All-American Poem
Matthew Dickman, *All-American Poem*
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*All-American Poem*, Matthew Dickman’s first collection, is as American as Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, and Women’s Suffrage. It is also as American as Pepsi-Cola, companies that manufacture toilet seats, and the ubiquitous Barnes & Noble parking lot. To comment on American culture today, as *All-American Poem* seems to do, is to concede to the conflict between American history and a current atmosphere of perceived consumption and pettiness. What stands out in this winner of the American Poetry Review/Honickman First Book Prize is that the speaker is thoroughly aware of the irreconcilable conflicts of “being American.”

Matthew Dickman writes prose poems that, like the poems of David Kirby, can be mind-bendingly long and make Incredible-Hulkian leaps in logic. While Kirby maintains a southern aesthetic, Dickman does not confine his subject matter or mindset to a particular region. Dickman’s poems inhabit much of America: California; Michigan; Massachusetts; Oregon; the Broken Spoke in Austin, Texas. The trampish atmosphere is best represented in the title poem, in which the speaker name-drops states of the union over eight pages as if they were friends and colleagues mentioned in an album’s liner notes:

You can take the Chinatown bus from Boston
to the Chinatown in New York City. You can go
from one shop window
with peeled ducks hanging by their ankles
to another shop window
with peeled ducks hanging by their ankles.
In Oregon you can go from one hundred-year-old evergreen
to another hundred-year-old evergreen and never turn around.
They’re everywhere, cut down
and loaded up, like paperbacks in bookstores.
My favorite bookstore is in Evanston, Illinois.
The owner is Polish and his daughter wore a wool skirt
that kept sliding up her legs
as she sat on the edge of his desk. God bless her
for it was cold outside and I was almost alone

These are “American” poems for their word play and leaping associations, but to read “American” as “provincial” is a misnomer. They are provincial in the sense that they embrace the vast American landscape, but they are in the same turn repulsed by it.

The poems are inhabited by an “I” speaker and include cameos by Warren Beatty, the Kennedys, Marilyn Monroe, Santa Claus, Jesus, and (of course) Elvis, who the speaker’s mother watches on television “move across the screen like something / even sex dreamed of having.” But it’s not just the self-awareness of the first-person speaker, the cast of characters or the litany of geographical references that make these poems authoritatively “American.” Dickman’s poetry is also conversant and idiomatic; it has no use or desire for stanza breaks; its conceits are accessible and humorous. At times, Dickman seems a poet wandering through language and logic, a fashionista sifting through a closet littered with clothes and shoes and accessories, trying to find the right getup for Saturday night.

And it is in this wandering that the reader finds a conflicted “Americanness,” in these long-lined, far-reaching poems that at times look messy and lack symmetry on the page—poems that are full of “things and stuff.” In a book that is nearly an inch wider than most slim volumes, even its physical properties seem to embrace American maximalism. In “We Are Not Temples” the speaker is certainly aware of this conflict, and unafraid to invoke self-repulsion:

As far as delusions go
it must be the ones I have about kindness,
that I am never mean or have never wanted to disgrace
your wife in the coat room of a community theater.
Or that I would always give up my seat
on the bus for the elderly woman who grumbles
These poems are about class and race and suicides, but they’re also about sex and parties and cigarettes. It is in this conflict that the reader must at times question the sincerity of the speaker. As poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth warned us decades ago, the line that separates the “disengagement of the creator” and the “utter nihilism of the emptied-out hipster,” is a thin and dangerous one. It has become fashionable to point out how a young poet is not straddling this border between disengagement and nihilism. A poet is groundbreaking if he is detached from the detachment of the Hipster Youth, a population of writers too ironic and disillusioned to feel anything, too focused on self-celebration and word play to look either inside or out of themselves. In the introduction to All-American Poem, Tony Hoagland proclaims Dickman to be this young, fresh, hip-but-not-too-hip-to-be-sincere sort of poet. But one would think dealing with the subject matter and emotional territory Dickman explores requires a certain degree of detachment to be effective, to not come off distilled of emotion or sincerity.

The cover photo, “Pope Crowds” by Max Breslow, also illustrates this conflict of detachment and sincerity. It is an overhead view of a faceless horde of onlookers waiting to catch a glimpse of Pope Benedict XVI, during his first visit to the United States. An aerial photograph of an American crowd waiting to see a foreign cleric is an interesting reflection of the duality of American pride, and its wanting to be liked by the outside world. The speaker in All-American Poem is one who belongs, one who is wholly—if not wholesomely—American, but is also one who wants to embrace the biting, skeptical voice of an outsider or an expatriate. The problem is, Dickman is neither.

—Jared Walls
Seconds pass on, tension grows stronger, blood flowing faster, heartbeat rises high, eyes search for answers. Clouded by thoughts; fear and anger pumping inside. Remember, all of the 234 poets currently listed on American Poems website, along with each of their 8025 poems, can be found in the poets section!