

Mayhap: Selected Brief Poems. David Giannini. Loveland, Ohio: Dos Madres Press, 2019.

Reviewed by Donald McNutt

David Giannini's *Mayhap: Selected Brief Poems* is an exploration of time, of the before and after of things, as well as the fleetingness of our lived experiences. He develops these themes from the outset by inviting us to realize how we're encountering his poems. The first stanza of "To You, Reader" challenges us to be mindful of what may come from our reading of *Mayhap*: "Do you really think / you won't have to pause / and savor silence before / and after these words?" With its exiguous lines and crucial message, "To You, Reader" prefigures the poems to come, where every image is charged with meaning.

All but one of the poems in *Mayhap* is short enough to fit onto one page, and yet each poem grapples with the largest of themes: how to accept time's passing; how death shapes our perceptions of living; how nature exerts its power on our imaginations. The book's title itself announces Giannini's creative approaches to time, with "mayhap" being an archaic expression for "it may (hap)pen." The photograph on the book's cover also recalls a previous era. The photo memorializes the granite face of "The Old Man in the Mountain," which was visible on a cliffside in the Cannon Mountains until its collapse in 2003. Gesturing again to the past, Giannini alludes to his own excellent collection of poems, *Faces Somewhere Wild* (2018), as he describes the stone feature in "Two Views of the Old Man in the Mountain," *Mayhap*'s second poem, where we find this opening line: "There are granites and waters of the human face—".

In several poems, Giannini explores time's meanings through mythological characters such as Sisyphus and Narcissus. But in *Mayhap*, these aren't just echoes from classical literature. Instead, they act with us in the world. In "Who Would Want To Be," Sisyphus remains doomed, even now, to his perpetual punishment on the mountain, "pushing hopelessly ever" on his rock. In "Narcissus," we are directed to stand before a mirror and accept the core person behind the reflection, even as "vanity / too fast even for glass" threatens to extinguish the flash of real self-recognition. Both poems rely on ancient, all-too-human characters as a way to express time's foreverness—how's that boulder, Sisyphus?—or time's instantaneous severances, maybe especially when it comes time for us to acknowledge what's best in ourselves.

The play of time is also captured in "Waking Up the Rake," where layers of meaning build out of three short lines:

Raking the brilliant slum
of autumn—letting
the rake move in.

This is my favorite of *Mayhap*'s seasonal poems because it configures autumn so vibrantly as a "brilliant slum." With time, even the best of neighborhoods can become something they weren't, just as leaves eventually lose their vitality each year, and then express that loss in brilliant colors. As a former landscaper, I can posit that rakes are probably the least exciting of yard tools, but here the rake is personified with power, awakened (again) for its work. The "brilliant slum" of spent leaves also demands better usage, apparently: clearing the leaves, the rake acts like any incoming new gentry, poised to "move in" and change the old neighborhood (though not always for the better).

Another seasonal poem, “How Else?” focuses on a very specific physical sensation in a winter setting:

To be the horizon of a snowflake
setting on your cheek—how

simple, even silly. But to feel
something so delicate in fade, some

thing of the air among the others
and intricate, some thing just itself

once.

The two infinitive verbs, “to be” and “to feel,” capture and suspend this delicate encounter as a continuous instant. Lots of poets write about the singularity of individual snowflakes, but Giannini develops here with true originality. Part of it springs from the double meaning in “feel,” which expresses the tactile sensation of “a snowflake / setting on your cheek.” At the same time, “feel” also denotes the mysterious ways in which our bodies and minds interpret the world, what we come to “feel” about it. The speaker reminds us that a “simple, / even silly” sensation can grow into something powerful and unique and memorable. The poem itself is all that, finding in a winter’s day something “intricate” and “just itself / once,” with this last word hovering on the page as if in open air.

I’m a great fan of William Blake’s poetry, so I always admire writers who innovate well with Blake’s work. Giannini does this with Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence” (1803), composing “To See a World”:

Only a grain
of sand riding
a grain of sand

or is it the dream
of a first stone step-
ping up to glisten?

Blake’s command to us in “Auguries”—“to see a world in a grain of sand”—is compressed here, in stanza one, into two simple images. The second stanza, imaging “the dream / of a first stone,” expresses exactly what Blake believed poetry should accomplish, and that is to show how the human spirit imbues the world with meaning and possibility. Once again, Giannini relies on an infinitive, “to glisten,” as a way of conveying how the imagination becomes the poem’s enlivening agent. As the stone aspires to shine, the poem’s message also springs from its visual shape. Stanza two, as it slides to the right of the page, takes its own first step.

Giannini’s innovations with Blake resemble his creativity with Sisyphus and Narcissus. These qualities contribute to *Mayhap*’s vital approaches to time and renewal, to human pain and death’s inevitability, but also to the continual promise of meaningful discoveries in our lives. Giannini

works masterfully within a long stretch of poetic traditions, invoking mythological characters as well as ideas developed by giants like Blake. These are great achievements, especially when the poems in *Mayhap* are all so brief. In this light, it's not surprising that Giannini concludes *Mayhap* with a stirring meditation on the scale of things. Whereas the book opens with a question to its readers, "*Humility*," the last poem, is an address to the poet from an unidentified voice. It could be "The Old Man in the Mountain." Or perhaps the voice is literary tradition itself. What I know for certain is that the core image in "*Humility*" sticks with me—of the poet as a flea riding the dog of the world. Such a reminder to stay humble is altogether timely and welcome, especially during this very strange spring of 2020.