

Book Reviews

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I Hear Their Voices Singing

Cortney Davis
Antrim House, Bloomfield, CT.
July 6, 2020, 194 pages



2nd Chance

Daniel Becker
New Issues Poetry and Prose
November 26, 2020, 72 pages

Reviewed by Johanna Shapiro, PhD

Cortney Davis, the author of *I Hear Their Voices Singing*, is a nurse, and Daniel Becker, the author of *2nd Chance*, is a physician. The commonalities and distinctions of their poetry are likely rooted in these professional realities.

Given the similarity of their professional backgrounds, many of the themes the poets address at the deepest levels are comparable. Both are committed to healing—their patients, and themselves. Both are attuned to the omnipresence of suffering and death. Ultimately, both poets adopt a somewhat similar position from which to contemplate their surroundings. Their stance is compassionate yet detached. They look at the world with complete honesty and clarity and do not turn away from what they see.

This resemblance is hinted at in the titles of the collections. Becker's *2nd Chance* implies that the first chance has already been taken and come to nothing. But, beyond the despair of this failure is the comforting idea that everyone deserves another opportunity at life, to finally get it right. In similar fashion, when Davis writes that *I Hear Their Voices Singing*, she finds the possibility of song rising from the rubble of life, but only after witnessing the prodigious suffering of one body after another.

The poetic style exemplified in each anthology is, by contrast, distinctive. Becker crafts long form poetry of association. Leonardo da Vinci observed that, "Everything connects to everything else," and Becker seems to have taken this insight to heart. Reading his work requires patience and erudition (or easy access to Google). The poems are long and driven by associative thinking. One image leads to another; one word

1 triggers another. Often the thoughts and allusions evoke
2 classic works of literature, music, art, and philosophy.
3 They involve dogs, cholesterol levels, love birds, catheters,
4 and coffins. Becker is a master juggler of image and allu-
5 sion. He is an expert weaver holding the variegated threads
6 without ever entangling or knotting them.

7 Skimming Becker's poems, one is initially tempted to
8 sink into bafflement. How can these apparently disparate
9 things (goals of care, piano movers, faith, *Dance of the*
10 *Marionettes*, Alfred Hitchcock, *Dante's Inferno*, pressure
11 sores, Liberace, the "Book of Job," Medicare loopholes,
12 and hugging) aggregate in the same poem, each making a
13 Hitchcockian cameo? Readers quickly discover that each
14 element is there for a reason; with patience, each reappears
15 to explain itself.

16 In their randomness, Becker's poems are unnervingly
17 like life. They unspool, they meander; and hidden in the
18 ordinariness of events are occasional little droplets of
19 wisdom.

20 There is no grammar for these poems; there is no way
21 of diagramming them. They are arbitrary, like life, yet if
22 readers look closely they can catch glimpses of underly-
23 ing meaning and connection. While everything in these
24 poems just seems to happen, one thing after another, there
25 is a recurring unity.

26 By contrast, Davis is a structured and specific poet of
27 moments. The collection's organization is highly inten-
28 tional, arranged around the theme of "voices," a way to pay
29 respect to each of the scenes she elevates. Davis excels in
30 capturing a specific incident, a moment in time, and then
31 drilling down to develop the image in unexpected and
32 profound ways. She believes in the power and multiplicity
33 of voices; and she ensures that the reader pays attention to
34 the voices she has heard throughout her career.

35 The idea of "Voices of Healing" bookends the collec-
36 tion; and comparing the poems at the start and the end
37 suggests the maturing of Davis' understanding of what
38 nursing and healing are all about, as she evolves from a
39 young nursing student into a grandmother leaving her
40 beloved clinic.

41 Davis goes on to write about "Desire," "Suffering," and
42 "Faith" showing that all of the voices she has encountered
43 throughout her career are singing, no matter the often
44 anguished content of their song.

45 If Becker's signature motif is the accidental connected-
46 ness of everything, Davis's is the body. Much of Davis' po-
47 etry is deeply rooted in "Details of the Flesh." She is always
48 aware of the body, its skin, its heart, its fluids, its smells
49 and what it feels like in her hands. She never loses sight
of the fact that nursing is rooted in physicality, physical

1 sensation, touching, bathing, lifting, turning, stroking, and
2 holding.

3 Davis knows that humans are embodied creatures,
4 and that many of the sources of our suffering are fixed
5 in the frailties and imperfections of the body—as are our
6 pleasures. She loves the body, and sometimes she hates
7 the body. The body burns, it drowns in its own fluids, it
8 undergoes assault, it decays and rots, and humans suffer,
9 sometimes endure, and sometimes die. At the end of the
10 day, both she and her patients understand “that the flesh
11 is everything” (“The Nurse’s Task”).

12 Many of Becker’s poems are written with a keen sense
13 of the precarity of existence, waiting for that “asteroid out
14 of nowhere” that will blot out carefree existence (“Joint
15 National Commissions Galore”). Existential questions
16 loom large in his writing and the chill of mortality is om-
17 nipresent. In “Christmas Bird Count,” Becker reflects that,
18 no matter what happens, we naively believe “we’ll be per-
19 fect again in the morning”—the hubris or hope that allows
20 us to go on living in a world of suffering and risk.

21 “Reading MiddleBrow Cosmology” combines reflec-
22 tions on cosmology, geometry, and Hebrew interspersed
23 with a wandering cat on the narrator’s chest while ponder-
24 ing, “...like Leibniz why something/rather than nothing...”
25 In between the cat’s steps, Becker searches the interstices
26 of light and darkness, meaning and emptiness.

27 The subject of death infuses a good many of Becker’s
28 poems. “Security Questions,” considers a patient’s death,
29 his mother’s death, and a couple preparing for the wife’s
30 death. Becker concludes that, “tragedy is failed comedy,”

31 In “Bulkheads,” a friend in remission tries to calculate if
32 he has enough time before dying to teach the narrator how
33 to roll a kayak, thus raising the unanswerable question of
34 what do we do with the time we have left. “In Memoriam,
35 has a busy doctor attending the funeral service of a patient.
36 He is thanked by the survivors, but the patient is dead,
37 so what exactly are they thanking him for? This poem
38 acknowledges how difficult it is for physicians to find self-
39 forgiveness for not being able to defy death.

40 “Swimming with John’s Ghost” imagines going swim-
41 ming with a long-time friend who has just died. They
42 exchange well-worn aphorisms and banter back and forth.
43 The narrator tells his dead friend to “get real” although of
44 course he never will.

45 Davis too feels the contingency of life. In “Late
46 Afternoon Nap,” as the narrator and her husband drift
47 into sleep, they “hope all hunters are lost,/ all predators
48 too full to bother.”

49 Though she tries to hide, the narrator of “Almost Fifty”

1 knows death lurks: “Death is in the meadows and the
2 fields.” In “Taking Care of Time” the narrator decides to
3 cherish each moment, although the sky is dark and omi-
4 nous. Death and dying (or not dying) capture her curiosity,
5 sometimes her admiration, and often her compassion.

6 Davis explores the prospect that death, as well as
7 birth, may be a beginning, an opening into possibility.
8 Sometimes Eros and Thanatos are inextricably intertwined
9 in the same poem—death and desire become inseparable,
10 each seeking a kind of liberation. In witnessing her first
11 death, (“Surgical Rotation”), as “death like a building fell”
12 Davis feels “hard desire,” pleading “...let this be, let this be,
13 let this be my life’s work.”

14 In “The Barking Dog,” as the patient succumbs, visitors
15 and passers-by wonder, “Why doesn’t someone/bring in
16 that dog?” When the barking stops, “everyone is relieved,”
17 fantasizing that the dog “was taken to a farm/and set free.”
18 The poem reminds us how much we misunderstand death,
19 willfully do not wish to know it, and are pleased when
20 it disappears. Only the nurses are mindful, every nurse
21 knows/the story/of the barking dog.”

22 In “Stoned,” Davis admits the futility of keeping death
23 at bay, “... we nurses with our flimsy cures/pushed every
24 chair against her door/ to keep death out.” But they can’t,
25 as their patient, Marion, dies high and hungry. In the face
26 of death, Davis is powerless, “I don’t like when it’s over/
27 and I realize/I know nothing” (“What the Nurse Likes”).
28 Yet, in the presence of her dying patients, the nurse cannot
29 be “frightened away.” The nurse simply stays (“The Body
30 Flute”), wondering whether, “as if somehow because I stay/
31 they are free to go” (“I Want to Work in a Hospital”).


32 In the process of scattering a friend’s ashes, Davis real-
33 izes that while she studied, “...How a nurse/might help the
34 body live/...our hardest lesson—when to let the body die”
35 (“Scattering Her Ashes”).

36 Becker’s poems also consider his relationship with his
37 patients. In “Home Visit” he contemplates the strange
38 alchemy that occurs when he walks into someone’s home,
39 someone’s life. Another poem explores how an exchange
40 of erudition, a disagreement, and a shared brandy dimin-
41 ish the essential loneliness that exists between doctor and
42 patient (“Twilight”). Becker’s mind often wanders during
43 clinical encounters, seeking kinder, more fertile ground
44 where he can make sense of an often nonsensical and cruel
45 world.

46 In “Goals of Care,” Becker contemplates how best to
47 send his patient home to die, while simultaneously pursu-
48 ing his larger goal of speculating on the unrelenting na-
49 ture of the unfairness of the universe, which he compares

1 unflatteringly to “a stiff prostate.” After fruitlessly attempt-
2 ing to sort the medicine and the philosophy, the humanity
3 of the relationship emerges in exchanging a medically risky
4 but emotionally satisfying hug with the patient.

5 Becker grapples with the job of a doctor. Is it to keep
6 track of the pills, to ask about the patient’s life, to listen as
7 the patient describes how he learns his ex has died sud-
8 denly and he is all alone (“Last Day”)? After the death of
9 a challenging patient, the doctor discovers all he has left
10 is prayer for the patient, her long-suffering family, her
11 hoarder house, and the strays she collected (“Even After
12 Retiring”).

13 The poem, “What I Like About Gout” echoes Tolsto 
14 “Hapless doctors are each hapless in different ways.”
15 Becker goes on to ask rhetorically, “How do we salvage our
16 sinking hearts?” in the face of the despair and indignities
17 inflicted on patients in the modern health care system.

18 “This Is Not a Drill” showcases the diligence of a doc-
19 tor during an earthquake drill that turns out to be the real
20 thing. The intrepid physician keeps seeing his patients (on
21 time!) in the parking lot. It is a funny and heartbreaking
22 metaphor for the impossibility yet necessity of practicing
23 medicine in a world gone mad.

24 An important theme for Davis as well is the nurse-
25 patient relationship. In “What the Nurse Likes,” she con-
26 fesses that patient care is “... like owning them.” She likes
27 telling patients what to do (although she also likes it when
28 patients don’t do what she tells them).

29 Many of Davis’ poems reflect detachment and connec-
30 tion, which seems to reflect Davis’ way of managing the
31 suffering that she observes daily. She feels a fierce loyalty
32 toward her patients derived from the physical intimacy
33 they share. In “The Body Flute,” she writes, “The doctor
34 and his theory/never owned you.” The nurse is the one
35 who walks with the patient, who washes the body, who
36 holds the hand and who accompanies them to the morgue.

37 The nurses who cared for Davis during a personal
38 health incident (“Blood Clot”) inspire her vision of care.“...
39 I vowed/ I would always love their way: Fierce./Physical!”
40 “Entering the Patient’s Room” shows her intrepid commit-
41 ment to each patient, as she enjoins herself to “Remain
42 steadfast,/...Let her mind and her body be all that matters.”

43 These two poets reveal that everything is connected to
44 everything: patients to their healers, nurses and doctors
45 to their patients, the living to those long dead, desires to
46 fears, and the butterfly’s flapping wing to a raging typhoon.
47 But, it is only because the butterfly has wings, attached to
48 its insignificant butterfly body, that these cosmic linkages
49 persist.

1 Becker and Davis take unique, sometimes idiosyncratic
2 paths, but their unique visions always express steadfast
3 solidarity with their fellow imperfect, suffering humans.
4 To enhance understanding of the human condition, to
5 ignite compassion, to laugh a little louder and cry a little
6 harder, we owe it to ourselves to forge an embodied con-
7 nection with these books, savoring their heartbreaking
8 beauty and courage with all our senses alert and engaged.

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