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ABOUT ME

**Benjamin Myers**

Benjamin Myers' first book of poems, *Elegy for Trains*, was published in 2010 by Village Books Press. His poems have appeared in, or will shortly appear in, *Measure*, *The New Plains Review*, *The Chiron Review*, *Ruminate*, *The Mayo Review* and many other journals, as well as online at [poetrybay.com](#) and as part of the Red Lion Square poetry podcast. His essays have appeared in *Studies in Philology*, *English Literary History*, and other academic and popular journals. He holds a Ph.D. from Washington University in St. Louis and is an Associate Professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University.

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SOME POET FRIENDS OF MINE

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FRIDAY, APRIL 8, 2011

Review: Alan Berecka, Remembering the Body

Alan Berecka, *Remembering the Body*. Mongrel Empire Press, 2011. \$15.00.

“Finding your voice” is a writing cliché second in prominence perhaps only to “write what you know.” Yet, as a reader, one does look for poetry that in some way distinguishes itself from the crowd of contemporary voices. Alan Berecka’s new book does just that, moving beyond a distinct “voice” to offer something even more rare: a discernible poetic personality. Berecka’s poems seem, to borrow a metaphor from Montaigne, consubstantial with the poet, displaying a unique mind and distinct viewpoint on the world. The personality enlivening *Remembering the Body* is witty and clear-sighted yet also conflicted and, above all, empathetic.

Sadly neglected in recent poetry, wit had its heyday as a literary value from the early seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, but, through ceaselessly rewarding word-play, Berecka makes a good case for its comeback. In “Rewriting a State Motto,” for instance, the possibility of bird-watching in New Jersey leads to a string of images caught between the literal and the half-dead metaphor: “odd ducks / jail birds, dirty birds and flipped birds.” This is witty in the contemporary sense of being funny, but it also exhibits wit in the literary sense of the term: it is apropos, evidence of a lively mind making unexpected connections that, once made, seem inevitable. This quality is also evident in Berecka’s use of line breaks. Consider his appropriation of Shakespeare’s Caliban, whom we are first led to see in his familiar bestial state, perhaps breaking some small animal over the rocks for his brutal meal, before Berecka, through a clever break, wittily revises our image of the famous beast: “Caliban cracks the spine / of each volume of his new *OED* and consumes / each word” (“Vollard Fails Caliban”). True wit in a poet enlivens the wit of the reader, takes the mind for a rewarding ride, as Berecka does repeatedly in *Remembering the Body*.

Berecka’s wit sometimes manifests itself in extended metaphor (what an earlier age called “conceit”). The best example of this tendency may be “The Theology of Dodge Ball,” which considers the coastal residents’ prayers in hurricane season in terms of a cosmic version of that hated gym-class ordeal. The poem raises classic questions about the justice of God by examining the troubling correspondence between “the jock” who “stands armed / on his side of the court” and “the God of mercy / and compassion.” The end result of the metaphor is a powerful bewilderment: “The spared will heap praise / on a loving God, as a stained ball / slowly rolls back across a gym floor.” This is deadly serious wit.

“The Theology of Dodge Ball” is also a great example of the conflicted side of Berecka’s poetic personality. Many poems in *Remembering the Body*, especially in the second part of the book, take up the problematic nature of faith in the contemporary world. Berecka seems drawn to believe and yet rejects the too easy pietism that often infects contemporary Christianity in the form of Joel-Osteen-like optimism or anti-body neo-Gnosticism. In “Shopping for Miracles: Lourdes, 1979,” the poet seems to counter naïve optimism by suggesting that real faith is modeled not by pilgrims seeking miraculous deliverance from the holy water of Lourdes but rather by his mother who “remained / bedridden and continued to say the rosary / through her pain every day until she died.” In

response to the undying heresy of the Gnostics, Berecka offers the collection's title poem, which first flirts with paganism as an alternative to disembodied Christianity before returning to an orthodoxy strengthened by doubt:

Once grace with this glimmer of Christ
 freed from Gnostic beliefs, I return
 to give thanks for the creed
 which states that Christ rose
 to reign forever, his body restored –
 a bright, blood-filled vessel – molded
 in the image of the Creator, as are we.

Berecka calls us to remember that the faith of the Christian is faith in a man who, like us, inhabits a physical body, both glorious and capable of suffering. In fact, the glory and the suffering are as intertwined in Berecka's poetics as they are in Christian theology and tradition. In poems such as "Easter Art" and "The Price of Art," Berecka suggests that beauty comes from pain (Not that Berecka's counter-Gnosticism is always morbid: consider the delightfully fleshy "My Bone of Contention with Roethke," in which the poet declares in response to Roethke's famous line about lovely bones, "I know a woman lovely, / and I mean lovely, in her flesh").

Such a theory of art born out of pain must put a great emphasis on empathy, on art as consolation in a fallen world. Berecka accordingly has filled his book with narrative poems in sympathy with a poetic type one might best describe as the "noble loser," a figure who seems, in some way, to represent essential humanity. Narrative verse is, we are told constantly, a distinctly unfashionable choice, despite the fact that it is utilized by many of the best contemporary poets, including David Mason and B.H. Fairchild, to whom Berecka pays tribute in one poem in the book. Berecka, however, boldly defies fashion to offer, instead, poems that satisfy the reader with a fullness of imagination. In fact, the poem "In Defense of the Narrative" pits the narrative poet's work ethic – describe in terms of a pinball game: "Ignoring / the lights and playing the game" – against the perhaps flashier poetics of the Imagists and their imitators. Such hard work pays off in stories of troublingly beautiful outsiders, like the "Litvak" champion of flatulence in "The Assimilation of Vita Perkunas," a character unlikable in a number of ways but whom Berecka manages to stir up empathy for regardless. Sometimes in *Remembering the Body*, the story seems to originate closer to home, as in "the Prophet," which tells the tale of the poet's uncle hiding in the cellar and drunkenly praying for mercy in fear that Neal Armstrong would knock the moon from orbit. The scenario provides easy laughs early in the poem, but by the end Berecka has brought us around to see the truth in his uncle's fear. Watching "a production line where robots / spot weld cars" and thinking, perhaps, of his own hard-working immigrant forbearers, Berecka realizes how fragile is the gravity that holds all our worlds in orbit, how suddenly a known universe of the personal sort may be obliterated. Many such characters inhabit *Remembering the Body* – Aunt Helen who talks to cows, Santos the drunk who talks to Jesus – and each one teaches us something about being human.

There are many more stand-out poems in this thoughtful, engaging volume. Both "Sins of the Father" and "Flashes," for instance, are masterful blends of narrative and personal lyric, finely paced and vividly imagined. Though he may occasionally count himself among his own "noble losers," as in his tribute

to Fairchild, in which he calls himself “a minor league poet,” Berecka has written a winningly witty and humane book indeed. *Remembering the Body* is clearly a major league accomplishment.

Posted by Ben at 1:39 PM

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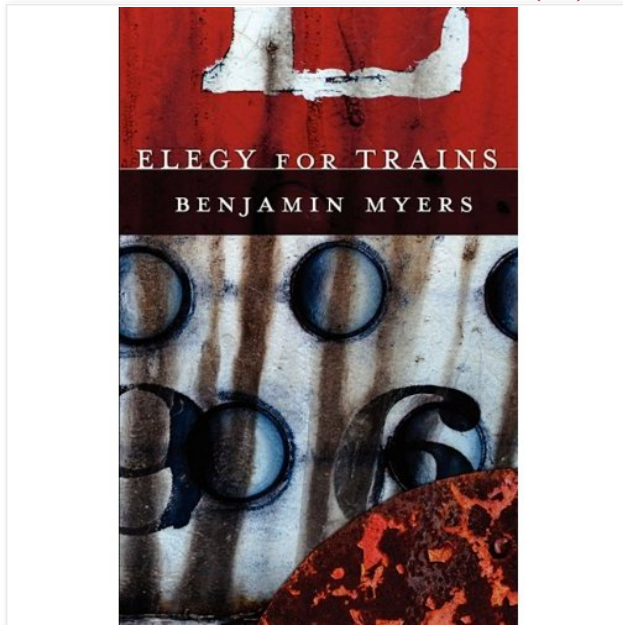
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