

## Through the Body, Everything Connects to Everything

A review of *I Hear Their Voices Singing* by Cortney Davis and *2nd Chance* by Daniel Becker

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This review considers two collections of poetry simultaneously and attempts to place them in dialogue. In some ways they are similar compilations, but in other respects differ radically from each other. Both authors are health professionals. Cortney Davis, the author of *I Hear Their Voices Singing*, is a nurse, while Daniel Becker, the author of *2<sup>nd</sup> Chance*, is a physician. The commonalities and distinctions of their poetry are likely rooted in these professional realities, as I discuss below.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the superficial similarity of their professional backgrounds, many of the themes the poets address at the deepest level are comparable. For example, both are committed to healing – their patients, 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. (Becker often has a slight smirk on his metaphorical face). This resemblance is hinted at in the titles of the collections. Becker's *2nd Chance* implies that the first chance for all of us 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 too still 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 what we might call 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 (not epic, but still, *long*) and they are driven by associative thinking. One image leads to another, one word triggers another. Often the thoughts and allusions evoke classic works of literature, 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 variegated threads without ever entangling or knotting them.

Skimming Becker's poems, one is initially tempted to sink into bafflement. How can these apparently 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) aggregate in the same poem, each making a Hitchcockian cameo? ("Goals of Care"). But we quickly discover that each element is there for a reason; with patience, each reappears to explain itself. In their randomness, Becker's poems are unnervingly like life. They unspool, they meander; and hidden in the ordinariness of events are occasional little droplets of wisdom. There is no grammar for these poems, there is no way of diagramming them. They are arbitrary, like our lives, yet if we look closely we catch glimpses of underlying meaning and connection. While everything in these poems

just seems to happen, one thing after another, there is a recurring unity (which we can only hope is true for life as well).

By contrast, Davis is a structured and specific poet of moments. The collection's organization itself is highly intentional, arranged around the theme of "voices," a way to pay respect to each of the scenes she elevates. Davis excels in capturing a specific incident, a moment in time, and then drilling down to develop the image in unexpected and profound ways. She believes in the power and multiplicity of voices; and one of her goals in this book is to ensure that we, the reader, pay attention to the voices she has heard throughout her career that others may neglect or overlook. The idea of "Voices of Healing" bookends the collection; and comparing the poems at the start and the end suggests the maturing of Davis' understanding of what nursing and healing are all about, as she evolves from a young nursing student into a grandmother leaving her clinic. As she goes on to write about "Desire," "Suffering," and "Faith" she wants to show us that all of the voices she has encountered throughout her career are singing, no matter the often anguished content of their song. She hears them, clearly, without compromise, and she wants us to hear them too.

If Becker's signature motif is the accidental connectedness of everything, Davis's is the body. Much of Davis' poetry is deeply rooted in "Details of the Flesh" (the title of one of her poems and a previous collection). She is always aware of the body, its skin, its heart, its fluids, its smell, what it feels like in her hands. She never loses sight of the fact that the work of nursing is rooted in physicality, physical sensation, touching, bathing, lifting, turning, stroking, holding. Davis knows that we are embodied creatures, and that many of the sources of our suffering are fixed in the frailties and imperfections of the body – as are our pleasures. Davis loves the body and sometimes she hates the body. The body burns, it drowns in its own fluids, it undergoes assault, it decays and rots, and the humans encased in that body suffer, sometimes endure, and sometimes die. At the end of the day, both she and her patients understand "that the flesh is everything" ("The Nurse's Task").

Many of Becker's poems are written with a keen sense of the precarity 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"). Existential questions loom large in his writing and the chill of mortality is omnipresent. In "Christmas Bird Count" Becker reflects that, no matter what happens, we naively believe "we'll be perfect again in the morning" - the hubris or hope that allows us to go on living in a world of suffering and risk. "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.

Given his attentiveness to ontological speculation, it is no surprise that the subject of death infuses a good many of Becker's poems. In the poem "Security Questions," which considers a patient's death, his mother's death, and a couple preparing for the wife's death, the poet concludes that "tragedy is failed comedy," implying that the misfortune of death is the ultimate botched joke. In "Bulkheads," a friend in remission tries to calculate if he has enough time before dying to teach the narrator how to roll a kayak, thus raising the unanswerable question of what do we do with the time we have left. In another poem ("In Memorium"), 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? This poem poignantly acknowledges how difficult it is for physicians to find self-forgiveness for not being able to defy death. Finally, "Swimming with John's Ghost" imagines going swimming with a long-time friend

who has just died. They exchange well-worn aphorisms and banter back and forth, in a donnish but affectionate sort of way. The narrator tells his dead friend to "get real" although of course he never will, because, once again, death has won.

Like Becker, Davis too feels the contingency of life. In "Late Afternoon Nap," even as the narrator and her husband drift into sleep, they "hope all hunters are lost,/ all predators too full to bother." Though she tries to hide, she knows death lurks: "Death is in the meadows and the fields" ("Almost Fifty"). In "Taking Care of Time" she decides to cherish each moment, although the sky that is supposed to shelter her is dark and ominous. Death and dying (or not dying) capture her curiosity, sometimes her admiration, and often her compassion. In the collection's very first poem, Davis explores the prospect that death as well as birth may be a beginning, an opening into possibility. Sometimes Eros and Thanatos are inextricably intertwined in the same poem – death and desire become inseparable, each seeking a kind of liberation. In witnessing her first death, ("Surgical Rotation"), as "death like a building fell" Davis feels not horror, but "hard desire," pleading "*...let this be, let this be, let this be my life's work.*" In the presence of death, she finds her life – and her life's work.

In a wonderful poem about the death rattle, "The Barking Dog," as the patient succumbs, visitors and passers-by wonder "Why doesn't someone/bring in that dog?" When the barking stops, "everyone is relieved," fantasizing that the dog "was taken to a farm/and set free." The poem reminds us how much we misunderstand death, willfully do not wish to know it, and are pleased when it disappears. Only the nurses are mindful: "every nurse knows/the story/of the barking dog." In "Stoned," Davis admits the futility of keeping death at bay: "... we nurses with our flimsy cures/pushed every chair against her door// to keep death out." But they can't, as their patient, Marion, dies high and hungry. In the face of death, Davis is powerless: "I don't like when it's over/and I realize//I know nothing" ("What the Nurse Likes"). Yet in the presence of her dying patients, the nurse cannot be "frightened away." The nurse expects nothing of them, not courage, or anger, or even a will to live. The nurse simply stays ("The Body Flute"), wondering whether "as if somehow because I stay/they are free to go" ("I Want to Work in a Hospital"). In the process of scattering a friend's ashes, she realizes that while she studied "...How a nurse/might help the body live/... our hardest lesson – when to let the body die" ("Scattering Her Ashes").

Becker's poems often consider his relationship with his patients. In "Home Visit" he contemplates the strange alchemy that occurs when you walk into someone's home, someone's life. Another poem explores how an exchange of erudition, a disagreement, and most of all a shared brandy diminish the essential loneliness that exists between doctor and patient ("Twilight"). The poet's mind often wanders during these clinical encounters, seeking kinder, more fertile ground where he can at last make sense of our often nonsensical and cruel world. In the previously cited "Goals of Care," Becker contemplates how best to send his patient home to die, while simultaneously pursuing his larger goal of speculating on the unrelenting nature of the unfairness of the universe, which he compares unflatteringly to "a stiff prostate." After fruitlessly attempting to sort the medicine and the philosophy, the essential humanity of the relationship emerges in exchanging a medically risky but emotionally satisfying hug with the patient.

Becker 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? ("Last Day"). After the death 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 (“Even After Retiring”). The poem “What I Like About Gout” echoes Tolstoy: “hapless doctors are each hapless in different ways.” Becker 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 seeing his patients (on time!) in the parking lot. It is a funny and heartbreaking metaphor for the impossibility of practicing medicine in a world gone mad. There is no place to hide from disaster or malevolence or insanity so doctors must simply carry on being doctors, hoping that the askew picture of a boat in the medical director’s office will somehow right itself, that the world will straighten out.

Similarly, an important theme for Davis is the nurse-patient relationship. She likes the power of nursing. In “What the Nurse Likes,” she confesses that patient care is “... like owning them.” She likes telling patients what to do (although she also likes it when patients don’t do what she tells them). She likes caring for her patients and she also relishes putting them aside. Many of the poems reflect this intriguing combination of detachment and connection, which seems to reflect Davis’ way of managing the suffering that she observes daily. She feels a fierce loyalty toward her patients derived from the physical intimacy they share. In “The Body Flute,” she writes scornfully, “The doctor and his theory/never owned you.” She, the nurse, is the one who walks with the patient, who washes the body, who holds the hand of the dying patient when the doctor is asleep and loved ones have departed, and who accompanies them even to the morgue. The nurses who cared for her during a personal health incident (“Blood Clot”) inspire her vision of care: “...I vowed/ I would always love their way: Fierce./Physical.” “Entering the Patient’s Room” shows her intrepid commitment to each patient, as she enjoins herself to “Remain steadfast,/...Let her mind and her body be all that matters.”

In the end, these two poets tell us, everything *is* connected to everything: patients to their healers, nurses and doctors to their patients, the living to those long dead, our desires to our fears, the butterfly’s flapping wing to a raging typhoon. But it is only because the butterfly *has* wings, attached to its insignificant butterfly body, that these cosmic linkages persist. Because, like the butterfly, we are incarnate beings, the connections in our lives exist only through our bodies: the hands that hold, the flesh that bleeds, the brain that loops round and round discovering an accumulation of associations if not of meaning. Daniel Becker and Cortney Davis take unique, sometimes idiosyncratic paths to reach this endpoint but their unique visions always express steadfast solidarity with their fellow imperfect, suffering humans. To enhance our understanding of the human condition, to ignite our compassion, to laugh a little louder and cry a little harder, we owe it to ourselves to forge an embodied connection with each of these books, savoring their heartbreaking beauty and courage with all our senses alert and engaged.