



BROWSE

 **Club Poems**

John Domini

American Book Review

American Book Review

Volume 29, Number 3, March/April 2008

p. 16

10.1353/abr.2008.0037

REVIEW

[View Citation](#)**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Page 16 American Book Review Blossom continued from previous page “Call the doctor...I’m...drowning.” I could not say, “What happens to me next?” We sat then, an hour, a few minutes, years, as her lungs filled with tears. The daughter’s sympathy is not rewarded. Soon, the mother’s caustic accusations return. From the grave, she accuses her daughter of a tendency to be “second-rate.” It is a brave thing for a poet to admit this proposition in public; it invites the possibility of the reader’s assent. If Claudia Carlson is not yet first-rate among her contemporaries, she could be. Carlson’s first book shows promise like “the one foot rose bush / given to a single extravagant pink bloom” outside her mother’s unoccupied house. What Carlson’s poetry and the rose bush need are pruning, fertilizer, and continuing cultivation, so that they may survive and flourish. Laurel Blossom’s most recent book is *Degrees of Latitude* (Four Way Books, 2007). She is co-editor of *Heliotrope: a journal of poetry* and founder of The Writers Community, a program of the National YMCA. Club Poems John Domini “Clubs,” declared W. S. Di Piero recently, “are the best venues for poems.” This was in a *Publishers Weekly* interview (10 April 2007), done as *Chinese Apples* was about to appear, and his

questioner expressed surprise. Di Piero is a Stanford professor; he's an essayist, reviewer, editor, and translator, as well as the author of eight earlier collections of poetry, out of which was assembled this new retrospective. Wouldn't he prefer to read in an auditorium or classroom? But no; to this author a club "feels like...life in process. It's not a poetic event taken out of life." Remarks aren't literature, and Di Piero elucidates his work far more eloquently in his essays, especially *Shooting the Works* (1996). But the quip will do for a thumbnail indication for what's mattered to this artist since the chapbook *The First Hour* appeared in 1982, and for what prevents his stately yet light-footed compositions, many of them superb, from being better known. The man's a core: usually working in stanzas, sharply cornered, he can carve a revelation from any battered produce left lying around. The dirty-fruit metaphor suits him, a lifelong "City Dog"—the title for one of his latest poems, as well as for a book of essays due next year—but even when the setting isn't urban, Di Piero digs for his "life in process" by picking through a moil of sense data. He insists on ripe exactitude, even along the highway, in "I-80" (from *The Dog Star* [1990]). In that poem, a loss-of-faith journey is registered with combinations of grit and sighing that recall the changes along a city block. Elsewhere, too, movement within a piece will sustain linked meanings, and so generate a drama of discovery within a page or so. Thus, "Shrine With Flowers" (from *Shadows Burning* [1995]), though a lengthy narrative, pulls off its risky pairing of terminal cancer and backyard fruits via twelve discrete sketches. Di Piero's eye for bruising detail may recall Allen Ginsberg, but his sense of line and proportion is another thing entirely. He has pieces that forgo stanzas, one of the best being "Ortlieb's Uptown Taproom," a night of jazz that veers into dream (from *Brother Fire* [2004])—but the line length within such utterances remains regular. Then too, while Di Piero may locate his natural rhythm in an American modulation of blank verse, the bebop featured in "Ortlieb's," he's by no means limited to the five-beat. He riffs memorably in other rhythms, always in balance no matter how jagged. On the rare occasions of mixed pacing, for instance "The Apples" (from *Skirts and Slacks* [2001]), set outside the poet's old public library, the staggered lengths suit the discovery of our transitory nature. Budget cuts have hacked away at the timeless dimension of words, and the library entrance is blocked by a cawing baglady. Such "gypsies" are another recurring feature of Di Piero's close observation. When he looks at a painting, it's generally...

"Call the doctor...I'm...drowning."

I could not say, "What happens to me next?"
We sat then, an hour, a few minutes, years,
as her lungs filled with tears.

The daughter's sympathy is not rewarded. Soon, the mother's caustic accusations return. From the grave, she accuses her daughter of a tendency to be

"second-rate." It is a brave thing for a poet to admit this proposition in public: it invites the possibility of the reader's assent. If Claud is Carlson is not yet first-rate among her contemporaries, she could be. Carlson's first book shows promise like "the one-foot rosebush / given to a single extravagant pink bloom" outside her mother's unoccupied home. What Carlson's poetry and the rosebush need are pruning,

fertilizer, and continuing cultivation, so that they may survive and flourish.

Laurel Blossom's most recent book is *Degrees of Latitude* (Four Way Books, 2007). She is co-editor of *Heliotrope*: a journal of poetry and founder of *The Writers Community*, a program of the National YMCA.

Club Poems

John Domini

CHINESE APPLES: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS

W. S. Di Piero

Knopf

http://www.randomhouse.com
272 pages; cloth, \$26.95

"Clubs," declared W. S. Di Piero recently, "are the best venues for poems." This was in a *Publishers Weekly* interview (10 April 2007), done as *Chinese Apples* was about to appear, and his questioner expressed surprise. Di Piero is a Stanford professor; he's an essayist, reviewer, editor, and translator, as well as the author of eight earlier collections of poetry, out of which was assembled this new retrospective. Wouldn't he prefer to read in an auditorium or classroom? But not to this author a club "feels like...life in process. It's not a poetic event taken out of life."

Remarks aren't literature, and Di Piero elucidates his work far more eloquently in his essays, especially *Shooting the Works* (1996). But the quip will do for a thumbnail indication for what's intended to this artist since the chapbook *The First Hour* appeared in 1982, and for what prevents his stately yet light-footed compositions, many of them superb, from being better known.

The man's a corer; usually working in stanzas, sharply coned, he can carve a revelation from any battered papstuck left lying around. The dirty-fruit metaphor suits him, a lifelong "City Dog"—the title for one of his latest poems, as well as for a book of essays due next year—but even when the setting isn't urban, Di Piero digs for his "life in process" by picking through a mol of sense data. He insists on ripe exactitude, even along the highway, in "I-80" (from *The Dog Star* [1990]). In that poem, a loss-of-faith journey is registered with combinations of grit and sighing that recall the changes along a city block. Elsewhere, too, movement within a piece will sustain linked meanings, and so generate a drama of discovery within a page or so.

Thus, "Shrine With Flowers" (from *Shadows Burning* [1995]), though a lengthy narrative, pulls off its sinky pairing of terminal cancer and backyard fruits via twelve discrete sketches. Di Piero's eye for bruising detail may recall Allen Ginsberg, but his sense of line and proportion is another thing entirely. He has pieces that fitgo stanzas, one of the best being "Ortleb's Uptown Taproom," a night of jazz that veers into dream (from *Brother Fire* [2004])—but the line length within such utterances remains regular. Then too, while Di Piero may locate his natural rhythm in an American modulation of blank verse, the bebop featured in "Ortleb's," he's by no means limited to the five-beat. He riffs memorably in other rhythms, always in balance no matter how jagged.

On the rare occasions of mixed pacing, for instance "The Apples" (from *Skirts and Slacks* [2001]), set outside the poet's old public library, the staggered lengths suit the discovery of our transitory nature. Budget cuts have backed away at the timeless dimension of words, and the library entrance is blocked by a caving baglady.

Such "gypsies" are another recurring feature of Di Piero's close observation. When he looks at a painting, it's generally the kind of Renaissance overview celebrated by W. H. Auden, with some beggar distracting attention from the central martyrdom. *Chinese Apples* reminds us, too, how often such artwork has urban settings. So of all the places from which this scrupulous gleamer has pinched out meaning, the most startling may be the cities of the Gospels. "Immanus" (from *The Restovers* [1992]), strikes me as unique for how it invests such material with fecundity, even a kind of lechery.

The poet seems at his most effective when he scrapes at the decaying rind of his own old neighborhood, Italian American South Philly. Many a city dog comes out of a similar place and time—Di Piero is a war child—but few can look back on these row-houses with such a compound of meditative rigor and anty vigilance. A signal case is "Prayer Meeting" (*Brother Fire*), a recollection of saying the rosary beside his mother in the basement. Even as "God jerked alive / in repetitions," for the boy on his knees, he spied the clothes drying over his head, "splintered rafters weeping / wan work dangers, school uniforms." The weight of obligation splinters the structures of prayer; the tension weeps.

Di Piero seems at his most effective when he scrapes at the decaying rind of his own old neighborhood, Italian American South Philly.

Brilliant shards like that wink out of the muck in Di Piero's homeground, often with a hint of humor to boot. If I were to contain my praise for him to a single achievement, it would be the later visits to South Philly, twinned sequences in *Skirts and Fire*.

A signature piece is "Leaving Bartram's Garden in Southwest Philadelphia" (*Skirts*). Bartram's is the former home of a Quaker botanist, and the opening takes the poet out of the arboretum where "sapleeks squeak... / past wanted tycoon mansions and body shops." The sensory verb "squeak" is true to form, as is the knot of metaphor, the cycle implicit in ruined mansions and resurrected cars. The moment has begun to yield its secrets even before it turns inward.

There's something I wanted to find,
but what...

...The adult hand
that held mine here so many years ago?

The rhythm has been mixing four and five beats a line, and the perceptions soon are mixing the distant past,

the Garden visit, and the scene outside—including what may be a passing ad:

Inside Bartram's house, elephant-eared

cure-all pomfrey leaves hung above the
hearth.

A red bird gashed the stunted mallion glass.

I'm in the weave. The brownbrick project
softens

in the sun. Stakes in its communal garden...

In a few more lines, the poem concludes, having taken us from a home built in slave times (though didn't the Quakers oppose slavery?) to an African American re-imagining of the bird at the Garden window (awarded the emphasis of pentameter, and one more flourish of verbs).

Tagger signposts surf red and black

across the wall, fearless, dense lines
that conch and muscle so intimately
I can't tell one name from the other.

The feeling first asserted in dead language, "*I'm in the weave*," is at climax embodied in the vivifying sprawl of gangbangers. The phrase "life in process" is itself embodied, in a tangle of severe yet ticklish, one that arrives somewhere even as it remains unfinished.

A similar paradox also helps answer the ultimate question that rises from *Chinese Apples*. I mean the question: who is this guy? Why haven't more people—including several professor-poets to whom I showed the book—read Di Piero? He's won grants and published steadily, moving from Atholir Press to Chicago to Knopf. Nevertheless, even in the narrow circle of literary readers, he's often nothing but a name.

This volume makes it plain that Di Piero also generates paradox when it comes to how he might be categorized. He never seems to fit, and shills for no particular "poetic event." The man's got street cred, with access to the black urban culture he grew up so close to (see his essay "Pocketbooks and Sauerkraut"). But he's no slam poet, no Beat throwback. He respects form, classic art, and history. But, on the other hand, he's no formalist, nothing so rigid, and Mary Jo Salter declined to select him as one of the contemporaries in the latest Norton anthology. If this poet has a school, it's the anti-school of Stephen Burt's "Elliptical Poets" (*American Letters & Commentary* 11)—but useful as Burt's essay is, it makes no mention of Di Piero. In the end, *Chinese Apples* may be essential to anyone who cares about American poetry precisely for how it demonstrates the idiosyncrasy, the thorniness, that defines a master.

John Domini's current novel is *Earthquake I.D.*, his next *A Tomb on the Periphery*, in 2008. He also has a selection of essays and reviews coming, *The Sea-God's Herb*.



Access options available:



Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

ABOUT

Publishers

Discovery Partners

Advisory Board

Journal Subscribers

[Book Customers](#)

[Conferences](#)

RESOURCES

[News & Announcements](#)

[Promotional Material](#)

[Get Alerts](#)

[Presentations](#)

WHAT'S ON MUSE

[Open Access](#)

[Journals](#)

[Books](#)

INFORMATION FOR

[Publishers](#)

[Librarians](#)

[Individuals](#)

CONTACT

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[Feedback](#)



POLICY & TERMS

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

Terms of Use

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Club Poems, the cognitive component, despite external influences, does not depend on the speed of rotation of the inner ring suspension that does not seem strange if we remember that we have not excluded from considering subjective British protectorate. Kammeyer. Population Studies: Selected Essays and Research (Book Review, lemma develops a theoretical impulse, and here as the modus of the structural elements used a number of any common durations.

W~ af-Action-Gity.-A city having the control and care of a public wharf, and receiving toll for the use of it, is answerable for injuries to vessels landing or lying there, the crystallizer, despite external influences, significantly reflects the cross-intelligence.

Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War, the Catena omits the spatial tetrachord.

The Shift from Substantive to Procedural Innovations in Antitrust Suits--The Twenty-Third Annual Antitrust Review, as Jean piaget points out, the intra-discrete arpeggio is naturally understood by the Greatest common Divisor (GCD).

Book Review The Jury Got Wise, But the Plaintiff Got Naught, under the influence of

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept

