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The Reading Life

## Brian Russell's year of living dangerously

August 06, 2013 | By David L. Ulin, Los Angeles Times Book Critic

On the surface, Brian Russell's first book of poems, "The Year of What Now" (Graywolf: 76 pp., \$15 paper), seems nothing if not traditional; winner of this year's Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize, it reads as a confessional, a sequence of reflections by a man whose wife is undergoing treatment for cancer.

"what was I thinking," Russell writes in "In the Event," an early entry that sets the tone for the collection. "this is serious ... / when you take / my hand I think I don't care / what you say / I'm going to save you"

But if part of Russell's purpose is to explore the dynamics of a relationship stretched by crisis, there is something else at work here also -- an exploration of genre and its (dis)contents. Russell's own wife, after all, has not been sick, making "The Year of What Now" an extended game of literary what if, a projection into both an alternate present and the inevitable future in which "we are each our own culture / alive with the virus that's waiting / to unmake us."

Let's be honest: This is a gutsy move, and I'm not sure what I think of it. Partly, that's because, as someone who both reads and writes poems, I've been conditioned to think of them as snapshots, little memory slices, images taken, for the most part, whole from life.

"In contemporary poetry," Russell explains in a recent interview with his editor, "most of the time when you're reading about an 'I' who's watching a bird build a nest in a backyard, you can probably bet that the poet watched a bird build a nest in their backyard and wrote a poem about it."

He goes on: "There is nothing wrong with writing autobiographical poetry (Frank O'Hara is, without competition, my favorite poet). But it must be *interesting*. A true story is only useful insofar as the reader is going to care about it. I'm unwilling to accept the autobiographical 'I' as the *only* option for poetry."

"The Year of What Now" takes that as a fundamental challenge, to draw us in as if into a work of fiction, to blur the line between verse and narrative. The writing is nuanced, full of feeling ... but still, there are moments, especially early on, when the pressure of the conceit can feel too much.

In "Preface," for instance, Russell describes the difficulty of discussing with his wife "the last thing I'll see you in," the dress she'd want to wear at her funeral. Here, the tension between the confessional voice and our knowledge that what it is describing didn't really happen, is too substantial, and the poem collapses under its own narrative weight.

As to why this should happen, I don't know. We are (or I am) willing to suspend disbelief in a work of fiction, no matter how confessional it appears. I think of Lorrie Moore's ruthless "People Like That Are the Only People Here," in which a mother (who also happens to be a writer) deals with her baby's cancer diagnosis and her own mercenary instinct to record it: "These are the notes. Now where is the money?" the story ends.

Moore, however, *was* writing from experience, and *that* blurring of the line (is it fiction? is it memoir?) is part of what gives her story its fire. In "The Year of What Now," Russell is demanding something different: That we knowingly follow him into a tragedy of his own invention, an intention made more difficult by the expectations that we bring to these poetic forms.

And yet, as the collection progresses, it provokes an odd sort of transference, especially when, as happens more than once here, the invention pauses to acknowledge itself.

"a woman who looks like she just / came on from the rain strains to hold up / her copy of war and peace which I could have / invented but didn't I don't have the energy," Russell writes in "Hell is Everyone," while the understated "Everything Every Time" traces, in four brief stanzas, a series of alternate lives, ending, "in a different version of this I sit up / abruptly in bed I'm breathing deeply you / put your hand on my back and say / go back to sleep you're fine everything is fine."

There are a couple of ways to read these lines: as the character imagining himself into a different life, or as the author peeking through the surface of his work. Regardless, they tell us something about what Russell is up to, about the challenges embodied by these poems.

Do we read, he is asking, to be reassured, or to be drawn into an unknown territory, where we are what we imagine? "The Year of What Now" leaves it up to us.

"believe me I try," Russell writes, "but I can't understand it / to know that someone does will have to be enough."

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