The Art of Mere Existence
Chinese Apples: New and Selected Poems by W. S. Di Piero
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The Art of Mere Existence

Danielle Chapman

Chinese Apples:
New and Selected Poems
by W. S. Di Piero.
$26.95 cloth.

The idea of a writing, especially
to poetry, is meant to emulate expen-
tence, to reveal and dramatize the
forces of life—rather than to help us
somehow understand or get over
them—would not, I imagine, sell too
well in our results-oriented culture.
Yet, for a poet like W. S. Di Piero, poetry
do not pretend to have any other pur
pose. His poems are tactile, imbued
with color, and often uncomfortably
realistic. Many of them give the impres
sion, like a piece of figurative painting
or sculpture, of some chunk of life that
has been mercilessly broken off and
refrigerated on the page. The pain that
it takes to do this—to suffer experience
in form—is the filament that ignites
Di Piero’s temperament and which siz
zles through everything he writes.
Despite his technique, which can be
both measured and complex, it often
seems that he perceives the world
directly through his nerves and merely
secretes the information into his lines.
In his poems, chaos and loneliness jut
side by side, threatening and attracting
each other, and occasionally resolving
into a moment of sensual clarity—
which, for Di Piero, is the only clarity
there is.

Rather than employing syntactical
fragmentation and disjointness to re
flect the chaos that surrounds and threatens
to destroy the project of consciousness,
Di Piero absorbs it into the very DNA
of his words. On a surface level, this
means that he can talk about “nickel
bags” and “skunk,” Mr. Chicken fast
food restaurants and EyeWitness News,
as naturally as he does “Graces dancing
in a shaggy shadow / before Massaccio’s
Trinity.” More essentially, he’s found a
way to actually transform English
words for his purposes: to swell them
up beyond their usual meanings in
some places, to erode them away in
others, thereby creating a wholly origi
nal vocabulary that conveys the fullness
of his perceptions.

Tagger signatures surf red and black
across the wall, fearless, dense lines
that conch and muscle so intimately
I can’t tell one name from the other.

In Di Piero’s work, things perform
actions of which we didn’t think them
possible. Yet he transforms matter with
out making it unreal, without veering
off into the realm of symbolism or sur
realism. Instead, it’s as if he reveals a
truer, more potent reality beneath the
world of objects in which most of us
live. Reading his work, one is electrified
by the sense of sheer potentiality, like
some undiscovered fifth or sixth dimen
sion, brimming beneath the surfaces of
things.

A painter—or perhaps sculptural—
poet (he also works as an art critic, in
prose), Di Piero is drawn toward hu
man subjects, which he approaches
with a realistic technique, framed like a
nerve at its edges. His most common
mode is portraiture; he likes to portray
city-dwellers, the city itself, and,
as much as he fits into these scenes, him
self. His figures appear in attitudes of
passion, blessed and doomed to revela
tion and confusion by the caprice of
powers beyond their control—God (or
God’s absence), pop culture, democra
cy, jazz, lust, and, not least, artistic
inspiration. While, by a cold count, the
speakers in Chinese Apples shadowed by
melancholy outnumber those illu
mined by Bliss, Di Piero’s palate is not
one of blacks and greys. Melancholy, as
it is commonly conceived—as flatness,
inertia, colorlessness—cannot describe
his characters’ various states of pain,
which seem to result from inhabiting too
much of the world rather than having
lost the life sucked out of them. If he
favors any one color, it is deep red, the
color of flesh reduced to its element,
and of amore, the love that dies with
the flesh.

Di Piero’s own life has provided
material of unusually varied textures,
and his earliest poems incorporate
what seem to be the most unwieldy
material imaginable: the potent, even
murderous dysfunctions of South
Pitt’s lounge lizards, jailbirds, carines,
and other all-around lost causes. Yet
it’s hard to imagine a poet, particularly
a young one, handling such material
more confidently. Di Piero delivers his
characters whole, without a trace of
judgment, in cagey, loose iambics that
allow both wistful incredulity—

Pino the lizen in his patent leather shoe
stores college none of us ever heard of,
though he told us at least a dozen times,
Pinam, you dope. It’s French.

—and seamless soundwork:

Sally may be trucking through pine barrens
or selling ta to Carmen Puerto Ricans.

Most impressive, maybe, is the way in
which he refuses the distance of
intellectualization—how dirty he’s willing
to get. In “Jewana Got Gypped,” a
flamboyant hobo rumored to have
a hovel full of jewels haunt the neigh
borhood with a shopping cart, tawling
for more treasure. Jewana is both
mythical and terribly familiar, so famil
iar that any identification with him
must be assiduously resisted.

He hates us more than we hate ourselves.
Ma, strong's! I'll punch you little fucker faces and fry your balls for breakfast.
Then you'll see who got gapped! We like him, but we're afraid of his craziness. He's not us.
When he's mad his neck turns to raw meat and his jaw is a coyote. He's not us.

Throughout Di Piero's work, South Philadelphia is the spring to which he must return and from which he must drink in order to restore his strength: the place where the water, however dark, runs clear. While a few of his Philly poems are coiled by nostalgia, their main energy is aesthetic and, I would suggest, spiritual. The city is the source of the poet's first visions and, by returning to it, he performs an act of devotion. In "To My Old City," a poem from the late Eighties, he heartily proclaims:

You're still there in the spectral impress, the pled grid of trucks and buses, diesel fume and bloodpoop streaked on wet streets, cars being evening papers from the black newsstand.

A decade later, in "Add Salt," he shows us that his gaze has never really strayed: "Here again are pied scrapmental cubes / and racked junkers freaked by light / and here I am again trying to say / what I see." His poems about street people mark another faithful return. Whether between the two rather dry extremes of sardonicity and a realism tainted by belief, Di Piero is drawn to Calibans, characters who, betrayed time and again by language, still can't give it up. It's no accident that these figures are also the most porous, the most permeated, the most infected by the swarm of noise and garbage that imperils any contemporary attempt to hold onto reality.

A poet who is utterly immersed in contemporary life, who condemns and enjoys it equally, yet who is also preoccupied by the forms, the stories, and the language of religious early Catholicism—W. S. Di Piero suggests that there is some fertile ground (or at least resolved into peace). It is Di Piero's delight which defines him, and in which he invests his whole passion. It's interesting that, while in his art criticism Di Piero has written about a great variety of painters and sculptors (and most ardently about artists like Giacometti, who he calls "the least devout of men"), when visual art figures into his poems, it is usually art of a religious nature. As one flips through the pages of Chinese Apples, the names jump out: Carpaccio, Tintoretto, Filippino, Caravaggio. There are two or three exceptions—a note about Cézanne here, Vermeer there—but overwhelmingly Di Piero's imagination is populated, and colored by, the drama of the Italian Catholic soul, all of that lush flesh it wears and the harsh

Shomie Tominu, Okinawan Victim of the Atomic Bomb Explosion in Hiroshima, 1969

I tell him I want the life princes have, not how the night sky's millions of departing stars, erased by city lights, terrify me toward God.

Feeney tells the jumpy young man that he doesn't have the call, then sends him back into the world, where, denied an officially religious vision, the poet has a worldly one:

On the subway home I found a Golgotha air of pine and smoke, sleepy workers, Cuban missiles dropping in their evening papers, and black people huddled down by cops or stretched by dogs. What was I running from? Deity flashed on the razor a boy beside me waggled, anstroke the hair of the nurse who licked to kiss her rosary. I believed the wall's filthy cracks, coming into focus

when we stopped, held stories I'd find and tell.

Though the scenery of the subway ride may have changed since Father Feeney turned him out (these days Di Piero's passengers are more likely to be fondling iPod earbuds than razors or rosaries), the apprehension of "Deity" that lands him on that train—and which, in its retreat, exposes the extra-sensory membrane through which he receives the world—is still a provocation for the poems, and therefore, for the poet, still worth believing in.

But, in the end, is art itself actually something we can believe in? Or to put it another way: is art like Di Piero's, whose only purpose seems to be to emulate experience, really enough for anxious contemporary readers like us, who need so many assurances in order to live? Di Piero's work answers with a shy, happily fatalistic shrug, shirking any label we might try to affix to it.

Yet, strangely, amazingly, this book reveals no trace of the shape-shifter either. We sense the poems issuing out of some adamantine center, some conviction which makes them, inimitably, Di Piero's own, and also endows them with a definite (if indefinable) moral authority.

If that center is anything more than a fundamental belief in the poetry and in the poet's own ability to accurately—and beautifully—present the reality he perceives, I would venture that it is a belief in experience itself. While Di Piero doesn't see our lives as necessarily good, and while he doesn't see much possibility of redemption on earth (or in death), he does believe that living is ultimately worthwhile—even, as the title Chinese Apples suggests, sweet.

And so, despite the fact that this book exposes us to more than our fair share of turmoil, and though it offers no balm for its author's wounds or our own, the sense that we have upon finishing it is not one of wretchedness and despair, but of vitality and accomplishment. In reading Di Piero's work, we admire not only the art of the poems themselves, but the risk that they take by totally committing themselves to the life they convey.

There is something uncanny—one wants to say miraculous—in how a rendering of life as accurate, as real, and as unconsoling as that which we find in Chinese Apples makes us more avid to live, more alive if it exists, more existence, is all that we truly desire.