

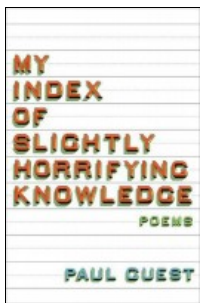
digital emunction

APR 7, 2009

paul guest's my index of slightly horrifying knowledge

ROBERT P. BAIRD

[Note: I recently completed a passel of reviews for a publication that decided not to publish them. Rather than let them die on the vine, I thought I'd throw a few them up here over the next couple of days. The second and third in the series are [here](#) and [here](#).]



Paul Guest, *My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge*

Poetry about the extraordinary suffering of its author presents its readers with a special conundrum. On the one hand we don't want to pretend that the suffering is incidental to the art; one of the more easily dispensable things that T.S. Eliot ever wrote was that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates." But to err in the other direction—to read the suffering instead of the art—well, that's what Oprah's for.

A reader comes wary, then, to a book like Paul Guest's *My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge*. It's not just the title: already on back cover of the book we find no fewer than three Poets Laureate warning us about the "irreversible, immense" quality of Guest's suffering, which the jacket flap specifies: "At the age of twelve, Paul Guest suffered a bicycle accident that left him paralyzed for life." Nor is this a publisher's ploy to secure our pity in advance; the end of the first poem, "A User's Guide to Physical Debilitation," offers a fair precis of what's to come:

It is our hope that this guide
will be a valuable resource
during this long stretch of boredom and dread
and that it may be of some help,
however small, to cope with your new life
and the gradual, bittersweet loss
of every God damned thing you ever loved.

Fortunately, Guest spares us our scruples, and he does so in the most difficult way possible: he makes art that is adequate to his suffering. By turns funny, sharp, angry, and sad, his poems compel us to trust their candor:

There are days I want
to lament broken glass
or put my fist through the door
or throttle the blue sky's silent
throat.
—From "My Arms"

I tried to think of a world
in which wisdom was optional
but that world had thought of me first.
—From "My Luck"

The best evidence that what's good about *My Index* is its craft and not the circumstances of its composition comes from Guest's own oeuvre. Consider the closing stanzas from "The Intrusion of Ovid," a poem from his first book, 2002's *The Resurrection of the Body and the Ruin of the World*:

You, yourself, trample
the sadness I lushly tend like a garden
and tell me to come in from the rain,

to laugh while I can, to get more sleep,
good advices all, and at this window

in which is framed the world that's mine
and once was yours, I'm inclined to listen,
to put you down and shut my eyes
because pain is ancient, and therefore classic,
as you are and I am not.

As finely appointed as these lines want to be, let's face it: this is lyric in rags. Knowing that Guest is paralyzed doesn't improve the melancholy of a sadness tended and trampled, the self-pitying plea to "laugh while I can," or the cloying apostrophe to ancient authority.

My Index, by contrast, shows a poet who has found a language appropriate to his harrowing experience. In place of that tone of crepuscular weariness, which has been luring sad young literary men since "Prufrock," Guest gives us this:

I was young and needed the porn but not
the money or the long seasons
of shame or whatever was the burning
sensation I felt in my head
—From "My Past"

Likewise, he's put the "ancient" "classic" Ovid to rest, a move that allows him to channel voices closer to home:

There were *secret methods*
and *proven techniques*
and when I closed my eyes
it sounded like birth control from an alternate dimension.
Supplies were low.
I had to order now
but I never did,
letting the night run out
like the special offer each one was.
While we made love
in a frozen world, operators were standing by.

Best of all, Guest sheds much of the sentimentality that freighted even his most recent book, *Notes for My Body Double*, in which he could still write of "stopping in a clearing of clouds / and canopy to note moon / like milk on my skin." Compare those lines to a section of "A Long Time I've Wanted to Say Something," from *My Index*. Though the poem includes a couplet that might, in another context, seem all awash in an ether of tepid plangency—

O world, I want to love you
better than I do, forgiving

—it quickly recovers and hones its edge, resolving into a wholly unexpected and immediate image:

every satellite dish bolted to the roof
and pointed towards the
ubiquity of the sky,
and all it holds within it like a gravid cloud—
darkness first of all
and then the post-mortem flare of the stars,
and fixed between both,
satellites soaking our cells
with beamed, invisible pornography
and all its stark frustrations,
its spacey coupling, its theater of vicious hunger.
How many times have I gone
home through that rain,
my body perforated by
waves of strange ecstasy?

The scraps of poeticism that remain in these lines—the unnecessary grandiloquence of *ubiquity* and *gravid*, the progressively enervating *stark frustrations*, *spacey coupling*, and *vicious hunger*—shouldn't distract us from the marvelously spooky image at their heart. "Satellites soaking our cells / with beamed, invisible pornography": yes, we say, that's our world, that's the one.

One of the most impressive things about *My Index*—and I say this with genuine admiration—is that Guest lets himself be a real son of a bitch. Playing the asshole serves him well on a number of levels: it adds to the air of honesty, yes, but it also acts as a prophylaxis to our pity and, perhaps most importantly, it gives him space to be funny. Guest can do many voices in this register. In "My Arms" he does sad, subtle scorn (think Robert Hass, after a fight with his wife):

Untrue to say I lost count
of what I never hoped to keep.
A lie to say that when
she held my hands to her hips
and her body above mine,
I loved such need, I did not hate us both.

"Eulogy" gives us affect-flat stand-up (think Billy Collins, after a fight with Garrison Keillor):

But it was his time, we should all admit.
Shouldn't we, who loved him
the way we love traffic
and cell phones during spectacular sex
and the degradations of puberty,
shouldn't we all feel
as though light were swelling within us,

inflaming us?
—From "Eulogy"

And, with "Semi-Apocalyptic R.S.V.P. with Contingencies," Guest proves he can conjure enough acid-soaked spite to power the devil's own Prius (think Frederick Seidel, after breakfast):

assuming witnesses dredged
from the quarry's alkaline depths
don't recover well enough to recall
their bad luck that night in May
when I was bowling with my lupus-stricken mother
after recording the progression of her grotesque deformities,
an activity which pleased her
for as long as Science still considered her human
.....
then I would be very glad to attend
the white wedding of your ass-faced daughter.

I doubt even Guest would consider those last lines to be great poetry, but they suggest why *My Index* makes for such a refreshing read. I can think of many young poets who might make room for the phrase "ass-faced daughter" in their work, but they'd be sure to swaddle it in layers of irony, making sure that we knew that they knew it's a hateful thing to say. Guest, however, lets that morsel of sophomoric bile poison his speaker's own mouth. In other poems lust, shame, anger, and humiliation come in for similar treatment, and the result is an emotional panorama the likes of which have rarely been seen since John Berryman.


To call Guest's poetry confessional will likely do it more harm than good, but in its own spiffed-up post-Ashberian way, that's what it is. While Guest doesn't yet have the technical mastery of the best practitioners of the mode—his ear sometimes runs flat and he tends to overdo the adjectives—his affective range and his talent for rhetorical candor put him up there with Frank Bidart and Carl Phillips in his ability to create an art of real emotional power.

3 Responses

-  Steve Fellner
April 10, 2009 (Edit)

I like that you're willing to offer genuine criticisms, but you delegitimize yourself with the embarrassing overblown praise in the closure. Frank Bidart? Carl Phillips? Bidart is one of the most SINCERE poets: Guest is cagey and indirect, coy and disingenuous. Which isn't a bad thing, but a trait that is not at all comparable to Bidart, one of our best living poets period. Phillips poems ARE syntax: something Guest doesn't seem that involved in. Very weird comments at end in a review that I thought would be self-controlled.


Reply

-  Robert P. Baird
April 10, 2009 (Edit)

Steve, I agree with most of what you say: about Bidart's greatness, about Phillips and his syntax, about Guest's relative lack of interest in syntax. I disagree with the implication that Guest *isn't* sincere—there may be a lot of surface indirection and coyness in his poems but you don't have to get too deep to find the vast reserves of sincerity on which they're built.

More importantly, though, I stand by my comparison at the end, which is more qualified than you give me credit for. I'm not comparing them absolutely, I'm comparing their abilities to make poems that have "real emotional power." I would agree that Guest isn't (yet) a poet of Bidart's or Phillips's caliber, which (as I suggested in the review) has much to do with his lack of technical mastery. But his poems do hit with the kind of emotional force that Phillips and Bidart can generate in theirs. That's what impressed me about his book, and I'm not at all embarrassed to say so.

Reply

-  michael robbins
April 10, 2009 (Edit)

Lazy readers have a hard time distinguishing among registers, or recognizing the layering of registers: I can say something outrageous (You are the stupidest reader I have ever encountered) with real sincerity, even if I'm obviously employing charged or hyperbolic rhetoric. Seidel gets the "insincere" slap a lot too: one of our most poignantly sincere poets. Guest strikes me as similarly sincere, almost painfully so. But some people have learned to associate sincerity with a certain diction or tone, one that can't assimilate cutting humor or outright zaniness (although someone who recognizes Bidart as sincere — this guy who writes about jacking off on the corpse of the little girl he murdered — ought to know better).

Reply

Leave a Reply