

The Sun Rises, Rises, Rises; The Sun Also Rises

A Review of “The Daily Mirror” by David Lehman

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In 1965 a long run was 5 miles, maybe less; a long bike ride was 15–20 miles, maybe less; but some time in the 1970’s people started running marathons, riding centuries. And in the 1980’s people started tacking these two together, adding a 3-mile swim, and calling the resulting a triathlon, suitable only for ironmen (and -women naturally). In the 1990’s

April 15
What a sweet guy I am
when one of my enemies dies
I don’t Xerox the obit and mail it
to the others saying “Let
this be a lesson to you,” no
I’m more likely to recall
the person’s virtues to which I
was blind until the news of mortality
opened my mind as you would
open a vial of Tylenol noticing
it spells lonely backwards with
only the initial T added, signifying
taxes no doubt, and now my headache
has gone the way of leaves in fall
am I happy I certainly am
as you would be, my friend, of
the Queen of Sheba returned your calls
as she does mine

and into the 2000’s, these events went from popular to packed to overcrowded, and today hundreds are turned away from such races. Has the human body improved so much? The human spirit? Has mental health declined so much? This is the age of too much, too fast.

We see it in our comfy home named “Poetry”, too. In earlier times, a poem a week was pretty good output—first and maybe a second draft. But a few years ago we started hearing about writing instructors assigning daily poems for 2 weeks, 30 days. There’s always been that lone marathoner: William Stafford is said to have written a poem a day for the last 30 or 40 years of his life. Well, we had marathoners in the 1960’s too, but someone stationed about 5 or so standard deviations off the norm is not so unusual. But now we’re starting to see the results of such labors routinely in print—Robert Bly’s “Morn-

ing Poems” [HarperCollins, 1997] and now Lehman’s “The Daily Mirror: A Journal in Poetry.” [Scribner, 2000] How are we to keep up? Is the daily poem in our future? Will the standard next book become the diary of poems?

“The Daily Mirror” by David Lehman is the latest entry in this particular new brand of sweepstakes. The lord of “The Best American Poetry” has taken up the challenge and spit out this sampling from several years’ work writing a poem a day—more or less—and filling out nearly a year of pages for us hearty readers. Admiration is obvious, but we’ve come to expect a particular level of achievement from one of our better poets, and this book does not deliver on those expectations. What’s difficult is to lock down precisely the reason for failure—because a casual look at almost any page of this book reveals the well-observed, the well-stated, the clever turning, the click endings; the stylish lack of punctuation, the in-your-face first-person present tense. There’s an immediacy and an almost unpracticed intimacy spread throughout that would make anyone—it made me—buy the book after pulling it from the shelf (of my local independent bookseller).

There is a lot to love in this book. Take a look at *April 15*. Fun and whimsical, an interesting observation—Tylenol backwards is lonely T—the echo of headaches, taxes, Tylenol (as headache cure), the only sure thing being death and taxes, death of an enemy, the taxman as enemy, April 15, and the

final jolt of the Queen of Sheba returning phone calls. Even the apparently nonsequitur Sheba ending is a combination of cleverness and scholarship: the Queen of Sheba travelled 1400 miles to visit Solomon, known in part for his taxation policies (which eventually ruined his kingdom) and for saying “the most certain [thing] is death.”

February 10

He was no altar boy
 She was no chorus girl
 He couldn't sit still
 She couldn't drive
 He couldn't sing
 She couldn't stop
 He wouldn't stop
 She didn't say no
 He hadn't planned to go
 She wasn't born yesterday
 He couldn't say
 She wouldn't listen
 He was no soldier
 She was no nurse
 It was no picnic

Add to this the sporadic punctuation—and the attractiveness of its lack—and there is a lot to like in this poem, not the least of which is the simple fun of reading it, puzzling it out, its spontaneity, and marvelling how it's so well-tied to April 15.

Some are just pure fun, like *February 10* which follows one of Lehman's invented forms he seems fond of in this collection. As he mentions in the introduction, coming up with a new form is one of the freedoms that the daily poem allows. In fact, the introduction is perhaps the part of the book most likely to endure, and there are indeed things to learn from it, especially those with more writer's block than a month's echinacea will cure. He writes:

The discipline that the daily poem imposes speaks in its favor. It does wonders for your rate of productivity, and it promotes a willingness to take chances. Having accumulated so many

poems, you are unlikely to prevent yourself from “wasting” one on a word game or a stunt that may, just may, turn into something worth perpetuating. You may as well try anything—a collage or cento, a “things to do” poem, a rhymed letter to a friend, a poem restricting itself to two words per line, and abecedarium.

One of the pleasant side-effects of reading this book—more so than Bly's “Morning Poems”—is that it dares you to try it yourself—the daily poem. I took the dare and I can report after 50 days that it indeed works. Lots of new material, some of it pretty good, and the fear that sometimes joins me when I sit down either never condenses or evaporates quickly. No or little forethought is necessary, the muse loves a quickie, place is no matter—some take a dozen minutes, others are written in the bathroom, grabbing a burger at In-N-Out, on a bike ride—and the discipline of working every day reduces the nagging feeling that writing poetry is so important that it requires a mighty heaping of inspiration and that only a Yeats-like feat of scribbling is sufficient for the day's labor. It's scary at first, but so was sex.

Lehman's book helps more than he wants in this regard by setting a low bar. The work here rarely rises even to the level of the samples I've shown. Lehman's daily shot of verse soon becomes as regular as sunrise in a Fall full of cloudy days. The enticing run-on nature of the poems and their blocky presentation become, well, boring and predictable after a while. Formulaic.

The poem *March 16* feels typical of many poems in the collection. It starts with an observation tied to the day or the recent past—this seems to be a trigger for Lehman. Then there is a

March 16

The weather is on a lottery system and I've lucked out two Saturdays in a row it's warm in Tampa where I want to eat paella and smoke a cigar and wonder if Tampax was invented here I remember the year my favorite song was “All of me” by Sinatra the phrase on everyone's lips was “in your face” I wrote odes to the nudes in Lee Friedlander's photos the tropical tufts of pubic hair and cheap alarm clocks constantly going off as if time were speeding up and the cabdriver taking me to the airport said I know you you're the guy who played the doctor in *Love Boat*

mention of a jazz song either remembered or heard in the air, along with its performer or composer. Next are some statements alluding to a tryst or other sexual or related matter. And finally a clever ending, either wrapped up with a click, a humorous twist, or oddball remark. Not all poems follow this form(ula), but many have some combination of its aspects. After a while the poems seem familiar, and the game becomes to look for one of the amusingly different ones, which do pop up about every 20 days (following the collection's calendar). Don't misunderstand: The poems in this collection are clearly the product of a master craftsman and poet of the first rank, but the results look exactly as the process of creating them indicates—they are finely honed daily poems, not unlike the quality we'd expect of a great writer's polished diary. But to me the deepest interest of a typical poem in the collection come from the interesting use of no punctuation and such juxtapositions of words as ". . . *you you're* . . ." in March 16.

But getting on toward the middle of the collection I found myself reading them at about the same pace they were written, one a day. This is the pace of eating good vitamins, and that's what makes me think this book is best taken as a sort of cure for poets stuck on hold or suffering from the poem-on-pedestal problem, or as a clear example of what Stafford meant by "then I just lower my standards."

I recommend checking out "The Daily Mirror," but for a better showing of daily poems, I'd look at Bly's "Morning Poems." Who knows, maybe one of these books will give you the just-do-it's and you'll take the leap into writing a poem a day.