

The Poet as Celebrant

By Ingrid Wendt

Book Review:

The Other, by Robert Dana,
Anhinga Press, 2008.



“Attentiveness,” held Nicolas Malebranche in 17th-century France, “is the natural prayer of the soul.” One gathers that he wasn’t referring to poems. Still, had Malebranche (priest, theologian, and philosopher) been able to read the many delicately nuanced meditations in *The Other*, Robert Dana’s 10th full-length collection of poems, he might have understood their prayer-like qualities.

Arranged in four thematic yet overlapping sections, *The Other* shows Dana engaged in a spiritual quest. Sequentially, these lyrics build from poems of anger and dismay—at violence around the globe and at environmental degradation—into a long, sustained hosanna in praise of the things of this world. From boulders to shark’s teeth, from the skies over Taos to the roses in his own front yard, from a heavenly host of bird presences (hawks and wrens, pelicans, jays) to the people and places he’s known since childhood, Dana’s poems exult in the here and now, leaving readers with the poet’s trademark light touch: “Prayer, / wind & slapdash from the hereafter.”

This isn’t the whole story. As epigraph to *The Other*, Dana quotes from Theodore Roethke: “Great nature has another thing to do / To you and me.” No moment, no thing, however beautiful or wondrous, exists without its darker, indifferent side. Behind all earthly pleasure exists an “Other.” What we perceive as real, the poet seems to suggest, is an embodiment not of light or dark, but of light *and* dark, yin *and* yang, beauty *and* horror, like, perhaps, the book’s enigmatic and powerful cover image: a brilliantly colored painting, “Mask,” by the Mexican artist David Alfaró Siqueiros. A

His torso, one splintered leg, and his raised arm
 lay morgued in a cardboard box on a worktable in the garage
 waiting for the miracle of reassembly.

Try what glue he may, nothing the poet does can bring those
 powers back.

In the light-hearted "Beach Attitudes" (echoing Christ's Sermon on the Mount), Dana begins, "Blessed is the beach, survivor of tides"; he leaps to "Blessed be the pacemakers and the peacemakers, // the slow striders, the arthritic joggers, scarred and bent under / their histories, for they're here at last by the sunlit sea"; and concludes, "the glossy lip of the long wave shall have the last kiss."

The poet controls the language he uses, giving his readers a voice to trust, as in the title poem, with its musical language listing daily horrors:

The morning radio's
 bombers, murderers,
 drunk behind the wheel,
 on prayer or sacred
 hashish, or brute vision,
 and bent on blood
 and terror, seem not
 to see how wide
 this world is for error,
 or this Other
 disdaining all we are,
 glorious or embittered.

We hear Dana's music in several poems in traditional forms (a *villanelle*, a rhyming quatrain, a rhyming octet) and through the bulk of this book, in stately free-verse lines that spread across the page on different levels (seldom flush left), carrying their import with dignity, grace, and the lightness of a minuet. The white space around them seems not of emptiness, but a rich, fruitful presence—

the distance between the mind's steps on its path of perception. A master of invention ("magicked," "rivering," "gardens truckling under the ruck and rot of winter"), Dana combines the compression of poetry with the click of the camera.

Readers will also delight in such lines as "The spirit / megametamorphic / hies itself home," which embody another characteristic Dana construction: the juxtaposition of lush, polysyllabic words with a literary vernacular. We find another kind of juxtaposition throughout the book: "regular" words paired with words of jazz-like contemporaneity: "Wash and flapdoodle of shallows"; "a hullabaloo of clouds"; "pour and tor of moonlight on the sea." Listen to the rhythms in "Old pungencies of wrack & weed. / Gulf waters flat. / Gray green."

"The real miracle," says Buddhist monk Thich Nhất Hạnh, "is not to walk on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth." Attentive, always, to the nature of this physical world, Robert Dana offers, throughout *The Other*, a catalog of small miracles. "Our day is what it is," he says, in the poem "Looking for Shark's Teeth."

. . . under the clouds, the streaming kites.

Among the red-yellow-green-and-blue-striped umbrellas.
Amid the busy little encampments of
beach chairs.

Sweet. Lucky.

NOTE: Robert Dana died on Feb. 6, 2010, in his home and after a long illness.