

into the oblivion of an empty lot. The brain is stimulated, not benumbed, by the superabundance of public transportation route references, digital clock-face blinkers, and brands of cigarettes smoked. This is no soft elegy—this is a muscular celebration of the city as the supreme place to practice observation, to distinguish between enemies and allies, and to get some determined grip on reality. For all its humdrum meditations on emptiness, *Nine* emerges as an ode—like Wordsworth’s “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge”—to the city as the place where the silent and bare, once perceived by the artist, becomes blaringly full.

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Amanda Nadelberg, *Isa the Truck Named Isadore*. Raymond, NH: Slope Editions, 2006. 94pp. \$14.95

Amanda Nadelberg’s first book comprises sixty-three poems, each of which takes its title from a dictionary of first names. The second poem, “Albert,” has the most conventional name in the book; the rest read like a grab bag of oddities culled from the attendance lists of a progressive preschool: Blodwen, Ceridwen, and Rhonwen from the Welsh; Elijah, Enoch, and Naomi from the Old Testament; Ferdinand, Leander, and Xavier from history and the classics; Dottie, Myrtle, and Nan from your grandmother’s bridge table; Helmet, Pancrazio, and Wilberforce, the requisite head-scratchers.

Nadelberg’s poems are jokey and hip like much contemporary poetry. Indeed, *Isa the Truck Named Isadore* is a charming book. This is not a quality that should be underestimated. Charm is a powerful weapon in social relations: it is a way of getting people to do what you want. And, at their best, these charming poems are didactic in a way that most contemporary poetry is not. Their didacticism is most effectively aimed at pretension—in particular the familiar pretension that jokey and hip is all that poetry needs to be. Pleasing your readers is one thing; getting them to criticize their own pleasure is another. When Nadelberg can do both in the same poem, her work is sharp. Consider “Geraldine”:

Today is not a day to be pregnant.
The environs are such that
anything could result in an
anti-pregnancy. The air
pressure makes a
fetus impossible. On
airplanes especially. Once,

I was driving, trying not to
get pregnant in Missouri and
the billboard this one billboard
in northern Missouri almost
Iowa said if you think you're
fat now, wait until you're
pregnant. For the most part
the roads there are for
truckers who all go home
and tell their wives and
girlfriends and daughters.
I went home I am not
a trucker and I laughed
at Missouri and Iowa for
where they are. A face and
its big belly a big belly in
the middle of the country.
Missouri is always pregnant.

Like most of the poems in *Isadore*, this one straddles the line between humor and pathos. The poem starts with a reasonable enough statement—who would contradict it? Nadelberg, however, extends the statement until it sounds like a travel advisory: “The environs are such that / anything could result in an / anti-pregnancy. The air/ pressure makes a / fetus impossible. On / airplanes especially.” These lines are meant to be funny, but also pathetic: if we laugh, it’s because we’re not worried about the possibility of Geraldine’s unwanted pregnancy. Real pregnancy, it seems, has nothing to do with anything.

The riffs on pregnancy continue as the speaker passes a sign on the highway: “if you think you’re / fat now, wait until you’re / pregnant.” Other drivers might laugh at the joke, but not this one; she doesn’t laugh until she makes it safely home: “I went home I am not / a trucker and I laughed / at Missouri and Iowa for / where they are. A face and / it’s big belly a big belly in / the middle of the country. / Missouri is always pregnant.” Our speaker doesn’t laugh at the roadside joke; she laughs because she doesn’t have to worry about being a trucker (or a trucker’s pregnant daughter, girlfriend, or wife). In her mind, the joke is on “Missouri and Iowa for / where they are.”

The question is, how much should *we* be laughing? “Today is not a day to be pregnant” is funny because in the context of the lines that follow it is absurd, but it is also sad because in the absence of that context it is true. “Missouri is always pregnant” isn’t just a witty riposte to a crass billboard; it’s hyperbole that accurately points to the unending importance of abortion politics in a swing state. The last eight years have proven that there is nothing even remotely funny about this. “Geraldine” undermines the authority of

its speaker, which makes it a traditional exercise in dramatic irony; it goes further when it criticizes the predictably self-satisfied response that this irony is supposed to provoke. This poem does not just make us laugh—it makes us cringe at our own laughter.

This is deft work and a high point in the book. Many of the other poems don't make it this far, remaining satisfied in their mix of laughter and poignancy, leaving readers amused or saddened but unscathed. Nadelberg's style might have something to do with this. Her language is mostly transparent. We see right through it, and we often see the same thing: a gee-whiz take on contemporary America.

Often, but not always. Some poems gain depth through syntactic complexity. But Nadelberg is a fundamentally rhetorical poet—in the sense that her better poems are attempts at persuasion modeled on speech—and so the most interesting moments in her book are those in which speakers and characters try to justify themselves. Here is “Daisy”:

I have brown hair and when I was
little I swam a whole lot on a team and
all the chlorine would make my hair so
light in the summer people called it
dirty blonde and I was. For years, I've been
keeping a tally of my showers. Many showers
for many years. People may think it's
strange but some people think about
their mothers while they're plowing
some lady and that's worse. Don't
you think all of us keep tally
of something? Light bulbs, sexes,
ice creams, episodes, houses, stars.
Let Daisy be in her little white dress on
a big blue lawn it doesn't really
matter what she's doing.

The tone and the prosody here are familiar, as is the joke. (Nadelberg is usually good for at least one laugh per poem, sometimes more.) But what is “Daisy” actually about? Here the question of subject matter is implicated in another, more venerable question—“What's in a name?”—and answering the latter question goes some distance toward answering the former, but *only* some. Daisy, as it happens, is a name with a serious literary pedigree: *Daisy Miller* comes to mind, as does Daisy Buchanan, of *The Great Gatsby* (from whose closing pages Nadelberg swipes the lovely image of the blue lawn); one Daisy is a victim of society and the other complicit in its corruption, but, despite being nominally rich, neither has what the men around them do, that