dusk Iridescent: A Gathering of Poems, 1972-1977.

Thomas Meyer.

Jargon Society, 1999.

257 pages. \$40.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jim Cory

It's hard in a brief review to generalize on the best work of a quarter century by a poet as accomplished as Thomas Meyer. Every poem in his new book commands attention, each shimmers with the energy it's made of. *At Dusk Iridescent* draws on work published in 11 previous volumes. The poems appear on the page without date or chronology, an approach that forces us to take each on its own terms. The book moves from form to form – part of its surprise and charm – and includes free verse, sonnets, epigrams, inventions, translations, and dream journals.

Like his masters, Dante and Duncan, Meyer is a spiritual wanderer, a wayfarer. He tells us his aim is "to draw / Up what is felt like well-water." Admirable as image, more so as ambition. But even as his imagery reaches for what is instinctual, and archetypal, his dense, reverberant lines – "single, golden / unready / and leafless / like thought" – grapple again and again with the effort to reconcile feeling with its shadow, reason. His poems, in effect, make a record of the interplay of nature and consciousness. That tension supplies the driving force for this work, and gives it its strength.

Meyer's poems often challenge us to find a way inside. In "Parts of the Story" and "Illuminated Electrically," the poet supplies us only with densely compact pieces of information. For readers who want to get it, the task is to reformulate the compositional context. This takes the idea of the poem as a written replica of

internal discourse to a whole other level.

"Sex is what these poems are all about," Meyer writes in "Venetian Epigrams." But that generalization could describe a large portion of his work. A subtle but powerful undertone of Eros registers throughout, most often in the sonnets ("Threesome," "A Comfortable Security") but not just there either. "Tom Writes this for Robert to Read," which originally appeared as a chapbook, weaves back and forth from domesticity to desire, much as its likely inspiration, William Carlos Williams' "Asphodel." In this piece, as in the sexy, intricately constructed sonnet sequences, Meyer lays down a flirtatious tone of casual intimacy, drawing us into the flow of his thought from just the right distance, proving Freud correct in his insistence that thought and instinct – i.e., sex – are never far apart.

t-shirt, jeans, the socks
no, leave your underwear on
height of intimacy,
white cotton

Meyer combines economy of expression with exuberance of spirit, a continuing quest for faith with solid intellectual concerns. This is a poet able, for instance, to summarize a half-century's experience in a couplet ("How much there is to touch / How little to say"). "Intimacy, I'm aiming for, not tedium," he writes in "Sonnets for Sandra." His poems display a mastery of line, form, and style that is never less than confident, and he uses them to raise, if only by suggestion, the questions that have no answers.

The redness of the rose. Without that red, or the rose itself, we'd
have no world, nor possible color.

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The Dying Animal.

Philip Roth.

Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

156 pages. \$23.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by Kevin McGowin

Am I missing something, or is this guy just the faux-metaphorical failed erotic purveyor of the Updike crowd? I mean, I tried. After somebody gave me his book (\$23, which seems to be the going rate for hardback fiction this year) and I couldn't get through it. Just like I couldn't get through *The Ghost Writer* literally last week! Or *The Great American Novel* two years ago. Or *American Pastoral*.

I got through *Portnoy's Complaint* about a million years ago, and for time-out-of-mind Roth has been living in Manhattan, writing it over, and over, and over