

# THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

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The Art of Mere Existence

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

Review by: Danielle Chapman

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“Typical contributors to *The Threepenny Review* are poet-critics like W. S. Di Piero, J. D. McClatchy, Robert Pinsky—writers who, if they’re in the academy, are not of it. The rare contribution by a scholarly expert is generally in a lighter, more personal mode, such as Stephen Greenblatt’s meditation on why we travel...If *The Threepenny Review* has a political slant, it is not a pronounced one. Left-liberal, certainly, intrigued by ethnicity but suspicious of separatist tendencies, its politics could probably best be described as cosmopolitan.”

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### A Note on the Artworks

Documenting war was one of photography’s earliest endeavors. From the very beginning, these images were created with a mixture of political, commercial, and journalistic intentions. When Matthew B. Brady dragged his equipment to the first engagement of the American Civil War, it was just two decades after the daguerreotype had been unveiled in France in 1839. As the conflict was protracted, the enterprising Brady assembled a team of photographers—among them Andrew J. Russell and Alexander Gardner—to publish a visual account of the war. In the 1860s, the collodion or wet-plate process of making pictures was laborious, often demanding two sets of hands to set up the camera and prepare the chemicals, and always requiring extensive time. Photographers thus had to turn their eye to the dead, the devastated landscapes, and to soldiers at rest. A few of the more inventive documenters, like Roger Fenton, were known to recreate battle scenes, but even his images suggest a ghostly, painted stillness.

Over the course of the twentieth century, photography gained a spontaneity that matched—and witnessed—the steady advance of warfare technology. Lighter, faster, more mobile cameras followed bombers up into the air and soldiers into combat, often in the hands of enlisted photographers like Edward Steichen and Elliot Erwitt. If images of battle retained a certain grandeur, however, the effects of war were also exposed by photographers such as Shomei Tomatsu and Susan Meiselas, who used their cameras to document the scars war leaves on entire communities, as well as the human rights issues that arise in times of violence.

We’d like to thank the photography department at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for assembling these images and making them available to us. For further information about SFMOMA’s collection, please visit online at [sfmoma.org](http://sfmoma.org) or write to SFMOMA, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, California 94103.

## BOOKS

### The Art of Mere Existence

Danielle Chapman

**Chinese Apples:  
New and Selected Poems**  
by W. S. Di Piero.  
Knopf, 2007,  
\$26.95 cloth.

THE IDEA that writing, especially poetry, is meant to emulate experience, 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 does not pretend to have any other purpose. His poems are tactile, imbued with color, and often uncomfortably realistic. Many of them give the impression, like a piece of figurative painting or sculpture, of some chunk of life that has been mercilessly broken off and refigured on the page. The pain that it takes to do this—to suffer experience into form—is the filament that ignites Di Piero’s temperament and which sizzles 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 loveliness jitter 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 dissonance to reflect 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 Masaccio’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 original 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 capable. Yet he transforms matter without making it unreal, without veering off into the realm of symbolism or surrealism. 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 dimension, brimming beneath the surfaces of things.

A painterly—or perhaps sculptural—poet (he also works as an art critic, in prose), Di Piero is drawn toward human subjects, which he approaches with a realistic technique, frayed 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, himself. His figures appear in attitudes of passion, blessed and doomed to revelation and confusion by the caprice of powers beyond their control—God (or God’s absence), pop culture, democracy, jazz, lust, and, not least, artistic inspiration. While, by a cold count, the speakers in *Chinese Apples* shadowed by melancholy outnumber those illumined 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 imbibing too much of the world rather than having had 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 would seem to be the most unwieldy material imaginable: the potent, even murderous dysfunctions of South Philly’s lounge lizards, jailbirds, carnies, 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 iambs that allow both wise-guy incredulity—

Pino the lizard in his patent leather shoes  
wears cologne none of us ever heard of,  
though he’s told us at least a dozen times,  
*Pinaud, you dopes. It’s French.*

—and seamless sound-work:

Sally may be trucking through pine barrens  
or selling taffy to Camden 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 haunts the neighborhood with a shopping cart, trawling for more treasure. Jewana is both mythical and terribly familiar, so familiar that any identification with him must be assiduously resisted:

He hates us more than we hate ourselves.

*Ma va, stronzini!*  
*I'll punch you little fucker faces and fry*  
*your balls for breakfast.*  
*Then you'll see who got gypped!* 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 cozied 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

it's a modern-day Hermes at Port Authority or a reincarnation of Jewana, 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.

AS 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 religion—particularly Catholicism—W. S. Di Piero suggests that there is some fertile ground

(or at least resolved into peace). It is Di Piero's doubt 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 compelled, and colored by, the drama of the Italian Catholic soul, all of that lush flesh it wears and the harsh

I tell him I want the life priests 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 piss and smoke,  
 sleepy workers, Cuban missiles drooping  
 in their evening papers, and black people  
 hosed down by cops or stretched by dogs.  
 What was I running from? Deity flashed  
 on the razor a boy beside me wagged,  
 it stroked the hair of the nurse who waked  
 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 an 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 sly, 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 adamant 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 one person's 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, as if existence, mere existence, is all that we truly desire. □



Shomei Tomatsu, *Okinawan Victim of the Atomic Bomb Explosion in Hiroshima*, 1969

devotion. In "To My Old City," a poem from the late Eighties, he heartily proclaims:

You're still there in the spectral impress,  
 the plied grid of trucks and buses,  
 diesel fume and bloodspoor streaked  
 on wet streets, cars biting 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 scrapmetal 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 sardonic atheism and blithe belief. Anyone who is mostly familiar with his recent work, with its addled desires, its "viral fingertips" and "feverish veins," its hopped-up hankering for the purely secular products of American culture—"pomegranate seed ball / bearings agleam in her nose" or "overdub[bed] hip-hop shouts"—will be surprised by how prominently Christianity figures into this *Selected*. Yet it wouldn't be quite right to call Di Piero a religious artist. He's not a believer, and his poems are not—as they were for George Herbert (or are for, say, W. S. Merwin)—moments of doubt offered up to God (or nothingness) with the hope of being saved through inspiration

shadows cast upon it. He's drawn to these painters—and to the characters, like Augustine and St. Francis, whom they often depict—more for their extremity than their piety, perhaps. Yet, occasionally, the poet's ever-present longing erupts into a fervor that is decisively non-secular, as in "Near Damascus," where he imagines himself as Saul being converted to Paul in Caravaggio's painting, "rousted, found out, blasted, saved / down in the road's pearly filth." At the very least, Christian belief provides for Di Piero an analogy to poetic inspiration.

In the recent poem "The Kiss," Di Piero's speaker makes this analogy literal, recalling a youthful visit to one Father Feeney: