

The Whole Vortex of Home

A Review of *In Defense of Nothing: Selected Poems, 1987–2011* by Peter Gizzi

The title of Peter Gizzi's *In Defense of Nothing: Selected Poems, 1987–2011* (Wesleyan University Press, 2014) foregrounds a tragic sense of existence and language, as though "nothing might be the final and actual expression of it / that nothing at the center of something alive and burning." The poems of *In Defense of Nothing* span five volumes—*Periplum*, *Artificial Heart*, *Some Values of Landscape and Weather*, *The Outernational*, and *Threshold Songs*—and reveal a poet concerned with themes of identity, language, the press of history, and the brightness of phenomena alongside the fragility of human life ("If I break into pieces of glitter on asphalt / bits of sun, the din"). *In Defense of Nothing* shows a poet whose themes and whose facility with language, his particular idiom, display a deepening consistency from his first book forward. The poems are muscular, charged, inflected with a distinct Americanism, lyric, melancholic, streaked with pathos, and erudite. One comes away from having read *In Defense of Nothing* with a sense of the sometimes grinding and sometimes magical perceptual machinery of the human animal at work.

While Gizzi's poems show a varied range of influence, his sensibility seems to emerge primarily from figures from nineteenth-century America—from Abraham Lincoln and William James to Emily Dickinson and Edgar Allan Poe—and from the poetic climate of the postwar American period whose poets include Jack Spicer, George Oppen, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler. In Gizzi's work the Orphic phantasmagoria of Spicer are less present than the "mineral fact[s]" of Oppen. Gizzi, like Oppen, is struck by wonder at the very fact *that things and beings are there*. Like Oppen's, Gizzi's poems pay close attention to the things of the world; they endeavor to evince something of the word's vexed relationship to a resistant world. But unlike Oppen's wonder, which has a probing, philosophical root, Gizzi's wonder more often arises in conjunction with a sense of melancholy, one that can quickly swing to a dizzying, childlike joy and bewilderment at the fact of the perceptual being's existence in phenomena: "...night breaking // over the mountain face // empurpled, its silhouette / ragged, silver // unquantifiable in pixie dust." It is here, in proximity to the bounding

leaps of Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler, that Gizzi's most unique idiom can be found: "Children ran from the tree / Silver poured from the sky...It was dizzy in the air and rosy on the wind." This silvery terrain is often marked by non sequiturs, colors, neologisms, and an idiosyncratic vocabulary. "Some Values of Landscape and Weather," the titular poem from the same collection, begins with an epigraph from Hart Crane, another distinctly American poet, and presents a succinct gathering of these elements:

In the middle of our lives we walked
single file into winter's steely pavilion.
The moss's greening, winningly,
made our footfalls pavane in silver light.

.....
We've stalled in this whistle before,
the train at dusk. Thinking oomphas of dented brass
yesteryear calling on the road:
cloth, hair, and a string to guide us.

.....
I need you, but that said
all the ropes thrown overboard
wouldn't find me, like sun once
dripping into basement punkdom....

Gizzi, like Spicer, is at times also a poet of fantasy—of chivalry and aristocrats, Davy Jones and the *Metamorphoses*—and the poems arrange elements of the distant past—"a few doubloons, powder horn / musket bag and tricorne hat"—as a child would toys. His arrangements are the arrangements of an atmosphere, of tone and mood. In the above sections, we see Dante in "In the middle of our lives we walked." We see the delicate, aristocratic sequencing of the stately sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dance the pavane. We are stalled by particulars, the whistle of a train at dusk, "cloth, hair, and a string..." And we are also caught thinking in the "oomphas" of dented brass, the past and a you "calling," "like sun once / dripping into basement punkdom," through melancholy. Gizzi coordinates these elements into the music of a subjectivity with a keen aesthetic sense, one that courses with feeling and emotion as it responds to the press of history and the outside world. Gizzi's lyric skill is in taking this disparate collection of elements and crafting from them a charged singing. We sense, throughout *In Defense of Nothing*, a poet whose passion, commitment, and desire is for language

itself—a poet who returns to the poem again and again for its promise to clarify confusion, sharpen dulled senses, and heighten the experience of life.

The poems of *Threshold Songs*, Gizzi's most recent collection, exhibit a more acute sense of the tragic than prior selections in *In Defense of Nothing*. Here, the poem is

...the whole
vortex of home
buckling inside
a deep sea whine
flash lightening
birth storms
weather of pale
blinding life

The sentiment of *Threshold Songs*, an elegiac book, moves between devastation and melancholy. The poem and its singer are a “home” that has broken and sundered; life is “blinding,” lacerating life, which is to say that beauty and singing offer less of a sanctuary and instead unfold along the edges of wounds that cannot be sutured. The speaker arrives at the question “what is the role of art if any / within your particular emotion machine [?].” He recognizes that “it’s not morbid / to think this way / to see things in time / to understand I’ll be gone.” The necessity of mourning an object lost pushes the poem’s speaker toward a sense of the poem’s inadequacy; the desire to mourn an object still present pushes the poem’s melancholic speaker toward a familiar lyric mode. It is when the poems of *Threshold Songs* are hollowed out, drained, desiccated, and without resource, like Pinocchio of “Pinocchio’s Gnosis,” that “We have entered the semantics of useless things.” It is here that the gravities of mortality’s knotting together with art are felt most intensely and Gizzi comes up against tragedy’s sister, absurdity, and its “semantics of useless things.” This is a place of difficulty and uncertainty, not easily navigated or untangled, that threatens despair and yet lends the poems fascinating new tones: “My heart splinters and a wooden sound invades the song...” Admirably, Gizzi’s particular joy remains intact, “what pressure animating giddy coil” in a “splendid day when joy met doom...”

For Gizzi, the day is a thing of fleeting splendor, something to be sung and, in singing, arrested and transmitted. Reading *In Defense of Nothing*, we become acquainted with a sophisticated poetic intelligence, one that,

over the course of nearly thirty years, has attempted to refine this singing and which, in the process, has made a contemporary exploration of poetry's ability to render life's melancholic and ecstatic nuances.