

## Book Review by Janet McCann

REMEMBERING THE BODY, by Alan Berecka. Poems. Mongrel Empire Press, Norman, Oklahoma. ISBN 978-0-9833052-0-0. 94 pgs. \$15.

When Alan Berecka's first collection *The Comic Flaw* (neoNuma Arts Press) came out in 2009, readers were introduced to a new and compelling voice. Berecka's poems introduced a cast of characters from a Catholic childhood filled with longings and rough edges—not so grim a place as in *Angela's Ashes*, but rough enough, with its own brand of irony and outrageous humor. The largely narrative poems provided vignettes of the bumpy and sometimes hilarious ride that was the speaker's coming of age and introduction to the world beyond childhood, a world where things were not necessarily better or even different. The darkly comic poems left readers wondering where the poet would, or even could, go next.

Berecka's new collection, *Remembering the Body*, gives a gratifying answer. It reintroduces some of the same characters now grown older, their relationship with the narrator changed by time. Again, the humor is compelling, and the narratives are unique. The narratives crackle with activity. Things happen in these poems, sometimes hilarious things, but this is not by any means light verse. Even in poems that provide belly laughs—and there are several such poems—there is a kind of kick to them, an uneasy afterthought that comes even after the reader has turned the page.

Yet one of the great delights of this book is the humanness or the humility of the speaker. This is an intelligence that has discovered much and is always ready to discover more, even if it hurts. By no means does the speaker seem to know it all, to speak down to the less enlightened, and this perspective is a great relief to someone reading through books of contemporary poetry. One of the most moving poems is a straightforward encomium to B.H. Fairchild and his unforgettably powerful poem "Body and Soul," which describes a hardscrabble, hard-working sandlot baseball team who refuse to "play around" a fifteen-year old genius they

have picked up as a fill-in—and who lose the game and the needed money as a result, but encounter the "vast gap between talent and genius" as a part of their experience. Berecka's tribute ends

I just finished reading "Body and Soul"  
for the hundredth time. The masterwork.  
of a one time pipe fitter and failed jizzer.  
And I'll be damned if I understand.  
how I can again land square in the middle.  
of these men's lives, how I got pulled  
back onto the middle of that ballfield  
but this time it's not the Mick playing.  
the role of the blue-eyed bringer of truth,  
it's Pete Fairchild staring down.  
this minor-league poet, delivering.  
the harsh truth about the vast gap.  
between my talent and his genius.

This truth is of course both painful and illuminating—as contact with a great poet provides both a sense of one's own limitation and a joy.

*Remembering the Body* is a satisfyingly full book of delights. It is divided into two parts. The first part, "Body of Art," contains poems about poets and artists as well as others about experiencing art and playing with artistic forms. It also contains some of his famous personae including new weird relatives and the return of some of the old ones. The second part, "Remembering the Body," is a heady mix of genuinely romantic poems addressed to his wife, of tales of childhood religion remembered and reinterpreted, and of spiritual quest poems. In this last group, the traditional answers don't seem to serve, but the questions are still there. The speaker moves toward and away from Christianity throughout these poems.

When Berecka is funny, he is very funny. The first poem in the book is “The Evolving Case for De-evolution” and it consists of four parts, with part four coming first and then three, two, and one. In Part IV the speaker as a child considers his heritage and wonders if he might be “the missing / cog in our genetic transmission/ that would slam the ascent/ of man into full reverse.” Part III by itself reads

One spring night in Matamoros, I staggered  
Past some kid standing by the bridge. He asked,  
*Hey, mister, you want a lady?* Tempted,  
but with friends, I declined and moved on.  
He yelled, *hey, mister, you want my sister?*  
*No thanks buddy.* He screamed, *Hey, mister,*  
*you want a monkey?* I hauled ass for  
Brownsville.

By the concluding couplet—named of course “Part I”—we are convinced of the case. Lots of other clever tricks play with the mind. There’s a nice relevant epigraph from Marcel Marceau, for instance. What would it be? A silence, of course. Titles are playful: “McDemption,” “Mother Nietzsche: A Modern Pieta,” “Gilligan’s Gone Again.” And we are intrigued by the weird straits his characters get into, the bizarre forces of fate marshaled against them. They find themselves contorted—physically, mentally, spiritually—by their own inclinations and the situations they encounter.

The poems that are not funny are often quirky, and they provide striking ironies for the reader to ponder. The poems are inhabited by a sea change; events and people are always changing in the poems as they do in real life, and the speaker is always haunted by Robert Frost’s query in “The Oven Bird” about “What to make of a diminished thing.” But usually there is some surprising element in this transformation, something unexpected that throws a new light on the results. And in Berecka’s world there is no time for long, solemn pondering. Too many things are happening.

Romantic poems concerning an older couple are unusual, and Berecka’s are comfortable and comforting. They include “The Sacrament of Marriage” and “On the Night of Our 20<sup>th</sup>

Anniversary.” Poems filled with religious imagery abound, but whenever the spiritual-seeker-reader thinks he has Berecka pinned, the poet slips out of the category and turns up somewhere else. And although there are grim twists in the poems, they have an oddly upbeat feel at the end. Things change and not usually for the better, but the change leaves a sense of possibility, of growth, even of revelation. There’s no assertion you could put your finger on, and certainly nothing that could be defined in terms of a dogma or a set belief. But something positive is there, nevertheless.

This book has 94 pages of poetry—more than most new poetry books that aren’t someone’s collected or selected. Yet I was disappointed to come to the end of it. It’s a book with a twisty plot and an open-ended conclusion.

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*Janet McCann's work has appeared in the KANSAS QUARTERLY, PARNASSUS, NIMROD, SOU'WESTER, CHRISTIAN CENTURY, CHRISTIANITY AND LITERATURE, NEW YORK QUARTERLY, and others. She has won three chapbook contests, sponsored by Pudding Publications, Chimera Connections, and Franciscan University Press. A 1989 NEA Creative Writing Fellowship winner, she has taught at Texas A & M University since 1969, is currently Professor of English. She has co-edited three anthologies with David Craig, ODD ANGLES OF HEAVEN (Shaw, 1994), PLACE OF PASSAGE (Story Line, 2000), and POEMS OF FRANCIS AND CLARE (St. Anthony Messenger, 2004). Most recent poetry book: EMILY'S DRESS (Pecan Grove Press, 2004).*