

Michael Gizzi, *Collected Poems*. Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2015. 517pp. \$25

When Michael Gizzi died in 2010 at the age of sixty-one, he left behind a copious body of poetry, all of it published by small presses, much of it out of print and hard to find. Now his *Collected Poems*, edited by Clark Coolidge and Craig Watson, warmly prefaced by William Corbett, and published by Geoffrey Young's The Figures, makes all of that poetry, along with almost one hundred pages of previously uncollected work, easily available. That this big book is a product of collaboration among Gizzi's friends and fellow poets is a testament to the powerfully social force of the person and his poetry. Never a widely read or academically recognized poet, Gizzi nevertheless galvanized a small but loyal company of readers and friends, not only through his activities as an editor and organizer of readings on his home turfs of Providence, Rhode Island and the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, but also through the generosity of his poetry. At its best, Gizzi's writing is a sort of linguistic potluck, open to all comers. A late-twentieth century rhapsode, he stitches into his poems the endlessly various voices of contemporary American life, letting them interrupt, fight with, and play jokes on each other. He speaks with an expanded "I," emerging as a product of diverse linguistic atmospheres, out of which he works up his inimitable spontaneous bop New England Italian-American pulp western television ad-addled synthetic English lingo. By tuning into countless other voices, Gizzi achieves a singular voice, consistent yet constantly shifting, a whole world crackling through him. Yet despite this exuberant plurality, loneliness and loss haunt these *Collected Poems*. Gizzi is an elegist as well as a rhapsode, and his work can be as harrowing as it is exhilarating.

The heart of the *Collected Poems* is Gizzi's informal "Italian-American" trilogy: *Just Like a Real Italian Kid* (1990), *No Both* (1997), and *My Terza Rima* (2001). In these books, Gizzi finds and develops his signature style. During the two preceding decades, he published five collections and worked in various styles, from the earnest Neruda-inspired surrealism of his earliest volumes, *My Grandfather's Pants* (1973) and *Carmela Bianca* (1974), to the playful, elliptical serial explorations of trees, birds, and Pierre Ordinaire's absinthe in his next three books, *Bird As* (1976), *Avis* (1979), and *Species of Intoxication* (1983), all published by Burning Deck. During this time Gizzi worked as an arborist and studied poetry at Brown University with Keith Waldrop, who would remain a lifelong friend, influence, and publisher. While the styles of these books are strikingly unlike the work of Gizzi's prolific final two decades, two tendencies of the early work carry through: a tender, sometimes tortured fascination with his family and its Italian-American Catholic heritage, and a

ludic receptiveness to diverse voices and verbal registers. In *Just Like a Real Italian Kid*, these two elements finally combine and explode in a rush of prose poetry:

Rollover water buffalo's varicose veins. Here I am where I was.
Buona sera! legs that changed the course of a river. Nonnie's that
terminate in flat-footed wormpaths of pachyderm splays.

Scares me 'cause we sleep together off the kitchen. I eavesdrop
an eyeslot, she prays to assorted memories displayed on dresser
altar. Under mattress, mojo palm cross.

She snores like buffalo, I tell her, in fertile delta. The ritual is:
She snores I scream her awake receive peasant curses then beat her
back to sleep. Next thing we know I'm in the all-night baccauso doing
my duty like a good little jamoke, 'O peepee in the toilet where you
belong.'

But nope. We're swept away on River Po flooding its banks
with minchia piss of little me a real pisser tricked again in dream
by waterbearer bedwetter boogieman. Scusa, Nonnie. Soiled again.

This is signature Gizzi. His lines roll and swell with assonance, consonance, and near rhymes, punctuated by percussive stops and shifts. The familiar Italian of Gizzi's childhood household mixes with the specialized multisyllabic English diction of "varicose" and "pachyderm," the caricatured locutions of 1950s TV Indians ("She snores like buffalo"), and prefab vernacular phrases we can imagine in the mouths of the adults around him ("Next thing we know" and "like a good little jamoke"). The irreverent, antic depiction of domestic life shows the influence of early William Carlos Williams, while the velocity and vulnerable swagger play off the spontaneous bop improvisations of Jack Kerouac, another "ethnic" Catholic New Englander and devotee of jazz. The poet cops a tough guy pose as he remembers wetting the bed. And this pose is right for *Just Like A Real Italian Kid*: the title emphasizes both simulation and authenticity, and indeed, Gizzi's prose poems present a sort of synthetic ethnic patois, an artificially compressed record of lived linguistic textures. The poet offers us first-person memoir, but that first-person voice energetically runs the gamut of mid-century American English. It's like the language of a real Italian kid but its expressive capacity exceeds any single kid's voice.

With the title sequence of *No Both*, a two-month-long journal poem marking the twentieth anniversary of his father's death in a 1972 airplane crash, Gizzi turns from childhood memories to the present moment of writing. His lingo dilates wider and swings faster:

Mr Bing Crosberry Earl of Morning Birds is toting on his foolscap of cheek-sucking kerplunk an alphabet of every sun was ever sunup in his bailiwick, bicycle-pumping some buttermilk into the Pillsbury Doze Boys as though every morning the Navy reapplied for a Mayflower.

Achtunged awake at 4:18 a.m. Mr Terrapin now minus his carapace cares more than he thought possible in his shell-life, suddenly he has a Nagasaki on his chest, his turtleneck a soupy shade of green per Looney Tune cartoon zipping about shall we say with Robert Johnson in his Terraplane beating on every rabbitry door.

“Hey Bunny you wanna play Pregnancy Test? You want a racy me?”

In this entry, Gizzi’s sonically-driven, free associative wordplay transforms early morning birdsong into the script of a lewd, WWII–haunted screwball cartoon in which a Casanova tortoise comes on to the hare in a hammed-up Italian accent with a soundtrack supplied by a pop crooner and a legendary bluesman. The poem’s non sequiturs and low-brow dalliances recall Ashbery, another of Gizzi’s major influences, and like Ashbery, Gizzi works up a strong, recognizable tone of voice even when we have no idea what he’s actually talking about. But Gizzi’s signature prosody makes a difference: the manic velocity of his music generates more heat than Ashbery’s cooler musings. *No Both* is Gizzi’s tour de force, “a journal of [his] own mania” and “an attempt to make weirdness everyday, or every day weird,” as he described the book during a 1997 reading recorded by Steve Evans at Brown. The poetry’s heat is almost palpable in the ambient sound of that recording, the room crackling with Gizzi’s bravura delivery and often erupting into laughter. You can feel Gizzi the performer channeling the energy of the people gathered in the room as he channels an endless array of verbal material in the poems. But because the tape ran out after forty-five minutes, Gizzi and Evans had to record the last poems of the sequence the next day and patch them into the original recording, and there’s a strange poignancy in the sudden shift from the full room to the lone voice. The break in the recording lets us hear the madcap, socially-charged rhapsode give way to the quiet, melancholy voice that delivers these words: “I’ve been sick all my life / It’s the living end / The handicap is perfection.” In such moments it’s loss, not heat, that’s palpable, reminding us that Gizzi wrote *No Both* to commemorate his father’s death, scattering *memento mori*, here as elsewhere, throughout his rambunctious work. It’s as if Gizzi were given the choice between rhapsody and elegy and replied, “No, both.”

The lonely, plaintive voice becomes more prominent in Gizzi's late work. The poems collected in *New Depths of Deadpan* (2009) continue to rely on non sequitur and sonic play, but as the book's title suggests, their mode is more laconic, their mood more subdued. Rather than the rush of paragraphs or the swing of shapely stanzas, these poems flatly juxtapose one-liners ("So we got this apartment on Jockey Street. They used to race houses there"), aphorisms ("Dreams speak in images speech once was"), and blunt declarations ("Some days he wants to cry, but antidepressants won't let him"). Reading them, I often want to laugh, but I'm not sure why; I recognize the form of a joke, but the punch line has gone somehow, often sadly, awry. Gizzi's stripped-down last poems drop the shtick almost altogether. The work in his final chapbook, *In This Skin*, published just before his death in 2010, addresses us in a hushed voice that recalls his earliest poems—a voice both direct and elliptical. It's the other side of the busy, densely populated mania recorded in *Just Like a Real Italian Kid* and *No Both*. "The fear of life is truly infinite," Gizzi tells us, as if all alone. He ends with this farewell:

Now it is definitely night
There's no one here to erase

"I'm kissing you
I'm not kissing you"

A few exotic excursions
and you're anybody

You say to the fog
"I'm sorry, but I can't stay"

Here the poet elegizes himself. Gizzi's capacious, rhapsodic style could draw an audience together with its verbal playfulness, but such elegiac passages leave the reader moved by the loneliness and despair that shadowed him. Among innovative American poets, Gizzi is one of the most vulnerable, even with all his hard-bitten wit and swagger. This *Collected Poems* gives us plenty to remember him by.

Patrick Morrissey