

“What Have I to do With Lamentation?”

Three Poets to Make Whitman Proud

[Cathy Porter, \*A Life In The Day\*](#), Finishing Line Press, Georgetown, Kentucky, 28 pages

[Mark Belair, \*Walk With Me\*](#), Parallel Press Poetry Series, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 59 pages

[Francine M. Tolf, \*Prodigal\*](#), Pinyon Publishing, Montrose, Colorado, 76 pages

Were mankind murderous or jealous upon you, my brother, my sister?  
I am sorry for you, they are not murderous or jealous upon me.  
All has been gentle with me, I keep no account with lamentation.  
What have I to do with lamentation?

-Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself” Canto 44



In the above quoted lines from “Song of Myself” Walt Whitman’s persona insists that it is not the province of the poet to whine or feel sorry for himself; he finds nothing in life to persuade him he needs an “account with lamentation.” William James was so thoroughly taken in by this persona’s claims that he lists Walt Whitman in his work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, as “the supreme contemporary example” of the “Religion of Healthy-Mindedness.” In writing about Whitman, James does not seem fully to recognize a distinction between poet and person; he cites Whitman’s biographer, R. M. Bucke, as saying Whitman took pleasure and happiness from all things. James leaves the impression that Whitman’s “Healthy-Mindedness” is congenital and unavoidable rather than a writer’s careful choice. In truth, anyone who reads Whitman’s “Prayer of Columbus” with understanding sees at least as much of Whitman as of Columbus in the “battered, wrecked old man,” that he describes, and sees also that Whitman was not immune to depression or lamentation in his actual life, for reasons ranging from his poverty to his later years of ill health, to his continued lack of recognition for his poetic greatness during his lifetime. As someone who did both his thesis and dissertation on Whitman, I was chagrined a few months ago as I prepared to read some of my own poems with a few of my colleagues at a student sponsored reading when the two poets before me read exclusively angry and/or sad poems. Since I had brought more poems than I expected to read, I actually had the chance to censor those of mine that most fit that same lamenting bill and went instead with some of my more hopeful lyrics. I don’t mean to criticize my colleagues, each of whom read some very effective poetry that night, but rather, with the three of us reading together, one after the other, it made me realize how typical it is within contemporary poetry to write poems of angry despair, self-effacement or clever cynicism, and why I probably so often seek out poems for publication in *GHLL* that are not of that ilk, that are more like the Whitman-minded poems I love best. Too much of contemporary poetry seems to me at times a wise lament, a focused rant, a precocious display of our brave attempt to say something clever or righteous as a Band-Aid against the inevitable flow of our despair. In the three poets I’ve chosen to review for this year’s issue, I find



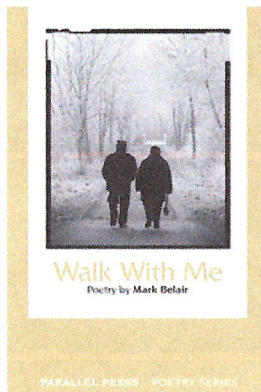
writers who have something to offer beyond depression, anger and remorse. I would say each has, like Whitman, taken to the role of poet as someone who cannot just be consumed by the hopeless or negative. Each poet in her or his own way will ask with Whitman, "What have I to do with lamentation?"

All of these poets, like Whitman himself, fully recognize how tough life can be, and how easy it is to conclude there is something inherently sad and even hopeless about it. All come from working class or lower middle class backgrounds and did not grow into adulthood with any silver spoons handy. All three poets also have a more direct admission than Whitman ever shares in "Song of Myself" that life is inherently difficult. In Cathy Porter's *A Life in the Day*, there is an acknowledgment that Nature itself often seems relentless and uncaring, as in "Autumn Winds," "The chill in the air/ never pauses to blink." (And Porter is an Omaha based poet, where chill autumn winds are too often harbingers of very severe winters to come.) But if Nature is indifferent, the poet has more leeway to choose how to react to it - and the fireflies and half moon in the first poem of the collection, "Air Dance," help reveal a writer who is willing herself to be "content" and who decides to conclude those fireflies are air dancing "just for me." Throughout the collection is this same kind of slightly whimsical stoicism, an understanding that there is plenty to whine about, but that whining doesn't get the bills paid, the love perfect, the dead returned to life. Instead, Porter has sympathy for all of her co-sufferers as in "Virginia Avenue," where she gets inside the head of a homeless woman whose dirty sheet can't keep "winter creeping up her backside," and whose former better times : "the girl who once smoked/ name brand only?" are no consolation to her now. Porter's sympathy extends even to the inanimate, as in "Blight," where she feels sorry for those houses which are "small and sad," never experiencing the "sound of a familiar voice/ whispering, "this is home."

Feeling sorry for a house might seem pointless at face value, like the attempt of one of my less successful creative writing students to tell a story from the point of view of a building (that's happened more than twice- I've been teaching a lot of years) but what makes "Blight" work so well is Porter's human and humane point of view predominating, and our understanding that what she is doing, with real skill, is not trying to make a house come alive, but sharing with us her knowledge of the many human homes that are not "loving," that have "frowns on the doors, / the tears on the windows," houses where unhappy individuals or families never find a way to get over lamentation. But rather than the sometimes seeming smugness of Whitman's persona, here we have overt sympathy- a shared sadness skillfully woven into a sonnet sized free verse poem.

In "Traditions" Porter also shares with us her own working-class background and her appreciation for her father's stoic approach to work: "there was no such thing/ as a job you liked." Still he worked, first in a print shop, then in a factory when the print shop closed, and kept his family fed and clothed. There is a clear though subtle appreciation in the poem for that approach, and in mimicking it herself Porter understands her father would "be proud" but "never say that/ aloud." In other words, Cathy Porter knows there is something poetic and ennobling in the work that ordinary people do daily (as in "Song of Myself," "And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero") without complaint or whining, and she follows that tradition, but unlike her Dad's "silence at the kitchen table" her sitting in silence includes writing, another step towards something hopeful, another inclusion of others, her potential audience, in her approach to life's challenges.

Porter ends her little chapbook strongly with "Stationary Action," a poem that admits that the continual light of metaphorical "golden sunsets" we are destined always to want to chase "does not, and will never, exist." But rather than being downtrodden by this insight, she leaves her readers with some remarkable last lines: "We are our own god/ and our god/ will continue/ to let us down, until we settle/ inside ourselves, and present ourselves/ as vessels of humility." With a poetic persona so distinct from Whitman's anything but humble "I" in "Song of Myself," Porter still captures a sympathy that is inclusive- this is advice anyone can follow and if it's not quite inviting us to "celebrate" ourselves, it is inviting us to discover a working way to have nothing to do with lamentation. Like Whitman, she agrees there is no divinity that is not essentially internal.



Like Cathy Porter, Mark Belair did not grow up well off. Yet his poems recall his past with fondness and it is on the strength of family and ethnic memory that he bases the happiness of the reminiscences. From French-Canadian stock, Belair grew up in Maine and all the poems in the sub-division within the book entitled: "Into the Country of the Past" are proud, positive recollections tied to his family's history and to their love for each other.

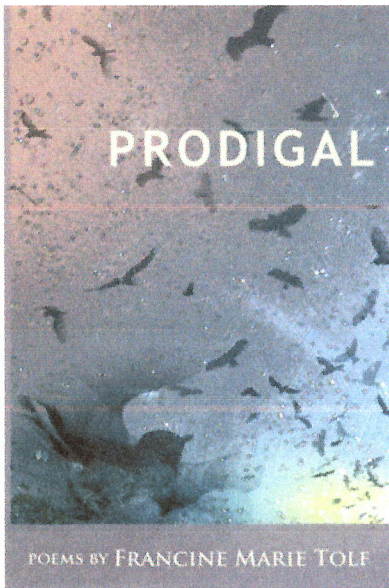
As a writer who has more than twice discussed the importance of the Italian bakeries of working class Queens to my childhood and beyond, I find Belair's poem "The Lemon Square" particularly poignant, as he does a great job relating the French-Canadian bakery in his small Maine town to his whole sense of pride in his ethnicity and even his family's poverty: "free to keep up/ our language, our culture, our religion/ despite our financial duress,/ which we refused to show." "The Rescuer" further describes his pride in his grandmother and great aunt, hard working women who also knew how to help him grow, while "all I knew," introduces us to Belair's grandfather Herve, who died in a car crash when Belair's father was only two, in a convincing prose poem detailing the genetic and maybe even mystical link between his and his grandfather's careers as drummers. The simplest but perhaps most poignant poem of the section is one we first published with *GHLL*, "Fakers" a simple story in six two-line stanzas about how as a boy Belair would pretend to be asleep after a long car ride so his father could carry him into the house, "faking he didn't know I was faking/ because he liked to carry his boy./ We two fakers/ hugging each other for real." Belair reveals how much one's perspective, one's choice of what to remember will determine one's approach to future life. Like Porter, he shows us it is within his province, and thereby within ours, to not let ourselves be written off by what we lack. Rather than being embittered by the second class treatment he and his family received, or angry about never getting to know his grandfather and the loss of affluence his family suffered when the society drummer was killed at 24, Belair chooses to have nothing to do with lamentation, and settles instead on memories that resonate with love and pride rather than anger at what he didn't get to have.



It is not surprising, then, that the rest of this collection, though not shying away from some of the sadder things in life, chooses to remain primarily upbeat. As in Porter's "Virginia Avenue," Belair shows sympathy for a woman who loses her home in "There Goes the Neighborhood" and a grittier, edgier but still real dismay for the dispossessed couple in "Trash." "The Mercy" is a prose poem which shows the incredible good luck he and his wife had when first moving to New York City, a charmed day he can't help but still enjoy recalling, even though now, as a longtime resident, he understands how fluky it was, how tough the city is. Yet in the adjoining poem, "Snow Angels," though Belair sees the many NYC skyscrapers either as "old, brute" or as "stripped of/ adornment as polished headstones," he recognizes that something as simple as snowfall domesticates, even maybe humanizes the structures, and in a wonderful last line, extends the metaphor to suggest that the snow, "flake by flake, consolingly, befalls us all." The perspective drives this lyric, the poet who finds something cheerful about a cold, snowy day in Manhattan, and writes a lyric so apt it makes it difficult for any reader not to at least consider the possible wisdom of the point of view.

The last section of the chapbook, "Over Uncertain Terrain," includes four poems: "The Necco Factory," "Nearness," "Eviction" and "Luminescence." All deal directly with issues of perspective and of how a continued faith is so difficult to maintain, even or especially for a poet. "The Necco Factory" would seem upon first reading to be an entirely negative poem, about how Belair's "faith collapsed" when he was eighteen, how he pondered suicide, "the water below/ cold and seductive" and how at poem's end he felt "like a cartoon character" who takes one chagrined look at the television audience before the twig he's holding snaps and he "drops out of frame." But the very evocation of cartoons and candy, two of the favorite things from most of our childhoods, are precisely the kinds of positive, tangible images that save him, from "the crash/ that wouldn't come." This idea is taken up in "Nearness" when the simple, tangible nature of "This espresso cup/ snug/ on its saucer doily. This tiny silver spoon," brings the poet back from a "dark/distancing/ grief-spun veil." What Belair has discovered, what he shares is that "Only patience cures./ Only the slow death/ of mourning/ restores." It is the insistence that the death of mourning is as inevitable as the deaths of our loved ones and eventually ourselves, that makes "Nearness" one of the briefest yet most effective elegies I have ever read.

"Luminescence" is even briefer—just eleven words, making it shorter than the epigraph that fronts it— but with those few words he countermands W.G. Sebald's assertion that civilization is a mere, "strange luminescence," of a doomed waning and fading away: Belair simply concludes: "Yet-/ it's amazing to be luminescent." This poem reminds me, oddly enough, of lines from García Márquez's novella, *Nobody Writes To the Colonel*, in which an elderly couple, having lost their only son to a political murder, living in abject poverty that has them close to starvation, and still endangered by their own political loyalties, while constantly bickering with each other, still manage to agree on one thing, that life is "the best thing that has ever been invented." That Belair closes his collection with a series of poems purportedly about grief and crisis of faith but ends up expressing his joy in our time to shine, keeps me confident that he too has nothing, ultimately, to do with lamentation.



Francine M. Tolf's poetry, with more time to unwind itself in a full blown collection, is a tougher sell for inclusion in this trio of poets refusing to lament. After all, more than a few of her poems are angry and much of the anger is directed at men. She is angry at scientists who are cruel to animals ("A Good Thing,") and other males equally cruel, like the boys who stoned a flamingo to death in Lincoln Park Zoo ("In This Rain,") or the man who forced a young serf girl to stitch the eyes of a falcon closed: "Seel..." She can assert, with grim, statistical confidence, that "Someone Is Beating A Woman," and she is especially angry at famous men who were not good to women, like Dylan Thomas ("Muse") or Socrates, ("Athens, 400 B.C.") And unlike the mostly fond or at least forgiving memories Porter and Belair have of their fathers, Tolf is often angry at hers, years after his death, ("In This Rain," "Plenty.") Of course, it isn't difficult to be appalled by the many awful things people have done and still do to animals, the many ways men have abused and hurt and still abuse and hurt women, or even the ways a father can be less than nurturing to a daughter or son, but if anger were the biggest engine for movement in these poems, I would probably not find them resonating for me as Porter's or Belair's poems do. Fortunately, Francine Tolf's poetry is not primarily anger or complaint based, except in as far as she shows us the path towards transcending mere anger or lament, and brings us (and herself) to something better.

One thing that I believe separates Tolf's poetry from that of Porter or even Belair is that it is more within the Romantic tradition. While Porter's approach to nature is close to Naturalistic and Belair's realistic, Tolf's poetry consistently believes in or at least wants to believe in the transcendent and it is this belief that, ironically, brings her often to anger and pain. Because she believes there is more we should and can do better, she is so often appalled when we do not even try, and this is why she is especially troubled by great poets or philosophers who were also only too human. Tolf does find some famous humans to admire, though: predictably, St. Francis of Assisi is one of them, a kindred spirit in his regards for animals ("Love Me,") but Christ also finds a kind of favor, in poems like "Cana" and "Kinship" for his willingness to "spill his divinity" and drink "it freely with others."

What I think Tolf may be searching for throughout this collection is to get to the level of the Christ who was said to have spoken on the cross, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." She certainly isn't entirely there in "In This Rain," when she explicitly states, "There are things I am not sure we are expected to forgive," but the poem ends with the admission that at least some things "must" be forgiven. She leaves us to choose whether it is her



father's imperfections and cruelties or the teens' murder of the flamingo that stands as unforgivable, but she does later evoke in Christ, a man who claimed to be able to forgive both. But what most redeems Tolf's poetry, what most makes it something we need to read, are her poems where she encourages us to believe there is something more to life than our own disappointments, our anger with the past, the present, that there is a place where a union with all the other believers can make us whole again.

In "Between You and Me" Tolf takes advice directly from Walt Whitman's most famous poem. She decides that "what I assume you shall assume," as Whitman does in the opening canto of "Song of Myself," and like him, talks directly to the reader. She feels certain we too sometimes feel directly part of nature: "you had not been/ you but all that you walked on, and by/ and through." In "Tonight" she further assumes all of her readers will feel the sympathy she feels for a young man she has read about who was mortally wounded and then denied medical aid because he was Jewish and she also shares with us her belief that if "we pray hard enough/ rivers can flow backward."

In "Sheridan and Pratt" a large lumbering man is not a threat, but rather a hero, someone Tolf is touched by for the simple tenderness he demonstrates in taking in an abandoned kitten; in "Morning" she admits she needs to believe in God, even when there is so much seeming counterevidence to God's existence. Perhaps most tellingly in "Always In October" Tolf again assumes that we too have moments where it all makes sense, where everything is beautiful and kind, where Nature is willing to embrace us no matter how often we have sinned against her: "You remember that hour, bare branches were fingers/ you wanted to touch." And that is the time when the evening is, "soft, it slid past me like a beautiful animal." Tolf can and essentially does say with Whitman in "Song of Myself": "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained..../ They do not sweat and whine about their condition.... No one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things." And when she is in that zone she has no need to whine or lament about her condition or anyone else's. She believes and invites us to believe. Her anger is gone and she has taken us with her away from that anger. She has taken control of her life and her writing. Like Porter and Belair she understands a person, a poet, has a choice, and the poet's perspective does not have to lead us to despair- what is inspirational and inspired about her poetry is that, as much as she is saddened by all the world's cruelty and madness, she finds something worthwhile about everyone after all. In the final and title poem of the collection, "Prodigal," the speaker, waiting for a cardiologist's appointment for "my stapled-together heart/ that refuses to remain open," Tolf observes "how prodigal beauty is," but this observation is a happy one, since beauty becomes for her, as for many great poets, the opposite of evil. Beauty saves her from despair and lets her convince herself and us that the fish in the doctor's office aquarium who press their noses against glass have "tender" gazes. That of course, on the face of it, is a pathetic fallacy- those fish she wills to be tenderhearted are really nothing of the sort. But she transcends that realism in this and other of her best poems because what she has revealed throughout the collection is a suffering heart, suffering for all of us, not just for herself, saddened by how miserably we often act, but certain there are clues in nature, in animals, in writing itself that can show us to something so much better. This Romantic lover of beauty and kindness takes us away from anger and resentment to a better place, a Whitmanic place, of trust in Nature and belief in the best that we all can be. Like Porter and Belair, she takes on the power, the responsibility of the poet, a responsibility too many poets presently neglect, to half discover, half invent, a reason not to despair. All three of these poets live within the Whitmanic tradition, refusing to have anything to do, in any ultimate sense, with lamentation.

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