

A Primer on Parallel Lives

Dan Gerber

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Dan Gerber's poems are something like the fox that graces the cover of this book: quick, graceful, alert to their surroundings, and rarely wasting a motion. The seventh book by this veteran poet, whose work was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and was featured in *The Best American Poetry 1999*, is a gathering of vivid, mainly brief, sometimes luminous explorations of the inner workings of time and place.

Early on, Gerber offers epigraphs from Spanish poet Juan Ramon Jiménez ("I am not I. / I am this one standing beside me") and Chinese poet Yang Wan-Li ("The Place I stopped last night is far away and tomorrow, tonight will be last night"). The quotes indicate both the themes of the mysteries of identity and the self, and the influence of Spanish surrealism and Chinese nature poetry on Gerber's work. Many poems in the first section focus on the natural world—"Tracking the Moment," the longest poem in the book, is built from a number of brief sections like one in which three elk trot away "only to put a few boughs, / like another language, between us." Gerber can write wryly and sharply of human events as well, however. In "Times Alone," he observes two women in black dresses laughing in a restaurant and concludes that he "wanted to laugh too, for which, / I'd have given anything."

The second section includes mostly bittersweet evocations of the poet's early life and family. They offer an especially frank and poignant—if troubling—sketch of the mother ("She came to me as a stranger ... and held me with her terrors"), first as a rather erratic parent and apparently unfaithful wife, later as a woman slipping into Alzheimer's and second childhood: "'I can't find my parents,' she cries ... / 'I'd like to *cook* 'em,' she growls, / her face now beaming with absolute glee." Compassion finally emerges through honesty in these poems, more convincing for seeming hard-won. Other poems skillfully render memories, including wartime ironies—singing "Silent Night" in German while "we were bombing the people / who sang in that tongue."

The third and final group of poems seems the most uneven. "Six Kinds of Gratitude," for example, has five fine brief sections in the mode of Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." But it ends with the flat and disappointing "This bird is the birdness of a bird."

While a few poems might have been cut from this section, others are excellent, and "The Local News" offers a key bit of self-disclosure: "I've always been one of those who look back— / half Zennist, half Goddist, my Zen master said— / like Orpheus." If given the chance, Gerber says, he would have gone back for Eurydice or for Lot's wife. Given the generous and gently wise figure he has offered, it is hard not to believe him.

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