

Redemption Songs

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Pity the Beautiful

By Dana Gioia

Graywolf Press. 80p \$15.99

Dana Gioia's new book of poems, *Pity the Beautiful*, offers a series of powerful meditations on loss and the redemptive power of beauty to sustain the soul through the most harrowing of hells. This is Gioia's fourth book of poems and his first collection in 12 years. The long hiatus was occasioned by Gioia's six-and-a-half-year service as chair of the National Endowment for the Arts under President George W. Bush. His long and successful foray into the realm of public service has served Gioia well as a poet. His signature public project—to take art out of the realm of academics and aesthetes and restore it to ordinary people—brought him into close contact with the preoccupations and the idiom of his readership, enabling Gioia to create poems that speak powerfully of our universal loves and losses and address our deepest desires. *Pity the Beautiful* does all of this, offering 35 poems that are compelling, haunting and, in fact, beautiful.

The narrative arc traced in the course of the volume is one of pilgrimage. Gioia is a modern-day Dante, moving poem by poem through the stations of Hell and Purgatory, bringing us to the gates of a Paradise that is promised but not yet gained. The poems take us, inevitably, to dark places: the special treatments ward of a hospital filled with dying children, the box of letters written by the poet's beloved dead (revenants who haunt this collection) and, in a wry twist, to the shopping mall, with its glittering altars to the false god of commerce we (un)wittingly worship.

Gioia's vision, however, is ultimately a hopeful one. An unspoken belief in the theological gift of grace pervades the poems—a suspicion, if not an outright conviction—that there is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will. The poems, then, become impassioned acts of beauty, sacramental gestures toward a hidden God who might be guessed but not known, and we the readers accompany him on his salvific journey.

Gioia channels a series of powerful voices in the poems, as well as speaking in his own. Earliest among these *dramatis personae* is “The Angel with the Broken Wing,” a presence who serves as the tutelary spirit—or the Virgil—of the volume. (In fact, the cover of the book features an angel, suggesting his pre-eminence.) Designed by a master carver in an era of belief, the angel has outlived his purpose. Shut away on account of his spiritual ferocity, desecrated by soldiers in a by-gone revolution, he appears a broken, impotent relic, “a crippled saint against a painted sky.”

The angel's uselessness in a secular culture and his obvious imperfection in a world that worships superficial beauty have relegated him to the farthest margins, yet he conveys a capacious and syncretic vision, one that embraces the past and present, the human and divine, eternity and now, and speaks with an elegant authority that moves us. We look in the wrong places for both truth and beauty, the angel warns us. The real sources of these are hidden from view.

In “Prayer at Winter Solstice,” one of several outright prayers in the collection, the poet maps the human spiritual journey as a *via negativa*. Echoing the Beatitudes, he delivers a series of unexpected blessings: “Blessed is the road that keeps us homeless./ Blessed is the mountain that blocks our way./... / Blessed are the night and the darkness that blinds us./ Blessed is the cold that teaches us to feel./ .../ Blessed is the pain that humbles us./ Blessed is the distance that bars our joy.” The poem gives thanks for our absences and privations, obstacles and afflictions, our longings and our griefs, finding in trials that typically lead us to desolation a circuitous route to consolation. In its biblical diction and insistent repetition, the poem acts as powerful

incantation, a counter-spell to the sorrow and losses that befall the poet (and us), the beauty of the language itself redeeming the agonies it blesses.

Those agonies are considerable, ranging from the superficial wound (the lost moment, the lost argument, the lost illusion) to the scarring (a lost lover, one's lost youth) to the most transformative of all, the lost child. In "Majority," the final poem of the book, the poet addresses his first son, who died long ago in infancy. Tracing the trajectory of a father's quiet grief over two decades, he imagines the son he has lost come alive in the bodies of other young boys as they learn to swim, play the piano or simply grow into their own stature. After years of this consoling fantasy, the poet finally recognizes the necessity of letting go: "How splendid your most/ mundane action seemed in these joyful proxies./ I often held back tears./ Now you are twenty-one. Finally it makes sense/ that you have moved away/ into your own afterlife."

The quality of understatement in Gioia's work, wherein he addresses the most exquisite of griefs in the plain language of ordinary speech, underscores our helplessness in the face of time and necessity and yet somehow asserts our extraordinary strength. That a father can speak—or write—such words and live makes us marvel and reminds us of the central symbolic act of Judeo-Christian tradition. Redemption somehow comes of a father's and a mother's sacrifice (we imagine Abraham at the altar, Mary at the cross), terrible and irrational as this may seem. This father's renunciation of his own agony concludes with the assertion of an afterlife, not as a possibility, but as a fact of faith, owned and claimed, a final reality that "makes sense."

I had occasion to hear Gioia recite this poem during a reading he gave in New York recently. As he prefaced his recitation with the circumstances of the poem, I saw a woman seated in front of me place her arm around the shoulders of the woman beside her, marking her companion as a mother who had lost a child. I could not take my eyes from this bereft mother as she listened to the poem, her head nodding in assent, tears streaming soundlessly down her cheeks and, strangely, a gentle smile on her lips. Here was public witness to the power of poetry to speak the unspeakable, articulate for us what we cannot and redeem our most piteous losses through beauty. The community poetry makes of our brokenness somehow makes us whole. At the end of the reading we all stood up, applauded and streamed out into the rainy night, stricken and triumphant.

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