

Lisa Vihos

Two New Poetry Collections by Mark Belair: *Taking our Time* and *Running Late* (Kelsay Books, 2019)

Mark Belair's books arrived in my mailbox in the middle of the pandemic, at a moment when I needed to be reminded that Time with a capital T is a human-made construct that can either rule me or set me free. Time is the agreed-upon backdrop we use to get through our days in relation to ourselves and others. When that backdrop is disrupted, it is helpful to turn to poetry. As Belair's poems affirm, we run late all too often. But if we flip that script, we will see we are simply taking our time. The poet skillfully dissects these divergent views of Time into its corollary parts, and in so doing, shows us the many blessings of being alive in the world.

The poems in both books are grouped into eleven sections of four to eight poems each. I must assume that the poet purposely did not create twelve sections, which would have been easy enough to do, but would also have been too neat and tidy in relation to our measuring time in twelves. Each section has an evocative heading, for example: "Taking Our Time As We Try to Connect" or "Taking Our Time As We Leave the Stage." In the other book, we find "Running Late Yet Leaving No One Behind" and "Running Late Yet in a Spell." His grouping of the poems into themes does suggest an order to the chaos. The poet provides us with some balm, a measuring of the mess of life.

Belair dwells in memory. He conjures frequent narratives from childhood, sensory moments that are never forgotten. In "Donuts," he remembers flailing around in the backseat of the family car with his sister on Sunday mornings after church, on the way to get a sweet treat:

But that first bite of donut —
coming after our giddy, tilted ride —
was the sacrament
that purged,
for another blessed week,
the waxed-wood taste of church.

Sometimes, an observation in the present will unlock a memory, as in the poem “Spring Chill,” when turning a corner from shade into sun on a spring day awakens a bodily awareness:

. . . childhood-small
and summer-warm,

a memory
radiating out

from marrow
to muscles. . . .

Many of the poems touch upon some moment in childhood that becomes the seed for something that the poet still carries with him. Belair clearly has nailed this approach and takes it further in poems that recount the memories of other people in his life, such as his mother and father. Expanding the circle of memory, some poems are memories that he imagines someone else might hold some day, as in the poem “Yellow Boots.” Here, he is drawn to the sight of a little boy in yellow boots who is out walking with his mother in the rain. As the “sweetly laughing” boy and his mother vanish down the street, the poet sees

into the boy’s far future;
into stringent days
sweetened

by his earliest —
if now departing —
rain-slicked memories.

Belair teases apart the past, present, and future. He unwinds them and then weaves them back together, at times crossing over from one consciousness to another. He points out that memory eventually gets muddled, as in the poem “Compass,” in which his father gives him a driving a tour of his boyhood haunts, making use of an old compass pulled from the glove compartment, allowing for

an Alzheimered version
of its glory days, a town
that my dad
would never forsake
no matter how forsaken
for as a fatherless boy
he could count on
the magnetic north. . . .

For me, the magnetic north of these two collections is summed up in the line “all time is One” from the poem “Pocket Watch.” Belair’s poems continuously reveal the many mundane things that hold us all together. His words reveal not only how we measure Time, but how Time measures us. If you think about it, that is exactly what someone who is both a professional drummer and a poet would be very well-suited to do. Belair is a master of taking the one small detail, the could-have-been-missed observation, the thing half-seen, and turning it into something that goes far beyond itself. He gives us the world, startling and fresh; placing it both inside and outside of Time. He reminds us to see that who and what we are is actually time-less, existing, as he writes, “in a living line of felt continuity.”