

Famous Poets and Other Oxymorons

By Amy Lemmon

Book Review:

Luck Is Luck: Poems, by Lucia Perillo. Random House, 2005.

The publisher's blurb on Lucia Perillo's latest book declares her poetry to be "high art that, like the work of Billy Collins . . . will be accessible to any reader." Collins himself, a former U. S. poet laureate and repeat guest on the popular *A Prairie Home Companion* radio series, has pronounced her work to be "aimed precisely at the reader." When I selected Collins' *Picnic, Lightning* for my introductory college poetry course a few years ago, my students surprisingly found Collins' work as challenging as the allusive modernist verse of Pound or Eliot. The truth is, most Americans are simply not accustomed to reading any poetry—"accessible" or otherwise. The compression of language, the reliance on image and figures of speech, the allusiveness that poetry relies on require more effort than most of us can, or want to, manage.

Lest we deem poetry phobia a phenomenon of our multimedia age, consider this observation from Randall Jarrell's 1953 essay "The Obscurity of the Poet": "If we were in the habit of reading poets their obscurity would not matter; and, once we are out of the habit, their clarity does not help." Although efforts by recent poet laureates, including Collins, Rita Dove, and frequent *Jim Lehrer NewsHour* guest Robert Pinsky, have produced a slight increase in public awareness of poetry, rare is the poet whose books sell more than 1,000 copies.

As poets go, Lucia Perillo has had a high-profile career. When she was barely 30, her first book, *Dangerous Life*, won the Norma Farber First Book Prize from the Poetry Society of America in 1989. She gained early attention for the directness, power, and humor of her poems, her startling, often visceral images, and an engagement

with current events and popular culture. Her second book, *The Body Mutinies*, dealt to some extent with her then-recent diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Though the disease progressed, she continued to teach in the creative-writing program at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale and, of course, to write. Perillo's leap from respectable university press to major commercial imprint came in 1999, when Random House published *The Oldest Map with the Name America: New and Selected Poems*. Then, in 2000, she was awarded a MacArthur "genius grant" and retired from teaching to write and live full-time in Olympia, Wash., where her husband works as a theatrical technician.

Luck Is Luck, Perillo's fourth collection, shows maturity while retaining the sass of her earlier work. Here the poet finds herself in mid-life. "Christmas at Forty" portrays her fast-forward feeling: "One minute you're a punk driving around / in Eddie Butterford's blue Dodge. . . . but then somehow you end up / with a whole mortgageful of ornaments in the attic." The teenager's hope for "something . . . hallucinogenic" gives way to leftover painkillers "bequeathed by your beloved / dying friends." The stance is tough, self-deprecating, unsentimental—even when the poet faces her father's death. "Book of Bob," a suite of seven decidedly un-elegiac poems paying tribute to her late father, is followed by "My Eulogy Was Deemed too Strange," which begins with a childhood dream image of her father "dressed like an Apollo astronaut."

The book bristles with the body's foibles ("For My Big Nose" and "Fizz Ed"), most often addressing the typical concerns of mid-life. This is no textbook for Victim Lit 101; her multiple sclerosis makes only a few notable appearances; and "Fubar," addressed to Paul Guest, a young poet paralyzed since childhood, simultaneously rejects self-pity and satirizes count-your-blessings optimism:

See the leaves falling; isn't this the trees' way of telling us
to just buck up?
Oh they are right: their damage is so much greater than
our damage.
I mean, none of my body parts have actually dropped off.

The poem ends with a cartoon-like vision of the speaker and her friend as Civil War veterans with prop head bandages and crutches. They appear to thumb their noses at tragedy and make music amid the ruin: "And looky, looky here at me: I'm playing the piccolo."

"In the Confessional Mode, with a Borrowed Movie Trope" begins with "The idea of another life / of which this outward life is only an expression." A man dying alone in "a fleabag hotel" morphs into "a boy who's upstairs in the house / where I've finagled my deflowering." After describing the awkward scene, the speaker reveals that her adolescent partner eventually "got stuck / with the same disease," and, as she considers the ruin of the man's once-beautiful body, the rhythm builds to lyrical intensity by the poem's end:

Oh we are blown, we are bags,
we are moved by such elegant chaos.
Call it god. Only because it is an expletive that fits.
His body, his beauty, all fucked up now.
God. Then the air cuts out, and then we drop.

If there are obscure passages in Perillo's poems, they stem from allusions used without gloss, or references so private that readers puzzle a bit even as we are invited in by her conspiratorial tone. Yet these poems have many moments that communicate vividly, through meticulously descriptive images and a no-holds-barred rhetoric. Overall, the effect is chiaroscuro.

Occasionally, Perillo allows the machinery of composition to enter the poem: "This is not a joke because the story wants to go into the record. / Yes it does want. The story has a little mind that thinks" ("Urban Legend"). The reader becomes part of the poem's process, making associative leaps that mimic the speaker's stream of consciousness.

Over half a century ago, Randall Jarrell asked, "*Is Clarity the handmaiden of Popularity, as everybody automatically assumes? How much does it help to be immediately plain?*" Readers who seek bracing portrayals of life in all its ugliness and beauty are willing to live with some mystery, to navigate the more opaque passages *en route* to moments of clarity.