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SEPTEMBER 23, 2015

Reviewing Poets David Cavanagh and Chard deNiord

By JIM SCHLEY

In "Adam's Curse," W.B. Yeats describes a paradox in the practice of making poems: "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."

I was reminded of this back-and-forth between formal eloquence and the illusion of expressive ease as I read two satisfying new books of poems, David Cavanagh's *Straddle* and Chard deNiord's *Interstate*. They make good companions, read side by side. Both poets are what Cavanagh calls "in-betweeners," given frequently to what deNiord calls "second thoughts."

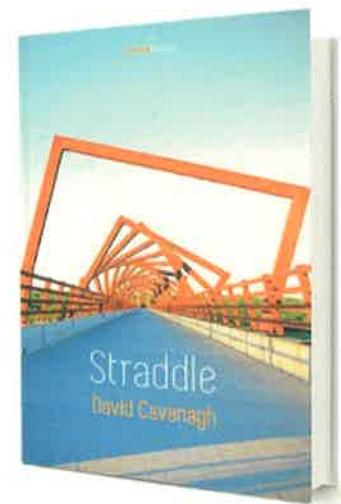
Chard deNiord, who lives in Putney, has recently been named the new Vermont poet laureate, and *Interstate* is his fifth book of poems. David Cavanagh lives in Burlington; until his retirement in 2014, he was codirector of Johnston State College's external degree program for working students. Like a couple of his previous collections, his fourth book, *Straddle*, is published by an esteemed Irish press, Salmon Poetry.

Both authors are men in their middle years, seasoned in their craft. They share a fascination with how sentences work (and play) across the staves of verse forms in pieces that are rhetorical yet conversational. Both of these books have titles that convey their authors' attentiveness to life's volatility, including the transitions caused by aging and the crossing of borders between places or states of being. And both books are particularly well paced, counterpointing ampler pieces (including several of the more beautiful erotic poems of mature love that I've read lately) with briefer exclamations, epigrammatic and compressed.

Any strong poem is a "straddle" between different levels of awareness, an evocation of an "interstate."

Cavanagh's poetic territory is juxtapositions and combinations: young and old, woman and man, to and fro, one and all. He's a dual citizen of Canada and the United States — "Canuck ... Yankee," as he says in the poem "Can-Am." He's dual in his artistic temperament as well, incorporating French and English phrases, for instance, into a poem recalling boyhood baseball games:

The little *anglais* with bad eyes peers
through the cage of the catcher's mask,
moves by instinct as much as sight
toward the hard slider of the wild-ass



Straddle by David Cavanagh, Salmon Poetry, 66 pages. \$21.

southpaw till it pops into his mitt
 behind the flummoxed batter.
 Atta boy, Mike, way to go. *Deux*
hommes morts, les gars, deux hommes.

This poem, "Behind the Plate in Montreal, 1964," not only shifts languages in the boy's vantage but also swings between first-person and third-person narration in a way I've never seen done so nimbly:

I was the little *anglais*, though it seems a cool
 tableau to me now, set there by memory,
 which calls the pitches and queers
 the outcomes. Mostly alone he was,
 hardly anyone to talk to, afraid to try
 French except for the *franglais* mishmash
 of monosyllables the game gave him
 to hide behind: *Heads up, les gars, heads up.*

Cavanagh can be funny and doleful at once, or tender and roguish. His syntax can coil, then snap, as in this first stanza of the poem "Now and Then":

Afterwards,
 the hollow and hillock of your belly and mound,
 small fall and rise
 with breathing. Decades ago like a slow-motion slap
 the sight stunned me,
 god, so beautiful. Stuns me still.

In "Chimes," he immerses us so deep in sensory description that we may not notice right away that we are reading a single flexing sentence flowing in from the title, rendering those chimes that

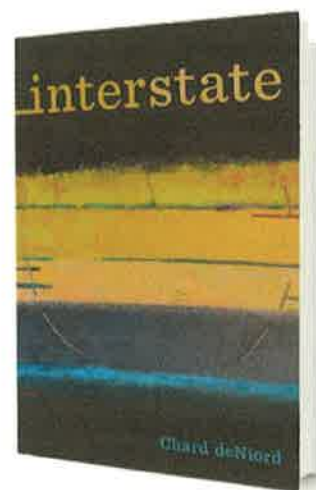
hang cock-eyed on the porch for years,
 still ring with each breeze, thin and off-key
 at first until the ear adjusts and finds
 a whole new register, a pleasing post-melody
 loosed from the weathered pipes by the faithful
 wooden clapper, a persistent minor song
 with ease given back to the ruffled air.

Here's a brief one, called "Customs," thematically and dramatically characteristic of Cavanagh's keen-bladed wit: "Anything to declare?" / asks the border guard. / Oh my. Where to begin?"

Chard deNiord is a border crosser of long habit, too. And, judging from many poems told from the vantage of a car, he probably spends a lot of time driving between his home in southern Vermont and his teaching job at Providence College in Rhode Island. In the poems where his narrator is not in a car, he may be in bed (like Cavanagh, deNiord writes well of amorous awe) or in the woods.

Interstate has four sections. Nearly every poem in the first involves intimate encounters with animals, including an ornery colt, a pet dog that kills day-old chicks, a grouse and a doe, mating pigs, an enormous snake, and a bat in a woodstove. These poems are incidental in the sense of pivoting on incidents, but they work like parables as well, asking, *What do we see, and what can we learn?* This quality deepens and widens as the book proceeds. In the second section, the poems are like riddles, not ambiguous but mischievous and mysterious.

Over the past decade, deNiord conducted a vigorous and valuable series of interviews with elder American poets, which were gathered and published in a wonderful book called *Sad Friends, Drowned Lovers, Stapled Songs: Conversations and Reflections on Twentieth Century American Poets*. Most of his interviewees have now died, and several of them are eulogized powerfully and unsentimentally in



Interstate. A particularly enabling presence here is the magnificent Ruth Stone, who is honored directly in one poem and implied in others, especially throughout the book's fourth part. In his poem "The Gift," deNiord channels another poet's own articulation of her task. The poem is presented in quotation marks, as though Stone were speaking in a voice overheard:

Interstate (Pitt Poetry Series) by Chard deNiord, University of Pittsburgh Press, 96 pages. \$15.95.

"All I did was write them down
 wherever I was at the time, hanging
 laundry, baking bread, driving to Illinois.
 My name was attached to them
 on the page but not in my head
 because the bird I listened to outside
 my window said I couldn't complain
 about the blank in place of my name
 if I wished to hold both ends of the wire
 like a wire and continue to sing instead
 of complain. It was my plight, my thorn,
 my gift — the one word in three I was
 permitted to call it by the Muse who took
 mercy on me as long as I didn't explain."

You hear the rhymes, lightly struck. Sometimes deNiord rhymes within the line, instead of at the more expected endings. Here is "Anchorite in Autumn," also an evocation of an old person, where the sideslipping rhymes counter what might otherwise settle into a nursery-rhyme gait:

She rose from the bed and coughed
 for an hour. Entered her niche
 that was also her shower. Shaved
 her legs with Ockham's razor.
 Rinsed her hair with holy
 water. Opened the curtain
 that was double-layered. Slipped
 on her robe in *the widening*
gyre. Gazed in the mirror
 with gorgeous terror. Took out
 a cigarette and held it
 like a flower. Lit it devoutly
 like the wick of a pyre. Smoked
 like a thurible in the grip of a friar.
 Stared out the window
 at the leaves on fire, fire, fire ...

These lines are slyly allusive, lofty yet casual and closely observed, roughened in texture by the staggered rhyming, which physicalizes the portrait.

Cavanagh's *Straddle* and deNiord's *Interstate* are agile, quietly intelligent and steadily pleasurable new books. Will they be noticed in the noisy frenzy that surrounds us? Yes, if readers read them.

Neither/Nor Nation

Born Irish Catholic *anglais* in east-end Montreal,
 I've trolled for years in U.S. waters for a reason
 and some reach. Decades into it, still divided,
 still unsure where I'm casting or what for.
 I meet so many with a lost but knowing look,
 Bosnia, Brooklyn, Congo, Cali, even townies
 who stayed put. Cut loose. Working out some
 wonder. Angling in the dark. Playing out the line.
 Our strength an open eye, our flaw a frequent
 stutter and a crippling second guess, sure only
 that those so sure of where they stand are sinking

on shore sands. And one thing more: no going back.
 Waters rise, heartlands harden, small brave flags
 of compassion flutter. Home is an idea.
 In love we are or lost in the lure. Hoping to hook
 some kilter. The nation of neither-here-nor-there.

David Cavanagh

Starlings

The maple outside the window was alive
 with birdsong, but the birds were hidden
 behind the leaves so that the tree itself appeared
 to be singing a loud, cacophonous song.
 They rose en masse like the shadow of a cloud
 with the emptiness they left calling back
 to them with the fullness of where they had been,
 like the tree before this and the tree before that.
 They sang ecstatically, as if it were morning,
 although the sky was heavy with evening
 and you could hear the silence in the sky
 beyond their singing.

Chard deNiord

Cavanagh appears at the Burlington Book Festival on Saturday, September 26, 10:30 to 11 a.m., in Marsh Lounge, Billings Center, at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

The original print version of this article was headlined "Of Two Minds"

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