

Michael Dickman *Flies*



WINNER OF THE JAMES LAUGHLIN AWARD OF THE ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS

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"Hilarity transfiguring all that dread, manic overflow of powerful feeling, zero at the bone—*Flies* renders its desolation with singular invention and focus and figuration: the making of these poems makes them exhilarating."—James Laughlin Award citation

"Reading Michael [Dickman] is like stepping out of an overheated apartment building to be met, unexpectedly, by an exhilaratingly chill gust of wind."—*The New Yorker*

"These are lithe, seemingly effortless poems, poems whose strange affective power remains even after several readings."—*The Believer*

Winner of the James Laughlin Award for the best second book by an American poet, *Flies* presents an uncompromising vision of joy and devastating loss through a strict economy of language and an exuberant surrealism. Michael Dickman's poems bring us back to the wonder and violence of childhood, and the desire to connect with a power greater than ourselves.

*What you want to remember
of the earth
and what you end up
remembering
are often two
different things*

Michael Dickman was born and raised in Portland, Oregon. His first book of poems, *The End of the West*, appeared in 2009 and became the best-selling debut in the history of Copper Canyon Press. His poems appear frequently in *The New Yorker*, and he teaches poetry at Princeton University.

Flies Details

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Daphne Stanford says

I'm torn about what to make of this book. Like his first collection, *_The End of the West_*, Dickman's short lines and jarring line breaks--with ample space in between everything--make for an eye-squinting read, at times. Eye-squinting because of all the space that requires filling in, and the dreamlike quality of the clipped visions that are roughly painted by terse, clipped phrases. Eye-squinting because rather than dreamlike, this book is more aptly described as nightmarish. I consider it impressive if a book makes me tear up; the last poetry collection that did that to me was *_Crush_*, by Richard Siken. This collection made me swallow back the urge to allow myself to sob because I was eating lunch in public at the time of my first reading, and I didn't want to appear to be crying over a book. But the emotion is one of feeling horrified at the visions and emotions roiling around in the air around me and inside my chest and throat, threatening to come up, like vomit. Which is what the book is about: mortality, bodies, death, stinking of meat, nightmare visions of people you know and love going out to sea, rocking back and forth, dying piecemeal right in front of you. That's what reading the book is like.

The four stars, rather than five, is because as much as I admire the highly crafted and deliberate nature of Dickman's aesthetic that successfully creates a very specific effect, I still can't quite stomach one-word lines, unless they are used sparingly. In this collection, they are everywhere. It reads like performance poetry to me, rather than lines of poetry honed and crafted, on the page. I don't doubt that each decision to cut a phrase or sentence in half was deliberated and conscious, but after a while it seems like an easy out, a pattern or trademark that feels a bit lazy. But I admit my bias: I'm more of a maximalist than a minimalist, at heart; I enjoy the weight of a poem that appears more substantial more than a short, terse poem that works as much with empty space as with the connotations created by ambiguity and multiplicities of images.

One last thing: for some reason, it doesn't offend me when Dickman writes about Emily Dickinson--as opposed to when Billy Collins writes about her. This is a good thing. Am also reminded of Emily Dickinson because of that feeling of having the top of my head taken off, kind of feeling. So, yeah. That's a good thing.

Eric says

Whew. This a rough collection of poems. Rough in that the poems do not fall anywhere within the realm of accessible. Rough in that they are depressing. Since they elicit an emotion in me, I can't call the poems bad. Truly bad poetry would make me fee...nothing. But poetry that just really, really bums me out, page after page, is also not very palatable. In fact, I found that every time I read one of Dickman's poems, I had to read something else almost immediately to cleanse the dirty feeling they left in my brain. Some people might actually enjoy having that dirty feeling in their brains. I didn't.

Grady says

Economy of Words, Plethora of Emotions

Michael Dickman writes his prolonged poems with the skill of a court stenographer. What seems to begin as

a short poem carries on for a few pages until the near childlike fantasy he shared is played out to the point where we the read believes him - whether it is true or imagined. He snips words out the air and pastes them together, meaningfully, toying with our visualizations of what he is constructing and then knocking over the toy block castle . 'Shaving My Father's Face' is a recollection of childhood made present by an act, in 'Home' he defines heaven for us ('In heaven/ ants are the doormen/to the flies...'). The creatures of title of the book - FLIES - alight in many of his poems as points of fascination and we're never sure why.

Some examples of the fascinating works contained in this volume include:

ALL SAINTS: I made the mask/ from scratch/ also the wings/ all by myself/ in the shape of a sick child/ or newly cut/grass/ It was hard to stand up at first because the wings were so heavy but/ I'm getting more and more used to them/ More and more ready/ Dripping/ waves of silver paint/ they shine like/ the blind/ But the beak is real/ A real beak/ instead of a mouth/ I brought the new/ body to school/ wrapped in tinfoil/ but left it in the coat closet/ in a backpack with/ my brain/ It was dark in there and scary and there were woods that no one had/ ever mentioned before and probably/ never will again/ I was called on all the time/ despite staring out the window/ as if the playground were/ on fire/ Stand closer/No one cared/ Stand closer/ The flames licked the blades/We will hold hands like children and sit on the floor in a large circle/ with our legs crossed in the late style of/deathlessness/ Waiting for /satori/ What I wanted to show you/ has disappeared/ through a hole/ in the back of my/ head/ What I wanted to tell you/ If you pee your pants on the floor/ you still have to sit there/ on the spot where/ you peed/ A halo/ seeping into the rug.'

Dickman's older brother committed suicide and this is how he coped:

DEAD BROTHER SUPERHERO

You don't have to be

afraid

anymore

His super-outfit is made from handfuls of oil and garbage blood and pinned together by stars

Flying

around the room

like a

mosquito

Drinking all the blood

or whatever we

have

to save us

who

need to be saved

I whispered 'To the rescue'

and sat

on the dead edge

of my bed

all night and

all morning

My feet did not touch the floor

My heart raced

I counted my breath like small white sheep and pinned my eyes open and stared at the door

Any second now

Any second

now

He saved my brain
from its burning
building
He stopped and started the bullet in my heart
with his teeth
Just like that
He looked down from outer space through all the clouds birds dropping like weights
He look out
from the center of the earth
through the fire
he was
becoming
in the doorway
and closed his eyes
his cape sweeping
the floor

Dickman pushes real emotions into surreal casts that can act out his fears and joys and frailties without ever leaving his safely guarded memory. This is poetry to read over and over, splashing around in the gifts of one who knows how to speak to us.

Grady Harp

Serena says

Michael Dickman's *Flies*, published in 2011 and a possible candidate for the Indie Lit Awards if it is nominated in September, won the Academy of American Poets James Laughlin Award, which is the only award for a second book of poetry. The collection is a dark look at family, but also takes a stark look at death and loss. However, there are lighter moments in the book, like in "Emily Dickinson to the Rescue" (page 21) that was highlighted in the Virtual Poetry Circle (<http://savvyverseandwit.com/2011/07/1...>).

Beneath the whimsical wordplay and imagery of playgrounds and imaginary friends, there is a deep sense of unrest and yet acceptance of how things have turned out, though the narrator has many regrets. In "Imaginary Playground" (page 27), the narrator is playing alone with his imaginary friends, but as the scene fills in, it is clear that where there once were trees and places to play, there is concrete and change. The narrator is nostalgic for those moments, even if they were solitary moments with imaginary friends — wishing there was a way to return to the innocence of childhood and the creativity that period imbued. "The swing sets/aren't really/there// . . . On the blacktop/we lie down in each other's arms/and outline our bodies/in chalk// . . . There are no hiding places anymore//" (page 27-9)

Read the full review beginning Aug. 4: <http://savvyverseandwit.com/2011/08/f...>

Robin says

I will fully admit to liking Matthew Dickman's writing style than Michael's. I know this is unfair because they are SO different... but it was interesting in this collection of poems, because it was so much about family, and Matthew Dickman has written quite a bit about family in his poems (among other things, too).

Usually I shy away from such dark poetry, but this was really moving. The continued imagery of water, lemons, birds, and especially flies was very interesting to spot throughout the book. Very dark, very moving, and very memorable.

Matt says

A book of closely observed lyrics about family-- if there was a larger resonance to the narratives that span this book and the emotional dynamics at work here, I didn't see it. I'm not saying that's a terrible thing, but this did feel like a fairly hermetically sealed world to me.

The form of the poems was interesting-- this wasn't a classic case of "lots of whitespace" though there are lots of one line stanzas here, breaking up sentences, etc. Other than the stanza breaks, in fact, the poems are pretty regular in their layout. I tried to read the poems as if there was some reason for their fracturing, especially when there were two line stanzas in the middle of poem of otherwise one line stanzas, but I never got very far with that. I do think that it brings in a level of intensity to what is being described, but then, that intensity was being summoned forth so often, it became kind of the regular mode of reading and lost its distinctiveness....

Kassandra says

The pluses: I like the surreal quality of the writing, and the grief you can feel, palpable and intense. Minuses: very repetitive, soul-crushing in its depression, and really, I can't imagine this having been published if somebody hadn't already known who he was. As a whole, the book carries weight, but on their own, a lot of these poems sound amateurish, like anguished high-school poetry. Very personal and internal, too, this is not a book I can imagine appealing to a wide audience of ordinary readers who are not completely engrossed in grief of their own. There is no light here, just an all-out assault on hope. Heavy and depressing, but depressing the way a child's crying grates on your nerves after the first few minutes of it at non-stop high volume.

Jeff says

The poor surrealist who can't find the absolute in this except through the child's tongue: "We hold hands like children and sit on the floor in a large circle . . . | What I wanted to tell you || If you pee your pants on the floor | you still have to sit there | on the spot where | you peed || A halo | seeping into the rug." The tropism, then, is "ants" and "gnats" and "shit flies" and "fleas" and "stars" and "pine needles" and "angel wings" for the multiplicity in the child's language and the child's teeth which fall out and come back -- and he can't get this lexical play out of the child's p.o.v, it's always the mother, the brother, the sister, the one lost, all of it insistently in the family romance with little in the entire volume that escapes the pressure valve of Dickman's craft decisions. No doubt many who don't come to poetry for thought will rather enjoy the heated-up pathos of a six year-old's birthday party, and the craft accommodates these predilections with ten-ers, thirteeners,

sixteeners, and the like. And no doubt a lost brother facilitates the psychosis, the obsessive turning the verse toward the making of little persons, to explore the scale at which life stopped making sense, though -- rather sadly -- the death is not represented.

Jeremy Allan says

This book deserves another half star, if I could give it. I enjoyed Dickman's voice, one that keeps a certain consistency throughout the book, even as individual poems or sections shift from higher to lower registers and back. Part of the continuity of the voice comes from a certain boyish imagination that brings life to the poems. Even as the speaker faces something of magnitude, like the recurring theme of a dead older brother (drawn from Dickman's life, but I prefer to speak of it here not as a lived truth but as a literary device), there is a youthful quality to the images and language play that make up the work. And, of course, in more playful moments, this youth really comes to the fore. I also liked Dickman's use of repetition, which reminded me a bit of what Richard Siken does in his book *Crush*, except in a way that felt much lighter and more productive, at least to me. I'll come back to this book in the future, both to reexamine that boyish imagination that I enjoyed, as well as to consider the length and space in these poems.

Gilbert Wesley Purdy says

For a moment, I considered attempting to be the first reviewer ever to mention Michael Dickman without including his identical twin brother Matthew. As it turns out, however, that is simply impossible. It's like trying to mention Frick without mentioning Frack. Each stands out in the popular mind by virtue of his relation to the other. While each of them is first and foremost a separate human being from his own perspective, each is supremely aware of all that being a twin has made, and will continue to make, possible for him. And, then, the remarkable bond common to identical twins is obviously genuinely powerful between them.

Before even considering their poetries, identical twin MFA-incubated poets are an endlessly fascinating topic. They would be fascinating even if they were pug-ugly, but these identical twin poets are baby-faced heartthrobs (even now, in their mid-30s). Each is pale, thin, and six-foot-two-ish with carefully tousled dark brown hair. Their matching off-the-rack horn-rimmed glasses and post-washed blue jean reading couture is as trendily varied by their individualized off-the-rack upper-body wear (generally: Michael, arrow-shirt and narrow tie, occasionally spiked hair; Matthew, open neck arrow-shirt and corduroy jacket) as their poetries of eternally growing up are varied by their different, notably trendy writing styles. In terms of musical comparison, as Matthew quite correctly points out, he is Talking Heads and Michael is Arvo Pärt.

At some point in their pubescent lives, the two simultaneously became ravenous readers of contemporary poetry and the contemporary cannon: Dickinson, Neruda, Eluard, Wright, et alii. At the same time, they became enamored of the theater. Soon they were both writing poetry and acting in regional theater productions with all the life and death seriousness that teenagers can bring to their pursuits. Their being twins even landed them matching roles in the Steven Spielberg movie *Minority Report*.

To read the complete review, click [here >>>](#) to go to Eclectica Magazine.

Rivka says

"Whatever I was made for I haven't yet started"

Flies, shit, families.

Julia says

Outstanding, surreal and challenging poems about family, loss and religion. These poems manage to encompass both the interior violence of a mind grappling with grief and loss and the exterior and alien world that the grieving mind moves through.

Ramón says

Absolutely stunning.

I hate writing reviews of poetry because I really don't have the faintest idea about the technical aspects. Nonetheless, I read these aloud multiple times and love his use of alliteration and rhyme. As in his first collection, these poems unfold in a cadence that hovers between funeral dirge, royal march and family reunion, all shot through with moments of anticlimactic revelation. Though Dickman gives a lot of attention to the juxtaposition of life and death, spiritual and material, this collection is unabashedly rooted in an earthy wisdom that does not overreach its capacity to feel.

In a step forward for me in a more analytical reading of poetry, I was able to follow some of the themes he carried throughout the collection, though I still feel like most of it eluded me. I imagine I will continue reading this collection periodically through the years. I'm very much looking forward to his third collection.

secondwomn says

the sort of looping that is guaranteed to gnaw on me.

A. says

We read this for the bookstore poetry group and I'm very thankful for the discussion because I was at sea reading it myself. Dickman's poems aren't easily accessible but when read aloud they sound beautiful. His brother's death hangs over the book and it's hard not read that into many of the poems. In the acknowledgments, he mentions that several of the poems are written in memory of his brother.

My two favorites were Shaving Your Father's Face and An Offering. These poems seem to hold together a little better than some of the others and were a bit more grounded. I'm showing my own biases here. The opening lines of An Offering shows Dickman at his most playful.

"Why not wrap the Lord up
in his sleeping bags
and put him downstairs
for the night.

So he'll be quiet."

The book is described as exuberent surrealism, but the exuberance is one of someone laughing so they don't start crying. I think many of Dickman's abstract ideas are saved by his beautiful, concrete descriptions and his repetitive images which ground the works.
