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Dana Gioia
Preface to the Second Edition

Long an important figure in American letters, Dana Gioia recently had his national prominence reaffirmed when the U.S. Senate unanimously confirmed him to head the National Endowment for the Arts. President George W. Bush would have been hard pressed to find a better qualified candidate for a position that has been highly visible since the mid-1990s, when a handful of controversial grants fueled debate over whether government should fund the arts at all. No stranger to controversy, Gioia has devoted his career to reinvigorating the once-moribund art of poetry. In his groundbreaking essay collection Can Poetry Matter?, he offered a radical critique of the academic culture of American poetry, and in doing so sparked debate among poets. Recently reissued by Graywolf Press, the volume—which critic Adam Kirsch calls “undoubtedly one of the most important American books of poetry criticism of the last 50 years”—has proven remarkably prescient. In the years since its publication, American poetry has grown more vital and varied by reaching a wider audience through such extra-academic venues as bookstore-based readings, radio programs, and poetry slams. Recent poets laureate have taken a more proactive role in bringing poetry to the masses, a stance that was improbable before Gioia raised the specter of poetry’s marginality in American culture.

Gioia’s notoriety as a critic and now as head of the NEA should not overshadow his poems, which are among the best currently being written. As accessible as they are elegant and erudite, poems like the long narrative “Counting the Children” and the lyrics “Planting a Sequoia” and “Words” deserve a lasting place in our anthologies. Gioia’s poetry received well-deserved recognition when his third collection, Interrogations at Noon, received the 2002
American Book Award. As a poet, critic, editor, and advocate for the arts, Gioia continues to make a lasting impression on the American cultural scene. In the two years since Boise State University first published this booklet, he has edited several literature anthologies. He founded the California-based Teaching Poetry Conference, dedicated to helping teachers instill a love (as opposed to a dread) of poetry in their middle-school and high-school students. He once again stirred up debate in literary circles with his essay “Fallen Western Star: The Decline of San Francisco as a Literary Region.” Originally published in Hungry Mind Review, the essay and the many responses it inspired have been gathered in The “Fallen Western Star” Wars. Most importantly, Gioia continues to write what critic William Oxley calls “simply good, beautifully-crafted poetry, written from within the timeless tradition set up by the best English-language poets of the past.” Of Gioia’s many accomplishments, his poetry is the most valuable and will prove to be the most lasting.

EDITOR’S NOTE

This new edition of Dana Gioia reflects changes in the poet’s biography and bibliography. The analysis of Gioia’s work is largely identical to the equivalent portion of the first edition. We have, however, quietly corrected typographical errors and edited this number to conform with current Western Writers Series style.
Dana Gioia

1. INTRODUCTION

The poet Dana Gioia is a pivotal figure in contemporary American letters. One of the most respected and vocal writers identified with the controversial movement commonly called the New Formalism, Gioia has helped to redefine the face of contemporary poetry. In his 1991 Atlantic Monthly essay, “Can Poetry Matter?” Gioia critiqued the American poetry scene, arguing that contemporary poets were writing mainly for an audience of other poets. He claimed that because poets weren’t trying to reach a general audience, contemporary poetry generally was going unread by non-poets, even by college graduates who regularly read novels. Gioia blamed the loss of general readers on the wholesale influx of poets into the academy, arguing that American poets had stopped paying attention to the needs of general readers. Moreover, in Gioia’s view, as poetry’s audience shrank and became more specialized, poets in turn became more defensive about their own importance and therefore less willing to write critical reviews of poetry. This lack of candid reviewing resulted in a confused and ultimately skeptical audience. In “Can Poetry Matter?” Gioia set forth a remedy for this malady, challenging contemporary poets to take a more visionary approach toward their art. He also provided a series of practical steps for reinvigorating poetry and for bringing it to a general readership.

The publication of “Can Poetry Matter?” sparked a rigorous debate on the role of poetry in contemporary American intellectual
life. The Atlantic was flooded by responses to Gioia; articles attacking and defending “Can Poetry Matter?” were published in a wide range of journals, including the Times Literary Supplement, The New Criterion, USA Today and Washington Post Book World. Gioia’s article was the subject of special interviews on the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, Public Television, and National Public Radio. Gioia’s critique stirred up controversy in literary circles, and marked him as a key figure on the poetry scene. Poets writing after the publication of “Can Poetry Matter?” have been forced to determine their stances in the face of his charges. Moreover, Gioia’s own poetry has been attacked and praised by critics, and he is considered a key figure in the New Formalist, or Expansive Poetry, movement.

2. EXPANSIVE POETRY

The term New Formalism was coined by critics in the mid 1980s to describe young poets (including Gioia, Timothy Steele, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, R. S. Gwynn, and Charles Martin) who were using such unfashionable poetic techniques as rhyme, meter, fixed form, and non-confessional narrative. However, Gioia finds the term “New Formalism” inadequate, preferring “Expansive Poetry” to describe the work in question. “I don’t consider myself a formalist,” he says, “only a poet who tries to do a good job. Sometimes form is regular, sometimes it isn’t. And, of course, form itself is not enough” (Peschiera 87). As the term “Expansive” suggests, practitioners of this poetry aren’t interested in limiting the range of poetry but in expanding it to include traditional verse techniques. Gioia has not limited himself to formal verse; approximately half of his published poems are written in free verse. Unlike the older generation of post-war academic formalists—a group that includes Richard Wilbur, Donald Justice, and Anthony Hecht—Expansive poets freely borrow elements from popular culture, including style,
subject matter, even whole poetic genres. Another defining characteristic of New Formalist or Expansive poetry is the conscious avoidance of two particular types of poem—the “formless, free-verse confessional poem or pretentious deep-image poem” (Peschiera 94)—that have been fashionable since the 1960s.

Perhaps the single overriding concern that unites this group of poets is their desire to reach readers who aren’t poets but who love literature. “In writing for a general audience that poetry had long ago lost,” Gioia says, “the New Formalists chose to embrace rather than repudiate the broader cultural trends of their era. Rather than be bards for the poetry subculture, they aspired to become the poets for an age of prose” (Can Poetry Matter? 225). The desire for a wider readership partially explains the reliance of New Formalists on traditional poetic devices. New Formalist poets use rhyme, meter, and storytelling—techniques made familiar by popular songs and movies—in an effort to win over a general audience of prose readers. Because of their emphasis on storytelling, some of the poets who are categorized as New Formalists are also sometimes identified as New Narrative poets.

Because New Formalism appeared in the conservative 1980s and represented a return to certain literary traditions, some critics charged that formal poetry is inextricably tied to right-wing politics while free verse is tied to liberal politics. Formal poetry also has been attacked as Eurocentric, even un-American. In response, Gioia says, “I cannot understand why a contemporary poet would not want to have free verse as one of the possible options for expression. Free verse, however, must be understood as a technique and not a political declaration” (Peschiera 95). In their preface to Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism, Mark Jarman and David Mason assert, “Popular phenomena as diverse as cowboy poetry and rap music demonstrate that the rhyme and meter that
characterize Emily Dickinson are just as American as the free verse of Walt Whitman" (xviii).

3. BIOGRAPHY

It may be no coincidence that many of the young writers characterized as New Narrative poets—among them Gioia, Robert McDowell, and Mark Jarman—hail from southern California. By telling stories, these poets hope to reach a wider audience, an ambition that can be traced to west-coast-style populism. When asked how his brand of populism grows from his status as a native Californian, Gioia points to his working-class roots and his Latin heritage, adding that his Mexican grandfather and great grandfather were both cowboys. To be a westerner is to value one's independence, according to Gioia, who points to the egalitarianism of Los Angeles in the fifties, and to the lack of traditional party affiliation that allowed the same Californian electorate to vote in both Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown. Other signs of Gioia's western-style insistence on independence are his choice to make his living outside of the academy and his decision to return to California, far from the centers of literary power, after nearly twenty years in New York. (However, Gioia's populism isn't without limits; he admits, for example, to having an elitist conception of literature in the sense that he believes some works of art are better than others.) Despite his time in New York, the thematics of Gioia's poetry, as well as his desire to reach a wide audience, situate him clearly as a western writer.

Gioia was born in 1950 in Hawthorne, California, an industrial suburb of Los Angeles. His childhood was a happy one. Paradoxically, he spent much of his time alone, but he grew up in a close-knit extended family, with a dozen relatives living within a half-block of his nuclear family. His mother was of Mexican descent; his father was Sicilian, and his relations spoke primarily in
Sicilian dialect. Although both Gioia’s parents worked six days a week, his father as a cab driver, and his mother as an information operator for AT&T, they encouraged his interest in the arts, driving him on their days off to galleries where he could look at paintings and literary manuscripts. When Gioia was six, his brother Ted—now a noted jazz critic and musician—was born. A brother, Gregory, was born in 1971, and a sister, Cara, in 1973.

Gioia describes the Los Angeles he knew as a child as “quite old-fashioned, very Latin, and deeply Catholic” (McPhillips 9). He was educated at a parochial school, attended Latin Mass every weekday and Sunday morning, and was taught liturgy, ritual, doctrine, and the folklore of saints and martyrs. Thanks to this early training, Gioia considers himself one of the last generation that experienced Latin as a living language, before the Second Vatican Council discontinued it as the official language of the Roman Catholic church. Just as Gioia’s early experience with Latin and Italian would contribute to his career as a translator, his early, intense religious education feeds his poetry, which makes considerable use of Catholic myth, symbol, and ritual.

Gioia’s high school career was somewhat checkered. Though he was class valedictorian and editor of the school paper at Junipero Serra High School, a Catholic boys’ school, he was also expelled or suspended for misbehavior on three separate occasions. Suspensions aside, he won a scholarship to Stanford. Stanford life proved something of a shock. The first member of his family ever to attend college, Gioia had never before spent time with people his own age who had college-educated parents. Eager to learn, he did well at Stanford, where he initially planned to be a composer. Eventually, though, he abandoned music, partly because his interest in tonal music went unappreciated by his teachers, who believed tonality was a dead tradition. Gioia spent his sophomore year in Vienna studying music and German. His immersion in the
German language fueled his interest in poetry, and he began spending much of his time reading poems in both English and German. By the time he returned to California, he knew he wanted to write poetry.

Back at Stanford, Gioia found that his strongest influences were the poets he read independently, including Auden, Eliot, Pound, Rilke, and Graves. In fact, he resisted much of his formal coursework at Stanford, where he was assigned the works of fashionable authors like Richard Brautigan, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Amiri Baraka:

Coming to maturity as a writer in the California of Haight-Ashbury, one was engulfed in waves of fashion. I found myself resisting. My literary sensibility tends to be contrarian. Had I grown up in a period when people wrote sonnets and villanelles, I would probably have gone off to Black Mountain College. (McPhillips 11)

At twenty, Gioia became editor-in-chief of Sequoia, Stanford’s literary magazine, and saved the journal from bankruptcy by increasing its readership. Under Gioia’s editorship, Sequoia grew to have the highest circulation of any small west-coast literary magazine.

After graduating Phi Beta Kappa, Gioia moved on to Harvard, where he studied comparative literature, with the ultimate goal of becoming a literature professor who would also write poetry. At Harvard he studied literature with the poets Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Fitzgerald. To teach himself prosody, he also spent time scanning the plays of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Webster. After completing coursework for his doctorate, however, Gioia left Harvard for Stanford Graduate School of Business, where he began working toward his MBA. Gioia’s reasons for leaving Harvard were literary as well as financial. He says,
I entered business because I needed to make a living and wanted some modest control over my life. The other reason I left academics was to become a poet. That sounds paradoxical, but I felt that I was becoming a worse writer with each passing year in academia. My poetry was becoming too studied and self-conscious. (McPhillips 20)

Feeling that he was being trained to write for a narrow audience of academics, Gioia moved back west.

For the next eight years, Gioia stopped submitting poems to magazines for publication, but he continued writing at night and on weekends; in addition, he returned to Stanford’s literary magazine, this time as poetry editor. He also conducted literary interviews for Sequoia and wrote book reviews for the Stanford Daily. Ironically, it was while earning his MBA that Gioia took the only creative writing workshop he had ever taken, taught by Donald Davie, whose literary tastes differed from Gioia’s and who discouraged him from writing in meter or narrative. Of this experience, Gioia says, “I am grateful to Donald for being so discouraging. It toughened us up. It let us know that, if we were going to do something different, we had to expect the worst from critics” (McPhillips 23).

At Stanford Business School, Gioia met Mary Hiecke, his future wife. The couple received their MBAs in 1977, accepted jobs at General Foods in White Plains, New York, and were married in 1980. They eventually made their home in Hastings-on-Hudson, a suburban village north of New York City. Gioia would work for fifteen years in marketing, in 1983 becoming Group Product Manager for Kool-Aid, the most profitable single brand at General Foods. For years, Gioia contrived to keep his identity as a poet secret from his co-workers out of concern that it might hurt his reputation as a businessman. He writes, “Whenever something of mine appeared in The New Yorker, I would discreetly buy all five
copies in the company shop, mail one to my parents, and slip the others into the finance department’s bulging recycling bin” (“Being Outted”). A 1984 listing in the “Esquire Register of Men and Women Under Forty Who Are Changing America” ultimately gave him away to his colleagues, but it didn’t hurt his corporate standing after all.

Though his choice to work in business instead of the academy isolated Gioia from other poets, it allowed him to spend as much time as he needed on a poem or essay, and to work only on subjects of his choice. Freed from worrying about the academic’s need to “publish or perish,” Gioia says that he is better able to write in his own voice: “Not worrying about publication gave me the freedom to make mistakes, to follow odd impulses. This period of public silence let me discover my own voice, develop my own set of concerns, without worrying about anyone outside approving or disapproving” (McPhillips 22). Working in business afforded Gioia perspective on his writing career.

In 1985, Gioia’s private, nocturnal literary work yielded Poems from Italy, an anthology of poems dating from the twelfth to the twentieth centuries, co-edited by Gioia and William Jay Smith. Daily Horoscope, Gioia’s first poetry collection, was published by Graywolf Press in 1986, and met with reviews that ranged from accolades to pans. Publications like Forbes and Business Month singled Gioia out as “the businessman poet,” for his success in two seemingly incompatible spheres, the literary and corporate worlds.

In 1987, Mary and Dana Gioia lost their four-month-old first son, Michael Jasper, to sudden infant death syndrome. After that tragic loss, Gioia stopped writing for a year. When he began writing again, he found that his relationship to his work had changed. “I saw poetry differently,” Gioia says. “Writing took on a spiritual urgency I had never experienced before—at least in so sustained and emphatic a way. I admitted my obsessions and allowed myself

In 1992, after fifteen years in marketing, Gioia left General Foods, where he had been promoted to vice president. He changed careers to write full-time and concentrate more on his family, which by then had grown to include son Theodore Jasper, born in 1988. A year later, another son, Michael Frederick, was born to Mary and Dana Gioia. (Each of the boys bears one of the names of his older brother.) In 1996, after twenty years in New York, Gioia and his family moved back to California, this time to the Sonoma Valley.

Before becoming head of the NEA, Gioia was one of the few contemporary poets to make a living as a full-time writer with no academic affiliation. Combining various literary jobs, he worked in the tradition of the public intellectual, a cultural role whose passing he has lamented. He has co-edited a series of college anthologies with the poet X. J. Kennedy, has written critical essays for *The Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, and has been a frequent literary commentator for the British Broadcasting Company.
Gioia is also interested in poetic theater. In 1995, his verse translation of Seneca's *Hercules Furens* was published by Johns Hopkins and performed in Soho. That same year, the Mark Ruhala Performance Ensemble adapted his narrative poem "Counting the Children" into a full-length dance-theater piece. In addition, Gioia has written the libretto for an opera by the California composer Alva Henderson based on F. W. Murnau's classic silent film, *Nosferatu*. A production of this opera's highlights made its world premiere in Crested Butte, Colorado. In addition to his writing projects, Gioia has taught occasional classes in poetic form and literary journalism at such institutions as Sarah Lawrence College, Wesleyan University, and Johns Hopkins. In 1995, Gioia and Michael Peich co-founded a summer poetry conference at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. Entitled "Exploring Form and Narrative," the conference was the first such gathering to concentrate on the techniques of rhyme, meter, and narrative, and on such genres as light verse. Its faculty is made up of creative writers and scholars, an unusual combination for a poetry conference. In assembling the conference, Gioia and his co-founder sought to bridge the gap that currently exists between writers and critics. The conference has been held every summer since 1995, and Gioia plans eventually to establish a similar conference in a western venue.

4. *POEMS OF EXILE AND LOSS: DAILY HOROSCOPE*

*Daily Horoscope*, Gioia's first collection of poetry, received sharply divided reviews, stirring up an unusual degree of controversy. Reviewers either loved the book or hated it. Two years after the book's publication, the anti-formalist critic Greg Kuzma assailed it in the *Northwest Review*. He wrote, "The fault I find with Dana Gioia is that his poetry is the poetry of leisure, or ease, or idle pleasures. I have called it the poetry of money because what it
values most are material things and what it promotes is an aesthetic based on what one can afford" (114). Kuzma points to the poem "In Cheever Country," in which the poem's speaker, a businessman who may well have stepped out from a Cheever story, rides through suburbs on his nightly commute, observing the convents and orphanages that "Robber Barons gave to God" in the name of charity and atonement. He observes the formerly grand estates, some of which

[... ] are merely left to rot where now
broken stone lions guard a roofless colonade,
a half-collapsed gazebo bursts with tires,
and each detail warns it is not so difficult
to make a fortune as to pass it on. (20)

Of this passage, Kuzma writes, "Ruined splendor, lost wealth, obsess this poet. Perhaps he fears bankruptcy most of all things" (118). Kuzma fails to notice that these gently chiding lines are less concerned with wealth than with loss itself, whether due to bad business sense or the passage of time.

While we find regret for squandered fortunes in "In Cheever Country" and elsewhere in Daily Horoscope, that regret is part of a larger thematic pattern of regret for places and states of mind that can be achieved, if at all, only ephemerally. As the volume's opening poem, "The Burning Ladder," warns, no matter how strong desire is, gravity is always more powerful. This principle undergirds the poems in Daily Horoscope, many of which revolve around a sense of loss. In these poems, fields are paved to make way for parking lots, and the things that matter most—innocence, dreams, fortunes, home, the past and one's memory of it—are always on the verge of slipping away.

When looked at as part of this larger pattern of loss, Gioia's poems of place take on an added significance. As a displaced
Some nights I drove down to the beach to park and walk along the railings of the pier. The water down below was cold and dark, the waves monotonous against the shore. The darkness and the mist, the midnight sea, the flickering lights reflected from the city—

westerner, Gioia is acutely interested in geography and questions of travel, just as Elizabeth Bishop—his former teacher—was. The first section of Daily Horoscope is made up of poems that either analyze and contrast the east and west coasts, or in which the poem’s speaker is in limbo, caught somewhere between two destinations.

Los Angeles—its piers and its mist—feature prominently in “Cruising With the Beachboys.” Here Gioia writes ironically about nostalgia. The poem’s speaker, a businessman in a rented car, is surprised by the power of an old hit song to trigger strong memories of teenage lovesickness. To his chagrin, he finds the song can still move him to tears, despite his understanding of the adolescent posing and self-dramatization that originally led him to choose the song as a kind of private theme-song:

Every lovesick summer has its song,
And this one I pretended to despise,
But if I was alone when it came on,
I turned it up full-blast to sing along—
A primal scream in croaky baritone,
The notes all flat, the lyrics mostly slurred.
No wonder I spent so much time alone
Making the rounds in Dad’s old Thunderbird. (5)

Just as the unnamed song is inextricably tied to memory, both are tied to place:

Some nights I drove down to the beach to park
And walk along the railings of the pier.
The water down below was cold and dark,
The waves monotonous against the shore.
The darkness and the mist, the midnight sea,
The flickering lights reflected from the city—
A perfect setting for a boy like me,  
The Cecil B. DeMille of my self-pity. (5)

Although the adult speaker critiques nostalgia by recognizing that his current tears are as self-pitying as the ones he shed as a teenager, he is nonetheless unable to resist the urge to wallow. The old song brings on tears “for no reason at all,” except for the powerful memories popular music can summon. Against his better judgment, nostalgia swamps the speaker, and his homesickness for the past is inextricably bound to the place where he lived out his early dramas, a seascape he now describes in loving particulars.

A similar note is sounded in the poem “California Hills in August.” Initially, Gioia presents the landscape in unappealing terms: hot and dusty, dotted with “sparse brown bushes” and weeds. By the poem’s end, however, the hills and their environs are revealed as a test of sensibilities. The speaker hypothesizes that an easterner in this landscape would be disdainful of

the meagerness of summer, the dry  
twisted shapes of black elm,  
scrub oak, and chaparral, a landscape  
August has already drained of green.

A native, however, could understand and appreciate the California landscape. In the last stanza, the poem’s tone modulates, and criticism of the landscape turns into affection for it:

And yet how gentle it seems to someone  
raised in a landscape short of rain—  
the skyline of a hill broken by no more  
trees than one can count, the grass,  
the empty sky, the wish for water. (4)

The poet values these dry California hills precisely because they can only be appreciated by the initiated.
While *Daily Horoscope* also contains numerous poems about east-coast life, Gioia consistently writes as a displaced Californian. The rugged west-coast landscape described in “California Hills in August” hides like a pentimento beneath the surface of all Gioia’s poems about Westchester County. “Eastern Standard Time,” for example, is a poem of displacement, spoken by a recently arrived Californian who has only just learned to recognize

the changes that prefigure storms:

the heavy air, the circling wind
and graduate darkness, but still

each time the air goes through even these
accustomed changes, I grow uneasy.

Sudden storms, shifts in temperature, even snow
in midwinter still surprise me,

unable to feel at home in a landscape
so suddenly transformed. (9-10)

The speaker’s discomfort with unfamiliar weather patterns proves to be a symptom of something larger, a discomfort with suburban life in general: “Sometimes the saddest places in the world / are just the ordinary ones seen after hours” (10). The only thing that can reconcile the speaker to his lack of connection with the barren landscape he walks through—a parking lot—is his abrupt realization that once it was a part of nature. This fact—that a dramatic change has taken place in the landscape—somehow reconciles the speaker to what he refers to, in a tone of ironically self-conscious melodrama, as the “Suburbs of Despair / where nothing but the weather ever changes!” (10). The poem’s modulation in tone and its ironic exclamation point reveal the speaker’s annoyance with his own inability to appreciate such safe and relatively comfortable
surroundings. A poorer or more beleaguered man might long for the calm and affluent suburbs; for the poem’s narrator, however, the static, paved-over nature of the suburbs of New York is their most alien feature, particularly in contrast to the untrammeled and therefore ever-changing California hills.

Two other poems in the volume’s first section offer contrasting views of the west and east coasts. “In Chandler Country” is spoken in the voice of the hard-boiled Philip Marlowe, hero of Raymond Chandler’s popular detective novels. Gioia’s appropriated narrator says things like:

Another sleepless night,
when every wrinkle in the bedsheets scratches
like a dry razor on a sunburned cheek,
when even ten-year whiskey tastes like sand,
and quiet women in the kitchen run
their fingers on the edges of a knife
and eye their husbands’ necks. I wish them luck. (7)

This highly stylized voice is a product of the rough cityscape that spawned it. In fact, the poem’s shadow subject is the ways in which a particular environment gives rise to a particular type of art, in this case Chandler’s novels. Atmosphere and content are inseparable from one another. Ironically, though, in the poem’s most atmospheric—and therefore most lyrical—moments, the voice seems farthest from Marlowe and closest to the speakers of Gioia’s other poems:

Tonight it seems that if I took the coins
out of my pocket and tossed them in the air
they’d stay a moment glistening like a net
slowly falling through dark water. (7)

The heat and the peculiar liquid quality of the air are more than a backdrop to violence. They function, in the world of the poem, as a
motive for the crime. And the two-dimensional men and women who populate the landscape of the poem are no less driven by their animal urges than the coyotes who close in at the poem’s end.

In contrast, the violence Gioia depicts in “In Cheever Country” is more subtle, a trespass against the sensibilities and the souls of those who live in New York’s Westchester County. What once was a landscape of wealth and privilege has been disfigured by time and the bad business sense of those who allowed their estates to fall into ruin. On the other hand, good business sense can also bring about crimes against good taste. The speaker observes the fabricated posture of the suburban towns:

The town names stenciled on the platform signs—
Clear Haven, Bullet Park, and Shady Hill—
show that developers at least believe in poetry
if only as a talisman against the commonplace. (19)

In these lines, a mild sense of despair over the cheapening of language and landscape mingles with an understanding of the motives and methods of developers.

Paradoxically, while “In Cheever Country” coolly laments the change inflicted on the land by decaying mansions and mushrooming apartment complexes, the poem’s speaker is further dismayed by a certain eerie timelessness of the landscape. His view that “here so little happens that is obvious” hearkens back to “Eastern Standard Time.” In both poems, aspects of Westchester County are depicted as soul-deadeningly static. In both poems, however, Gioia achieves a reconciliation with the landscape. The narrator of “In Cheever Country” finds beauty in a static domestic tableau, a beauty the reader may contrast with the wild and dangerous beauties of California. Of a particular train station, Gioia writes, “If there is an afterlife, let it be a small town / gentle as this spot at
just this instant” (20). The poem concludes with a vision of family life as a source of consolation:

And this at last is home, this ordinary town
where the lights on the hill gleaming in the rain
are the lights that children bathe by, and it is time
to go home now—to drinks, to love, to supper,
to the modest places which contain our lives. (21)

The comfort the speaker finds in his safe homelife is a momentary stay against the larger east-coast world of decaying grandeur, ruined landscapes, and potential financial ruin. This vision of the suburban household as a refuge nevertheless proves false in the small hours of the morning. In “Insomnia,” a sleepless character addressed in the second person hears his own failures and disappointments in the various nighttime noises of his house:

INSOMNIA

Now you hear what the house has to say.
Pipes clanking, water running in the dark,
the mortgaged walls shifting in discomfort,
and voices mounting in an endless drone
of small complaints like the sounds of a family
that year by year you’ve learned how to ignore.

But now you must listen to the things you own,
all that you’ve worked for these past years,
the murmur of property, of things in disrepair,
the moving parts about to come undone,
and twisting in the sheets remember all
the faces you could not bring yourself to love.

How many voices have escaped you until now,
the venting furnace, the floorboards underfoot,
the steady accusations of the clock
numbering the minutes no one will mark.
The terrible clarity this moment brings,
the useless insight, the unbroken dark. (18)

In "Insomnia," the demands of property—getting it and keeping it from falling apart—resemble the demands of loved ones, whom despite our best efforts we can never love enough. The middle-class haven money can buy proves a trap, and the "you" in this poem is haunted by the ways in which his possessions have come to own him. Gioia's use of the second person serves a dual purpose by momentarily implicating the reader and by enabling Gioia to avoid the appearance of Confessionalism.

Another trapping and/or trap of middle-class success—air travel—is addressed by Gioia in "Waiting in the Airport." In this poem, he explores the anonymity of the airport terminal, that placeless place leading to so many destinations. The poem's meter mimics the relentless nature of frequent job-imposed travel:

  But nothing ever happens here,
  This terminal that narrows to
  A single unattended gate,
  One entrance to so many worlds. (13)

The poet chooses once again to substitute an "eye" for an "I," coolly observing the interactions—and the lack thereof—of his fellow travelers:

  On the same journey each of them
  Is going somewhere else. A goose-necked
  Woman in a flowered dress
  Stares gravely at two businessmen.
  They turn away but carry on
  Their argument on real estate.
Lost in a mist of aftershave,  
A salesman in a brown toupée  
Is scribbling on his *Racing Form*  
While a fat man stares down at his hands  
As if there should be something there.

The soldiers stand in line for sex—  
With wives or girlfriends, whoever  
They hope is waiting for them at  
The other end. The wrapped perfume,  
The bright, stuffed animals they clutch  
Tremble under so much heat. (13)

The people observed here are reduced to stereotypes—salesmen in toupees and goose-necked women. The soldiers’ pending reunions with their respective wives or girlfriends are boiled down to one bald word: sex. If the poem provided more of the speaker’s identity, we might be tempted to see him as a jaded or insensitive character. The poem’s refusal to do so instead denies even the speaker his full humanity, hinting that air travel dehumanizes us all by whisking us out of context. When they arrive home, the poem’s characters will again be fully human, but in the airport, each is reduced to a type.

A thematically-related poem, “Flying over Clouds,” is markedly less detached emotionally. In this poem, the seeming purity of a cloudscape glimpsed from an airplane window triggers an intense nostalgia for

an innocence one may have felt  
on earth—but only for a moment. . . .

O paradise beyond the glass,  
beyond our touch, cast and recast,  
shifting in wind. Delicate world
Interestingly, even in childhood the feeling of innocence is as elusive and mutable as a cloud. The mood here is nostalgia for an innocence that existed, if it existed at all, only fleetingly. Moreover, as in “Waiting in the Airport,” there is a sense of suspension between places. The commuter, of course, is neither here nor there, and his plight is therefore “cold beyond endurance,” like the air through which he moves. Nevertheless, something seductive remains about the “fluent oblivion” of the clouds and of travel itself. The desire for freedom, like the nostalgia for childhood innocence, outweighs, in this poem at least, the longing for any particular place. The poem’s heightened rhetoric is much more self-consciously poetic than that of “Waiting in the Airport,” hinting at the impracticality of the speaker’s longing to remain suspended in air.

In contrast, the brief poem entitled “Cuckoos” is expressly about homesickness. While reading of cuckoos, the speaker remembers climbing in unidentified mountains, and hearing the cries of cuckoos,

back and forth from trees across the valley,
invisible in pinetops but bright and clear
like the ring of crystal against crystal. . . .

So now, reading how the Chinese took their call
to mean Pu ju kuei, pu ju kuei—
Come home again, you must come home again—
I understand at last what they were telling me
not then, back in that high, green valley,
but here, this evening, in the memory of it,
returned by these birds that I have never seen. (70)
Although the speaker is returned to those mountains by memory, the difference between return by memory and an actual homecoming looms large. Moreover, the speaker of “Cuckoos” is exiled from the longed-for landscape not only by distance but also by the passage of time.

Of all the poems in *Daily Horoscope*, the one with the strongest sense of longing for the ephemeral is also the most cryptic and complex. The volume’s title sequence takes the daily newspaper horoscope column as a jumping-off point, employing an oracular speaker who doles out advice. In the first section of this long poem, the reader is advised that no matter how much she might want to return to the dream from which she’s just been awakened, she can’t. Dreams are presented as more attractive and more real than reality—but nevertheless just out of reach:

[...] These walls, these streets,
this day can never be your home, and yet
there is no other world where you could live,
and so you will accept it. (25)

Section two is more consoling, advising that even if we can’t choose to remain in our dreams, when we awaken they aren’t really lost. Nothing is truly lost, the poem’s all-knowing speaker insists, although it may be diminished. We are advised to accept each thing—no matter how small—when it returns to us, and to see its importance.

In section three, however, the advice grows more ominous as the speaker warns us against presuming we can have any true understanding of the world around us:

[...] One
more summer gone,
and one way or another you survive,
dull or regretful, never learning that
nothing is hidden in the obvious
changes of the world, that even the dim
reflection of the sun on tall, dry grass
is more than you will ever understand.

And only briefly then
you touch, you see, you press against
the surface of impenetrable things. (27)

Only in realizing that we will never fathom any of life's mysteries
will we achieve moments of understanding, and these visions will
be fleeting, the oracle warns.

However, even the advice against searching for meaning proves
ephemeral. The poem's fifth section advises that meaning may be
found not in the stars—the usual source of astrological wisdom—but on earth, in the humblest of natural details. We should

Look for smaller signs instead, the fine
disturbances of ordered things when suddenly
the rhythms of your expectation break
and in a moment's pause another world
reveals itself behind the ordinary. (29)

It's this hidden world—the world of dreams, epiphanies, and sud-
den but ephemeral visions of the ordinary world—from which we
are usually exiled. The rare and brief moments in which we again
glimpse that other world are, ironically, the only times in which
we feel truly at home. This sense of exile from essential things is
underlined by the poem's last section, where a late-night phone
call momentarily transports us to "the lost geography of child-
hood," a landscape in which we cannot remain. A state of mind is
envisioned as a place—interestingly, an Edenic landscape in which
one's childhood was spent. By the poem's end we are thrust back
into the fallen world of adulthood, where we must face such harsh
details as "the ticking of the clock, / the cold disorder of the bed" (30). Once again, we are in exile from what matters.

Though the volume's title sequence is its most adamant crystallization of the poetics of exile, the themes of loss and displacement run through much of the rest of the volume. In "The Memory," for example, Gioia again employs the second person to warn us that memories are seductive and tricky:

Don't listen to it. This memory
is like a snatch of an old song
in the back of your head: something
you heard years ago. Pay
attention to it now, and it
sticks forever, just out of reach,
getting louder all the time
until you swear you know the words.
Don't fool yourself. You know by now
you can't remember where it's from,
and all you'll ever get for searching
is just the sense of having left
something important in a place
you can't get back to. [...] (46)

In railing against the attractions of memory, the poem's narrator gives away his own obsession with random bits of the past, fragments that resurface when we're not expecting them, only to submerge again as quickly as they appeared. The speaker's admonitions are a cover-up of his own disappointing inability to experience the past fully.

If the past is a place we can't get back to, then the place in which we spent our past, "the lost geography of childhood," is the most emotionally potent place of all. In contrast, a visited landscape and the cultural artifacts it contains can never have the
power to shape and change us in the way that a lived-in place can. This idea is touched upon in “Instructions for the Afternoon.” Here an omniscient speaker advises a tourist on how best to find what she’s looking for—the art object that will change the way she sees the world. The reader/tourist is advised to forsake popular tourist attractions in favor of

Sad hamlets at the end of silted waterways,
dry mountain villages where time
is the thin shadow of an ancient tower
that moves across the sundazed pavement of the square
and disappears each evening without trace. (56)

Only by trying to blend into her surroundings will the traveler find the desired object “shoved off into a corner, almost lost / among the spectacle of gold and purple” (57). But even if a tourist can, with effort, achieve moments of understanding and transcendence, she should not expect these moments to have a lasting impact on her life: “Strange how all journeys come to this: the sun / bright on the unfamiliar hills, new vistas / dazzling the eye, the stubborn heart unchanged” (58).

In order really to be changed by a landscape, we have to live in it long enough to be transformed by it, especially by its hardships. In “Song From a Courtyard Window,” the longed-for epiphany is figured as imaginary music:

This was the only music we had hoped for:
something to make us close our eyes and lose
the courtyard full of people, silence all
the conversations at the other tables
and stop us from believing that we heard
the sunlight burning in the open sky.
Yes, and for a moment we heard nothing
but the rush of cool water underground
moving from the mountains to the hills
into these fountains splashing in the sun.
And listening we did not wonder
that all the buildings melted to a field,
off in some high country—a landscape we
had never seen before, nor had imagined,
a bitter landscape that two thousand years
of pastoral could not obscure or soften:
a wide dry field under the sun at noon
where tall brown grass was bending in a wind
filled with the sharp smell of a single weed
that had marked this season here for centuries. (60)

The music heard by the poem's speaker and his fellow traveler is a
product of the harsh landscape, just as in "California Hills in
August," the driest and seemingly least welcoming places test the
speaker's sensibilities, and his ability to appreciate his surround-
ings yields satisfaction. In this small and limited way, the speaker
relives a tourist's version of the reward reaped by those who live
in the landscape and triumph over its hardships. Ultimately the
music comes from "a thirsty man / singing praises to the heat, a
song / to celebrate the dust, the weeds, the weather, / the misery
of living here alone" (60-61). Because the speaker and his implied
companion can appreciate the landscape, they are able to hear the
music for a while. The music soon fades, however, as it must for
the traveler. Presumably, only the native, who sings the song cele-
brating his home, is allowed unlimited access to the music. The
tourists enjoy only a momentary epiphany. The poem ends on a
not entirely pessimistic note, as the travelers are left wondering
whether or not they carry their recent epiphany within them.

It is significant that Gioia's protagonists experience their short-
lived epiphanies in Italy. Gioia finds an affinity between the
respective landscapes of southern Italy and California, the home of his childhood and adolescence:

My Italian grandfather said he settled on the coast of California because it reminded him of Italy. When I went to Italy for the first time, I was immediately struck by its similarity to California. Both are dry landscapes, full of light, with the sea as a presence. I wrote about the Italian landscape because I knew how to read it. (Lindner, Personal Interview)

Like Gioia, the protagonists of "Song From a Courtyard Window" know how to read the Italian landscape, which is why it yields up its song—however briefly—to them. Moreover, while most American poets who write about Italy focus on art and culture, Gioia writes about the landscape, seeing it in terms of the American west—harsh, dry, demanding, and austerely beautiful.

5. THE POETRY OF BUSINESS

The speakers of Gioia’s poems tend to prefer rugged countryside to picturesque vistas. Gioia’s penchant for finding beauty in that which isn’t normally considered beautiful corresponds with his interest in finding poetry where few if any have found it before. His commitment to exploring new subject matter leads him to write about the corporate office and the experience of the white-collar worker.

In his essay "Business and Poetry," Gioia notes the historical reluctance of American poets to write about business, even though our poetry celebrates all subject matter, from the high to the low. He writes:

American poetry has defined business mainly by excluding it. Business does not exist in the world of poetry, and therefore
Gioia defines the tradition of businessman poets in American literature, and observes a disconnect between the work and lives of the poets who wrote in this tradition. Although quite a few American poets—notably Wallace Stevens, A. R. Ammons, and James Dickey—have supported themselves in the world of business, their work contains no poems about business.

In poems like “In Cheever Country,” Gioia plays against this absence, contrasting the quiet suburbs with an imagined landscape in which the commercial activity is bustling and idealized: “Somewhere upstate huge factories melt ore, / mills weave fabric on enormous looms, / and sweeping combines glean the cash-green fields. Fortunes are made” (21). This description, which ironically portraits commerce in the manner of a Depression-era WPA mural, has prompted criticism from the critic Greg Kuzma, who sees this passage as a sanguine, chamber-of-commerce-like vision of industry. Kuzma writes, “I find it rather difficult to accept this vision as either valid or humane. My father worked in one of those “huge factories” upstate from “Cheever Country,” and was made deaf there, and spiritually damaged, and my brother killed himself in a car rather than accept that same fate” (119). This ideological critique misses the fact that the poem’s idealized vision of production belongs to its persona, a character from a Cheever story, and his cheerful vision of industry contrasts ironically with the darker one set forth in Gioia’s other poems. In “Men After Work,” for example, Gioia depicts workers in coffeeshops or diners as, “always on the edge of words, almost without appetite, / knowing there is nothing on the menu that they want” (12). These spiritually exhausted workers are faceless, their names, jobs, and social classes left by implication it has become everything that poetry is not—a world without imagination, enlightenment, or perception. It is the universe from which poetry is trying to escape. (Can Poetry Matter? 102)
unspecified. All we see of them is their weariness and alienation from their families and fellow workers. Clearly the vision of an idealized, hyper-productive economy imagined by the speaker of “In Cheever Country” comes with a human price-tag.

The malaise of the working man is figured in more explicitly white-collar terms in “The Man in the Open Doorway.” Gioia’s depiction of a typical corporate office illustrates how airless and distant from the natural world such workplaces can seem:

This is the world in which he lives:
Four walls, a desk, a swivel chair,
A doorway with no door to close,
Vents to bring in air. (16)

Elsewhere in the poem, we learn that the movement of the clock’s hands is the only movement within this artificial space. The poem’s hypnotic meter and rhyme move it along as relentlessly as the hands of the clock. Ultimately, the businessman’s longing for contact with other human beings and the natural world is revealed by a single gesture; even while he muses on the day’s successes, the nameless man finds himself

[. . .] pause[d] in a darkened stairway
Until the sounds of his steps have ceased
And strok[ing] the wall as if it were
Some attendant beast. (17)

Gioia’s relationship to the sphere of business is clearly a complex one. In describing the loneliness of the businessman, he presents a darker vision of the working life than one might expect. On the other hand, in overtly addressing the businessman’s estrangement from nature and from other human beings, he attempts to speak about a world that other poets might see as not worth talking about. He has commented:
It's the poet's job to redeem the ordinary world around us for the imagination and the spirit—even if that world is the suburbs and office life. But the poet cannot attempt this redemption at the price of simplifying or distorting it. One must see the world for what it is. One must present all of the burdens and miseries of this common life and still see the value in it. (McPhillips 25)

In making white-collar lives the subject of poetry, Gioia communicates to workers (who are, after all, members of his intended audience) that their daily life may be the stuff of poetry after all—albeit a poetry of vague discontent, into which fresh air is rationed by vents.

6. TELLING STORIES

In his lyric poems, as we have seen, Gioia often uses rhetorical devices (the second person rather than the first) or generalization (an unnamed businessman; many men after work) to distance the work from the author—both strategies for sidestepping the confessional urge. This desire for impersonal objectivity may explain Gioia's interest in narrative poetry, just as his lyrical impulse has focused that narrative mode into the dramatic monologue, the form most rich in character and personal style. For Gioia, the successful long narrative poem traffics in matters of life and death and recounts moments in which "the fabric of everyday life is torn" (Lindner, Personal Interview). Interesting images and compelling language aren't enough: a narrative poem needs to convey a story with moral weight. The inner life of a character must be brought outward, a phenomenon that happens most readily in violent, frightening situations.

In "The Room Upstairs," a mountain-climbing accident allows a character briefly to transcend his own selfish concerns. The poem's
narrator is a solitary bachelor professor whose most intense relationships are with the young men who rent his upstairs room. Addressing his newest tenant—a young college student just moving in—the speaker reminisces about his most memorable former tenant, David, whom the speaker sees as the son he never had. The sexually-charged description of the attachment between the speaker and David alerts the reader to the landlord’s romantic feelings toward his former tenant. Though we are never explicitly told whether the speaker is aware of his own homosexual feelings, his failure to overtly address these questions suggests that those feelings are repressed. We are also told that the speaker avoids looking in mirrors as a way of avoiding the physical changes that come with age, and that he has tried unsuccessfully to avoid seeing how overdevelopment has transformed the desert he lives in into a suburb. These efforts at evasion seem part of the speaker’s lack of self awareness, an unwillingness similar to his refusal to admit the sexual nature of his feelings for David. Moreover, he doesn’t seem aware of the religious resonance in his description of one particular encounter with David. After saving a young woman who panics during a rock-climbing expedition, David unexpectedly returns to the landlord instead of to his parents’ home. Recounting this visit, the narrator says,

   I watched him standing in the steamy bathroom,  
   His naked body shining from the water,  
   Carefully drying himself with a towel.  
   Then suddenly he threw it down and showed me  
   Where the ropes had cut into his skin.  
   It looked as if he had been branded,  
   Wounds deep enough to hide your fingers in.  
   I felt like holding him but couldn’t bear it. (83)
David's near-religious significance in the speaker's life is made even clearer after the boy dies in a mountain-climbing accident.

[...] I dreamt
That suddenly the room was filled with light,
Not blinding but the soft whiteness that you see
When heavy snow is falling in the morning,
And I awoke to see him standing here,
Waiting in the doorway, his arms outstretched.
“I’ve come back to you,” he said. “Look at me.
Let me show you what I’ve done for you.”

And only then I saw his skin was bruised,
Torn in places, crossed by deep red welts,
But this time everywhere—as if his veins
Had pushed up to the surface and spilled out.
And there was nothing in his body now,
Nothing but the voice that spoke to me,
And this cold white light pouring through the room.

I stared at him. His skin was bright and pale.
“Why are you doing this to me?” I asked.
“Please, go away.”
“But I’ve come back to you.
I’m cold. Just hold me. I’m so very cold.”

What else could I have done but hold him there? (84)

In the dream, David needs and accepts the solitary professor’s love, just as in life the boy needed and accepted the older man’s friendship. In doing so, David briefly allows the speaker to rise out of his coldness and self-absorption.

The two long poems published in Gioia’s second poetry collection, *The Gods of Winter*, take a distinctly darker view of the human predicament. One of Gioia’s most complex and moving poems,
“Counting the Children” is narrated by Mr. Choi, an accountant sent to audit the estate of a lonely old woman. Visiting the apartment where she died a solitary death, he sees a hellish collection of dolls in various states of disrepair and is confronted by the ways in which time ultimately steals all our individuality:

Where were the children who promised them love?
The small, caressing hands, the lips which whispered
Secrets in the dark? Once they were woken,

Each by name. Now they have become each other—
Anonymous except for injury,
The beautiful and headless side by side.

Was this where all lost childhoods go? These dim
Abandoned rooms, these crude arrangements staged
For settled dust and shadow, left to prove

That all affection is outgrown, or show
The uniformity of our desire? (14)

The fact that what makes an individual unique and valuable will erode with time (or as Gioia puts it, “Dust has a million lives, the heart has one”) is excruciating for Mr. Choi when he realizes that it applies to his sleeping daughter. At her beside, Mr. Choi meditates on the perfection of children. This is a passage whose themes are reminiscent of Wordsworth’s Intimations Ode.

What if completion comes only in beginnings?
The naked tree exploding into flower?
And all our prim assumptions about time

Prove wrong? What if we cannot read the future
Because our destiny moves back in time,
And only memory speaks prophetically? (18)
These musings give way to terror when the father notices his daughter's dolls arranged on a shelf just as the old woman's collection had been, a sight that abruptly embodies his daughter's mortality:

I felt like holding them tight in my arms,
Promising I would never let them go,
But they would trust no promises of mine.

I feared that if I touched one, it would scream. (19)

Among the poems that make up The Gods of Winter—explorations of death, aging, lost love, and the prospect of outliving one's own children—the volume's second long narrative poem nevertheless stands out for its pessimistic view of human nature. "The Homecoming" explores the potential for violence in even—perhaps especially—a sensitive and intelligent person. An escaped convict on the verge of arrest recounts the events that led him to commit murder. Abandoned in childhood by his mother, the speaker is taken in for charity's sake by a religious fundamentalist foster mother who doesn't love him. After encountering his birth mother, who fails to recognize him, the speaker makes a conscious decision to overcome his own helplessness and despair. Toward this end, he commits random cruelties as part of a self-imposed regimen:

If I could only become strong enough,
I could do anything. I only had
to throw away the comfortable lies,
the soft morality. The way a snake
sloughs skin when it becomes too small, the way
a wolf cub sheds its milk-teeth for its fangs.

The next day when I saw a neighbor's dog
sniffing around the well, I called him over,
let him nuzzle me, and slit his throat.
I stuffed him full of rocks and threw him in.  
I wanted to be sick, but I stayed strong.  
Later I killed a cat and then another dog,  
and when I heard two neighbors talk about  
keeping their kids and pets inside at night  
because a wolf had come down from the hills,  
I had to smile. My new life had begun. (46)

The narrator of “The Homecoming” consciously chooses evil as a  
means of gaining power. By the poem’s end, however, he is forced  
to realize that his power has been limited and temporary. He es-  
capes, with the sole motive of killing his foster mother, only to  
find that her death increases her influence on his future:

[. . .] as I stood there gloating, gradually  
the darkness and the walls closed in again.  
Sensing the power melting from my arms,  
I realized the energy I felt  
was just adrenaline—the phoney high  
that violence unleashes in your blood.  
I saw her body lying on the floor  
and knew that we would always be together.  
All I could do was wait for the police.  
I had come home, and there was no escape. (52)

In its pessimistic analysis of human psychology, “The  
Homecoming” is comparable to another, more cryptic poem.  
Entitled “Maze Without a Minotaur,” the poem imagines the hu-  
man psyche as a cramped and dirty house:

[. . .] who  
could bear to see it all? The slow  
descending spirals of the dust  
against the spotted windowpane,
the sunlight on the yellow lace,
the hoarded wine turned dark and sour,
the photographs, the letters—all
the crowded closets of the heart. (57)

In the dark and crowded maze of the psyche, there are “no monsters but ourselves.” Anyone who looks too closely finds herself wanting to deny her own humanity:

One wants to turn away—and cry
for fire to break out on the stairs
and raze each suffocating room.
But the walls stay, the roof remains
strong and immovable, and we
can only pray that if these rooms
have memories, they are not ours. (57)

For Gioia, even the “normal” psyche, looked at too closely, is fearsome. In the end, it is not far from the interior prison in which the sociopathic narrator of “The Homecoming” finds himself.

Like “Counting the Children,” many other poems in The Gods of Winter are concerned with mortality. “Guide to the Other Gallery,” for example, takes a satirical view of death as the great leveler. The poem’s emotional impact rests on the ending’s surprise twist. The narrator, a tour guide, takes his listener through a museum of dead and useless objects, saying,

This is the hall of broken limbs
Where splintered marble athletes lie
Beside the arms of cherubim.
Nothing is ever thrown away. (27)

Most of the poem is a catalogue of the gallery’s contents, all of which seem, like the dolls in “Counting the Children,” to lose their individuality over time:
These butterflies are set in rows.
So small and gray inside their case
They look alike now. I suppose
Death makes most creatures commonplace.

These portraits here of the unknown
Are hung three high, frame piled on frame.
Each potent soul who craved renown
Immortalized without a name. (27)

The significance of the gallery provides the poem’s punch line:

You’d like to go? I wish you could.
This room has such a peaceful view.
Look at that case of antique wood
Without a label. It’s for you. (27)

The speaker’s extravagantly genial manner and the poem’s lulling meter and rhyme contribute to the shock of the ending.

In “All Souls’,” Gioia takes a gentler tone to speculate on a related notion: If death robs us of all individuality, perhaps the souls of the newly dead are most saddened by their inability to appreciate the particulars of the natural world.

ALL SOULS’

Suppose there is no heaven and no hell,
And that the dead can never leave the earth,
That, as the body rots, the soul breaks free,
Weak and disabled in its second birth.

And then invisible, rising to the light,
Each finds a world it cannot touch or hear,
Where colors fade and, if the soul cries out,
The silence stays unbroken in the air.
How flat the ocean seems without its roar,
Without the sting of salt, the bracing gust.
The sunset blurs into a grayish haze.
The morning snowfall is a cloud of dust.

The pines that they revisit have no scent.
They cannot feel the needed forest floor.
Crossing the stream, they watch the current flow
Unbroken as they step down from the shore.

They want their voices to become the wind—
Intangible like them—to match its cry,
Howling in treetops, covering the moon,
Tumbling the storm clouds in a rain-swept sky.

But they are silent as a rising mist,
A smudge of smoke dissolving in the air.
They watch the shadows lengthen on the grass.
The pallor of the rose is their despair. (4)

If the hypothetical ghosts in “All Souls’” despair over their lost ability to take sensual joy from nature, one loss is even greater: their lost ability to have an effect on the world. To live in nature and yet be unable to touch or be touched by it is a kind of limbo.

Other poems in The Gods of Winter focus on the plight of the survivor. The most striking of these is “Planting a Sequoia,” a poem in which Gioia allows himself to be more openly autobiographical than usual. The poem’s main action takes an ironic twist on the Sicilian tradition in which a father plants a tree in celebration of the birth of his first son. At its beginning, the poem’s second-person address is startling—“All afternoon my brothers and I have worked in the orchard, / Digging this hole, laying you into it, carefully packing the soil” (10)—until the reader realizes that the “you” being directly addressed is a tree, not a person. However, if
the poem’s action doesn’t involve an actual burial, it does involve a funeral rite; at the tree’s roots, the speaker buries, “a lock of hair, a piece of an infant’s birth cord, / All that remains above earth of a first-born son, / A few stray atoms brought back to the elements” (10). This homespun commemoration is meant to bring about a catharsis the speaker hasn’t achieved through more traditional religious rites. Tellingly, the chosen tree is a California sequoia, “our native giant,” as opposed to the olive or fig tree a Sicilian father might plant for his living son. Instead of bearing fruit, a sequoia casts a long shadow, as the son’s brief life has done, and is monumental in nature. A tree’s long lifespan makes it an apt memorial:

And when our family is no more, all of his unborn brothers dead,
Every niece and nephew scattered, the house torn down,
His mother’s beauty ashes in the air,
I want you to stand among strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,
Silently keeping the secret of your birth. (10)

The choice of tree also personalizes this ritual, a ritual of connection with place. The newly planted tree consoles the grieving father, and not just because it will outlive the father as the son will not. In attaching symbolic value to the landscape, the poem’s speaker achieves the kind of give and take with nature that the wistful heroes of poems like “Eastern Standard Time” never do. One feels that this symbolic relation with nature would only be possible for Gioia in a west-coast landscape—if not in southern California, the “lost geography” of his childhood, then at least in northern California. Gioia says,

I came back to California because this is where the landscape spoke to me the most deeply. One has a kind of allegorical relationship to the landscape. If you grow up in a
landscape, you know how to read it. Your own past is inscribed in it. When you see a hawk fly by, all of the other times you've seen that hawk are somehow recapitulated. Because I can name the trees, I can see them more clearly. We forget the things we cannot name. (Lindner, Personal Interview)

Gioia chooses to head one of the sections of The Gods of Winter with an epigraph from John Haines: “I think there is a spirit of place, / a presence asking to be expressed” (22). These words could well be the marching orders for the poem, “Becoming a Redwood,” in which the speaker imagines what it would be like to become part of his surroundings. By standing still, he tries to approximate the experience of a tree.

**BECOMING A REDWOOD**

Stand in a field long enough, and the sounds start up again. The crickets, the invisible toad who claims that change is possible,

And all the other life too small to name. First one, then another, until innumerable they merge into the single voice of a summer hill.

Yes, it's hard to stand still, hour after hour, fixed as a fencepost, hearing the steers snort in the dark pasture, smelling the manure.

And paralyzed by the mystery of how a stone can bear to be a stone, the pain the grass endures breaking through the earth's crust.

Unimaginable the redwoods on the far hill, rooted for centuries, the living wood grown tall and thickened with a hundred thousand days of light.
The old windmill creaks in perfect time
to the wind shaking the miles of pasture grass,
and the last farmhouse light goes off.

Something moves nearby. Coyotes hunt
these hills and packs of feral dogs.
But standing here at night accepts all that.

You are your own pale shadow in the quarter moon,
moving more slowly than the crippled stars,
part of the moonlight as the moonlight falls,

Part of the grass that answers the wind,
part of the midnight’s watchfulness that knows
there is no silence but when danger comes. (55-56)

The act of imitation eventually yields an understanding of the
glass’s pain and the timelessness of the redwoods. Coming when it
does, the word “unimaginable” is startling, since the speaker has
succeeded in imagining himself so thoroughly into vegetative life
that he can stand fearless among the hunting coyotes and feral
dogs. As is the case in “Daily Horoscope,” close attention to seem-
ingly insignificant details of the natural world enables a spiritual
breakthrough.

Another kind of spiritual breakthrough is almost achieved in
“Equations of the Light,” and once again the possibility of tran-
scendence is triggered by place. In this poem, the place is urban, a
“quiet, tree-lined street, only one block long / resting between the
noisy avenues”—an unlikely haven in which “each tall window /
glowing through the ivy-decked facade / promised lives as perfect
as the light” (61). But the speaker, glimpsing the scene with an
unnamed other, cannot quite allow himself to trust the perfection
of the scene.
Walking beneath the trees, we counted all the high black doors of houses bolted shut. And yet we could have opened any door, entered any room the evening offered.

Or were we deluded by the strange equations of the light, the vagrant wind searching the trees, that we believed this brief conjunction of our separate lives was real?

It seemed that moment lingered like a ghost, a flicker in the air, smaller than a moth, a curl of smoke flaring from a match, haunting a world it could not touch or hear. (61)

Ultimately, the speaker is right not to believe in transcendence. This brief epiphany is a mere blip in the real lives of the speaker and his walking companion, as is the speaker’s easily shattered conviction that he and she are sharing a moment of true intimacy. As in the sequence “Daily Horoscope,” moments of insight or belonging are fleeting. In “Equations of the Light,” however, the poet questions the reliability of such moments.

“Summer Storm” similarly reflects on the attractions of roads not taken. The speaker addresses a woman he remembers meeting briefly at a wedding reception twenty years before:

We stood on the rented patio
While the party went on inside.
You knew the groom from college.
I was a friend of the bride.

We hugged the brownstone wall behind us
To keep our dress clothes dry
And watched the sudden summer storm
Floodlit against the sky. (Interrogations 66)
If the change in weather is sudden, so is the moment of intimacy that occurs between the speaker and the woman.

To my surprise, you took my arm—
A gesture you didn’t explain—
And we spoke in whispers, as if we two
Might imitate the rain. (66)

This moment—perfect perhaps because it was so brief—haunts the speaker twenty years later.

There are so many might have been,
What ifs that won’t stay buried,
Other cities, other jobs,
Strangers we might have married.

And memory insists on pining
for places it never went,
As if life would be happier
Just by being different. (67)

The mature speaker realizes the absurdity of his self-pity but can’t help feeling his disappointments as keenly as he did in youth.

The regret voiced by “Summer Storm” and “Equations of the Light” is not so much for the actual women addressed by these poems, but for the missed possibility, the alternate life that might have proved better “just by being different.” Missed chances are irretrievable, and in the world of Gioia’s poetry, anything that can’t be retrieved must be mourned, however briefly.

7. THE MOTETS OF EUGENIO MONTALE

Gioia’s interest in the lost and irretrievable may have been what drew him to translate Eugenio Montale’s Mottetti: Poems of Love, a classic of Modernist Italian poetry. Elusive and full of private references, Montale’s hermetic sequence is stylistically far removed
from Gioia’s own poetry, with the exception of the “Daily Horoscope” sequence, which bears traces of Montale’s influence.

Thematically, however, the Motets often resemble Gioia’s own poetic of regret and nostalgia.

In Montale’s poems, a man speaks—in his imagination and on paper—to a woman he loves but will never see again. In his introduction to the book, Gioia writes:

Although the poet knows that he is absolutely separated from [his beloved] in a physical sense, he hopes that through these epiphanies they might still in some inexplicable way enjoy a spiritual union that events cannot alter or destroy. He looks for her continuing presence in signs of an almost sacramental nature in the physical world. Sometimes the miraculous signs appear. More often they do not. The appearance or denial of these epiphanies form the central experience of the Motets. (14)

The speaker of the Motets finds consolation in his belief that he is achieving a two-way spiritual communication with his lost beloved via symbols he finds in the natural world. Anything, no matter how commonplace, could be a message from her. Ordinary objects and phenomena, when seen in this light, take on the aspects of minor miracles:

Here is the sign; it trembles
over a wall that is turning
itself to gold:
the fretwork of a palm leaf
burnt by the blinding
dazzle of sunrise.

The sound of steps coming down
so lightly from the greenhouse
is not muffled
by the snow, is still
your life, your blood
in my veins. (39)

As skeptical as a reader might be about the possibility of this kind of communication, Montale’s faith in such miracles feels complete, perhaps because the speaker of these poems needs so desperately to contact his loved one. The speaker of the Motets is likewise certain that he survived the trenches of World War I because, as he tells the woman he loves, “I had not met you yet / and had to” (31).

Montale’s sense of predestination, even in the face of loss and heartbreak, is the antithesis of angst revealed by the speaker in “Summer Storm,” who gives no sign of finding his present life inadequate or unfulfilling, but who nonetheless can’t completely stop wondering what might have been. Moreover, the notion of a psychic link that can transcend physical separation appears elsewhere in Gioia’s ouevre. It is a central motif in his libretto for Alva Henderson’s opera Nosferatu.

8. THE POET AS LIBRETTIST

In writing a libretto, Gioia broadened his ambitions as a poet. The theatrical medium of opera allows him to tell a story that wouldn’t be adequately conveyed by the page alone. He says:

In Shakespeare’s time, poets took for granted that they could work in all three basic literary forms—the lyric, narrative, and drama. But nowadays poets are supposed to settle down and just write short lyric utterances. [. . .] Once you accept its special requirements, opera allows a writer to explore all sorts of material that doesn’t easily work in other forms. It opens up extraordinary artistic possibilities. (Vance-Watkins 1)
In *Nosferatu*, Gioia attempted to write lyrics that function as well in performance as on the page. To write for a musical setting—in this case the music of neo-romantic composer Alva Henderson—presents particular challenges. According to Gioia, “The words must be poetic but not so rich as to block the composer's own inspiration. They must be concise but also unfold the drama in all its psychological and narrative depth” (“Sotto Voce” 81).

Unlike the F. W. Murnau silent film upon which it is based, Gioia’s libretto focuses not on the vampire Nosferatu but on his victim, Ellen, a “sensitive woman trapped by tragic circumstances beyond her control.” Eric Hutter, the impoverished young bridegroom, reluctantly leaves his delicate bride and travels from Wisborg to Hungary to do business with Count Orlock, a wealthy nobleman. When Eric shows Orlock a portrait of Ellen, the Count realizes immediately that she is an extraordinary being, fated to become one of the undead. He decides that she is meant to be his bride, and resolves to claim her. Even as the Count hypnotizes Eric to get him out of the way, Ellen can feel impending danger. She is able to communicate psychically with Orlock and can struggle with him, albeit fruitlessly, for control over Eric. This paranormal form of communication encompasses both the spiritual and the sexual, taking place before Orlock and Ellen know of each other’s specific identities. In an aria entitled “Nocturne,” Count Orlock describes himself as the darker half of Ellen’s psyche:

I am the image that darkens your glass,  
The shadow that falls wherever you pass.  
I am the dream that you cannot forget,  
The face you remember without having met.  
I am the truth that must not be spoken,  
The midnight vow that cannot be broken.  
I am the bell that tolls out the hours.  
I am the fire that warms and devours.
I am the hunger that you have denied.
The ache of desire piercing your side.
I am the sin you have never confessed,
The forbidden hand caressing your breast.

You’ve heard me inside you speak in your dreams,
Sigh in the ocean, whisper in streams.
I am the future you crave and you fear.
You know what I bring. Now I am here. (Nosferatu 43)

As in Montale’s Motets, the communication between Count Orlock and Ellen takes place across time and space, manifesting itself in natural details—shadows and streams. However, unlike the communication between the lovers in the Motets, the communication between Orlock and Ellen is two-way. Though Ellen uses her ability to “talk” with Orlock to rescue her husband from the vampire, she is at least initially repulsed and frightened by Orlock’s attentions. As befits Gioia’s poetic of exile and loss, true contact between lover and beloved is impossible in the Motets, whereas in Nosferatu contact is possible but repugnant, and ultimately disastrous.

9. THE POET AS CRITIC

In writing the libretto for Nosferatu, Gioia is reacting against what he sees as the homogenization of contemporary American poetry. Gioia’s willingness to branch out into largely ignored genres backs up the argument he mapped out in “Can Poetry Matter?” In that essay and elsewhere among his critical writings, Gioia speaks out against a literary climate that favors the private autobiographical lyric to the exclusion of other modes. In “The Dilemma of the Long Poem,” Gioia imagines how an eighteenth-century reader might react to a survey of poetry published in the course of a recent year:
His overall reaction, I suspect, would be a deep disappointment over the predictable sameness, the conspicuous lack of diversity in what he reads. Where are the narrative poems, he would ask, the verse romances, ballads, hymns, verse dramas, didactic tracts, burlesques, satires, the songs actually meant to be sung, and even the pastoral eclogues? Are stories no longer told in poetry? Important ideas no longer discussed at length? (Can Poetry Matter? 23)

Finding mostly free verse and a little iambic pentameter, Gioia’s hypothetical reader would also be dismayed and puzzled by the lack of technical range of poets in the late twentieth century. Moreover, as a general rule, contemporary poets have ceased to write long poems, with the exception of the occasional—usually unsuccessful—epic poem. Gioia concludes that, “American poetry may be bold and expansive in its moods and subject matter, but it remains timorous and short-winded in its range” (24).

The various problems that plague contemporary poetry can mostly be traced to the professionalization of poets as university teachers. According to Gioia,

Decades of public and private funding have created a large professional class for the production and reception of new poetry, comprising legions of teachers, graduate students, editors, publishers, and administrators. Based mostly in universities, these groups have gradually become the primary audience for contemporary verse. Consequently, the energy of American poetry, which was once directed outward, is now increasingly focused inward. (Can Poetry Matter? 2) 

This inward focus takes its toll on the poetry itself. Gioia feels, for example, that poets have lost touch with the working class, even with bohemia, and the content of their poems reflects that lack. More importantly, he also believes that the mass movement of
poets into the academy has led to overly polite reviews and criticism, and anthologies full of the editor’s colleagues and friends. Because most poets inhabit the same professional network, professional courtesy has taken the place of harsh and incisive criticism. Gioia doesn’t want creative writing programs done away with, but he does want to see them reformed.

If poets have turned their backs on a general readership, general readers have reacted by turning their backs on poetry. Although literary magazines and scholarly newsletters proliferate, these publications are aimed at a limited audience and are seldom read by non-poets. (He also speculates that most of these publications are not even read by poets.) Also, as Gioia points out, daily newspapers no longer review poetry. Even the New York Times Book Review assesses books of poetry only rarely, and, when it does, it lumps a group of poetry books together so that no one book receives the in-depth attention a novel would get.

The lack of general interest in poetry is a loss, Gioia argues, not just for poets but for readers. Unlike certain critics who believe no good poetry currently is being written, Gioia argues that the contemporary poetry scene, despite its problems, has “produced personal poems of unsurpassed beauty and power” (Can Poetry Matter? 10). Moreover, society at large should be concerned by the loss of poetry’s general readership: “A society whose intellectual leaders lose the skill to shape, appreciate, and understand the power of language will be the slaves of those who retain it—be they politicians, preachers, copywriters, or newscasters” (Can Poetry Matter? 17). It is precisely this skill that is sharpened by the reading of poetry.

In “Can Poetry Matter?” Gioia sets an ambitious goal for contemporary poets: to help poetry regain its former importance in American cultural life. He looks back to the 1940s as a time when poets had, if not a mass audience, a readership that included
educated readers from all walks of life, and he makes six concrete suggestions for returning poetry to its rightful place in our culture: Poets who give public readings should devote at least part of the program to reciting other people’s work; Poetry readings should mix the spoken word with other arts, especially music; Poets should make a point of reviewing books of poetry more often and more candidly; Poets who edit anthologies should choose poems according to quality, not professional courtesy; Teachers at the high school and undergraduate levels should emphasize performance more and analysis less; and, finally, radio should be exploited as a medium for exposing poetry to a new audience.

In another essay, “The Poet in an Age of Prose,” Gioia examines the difficulty posed to poets by the fragmentation of cultural tradition. In our media-driven age, we are overloaded by information. An individual citizen, unable to absorb everything, absorbs whatever interests her most. Thus our society has fragmented into “specialized subcultures that share no frame of reference” (Can Poetry Matter? 222). This intellectual climate is particularly disastrous for poetry, because a poem can only be fully understood in the context of all the other poems that preceded it. Rather than lamenting the loss of a common cultural tradition, Gioia examines the ways in which poets have reacted to this loss. He sees trends in contemporary American poetry as “a series of rebellions against and reconciliations to the writer’s cultural predicament” (Can Poetry Matter? 223) and sees New Formalism as “the latest in a series of rebellions against poetry’s cultural marginality” (Can Poetry Matter? 224).

Elsewhere, Gioia also says that some of the most exciting American poetry written over the last thirty years has come from such rebellions. In addition to the New Formalists, he cites disparate poetic schools like the Beats, the Confessionalists, the feminist poets, poets of Black Consciousness, gay poets, cowboy poets,
and rap poets. Each of these groups avoids narrow academicism in the hope of reaching an audience outside of the university (Ahrens 29). For Gioia, poetry's best hope lies in this kind of intelligent democratization that results when poets reach out to readers of all classes, ages, races, and walks of life.

Since the publication of *Can Poetry Matter?* the American poetry scene has changed significantly. Poetry readings have become common events in bookstores and coffee houses. Rap music has crossed over into the mainstream, and Spoken Word and cowboy poetry have found a large audience. Tribute was paid to the importance of poetry in American life when the poet Maya Angelou was invited to read at Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential inauguration. (Significantly, Clinton quoted Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" in his first White House Poetry Day in 1998.) Gioia is hopeful about these developments, particularly the emergence of the bookstore as a place where a non-academic audience can hear new poetry. While admitting that the work showcased in bookstores and coffee houses tends to vary in quality, Gioia believes that poetry's new higher profile will enable listeners to make up their own minds about the quality of the poems they are hearing. However, the new importance of the public poetry reading is liable to bring about serious changes in the nature of poems, which increasingly will be written for performance instead of for the page. Says Gioia,

For better or worse, the future of poetry will increasingly depend on the public reading. We have moved back into an auditory culture. The current environment for a young poet is much closer to the performative world of Shakespeare and Marlowe than to the print world of Pound and Eliot. This new environment is disturbing in some respects because no writer or reader wants to lose the wealth of print culture. It is, however, reassuring to remember that poets have not only been in this kind of auditory culture before, but have thrived
in it. This is a cultural world that Virgil, Dante, and Donne would have understood. (Peschiera 98)

As our culture becomes less and less dependent on the printed page, poetry will return to its roots. The new popular poetry forms often use meter and rhyme as a way of making poems memorable and instantly accessible.

Asked for his opinion on where poetry should be headed, Gioia describes an American poetry that is rooted in the great literatures of the past, but understands that tradition is necessarily a dynamic process, that the past enriches the present, but does not restrict it. I want a literature that can learn as much from pop culture as from serious culture. A poetry that seeks the pleasure and emotionality of the popular arts without losing the precision, intensity, and depth that characterize high art. I want a literature that would try to address an audience distinguished for its intelligence and imagination rather than its professional credentials. What I want is a poetry that would risk speaking to the fullness of our humanity, to our emotions as well as to our intellect, to our memories as well as intuitions, to our imagination as well as our senses. (Ahrens 30)

10. POET, CRITIC, VISIONARY, WESTERNER

As a poet, Gioia is still building his oeuvre. However, with three published volumes of original poetry, four of translation, and the libretto for Nosferatu, he has already demonstrated mastery in both traditional and experimental forms, as well as in free verse. Though most of his poems are brief lyrics, his longer poem, “Counting the Children,” ranks as one of the masterpieces of the New Narrative movement. Gioia’s versatility extends to his subject
matter. His poetry concerns itself with both popular and high culture, the past and the present, the personal and the public, the east coast and the west.

While his early achievements augur well for the future, Gioia—now in his early fifties—is very much in mid-career. His importance as both poet and critic is, however, already firmly established. In an age when poets and critics seem to be speaking different languages, Gioia is unique in his efforts to bridge the gap between these two worlds. Written for an audience of educated non-specialists, his essays and reviews hearken back to the age of poet-critics like Randall Jarrell, when practicing artists believed they could serve as cultural commentators. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Gioia has willingly grappled with big issues, including the shape American poetry will take in the twenty-first century and the role of the poet in our society.

Gioia’s commitment to questioning the literary status quo is part of what makes him an identifiably western writer and thinker. Although he lived in New York for many years and published in the best journals, he maintained an outsider’s perspective and continued to challenge the east-coast poetry establishment. It is particularly western of Gioia that he seeks to redefine the very notion of what it means to be a California poet. “A California poet almost inevitably feels the competing claims of language and experience,” he writes. “English is my tongue. [. . .] The classics of English—Shakespeare, Milton, Pope and Keats—are my classics. The myths and images of its literature are native to my imagination. And yet this rich literary past often stands at one remove from the experiential reality of the West” (“On Being” 74). For Gioia, a California poet must seek to reconcile the realities of western life and landscape with the traditions of English literature.

In seeking to redefine what it means to be both a California poet and an American poet, Gioia has had a measurable impact on
contemporary letters. His influence has been increasingly strong within the academy, where the goals of Expansive Poetry were at first unpopular but have recently gained significant ground. Within the last decade, mainstream poetry journals (many of which have academic ties) have begun publishing formal poems on a regular basis. Creative writing instructors have become more likely to teach prosody, and find their students eager to learn to write in rhyme and regular meters. Enrollment at the West Chester poetry conference on formal and narrative poetry has doubled since Gioia helped launch it in 1995. The resurgence of formal verse stems from a widespread hunger for traditional form and narrative among those who love poetry. In seeing and articulating this cultural desire, and in his crusade to ensure poetry's survival in the electronic age, Gioia has proven himself a visionary.
Selected Bibliography

WORKS BY DANA GIOIA

Poetry Books and Chapbooks

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**FURTHER READING ON GIOIA AND THE NEW FORMALISM**


About the Author

APRIL LINDNER teaches creative writing at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia. Her poetry collection, Skin, received the 2002 Walt McDonald First Book Prize from Texas Tech University Press. Her poems have appeared in The Paris Review, Crazyhorse, Prairie Schooner, The Formalist, and many other magazines, as well as on Garrison Keillor's syndicated radio show The Writer's Almanac, and in his anthology, Good Poems. She is the author of a second booklet in the Western Writers Series, New Formalist Poets of the American West, and lives in Havertown, Pennsylvania.

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