

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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

again. Not to say it's that good a book, either. It's not.

And *The Dying Animal* is even worse, what with the usual themes of young men in their early 20s who are writers, usually in Manhattan, who have father complexes and are out to score some pseudo-intellectual nookie, and are having a hard time because they're REALLY Philip Roth, and he's boring. And more pretentious than Norman Mailer. An example from the current book:

The seat next to the most beautiful girl in the world – and it's empty. So you take it. But now isn't then, and it'll never be calm. It'll never be peaceful. I was worried about her walking around in that blouse. Peel off her jacket, and there is the blouse. Peel off the blouse, and there is perfection. A young man will find her and take her away. And from me, who fired up her senses, who gave her her stature, who was the catalyst to her emancipation and prepared her for him.

Does that make you want to go out and buy and actually READ this thing? "Peel off the blouse, and there is perfection. A young man will find her and take her away."

Well, I would do the honors, pal, did she look like the cover, which is by Modigliani, who is All the Rage in New York these days, and yesterday too, I think, when the publisher wanted to suggest that in the pages of this novel elderly professors will find their way to muted and furtive gratification, one way or another.

But she doesn't. Because Philip Roth couldn't draw a rounded female character to save his ass. All you get is the work of a rich, boring pompadour, for whom contrived artifice passes for emotion – and trite, impotent emotion at that.

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In Company: Robert Creeley's Collaborations.
Amy Cappellazzo & Elizabeth Licata, editors.
University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
108 pages. \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jeffery Beam

Robert Creeley, a poet with an innate capacity to seamlessly integrate intelligence in metaphor has throughout his notable career practiced collaboration with visual artists of equal stature. Those fortunate enough to see this recent traveling exhibition experienced firsthand the "locus (Creeley) inhabits and investigates, a way for him to explore the shifting relationship between 'I' and 'he,' the subjective and the objective." This comment from John Yau's essay resonates throughout the other essays in the catalog as well as in the beautifully reproduced images from the show.

The catalog, and the show it represents, documents the stunning and exhilarating power of visual, literary,

and publishing arts to create layers of experience and dialogs between modes of communication. Artists such as Georg Baselitz, Francesco Clemente, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, R.B. Kitaj, Marisol, Susan Rothenberg, and Elsa Dorfman have joined Creeley in these experiments with form and image. The catalog includes statements from the artists that elucidate Creeley's sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and genius as a poet and collaborator, and appreciator and "reader" of visual language.

The reproductions and documentary photos (including superb early photographs of Creeley by frequent *Oyster Boy* contributor, the poet, publisher, photographer, and essayist Jonathan Williams) offer stimulating looks at the show's lovely, engaging, technically adventurous, and oftentimes tender works. As integral as the conversations are between Creeley's words and the visual works, each stands alone as challenging and compelling works of art: "If I had thought / one moment / to reorganize life / as a particular pattern, / to outwit distance, depth, / felt dark was myself / and looked out to me, I / presumed. It grew by itself." (from *Life & Death*, a collaboration with Francesco Clemente)

* * *

The Love-Artist.

Jane Alison.
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001.
242 pages. \$23.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by Larry Johnson

If, like me, you've always wanted to write a novel about Ovid in exile and were not quite satisfied with David Malouf's wonderfully written but rather bleak version in *An Imaginary Life*, then *The Love-Artist* may be for you. True, it's not about Ovid's exile but the events leading up to it, but those are things we've always wanted to know as well, and Jane Alison's first novel portrays a set of unlikely but delicious circumstances that one at times wishes were true. Better that Ovid should be exiled for these events (which do turn out to involve "a poem and an error") than for Augustus' mere hypocritical displeasure with *The Art of Love*.

The novel opens with Ovid's arrest and departure toward exile and the remainder is flashback until the epilogue. Having finished his great work *Metamorphoses*, Rome's most famous and fashionable poet decides to get out of the City for awhile and let the poem's effect settle on critics and emperor alike. He chooses to holiday in a rather unlikely but exciting place: the east coast of the Black Sea, not far from the fabulous land of Colchis, home of the witch Medea. Even the backward natives here have heard of his fame, especially a beautiful young herbalist and spellcaster, Xenia. The two meet amid luscious natural beauty and Xenia, whose one wish