

BECKER SECOND CHANCE

In this review, I consider two collections of poetry simultaneously and attempt to put them in dialogue with each other. They are both similar and very, very different compilations. The author of one is a nurse, the author of the other is a doctor. Nurses, as Cortney Davis has pointed out elsewhere, write poetry that differs from that of physicians because it is more embodied, more likely to emanate directly from the bedside.

In *2nd Chance*, Becker explores what we might call long form associational poetry. Reading his work requires patience and erudition. The poems are long (not epic, but still, *long*) and they are highly associational. One thought leads to another, one word triggers another. Often the thoughts and allusions evoke classic texts, music, art, and philosophy. Just as often they involve dogs, cholesterol levels, love birds, catheters and coffins. Becker is a master juggler of image and allusion, who keeps all his balls in the air. Or maybe he is an expert weaver, holding the threads without ever entangling or knotting them.

Skimming these poems, one is tempted to say huh? How do these seemingly disparate things (goals of care, piano movers, faith, *Dance of the Marionettes*, Alfred Hitchcock, Dante's *Inferno*, pressure sores, Liberace, the Book of Job, Medicare loopholes, hugging and so much more) drop in (like a Hitchcockian cameo) to the same poem? But we quickly discover each element is there for a reason; each element reappears to explain itself.

Becker's poems are uncomfortably like life. They unspool, they meander; and hidden in the ordinariness of events are little droplets of wisdom. In "Christmas Bird Count," the poem begins by recounting a bird he sees while interviewing for a job long in the past; then moves on to a description of what the count is like, then moves again into questions of faith, plantations, manifest destiny, white fragility, anti-Semitism and racism, *Moby Dick* and *dialectical materialism*. There is no grammar for these poems, there is no way of diagramming them. They are random, like life, yet if we look hard enough we can catch glimpses of an underlying meaning and connection. While everything in these poems just seems to happen, one thing after another, (not unlike life), there is a recurring unity (which we can only pray is true for life as well).

The poem "Like All Perfect Strangers" shows us that Becker is acutely aware of what he is doing craftily with his craft, as he writes ironically about *Middlemarch* (which of course has its own pretentious do-gooder physician in tow) and its lengthy efforts to get to the point. But of course what is the point – of a poem, or really, when we think about it, of anything? "Perfect Strangers" meanders along, taking time to reflect on anatomy and dog labs (*Middlemarch* also has its own long-suffering dog), eventually winding its way to working with patients across language and culture, which like everything else in this poem stands both for itself and for something ever more vast – what it's like crossing into strange lands - like disease, like *Middlemarch*, like death. And in the process, almost as an afterthought, the poem acknowledges that the vulnerability of Spanish-speaking patients echoes the vulnerability we all share, the fragility of the world, all we don't know.

One of Becker's themes is the value of listening – to music, to patients, to hearts – and in each kind of listening, he finds “worlds beyond our threshold” (“Among the Deep Listeners in Listening 101”). In another piece, “We’re Talking About What to Look For When Listening,” the poem travels from the act of listening to nonverbal cues, Sapho, blackberries, Norwegian conference attendees, memory assessment, and dogs' liquid eyes, all to make the point that it is through listening that we discover meaning for ourselves and bring meaning to others.

Many of these poems are written with a keen sense of the precariousness of existence, how we're all waiting for that “asteroid out of nowhere” that will blot out our seemingly ordered, carefree existence (“Joint National Commissions Galore”). The existential questions loom large. The chill of mortality is omnipresent. Escape is impossible even for physicians, because there is no difference between doctors and patients (reflecting the sobering syllogism in Tolstoy's *“The Death of Ivan Illitch*, a work of literature surprisingly not cited by Becker, that since all men die, and Caius is a mortal, Caius will die). This poem acknowledges that doctors and patients both yearn for happy endings and avoid confronting the inevitability of death. In “Christmas Bird Count” Becker takes the long view on the craziness of our civilization “...that kills for sport, plays tackle football, and reveres camo.” “Reading MiddleBrow Cosmology” combines reflections on cosmology, geometry, and Hebrew interspersed with a wandering cat on the narrator's chest while pondering “...like Leibniz why something/rather than nothing....” In between the cat's steps, Becker searches the interstices of light and darkness, meaning and emptiness.

Becker's poems often consider what he as a physician and we as fellow humans can learn from patients. In “Home Visit” he contemplates what can be learned when you walk into someone's home, someone's life, the desperation and hope of rural poverty-stricken Virginia that puts its faith in “sweet Jesus”. An exchange of erudition, an exchange of disagreement, and most of all a shared brandy cuts the essential loneliness (“Twilight”). The poet's mind often wanders in his patient encounters, seeking kinder more fertile ground where he can at last once and for all make sense and understand his patients “Goals of Care”. The poet's mind often wanders in his patient encounters, seeking kinder, more fertile ground where he can at last make sense of this random, often nonsensical and cruel world. “Goals of Care” begins ironically with the failure to thrive of a dying patient, then wrestles with how to move him home (piano movers come into play), detouring to piano teachers and the limited value of practice, then back to denial, dignity, pressure sores, catheterization, hospice, and advance directives. Somehow Dante, Hitchcock, Liberace and Job worm their way into the poem while Becker continues his larger goal of speculating on the unrelenting nature of unfairness “like a stiff prostate.” After fruitlessly attempting to sort the medicine and the philosophy, the humanity emerges in exchanging a medically risky but essential hug with the patient.

The other side of the coin is the fact of being a doctor: Becker loops around and around, swoops in and out, but ultimately he grapples with the question, what is a doctor's job? Is it to keep track of the pills; to ask about the patient's life; to listen as the patient describes how he learns his ex has died suddenly and he is all alone? Everyone is gone, and the doctor's job is to tell him, it's my last day too. In the end, we die alone (“Last Day”). In “Even After of a patient who was challenging to say the least, the doctor discovers all he has left is prayer - for the patient, her long-suffering family, her hoarder house, and the strays she collected. In “Christmas Bird Count” Becker reflects that, no matter what happens, we believe “we'll be perfect again in the morning” - the hubris or the hope that allows all of us, doctors and patients, to go on. We find a tribute to gout embedded in a lament about the limitations of healthcare and medicine: “hapless doctors are each hapless in their own ways.” (source?) (Just as, in “Like All Perfect Strangers,” he adds a variant: each patient is desperate in his

own way). He goes on to ask rhetorically, *"How do we salvage our sinking hearts?"* in the face of the despair and indignities inflicted on patients in the modern healthcare system. *"This Is Not a Drill"* ironically showcases the diligence of a doctor during an earthquake drill that turns out to be the real thing: the intrepid physician just keeps going, seeing his pts (on time!) in the parking lot, It is a funny and heartbreaking metaphor for the impossibility of life – there is no place to hide from disaster or malevolence or insanity so we keep going, hoping that the askew picture of a boat in the medical director's office will right itself, that the world will straighten out.

And of course infusing a good many of these poems is death. Trying to complete a death certificate online evokes the absurdity of passwords, usernames and security questions without which death cannot be verified. This patient's death reminds the narrator of his mother's death and shopping for a coffin made of mahogany, which ultimately circles back to the deck he is building – naturally, out of mahogany (*"Security Questions"*). In this same long poem, the narrator also presents us with a husband's matter of fact preparation for the death of his wife by building her coffin, while the wife, apparently with equal aplomb, quilts the quilt she will be buried in. The poet concludes that *"tragedy is failed comedy."* Does this mean he always looks for the (mordant) laugh amidst life's calamities; or that all attempts at laughter collapse in the face of human misfortune? In *"Bulkheads,"* a friend in remission tries to calculate if he has enough time before dying to teach the narrator how to roll in a kayak, thus raising the unanswerable question of what do we do with the time we have left. In another poem (*source?*), a busy doctor attends the funeral service of a patient. He is thanked by the survivors, but the patient is dead, so what exactly are they thanking him for? Yet that he is there, invoking the saints who have it too easy (*"...their share of suffering/is over, blame placed,/sins forgiven,/and all they have to do now/is exemplify faith and endurance"*), suggests just how hard it can be for doctors to forgive themselves for their imperfections and mistakes; as it is for all of us. Finally, *"Swimming with John's Ghost"* imagines going swimming with a friend after the friend's death. They exchange well-worn aphorisms and banter back and forth, eruditely. The narrator tells his dead friend to "get real" although of course he never will.