

# CHICAGO REVIEW

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Isa the Truck Named Isadore* by Amanda Nadelberg

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into the oblivion of an empty lot. The brain is stimulated, not benumbed, by the superabundance of public transportation route references, digital clock-face blinkers, and brands of cigarettes smoked. This is no soft elegy—this is a muscular celebration of the city as the supreme place to practice observation, to distinguish between enemies and allies, and to get some determined grip on reality. For all its humdrum meditations on emptiness, *Nine* emerges as an ode—like Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge”—to the city as the place where the silent and bare, once perceived by the artist, becomes blaringly full.

Joshua Baldwin

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Amanda Nadelberg, *Isa the Truck Named Isadore*. Raymond, NH: Slope Editions, 2006. 94pp. \$14.95

Amanda Nadelberg’s first book comprises sixty-three poems, each of which takes its title from a dictionary of first names. The second poem, “Albert,” has the most conventional name in the book; the rest read like a grab bag of oddities culled from the attendance lists of a progressive preschool: Blodwen, Ceridwen, and Rhonwen from the Welsh; Elijah, Enoch, and Naomi from the Old Testament; Ferdinand, Leander, and Xavier from history and the classics; Dottie, Myrtle, and Nan from your grandmother’s bridge table; Helmet, Pancrazio, and Wilberforce, the requisite head-scratchers.

Nadelberg’s poems are jokey and hip like much contemporary poetry. Indeed, *Isa the Truck Named Isadore* is a charming book. This is not a quality that should be underestimated. Charm is a powerful weapon in social relations: it is a way of getting people to do what you want. And, at their best, these charming poems are didactic in a way that most contemporary poetry is not. Their didacticism is most effectively aimed at pretension—in particular the familiar pretension that jokey and hip is all that poetry needs to be. Pleasing your readers is one thing; getting them to criticize their own pleasure is another. When Nadelberg can do both in the same poem, her work is sharp. Consider “Geraldine”:

Today is not a day to be pregnant.  
The environs are such that  
anything could result in an  
anti-pregnancy. The air  
pressure makes a  
fetus impossible. On  
airplanes especially. Once,

I was driving, trying not to  
get pregnant in Missouri and  
the billboard this one billboard  
in northern Missouri almost  
Iowa said if you think you're  
fat now, wait until you're  
pregnant. For the most part  
the roads there are for  
truckers who all go home  
and tell their wives and  
girlfriends and daughters.  
I went home I am not  
a trucker and I laughed  
at Missouri and Iowa for  
where they are. A face and  
its big belly a big belly in  
the middle of the country.  
Missouri is always pregnant.

Like most of the poems in *Isadore*, this one straddles the line between humor and pathos. The poem starts with a reasonable enough statement—who would contradict it? Nadelberg, however, extends the statement until it sounds like a travel advisory: “The environs are such that / anything could result in an / anti-pregnancy. The air/ pressure makes a / fetus impossible. On / airplanes especially.” These lines are meant to be funny, but also pathetic: if we laugh, it's because we're not worried about the possibility of Geraldine's unwanted pregnancy. Real pregnancy, it seems, has nothing to do with anything.

The riffs on pregnancy continue as the speaker passes a sign on the highway: “if you think you're / fat now, wait until you're / pregnant.” Other drivers might laugh at the joke, but not this one; she doesn't laugh until she makes it safely home: “I went home I am not / a trucker and I laughed / at Missouri and Iowa for / where they are. A face and / it's big belly a big belly in / the middle of the country. / Missouri is always pregnant.” Our speaker doesn't laugh at the roadside joke; she laughs because she doesn't have to worry about being a trucker (or a trucker's pregnant daughter, girlfriend, or wife). In her mind, the joke is on “Missouri and Iowa for / where they are.”

The question is, how much should *we* be laughing? “Today is not a day to be pregnant” is funny because in the context of the lines that follow it is absurd, but it is also sad because in the absence of that context it is true. “Missouri is always pregnant” isn't just a witty riposte to a crass billboard; it's hyperbole that accurately points to the unending importance of abortion politics in a swing state. The last eight years have proven that there is nothing even remotely funny about this. “Geraldine” undermines the authority of

its speaker, which makes it a traditional exercise in dramatic irony; it goes further when it criticizes the predictably self-satisfied response that this irony is supposed to provoke. This poem does not just make us laugh—it makes us cringe at our own laughter.

This is deft work and a high point in the book. Many of the other poems don't make it this far, remaining satisfied in their mix of laughter and poignancy, leaving readers amused or saddened but unscathed. Nadelberg's style might have something to do with this. Her language is mostly transparent. We see right through it, and we often see the same thing: a gee-whiz take on contemporary America.

Often, but not always. Some poems gain depth through syntactic complexity. But Nadelberg is a fundamentally rhetorical poet—in the sense that her better poems are attempts at persuasion modeled on speech—and so the most interesting moments in her book are those in which speakers and characters try to justify themselves. Here is “Daisy”:

I have brown hair and when I was  
little I swam a whole lot on a team and  
all the chlorine would make my hair so  
light in the summer people called it  
dirty blonde and I was. For years, I've been  
keeping a tally of my showers. Many showers  
for many years. People may think it's  
strange but some people think about  
their mothers while they're plowing  
some lady and that's worse. Don't  
you think all of us keep tally  
of something? Light bulbs, sexes,  
ice creams, episodes, houses, stars.  
Let Daisy be in her little white dress on  
a big blue lawn it doesn't really  
matter what she's doing.

The tone and the prosody here are familiar, as is the joke. (Nadelberg is usually good for at least one laugh per poem, sometimes more.) But what is “Daisy” actually about? Here the question of subject matter is implicated in another, more venerable question—“What's in a name?”—and answering the latter question goes some distance toward answering the former, but *only* some. Daisy, as it happens, is a name with a serious literary pedigree: *Daisy Miller* comes to mind, as does Daisy Buchanan, of *The Great Gatsby* (from whose closing pages Nadelberg swipes the lovely image of the blue lawn); one Daisy is a victim of society and the other complicit in its corruption, but, despite being nominally rich, neither has what the men around them do, that

is, freedom to shape her circumstances. The final lines allude poignantly to the symmetry of this predicament: “Let Daisy be in her little white dress on / a big blue lawn it doesn’t really / matter what she’s doing.”

Read exclusively through the lens of its literary allusions, then, “Daisy”, would appear to be a poem about the capacity for action—but whose? The poem isn’t spoken by one of our literary Daisies, or even someone else named Daisy (unless we imagine the speaker referring to herself in the third person at the conclusion). The “I” of the beginning speaks to the “us” of the middle about the way certain things happen (“all the chlorine would make my hair so / light”), about our fragile process of self-justification (People may think it’s / strange but...”), and about our attempts at convincing ourselves of our own reasonableness and normalcy (“Don’t / you think all of us keep tally / of something?”). “Daisy”, then, is not just about the capacity for action or the lack thereof. It is about fantasy, particularly the fantasy of a middle-class American girl to imagine that her own private experiences are what actually “matters”—“For years I’ve been / keeping a tally of my showers. Many showers / for many years”—and the capacity of a middle-class American poet to dramatize and thus ironize this claim. When the speaker of “Daisy” insists that that it doesn’t really matter what Daisy the character is doing on her big blue lawn, she both notes the character’s servitude and extols her freedom to keep tally of whatever she wants. It is an important and uncomfortable moment for a book whose roll call of names is something of a tally itself, and it comes very close to implying that there is little at stake in this attempt at poetic invention *besides* the ephemera of private pleasure. This is self-criticism at its most bracing.

V. Joshua Adams

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Dan Machlin, *Dear Body*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2007. 104pp. \$15

Do you read first books differently than books by established poets? Hoping for something truly new, I nonetheless find myself settling for “promise” or “potential.” Such lowered expectations protect against the disappointment that comes from recognizing a first book as yet another example of a period style, at best a fresh minting of the common coin. But bracing for compromise has other effects as well: when a great first book actually arrives, it entralls.

The poems in the long first section of Dan Machlin’s debut collection *Dear Body* are a case in point. Even though the epistolary form is a popular poetic contrivance, and the mind/body problem is older than Descartes’ *Meditations*, Machlin wields both in ways so timeless *and* so intensely con-