

## ◆◆◆Reviews

### POETRY

**Damian Rogers**, *Paper Radio*, ECW Press, 2009

**Matthew Tierney**, *The Hayflick Limit*, Coach House Books, 2009

**Billeh Nickerson**, *McPoems*, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009

Damian Rogers's debut poetry collection, *Paper Radio*, borrows its title from a poem written by John Sinclair, a Detroit-based activist writing in the mid-sixties: 'stay tuned to the paper radio for more news as it happens.' The line itself appears as an epigraph to Rogers's own poem written, ostensibly, to the same police officer who had multiple run-ins with Sinclair and who eventually arrested him. This poem, 'Another Poem for Warner Stringfellow,' and the epigraph that precedes it, seem to me a good place to appreciate what's characteristically best about this difficult collection.

The poem retrospectively describes—with sudden shifts in tone and fragmented imagistic transitions—the sociological landscape of late-sixties Detroit, and seems to accuse the so-called counterculture of both failure and hypocrisy:

We've forgotten the daughter  
slaughtered by her father,  
gunned down in her sleep  
on Lincoln Street, naked  
in bed with her sweetheart  
and some friends.

The metre employed, a kind of lullaby or nursery rhyme (for nightmares) is not characteristic of Rogers's poems in general (which are dominantly free verse), but it does surface occasionally. In this instance, the metre aids her vision tremendously, somewhat analogous to the appearance of a few bars of folk melody in the midst of an atonal symphony. The reader is jerked into recognition, but just as quickly both tone and image change, and the metre is dropped: 'Later,/some papers were pointed about a black boy/crashed out on the couch in the next room,/wiped out with the rest.' Suddenly a quasi-Greek chorus begins to shout: '*We understand!*/cried the parents./*Kill the assassins!* cried the pacifists.' The reader could at this point pause and wonder who are the parents and pacifists and why they say such things, but that doesn't seem to be the point. For the poem turns

again very quickly, and the speaker, now laconic, identifies the actions and beliefs of a generation who 'thought love would lead them/into a rainbow-domed freedom,' but whose 'embroidered banners/gave way to racks of designer jeans.' Add references to 'the West,' 'control-addict creeps,' 'street-fucking freaks,' 'the People's Ballroom,' as well as someone who 'made it with a Temptation,' and the reader, I trust, can sense much more in this poem besides my simplified summary here. And that is another characteristic of Rogers's poems in general: one is left either babbling or saying very little if pressed to express in other words what the poem itself says, irreducibly—even infuriatingly so—on its own.

The coherence of this book hinges on its title. A 'paper radio' signifies a book of poems, or *this* book of poems. The poem is a radio, or radio program, that the reader (or listener) might tune in and out of with restless indecision, the meaning of which is received only in part, without adequate context, or confident identification of either the speaker or her subject. Indeed, early on, the speaker announces her desire (or need) to be a receptor, and identifies her body with 'an underwater antenna/tuned to a black line of a tile.' She pleads to a God whom she identifies as a 'cold pool in Tuscon/surrounded by red doors' to 'Send me a signal... Send me a sign.' And, a few poems later, the speaker concludes with a kind of programmatic thesis: 'There will be things to write down.'

The idea of the poet as a kind of receptor is not new, and remains for me an important metaphor within which to understand the work of poetry. It offers instruction in how to listen to these poems: that is, to listen as one might to late-night talk radio, when one accepts that one might only get part of the story, that the voices—urgent, enraged, sad—arrive from nowhere, and that one is left alone with the burden of giving coherence to much of that material. A more specific question also lurks, concerning what 'things to write down,' what news will be picked up 'as it happens.' Here is where the significant distinction of these poems stands or falls. 'Another Poem for Warner Stringfellow' (and not only this poem) is an extraordinary success in terms of the sensibility and ambition of this book. Its parts resonate; its varied tones and images serve to enhance the whole rather than merely to announce difference. That, however, cannot be said for other parts of this book. Take for instance 'Her Teeth,' a litany structured by the refrain 'Her teeth,' e.g., 'are boiled plums/... Her teeth summer where they winter/... Her teeth mean well. Her teeth mean nothing,' or the found poem 'Found Weather' that seems to assemble a series of remainders for no purpose at all. These are more extreme examples, yet nonetheless point to the kind of imagistic dissonance

and narrative opacity that often tarnished the pleasures of reading Rogers's poems.

I was then left wondering what news here will stay news. My favourite Rogers poems—'Sun Down,' for example—reminded me of early Auden who, like Rogers, does not offer the reader a fixed address from which to understand his poems. And where Rogers succeeds, she does so in a way similar to the way Auden does in, say, 'Who Stands...': the poem is more intense and compelling precisely because the reader is bewildered and does *not* know his or her way around.

*The Hayflick Limit*, Matthew Tierney's second collection of poetry, is a fine object to handle physically and admire without reading a word. My strongest inclination on finishing this collection was to begin simply to catalogue not the poems but the individual passages—ranging from subclauses to stanzas—that troubled me with that familiar mix of envy and awe one feels in the face of a brilliant contemporary.

Take the final image of the appropriately titled 'Optic Nerve,' that is itself a catalogue of the dissonant sights and feelings that bombard a speaker locked into the routines and structures of life in downtown Toronto: 'Topside, empty coffee cup/in fists, like white-lipped howls./The lightless figures behind them.' Or from the love poem 'XX,' where the speaker opens with, appropriately, a reflection on not only love but its origins and contingency by invoking that classic Greek symbol of reverie, the cicada: 'Dog-day cicadas up the drama, drumming/abdomen amphitheatres...' Or from my favourite poem in this book, 'These 30 or 40 Years'—a poem that digs into and revitalizes that classic Dantean trope of being struck by a sudden, clarified awareness of one's life midway between birth and death. Here, however, the speaker is seized in the most appropriate of North American circumstances, the long drive over a cross-continental highway:

Constant motion counterfeits stillness,  
and if not for the eye's reassurance  
we'd have no sense of progress, though progress,  
in turn, demands its own measure,  
some thought of the to and the from.  
Briefly, now, I drive between them...

This is not, however, a book of fragments. Its most programmatic poems employ lyric—with its characteristic formal and stylistic moves—to chart implications, both existential and conceptual, of techno-scientific development. Indeed, this is a book about limits: The speakers in these poems seem to stand weak-kneed at that point where traditional notions of humanity and rationality begin to shift

or disintegrate or transform. This fact, if a fact, is received by these poems with a mix of awe and terror. Consider the monologue of a 'couch-potato' whose remarks on apathy are realized via reflections on the atomization and fragmentation of time: 'Each moment, O it mushrooms, so many/options, a foaming cloud/of nows...' The allusion here to a mushroom cloud is both obvious and apt: it shoves the reader into the disaster that marks the essence of our technological society. Similar existential disease is charted by a fine sequence of poems written in the voices of persons who suffer from various obscure phobias—e.g., of parades, clocks, rooms, laughter, etc. The excess of rationality, as well as its temperance, is given compassionate treatment in a central sequence, 'The Chess Player,' a meditation and recollection on the speaker's younger brother, who was a chess prodigy. Bobby Fischer appears in these poems as both foil to and symbol of the excesses the speaker and his brother luckily avoided. These are ambitious themes, and worth the attention of our best poets.

The monologue 'The Prisoner's Dilemma' accords with the conceptual intent of this collection. A standard problem in decision theory, the prisoner's dilemma exemplifies the idea of human beings as rational calculating machines, and throws into harsh relief the fundamental selfishness of altruism. Here the speaker is a crook wrestling with the choice of whether or not to co-operate with the police, stay mute, or turn in his friend (who, as must be the case, wrestles with the same dilemma in a different interrogation room). Again, I applaud the ambition of the poem, but its excesses highlight what, for me, is a general weakness of the collection. When it fails, or at least stumbles, it does so by edging into the fireworks of craft and linguistic density at the expense of the deeper integrity of the individual poem. In the case of this poem, this crook asks questions like 'Does fatuity make for the better//man?' and offers descriptions of his current circumstance: 'Sulphur-whiff/and sweat-musk, chiaroscuro/along the east wall, Chanderlesque...' Unlike, say, Simon Armitage's early poem written in the voice of a small-time pickpocket, Tierney tends to wear his craft too heavily, as if too close to the influences of fellow Toronto poets like Ken Babstock and Jeremy Dodds. That said, these poems are not derivative, and I look forward to Tierney's next book.

If I'm forced by space limitations to give less consideration to Billeh Nickerson's recent collection *McPoems*, it is with some relief, since Nickerson's short book is simply a pleasure; it is a slim collection in which Nickerson's characteristic humour and sympathetic pathos are easily realized. I should confess that it's difficult for me to re-

spond to these poems with much pretension to objectivity. When I was a first-year undergraduate in the late nineties, Nickerson was the graduating star of UVIC's writing department, and I can't help but hear his distinctive and delightful voice behind these short, postcard-picture poems. Whether other readers unfamiliar with Nickerson the performer will also hear it, I cannot determine with any certainty.

The author photo on the last page of *McPoems* features a young Nickerson as McDonald's July 1989 Outstanding Employee. The book is divided into four thematic sections featuring key terms lifted from a McDonald's training manual: quality, service, cleanliness and value. Written in the second person, these are short poems, many of which dispense with line breaks and edge into prose. Formally this approach is effective for Nickerson's purposes. The speaker offers clear reports, unassuming descriptions, of encounters with the public (and also with fellow employees) while standing behind the counter: 'A grown man cries in front of you after the cooks in the back put a pickle on his burger for the third time this week.' But these simple descriptions are usually supplemented by the speaker's own assessments and reactions: 'That guy's not crying because of his burger, it's something else, something you hope isn't contagious as you scoot past the counter, put your arm around him, offer to refill his coke.'

It's difficult not to enjoy these snapshots of a job most of us have known at some point in our lives. Nickerson's irony rings through, but his tone, somehow, never turns to spite. (Well, he does seem to feel some contempt for his manager who fired another employee near Christmas for making pretend snowflakes out of the napkins. Nickerson responds, 'you nickname the manager that fired him Grinch, and hum Christmas carols whenever he walks by.')

Much like fast food (minus the negative health effects), these poems can be taken in quickly—their satisfactions are nearly immediate.

—Darren Bifford