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**Traveling from Delight to Wisdom
with Art Goodtimes**

As If the World Really Mattered

Poems by Art Goodtimes

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Poetry is not a democratic art. It is not a product of the *demos*, that is, but the fruit of solitary labor—though honed, in some cases, by public performance. It is idiosyncratic, suffering in committee and dissenting—sometimes loudly, sometimes *sotto voce*—from every parade. It minds its manners only to sharpen the impact of its wit, which is always subversive. French scholar Jean-Yves Maleuvre has persuasively argued that even Virgil, traditionally viewed as a technically brilliant toady like Leni Riefenstahl, in fact filled his poetry with stealthy attacks on Augustus; according to Maleuvre, Augustus had Virgil murdered in retribution for his dissent. Of course, American poets live in a republic and so

need not fear assassination (at least not yet). This is why the retreat of many poets into solipsistic wordplay or the plush billiard rooms of fusty traditional forms is so dispiriting: they are proving themselves to be joiners. The Committee announces that Derrida is *de rigeur*, and certain poets queue up dressed in bunting and balloons; others accept the complaint that poetry is “obscure,” and therefore adopt the simplistic tone of the anchorman or the snappy patter of the standup comic. Small wonder that when a book of genuine poetry comes along we find work that leads us, as Frost said it should, from delight to wisdom.

As If the World Really Mattered, a collection of poems by Art Goodtimes, is just such a book. Don't be dissuaded by the author's name: Goodtimes is no epicurean, although the ground note of his poetry is joy. This poet is a bard, an environmentalist, a social historian, and a scholar whose work reflects ideas drawn from a variety of traditions—including pre-Socratic philosophy, Buddhism, Catholicism, Dadaism, the *Kuksu* religion of Central California's tribal peoples—and a variety of writers: Sappho, Neruda, Steinbeck, Edward Abbey and more. His poems entertain, but more importantly, they *reveal*—and their revelations spring from a profound moral vision rooted in a reverence for nature both outside and inside human beings.

“If we lived as if all that whirled really mattered,” he writes in the book's invocation, “*mirabile dictu*, / what strange shape would our lives take?” In its own way, each poem that follows is an answer to that question—an answer *out loud*. “All are performance pieces,” Goodtimes tells us, “meant to be read aloud.” Readers bored by tame, “well-made” poems will be especially taken with Goodtimes's measures. Take these lines from “Wildflowers”:

Fireweed. Tansy. *Solidago odora*.
Beside the bituminous asphalt's edge

where the wild things grow lush

a hand searches for hues. Is it
 necessary to know the names of things
 to set stems in water? To make
 colors leap like salmon from a fountain
 of white porcelain? The map-followers
 whiz by on their wheels. They have no
 time for tints & shades. Enough
 the pleasant blur of forms. Dutchbarn.
 Billboard. Deer in the pines.

The world—all that’s whirled—is where Goodtimes takes us by ditching our maps. It’s a place full of things and creatures, names and colors, metaphors and subtle strains of music. Notice, too, that the poet insists on the value of these specifics: the world is not the map.

In poem after poem, he reminds us that our addiction to the maps our culture provides has been a disaster for the natural world around and within. “Current Events” is just one example:

Toolmakers. Machinetamers. Twentiethcenturyclocks.
 We bow obedient to the swing of our chromosomes.

All the time calling it destiny. Philosophy. Or better yet
 consciousness & man’s (*sic*) rise to civilization.

Which translates into the vulgate as lording it over
 the elephants & other mammals, minerals, Jurassic latebloomers
 whose base elements may one day soon usurp command
 & transmute the planet into pure meat. Hot spirit.

Even before we get our chance outproducing one another
 to gag, glut, and gadget ourselves into ha-ha oblivion.

Heading as we are, ringaroundtheashes, fullspeed downthetubes
 towards yet another less auspicious BIG BANG.

Unless of course someone pulls a rabbit out of the Edsel.
 Saws the bicameral brain in half & presto! peacefully

puts Humpty-Dumpty back together better than ever.
Which is only to imagine some androgynous zen Houdini

handcuffed & submerged in the cells since childhood
leading us out from the locked jaws of plutonium

to leap uncharted circuits in a single bound
& just maybe once again connect us to the heart.

That ancient, though illogical & most highly-feared,
path of least resistance.

Sharp wit, subversiveness, references ranging from James Tate and Superman to Julian Jaynes and Mother Goose, all designed, I think, to serve as a counterweight to the poem's essential pessimism about our species—an undercurrent throughout the book that Goodtimes consistently opposes with sheer verbal energy and invention.

Clearly, Art Goodtimes's poetry is "engaged," as we used to say, in a way that goes beyond sneering at some political incompetent or tossing out bromides of the left or the right. In fact, serves in the unglamorous role of Green party county commissioner in Telluride, Colorado. "I do politics by matching / fixed attention with free intention," he tells us in "Basketweaving," whose controlling metaphor is significantly both process and product. The aim, he explains, is not to exercise power, but to offer up "[a] vision / tied into shape & formed / for the benefit of all."

Even the poems that draw on particulars of the poet's life—from his adventures in Catholic schools to the pain of an auto accident to the pleasures of lovemaking—go far beyond personal expression: they touch on the life we hold in common. I've never killed an elk, for example, much less helped to skin one, but Goodtimes has—and what he shares about the experience (or *through* it) is a genuine revelation:

SKINNING THE ELK

“There’s a whole lot of life in these animals,”
George nods, almost lie a prayer
as I hold the hoofed leg
steady for the knife,
mist rising from the gutted belly,
skin still warm.

Tempered steel peels back
thick hide. Fur.
The dark meat of the interior.

Secret organs slide steaming into full moonlight
on the bed of Greenbank’s battered pickup.

I can stop peering
into the glazed crystal
of those antlered eyes.
Two perfect rivets
welded to the girder of that
skeletal moment when
the bullet’s magic
cut life short.

Later,
after the carcass is hung
in a cottonwood tree,
I go inside to wash my hands.
But the blood won’t come off.

There’s no mistake.
I am marked for life.
I wear the elk’s tattoo,
as its meat becomes my meat
& its blood stains my blood.

Spirit leaping
from shape to shape.

Nothing here of “liberal guilt,” no Disney-fication of the animal, only a deep and honestly inspiring respect for the fleshly presence of the sacred.

La Alameda Press has done a fine job of honoring the art of Art Goodtimes, in part with its beautiful book design, in part by providing space for both a prefatory “Invocation” by Dolores LaChapelle (which correctly places in the tradition exemplified by Gary Snyder) and for Goodtimes’s own detailed commentaries on nearly every poem in the book. (I hasten to add that these are not like Eliot’s erudite but coy notes to “The Waste Land”; they are genuinely helpful, expansive and intriguing, as if the poet were engaged in conversation with the reader.) *As If the World Really Mattered* is a performance no lover of poetry should miss.