

Jeff Gundy, *Without a Plea: Poems*. Huron, OH: Bottom Dog Press, 2019. Pp. 96. Softcover, \$16.00.

I mostly think of Jeff Gundy as poet *qua* folk singer. If Patrick Friesen is more Miles Davis, Gundy usually works closer to Dylan or Guthrie. But his latest poetry volume *Without a Plea* reminds me of *Kind of Blue*—era Davis, that soundscape of variant melodies playing over a consistent theme. Gundy’s title initiates a subtle progression at work under the four sections of poems. From the start, the refrain of that familiar invitation hymn “Just As I Am” hums as a subconscious foundation to Gundy’s meditative exploration of topics ranging from writers’ retreats to departmental meetings to juxtapositions of “the grinning orange nemesis” with a grandson singing “come thou fount of every blessing.” The harmonies created by these seemingly discordant scenes are satisfying and illuminating, and all are counterpointed against the question posed by his title: how do I respond to God and this world just as I am, without one plea?

This collection of poems is consistent with observations Gundy has made of his Mennonite/s writing context: it is “sparse with explicit Mennonite markers yet pervaded by the themes and tensions of contemporary Mennonite life,” manifesting willingness to “dwell with mystery, uncertainty and doubt” (“Enigmas”). I envy and admire that willingness which persists in Gundy’s poetry, even while catching my breath at the daring of titles like “God Is Not Right, He Is Big.” Sometimes, however, Gundy’s theopoetics hint at a more orthodox Anabaptist connection: in “Plain Advice” he writes, “And beauty is like God, mystery / in plain sight, silent, hesitating.” Other times that connection is more explicit. In “Nothing Is Level There,” Gundy looks through the lens of Hans Denck’s sixteenth-century observation of the world as an evil tree:

“It has never borne as much evil fruit as in our day,”

he wrote. “But there is not that much to bewail us yet. There is more, by far, to be thankful for.”

For all Gundy’s attentiveness to the surrounding world, a persistent Anabaptism remains within the margins of his perception. There is piety here. Not the easy piety that comes from uniformity and dogmatism, but piety resulting from what Kenneth Burke describes as “the sense of what properly goes with what.” Gundy’s piety is frequently expressed through humour, as in “Why I Got Nothing Done This Summer.” Here he reflects on being “known for

sulking through meetings, / while some of my worthy comrades love them so much / they prolong them to spectacular lengths.” With a sly Wilde-esque aphorism he concludes: “Minutes arrive the next day, the next week, / but the hours do not reappear.” Just because it’s slightly uncomfortable doesn’t mean it can’t be slightly funny, and vice versa.

Elsewhere Gundy has claimed poets are “better equipped than most” to “help us find the wisdom to cope with [the human experience] in responsible Christian ways” (“Enigmas”). It’s a position that resonates with Burke’s suggestion that the poet’s burden is to write against our “trained incapacity,” the ways in which our strengths shape our understanding and leave us with inadequate interpretations of the world around us. For Burke, the gift the poet provides is the “perspective by incongruity” generated by the artful use of language. Gundy hints at a similar new perspective in this collection, succinctly capturing the effect of language on experience by confiding that “when I shifted I saw / what I hadn’t seen.” The adjusted perspectives here often locate the profound within the quotidian, like the burgeoning awareness of mortality in the lines, “Someday you’ll look at the bulk pack of batteries and then just buy two, / so your children won’t have to deal with the leftovers.” In the same poem, he offers a playful self-awareness of how perspective can shift with language: “It’s not the worst thing to admit that you hate what you love most. / The word *sometimes* belongs somewhere in that sentence.” Readers are invited into the wordplay, to slow the pace of reading and try out that word *sometimes* across the syntax of the preceding line.

Gundy’s stylistic variations create a compelling and textured reading experience. Many poems in this collection are structured in Gundy’s usual free verse couplets, in which possible meanings unfold through effective enjambment. In “Determinism On a Summer Morning in the Midwest,” for example, he admits “I still don’t know how to be myself and belong / to something at the same time, much less rest easy [...] at the blind corners where a pickup may be / blazing my way with its oblivious tons of doom.” The two possible subjects governing the verb “blazing” demonstrate how Gundy captures the active participation latent in all embodied experience. Other poems, however, have longer prose stanzas allowing more expansive syntactic meditation, or are precluded by epigraphs that draw readers into broader conversations, from Lorca on *duende* to Daniel Kauffman’s *Manual of Bible Doctrines*. Others still, such as “Late Explanation,” use declarative single lines:

I write out of indigestion, out of dejection, out of disdain and despair
for the greed and venality of Those People.

You know who you are. OK, maybe I'm one too.

Because I want to think I'm trying.

Because I'm lazy, because I hate talking on the telephone, because I
hate meetings even when I love the people in the meetings.

Lines like these recall the *Kind of Blue*-era Davis mentioned above, where Gundy's subtly-developing ideas are grounded in repeated words and phrases just as Davis's melodies developed from repeating note and chord progressions.

Gundy is always easy to recommend. Not because he is *accessible*, whatever that means, but because the eye he casts is at once profound and grounded in the experience of the dirt, mud, and grass of the world around him. And this matters, because all of us occupy communities desperate for some perspective by incongruity. We need the gift of language that disrupts our trained incapacity, familiar enough to provide a sense of facility, but unfamiliar enough to push past that facility into additional perspectives and ways of seeing. *Without a Plea* is such a gift, an almost unapologetic declaration of "Just as I am," both response and invitation into the world as we currently have it.

Kyle Gerber
University of Waterloo

Works Cited

- Burke, Kenneth. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. 2nd ed., Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954.
- Gundy, Jeff. "Enigmas of Embodiment in Four Books of Poems." *Walker in the Fog: On Mennonite Writing*. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2005, pp. 204-224.