

EDITORS' CHOICES

Lawrence Bridges. *Horses on Drums*.
Los Angeles, CA: Red Hen Press, 2006.

You are already familiar with the cultural impact of the work of Lawrence Bridges. Even if you haven't yet read his debut collection of poems, *Horses on Drums*, Bridges has likely already trespassed your psychic property.

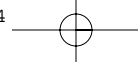
Bridges is one of America's premier ad-makers; he is considered the primary architect of the so-called "anti-commercial"—those stark television advertisements, often grainy and employing hand-held cameras, that brought an air of realism to the wholly unreal realm of "the pitch." Bridges, in fact, is one reason the advertising world now views editing as an essential part of its process.

But it is his debut poetry collection that allows us to consider his unique view of the world.

It might be useful to consider Bridges one of a growing number of poets sometimes called Dissociative Poets. The term seems coined by—if not, at least illuminated by—poet Tony Hoagland. His essay "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," found in his *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2006), expounds the term and examines both positive and negative implications of the development of this trend in poetic style.

Hoagland examines poems that utilize the "lyric-associative fragment," forego straight-forward situation or story, and eschew logical syntactical development, suggesting that our visual culture makes the crafting of traditional and linear narrative a difficult and boring task. Bridges employs these tactics in offering the often dream-like psychic landscapes and distorted sense of time of the characters in his poems. The speaker of the fourth section of "Sweeping the Brane" reminds us that "poets play time from both ends." In "The Butterfly Circus" the poem's situation is explained thusly: "A day was starting under a day that was / Ending. I work backward."

The speaker of "Round Trip" informs us that "Art is quaint / And meaningless in the world of change"; the meaninglessness examined in



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Bridges's work is not an absence of possible meaning or significance, but an awful, disturbing, yet amusing pith of meaning gone awry, an askew, oddball logic and sense that is both quotidian and poignant.

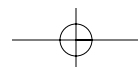
The speaker of "Threaten to be Arbitrary," itself a poem perhaps intended to assist us in our reading of the collection, addresses the reader directly, saying, "Any word you say is the most important / word in your world: bi-valve. It works." The speaker of "What I Say When You Ask Me What I Do" admits "I spend my idle hours in exercise, describing: / In audible and tripping pattern, the already abstract."

It is not, however, that Bridges finds meaning only in the well-turned phrase; the interactions and experiences of his speakers and characters in the contemporary world compel and resonate. In Bridges's urban and suburban landscapes, in a daughter dropping a remote control into a glass of soda, in a baby monitor catching signals from nearby houses, in poems of travel, in poems about specific locales, in "nifty / I max shot[s]" from airplanes, and in metapoems—insight and poignancy exist.

And while absurdists, surrealists, and all manner of avante garde writers of the past have poetically engaged voice and story in similarly discordant ways, Bridges eludes the shackles of clear-cut meaning in a wholly original manner, offering oddly spliced-together vignettes, images, aphorisms, and voices. Consider an "off-course blimp advertising / Movies swept into power lines," "A pomegranate / Seed with fifty ivory elephants inside," and "children [who] sleep / In raincoats, while the adults eat the swimming rabbits." "I don't know about you," says one speaker, "but I'm seeing ridiculous / But lovable characters saying these things."

What stories do arise from Bridges's fragmented telling are often dream-like, mesmerizing, full of self-sustaining 'one-liners,' and interestingly off-kilter. Bridges's poems do what Hoagland says "quintessential Poem[s] of Our Moment" do—refuse to "commit themselves to the sweaty enclosures of subject matter." Sometimes, the poems are about merely the psychic moment. In many poems, the only detectable 'situation' is that of a speaker in contemplation.

While Language Poetry may be born of some of the same fodder that



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propels Bridges—what Hoagland says is a “refusal to cooperate with conventions of sense-making” and a “refusal to conform to a grammar of experience”—his poems aren’t merely playful, obstinate or swankly perspicacious. Although one of Bridges’s speakers reminds us that “Language is a trampoline,” these poems examine the self in a manner that is realistic and to-the-point—and frightfully so, given the oddity of phrasing such as “Perhaps the mind / Has migrated in it’s [sic] own medium / To sit at the surface . . .” (from “Asleep on the Pacific”) or “My teeth are my theme. / The body is to poetry as the eye is to breath” (from a section of “Sweeping the Brane”). The speaker of the first section of “Sweeping the Brane” may speak on behalf of the poet, saying “I can’t say that poetry is a foreign thing, / Though I live in it like a circus kid.”

Hoagland’s ultimate warning is that dissociative poems risk triviality. Luckily, *Horses on Drums* leaves its reader with the feeling that one must examine what might at first seem arbitrary or pointless and that the out-of-control world around us carries more meaning than might first meet the eye. As the speaker of “Atomic Body” says, “Everything is urgent.”

Paul-Victor Winters