

Towards Hope with Mike Madill's Poetry Book
***The Better Part of Some Time* (Wet Ink Books, 2022)**

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“... *because there is hope*”. Job 11:18. The Holy Bible

2021 Don Gutteridge Poetry Award Winner, Mike Madill, holds our hand with a firm grip and ushers us into his *The Better Part of Some Time*, a 2022 Wet Ink Books publication. With an impressive opening piece, “Tether”, three sections and fifty-nine poems, Madill is master of theme and readers’ guide along memory lane. Poetry becomes an awesome feat when it successfully limns reality and bleeds motifs no one can avoid relating to. Madill’s writing validates such truth.

“Tether” stands as a formidable overture. The lines (fragments)

Every blink a freeze-frame,
tethering befores and afters.
An endless rope-ladder
flung into the unknown.

Cling to the belief
of safety in numbers,
like shoaling fish or
flocking birds.
Keep each other in sight,
cherish that tenuous grasp
amidst the tidal drift
of everything unnamed

invite—exhort, for the poet knows firsthand what *the unknown* has in store, what that *everything unnamed* is. Madill sweats and sheds tears with every single word, every single feeling wrapped in touching remembrances. As Barry Dempster comments: “Madill’s

poems are clean and thorough; he writes with a chisel on hard rock, sparks flying madly around the room...”

Steve Madill, Mike’s brother and a novelist, says, “Front and centre is the universal experience of the decline and passing of a parent.” The hefty notion of loss marks the book and marks *me*, deeply: I lost my father in sad yet unavoidable circumstances and have been writing poems to him ever since. Reading it now, a year after my father passed away, has made me relive moments Madill masterly describes in what Elizabeth Greene deems “A memorable book, impeccably written.”

The poet moves across a turbulence of sundry emotions, strong, profound, caustic, reminiscent, hopeful – necessary and unavoidable, because we are human after all – but we see, and welcome, the understandably harrowing shift from grief and helplessness to the courage he musters to survive.

English professor Dr. Linda Burkhardt puts it this way: “Mike Madill’s debut collection of poetry traverses the experiences and emotions that make us human, fragile, and humane: childhood wonder and joy, uncertainty, self-doubt, loss, love, friendship, grief, and ultimately the unrelenting hope that keeps us all moving forward.”

So, initially we are witness to a poet urged by childhood recollections, haunted by pain, experienced and ingrained in the flesh and the mind, but saved by hope he clings to as we progress through the book. His piece “Personal Effects” (Bedside – 1), for example, is vividly illustrative of the pain (fragments)

*Two nurses grimly lift the hem of your
blue bed sheet, denying my view of the
doctor removing your intubation tube.
Then, I see your chapped lips, slightly parted,
poised with an unfinished thought... //*

*... a corner of your blanket dragged
off the bed, draped over your shoulder.
This bloody cornea is like a rage
you’d never shown before,
dashing our final superhero hopes.
Without the breathing tube, he might last
five minutes, an hour at most.*

*Your chest rises and falls in an almost
imperceptible way... //*

*... Your warm hand,
your grip less than I need. The grit of
pain held so close for so long... //*
*I stare at your chest, willing it to rise
just once more.*

Later, his poem “Escape Hatch” gives us a readapting, acknowledging, struggling, nostalgic, transformative and perhaps already accepting man (fragments)

*... counting and
recounting the sides of
my pencil, imagining it
drawing a cartoon escape hatch
on the board room wall.*

*And now here I am, wishing I was
clean and dry and planted behind
a desk again, contorting brain instead
of body. Maybe it's the cat in me
wanting in, then wanting out, in and out,
waffling between worlds.*

Further on in the book, we read his poem “You Are Happy”, which flashes that signature Dempster says Madill’s poetry carries: poems “imbued with an honesty that is often stunning” or Dr. Burkhardt says is ever-present: “Amid the existential struggle, though, there emerges a refreshing wit that is often dark but also hopeful. It is a wit that reminds us to laugh at the absurdities of existence...” The poem (full):

*Remember when you used to wear a watch?
Before you strapped 10,000 steps to your wrist
and your pocket started chirping with texts.*

*Before bark began to peel from the lofty
crimson-king centerpiece in your front yard,
and rust appeared around your vanity's drain.*

*Never mind. Straight back to the dealer –
there's another smudge on your
limited edition Lexus and its opalescent finish.*

*Upgrade your windows before the neighbours notice
they're lowly crank-outs, not double-hung and
triple-glazed. Get that cedar mulch
absurdly mounded around every honey locust*

*because Better Homes and Gardens said so.
Purchase only artisanal potato chips – twice the price,
gluten-free, and everyone will be impressed.*

*Maybe even you. A persona only fully realized
with the walk-in closet you had to wait until
you were forty to find and fill. Now picture yourself
robbed of all the brand names and prestige:*

*no more nine-foot ceilings, three-car garage,
grand piano, in-ground pool. What's left?
Nothing more than me. Cb-ching.*

However mixed we may find the emotions/themes crisscrossing Madill's book, there remains a bonding aspect to his poems as a solid whole: the acceptance of our human condition, which sees us born, undergo life's ups and downs (sideway lapses as well), wrinkle into old age and eventually depart. In between are all the involvements and mementoes we build or are thrown into—and hope.

Lisa Burkhardt tells us: “With all of the growing pains, life experiences, joys and loss that make us who we are, Madill takes us there with melancholy (‘Alive’), vulnerability (‘Smother’) and humour (‘Ars Poetica’). Enjoy the journey – I know I did.”

Able to fathom, capture and *chisel on the hard rock* of writing memories as they emerged, grew, registered and affected his life, Madill soldiers on with a style all his own, plying syntax and word *like they were Byron’s or Blake’s* to deliver this Don Gutteridge Award winner, that at the end of the day looks at hope prompting us, as Dr. Burkhardt states, “to embrace 'the better part of some time'”, because what makes us go on is honoring what’s lost, resurfacing after having hit rock bottom, enduring, learning, living and *hoping*.

I have made it almost a habit to include at the end poems of mine related to the themes I review. Wet Ink Books publisher – and generous friend – Richard Grove (Tai) continues to please me by allowing my “whim”. I wrote the piece I finish my review with less than two months before my father died. He didn’t have the chance to read the Spanish version... May it serve as a tribute to him and to Madill’s father. Thank you, Tai. Thank you, Mike.

Memories

(To my 84-year-old father, for Father’s Day, June 20th, 2021)

Honor thy father. Deuteronomy 5:16

It hurts to see your spirit cave in
under the burden of Time, unforgiving years
collecting on your shoulders like blankets of age,
heavily cold, coldly heavy. It was me, long ago, on those
shoulders. I remember. I was a merry jockey up there,
my rein your thinning hair or your ears,
me barefoot with my make-believe spurs prodding your chest
so you’d carry me around, so you’d take your
fond-of-horses son out to the street to rival coaches.
I remember. Now, I carry you. Less jollity, more pain
lancing down your legs. *I’m far too old*, you complain,
looking me in the eye as if asking for an explanation.
I cringe at the inevitability of tomorrow—or yesterday,
when eternity stole Mom away. I remember.
Can hardly walk, you mumble. The joyous trots of past days

have cantered down to an effortful walker-assisted shuffle
trying to beat the distance between your bed
and the nearby rocking chair that seems to be, in your mind,
a million miles away. You used to bike to and
from work. I remember. You used to race fishes
in the beach, run athlete-like, carry Mom in your arms...
Today, those memories vanish for you but not for me:
I was there with you, you guided me, you prompted me,
you taught me. I rekindle those stories, retell them
to cheer you up. You say *Thank you*, faintly giving me
a smile of gratitude I'll always remember.