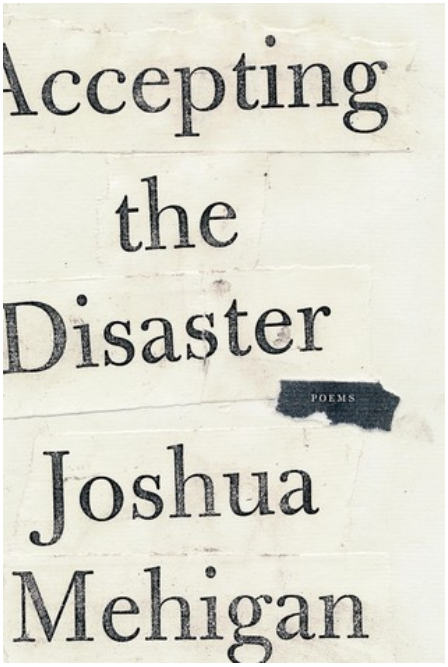

Accepting the Disaster: Poems

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Accepting the Disaster: Poems Joshua Mehigan
One of *The New York Times*' 10 Favorite Poetry Books of 2014

An astonishing new collection from one of our finest emerging poets

A shark's tooth, the shape-shifting cloud drifting from a smokestack, the smoke detectors that hang, ominous but disregarded, overhead—very little escapes the watchful eye of Joshua Mehigan. The poems in *Accepting the Disaster* range from lyric miniatures like "The Crossroads," a six-line sketch of an accident scene, to "The Orange Bottle," an expansive narrative page-turner whose main character suffers a psychotic episode after quitting medication. Mehigan blends the naturalistic milieu of such great chroniclers of American life as Stephen Crane and Studs Terkel with the cinematic menace and wonder of Fritz Lang. Balanced by the music of his verse, this unusual combination brings an eerie resonance to the real lives and institutions it evokes.
These poems capture with equal tact the sinister quiet of a deserted Main Street, the tragic grandiosity of Michael Jackson, the loneliness of a self-loathing professor, the din of a cement factory, and the saving grandeur of the natural world. This much-anticipated second collection is the work of a nearly unrivaled craftsman, whose first book was called by *Poetry* "a work of some poise and finish, by turns delicate and robust."

Accepting the Disaster: Poems Details

Date	:	Published July 1st 2014 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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From Reader Review Accepting the Disaster: Poems for online ebook

Juliana Gray says

This book just fucking rocks. That may seem like an odd sentence to describe a collection of formalist (yes, rhymed and metered) poetry, but it's true. Don't believe me? Google Mehigan's poem "The Orange Bottle," available from the POETRY Magazine site. I'll wait here while you read it.

Finished? Did it blow the top of your damn head off? Yeah it did.

Y'all go get this book. It's terrific.

Monica says

Amazing gripping verse. I admire Josh for his abilities with meter & rhyme. He is a master at both of those elements of poetry. This work shines a light on the power form can have on the reading and rendering of poetry. The form aside (not really because form drives function and content) the overall work is gut-wretchingly intense. There is a sadness that hangs on nearly every page. There is also humor, at times, and there are observations and wonderings that are haunting well after you've read them. The title poem is a whammy knockout punch of a poem & I, simply put, adore it.

Joel Zartman says

It seems to me the fundamental problem for any poet is the problem of poetic diction. Why do I think so?

1 - poetic diction has always been the problem. Not just for Wordsworth. It was for Eliot and it has been since Eliot. It was for Chaucer who broke away from the old poetic diction. It is what makes Elizabethans Elizabethans, what is the whole point of Milton. W.H. Auden can write formal verse and not sound like other ages because he has solved for himself the problem of poetic diction.

2 - because no poet speaks for himself, but for a people. Language is common property, and how we speak has to do not only with ourselves, but when we live. Because it is our common property we can fight to preserve things, and should, but we should also realize it is common property. These days writers call it voice, but it is what used to be called style. It is yours, but it is also common.

3 - and poets are the ones who understand how things are said, and renew the language, not by turning it back, but by speaking in the diction of our time, finding its possibilities, pouring into life the vital imagination of words and the language's potential under present circumstances. Like any medium, you have to work with it. You can't do with marble what you do with clay. The poet's medium is the language of his time.

That is not easy. I think one of the reasons so many resort to free verse is that it seems more authentic. If you try to do formal verse you come face to face with the real problem. There is a discipline beneath the

discipline. There is something you have to hear that is the music wrung out of living expression and is not added by artifice, but only enhanced. It is felt that simply using free verse solves the problem of poetic diction, but it does not. The problem is not too much discipline, but too little, because good free verse has its principles and I think depends for its vitality on the memory of formal verse. Formal verse brings you hard up against the problem because all the devices have to be mastered, and that's how what you say is scrutinized. The devices will amplify your right choices about language or they will show up your shortcomings. Free verse is more muted about both, and that's why I think you can get away with it longer. The devices of poetry can't be brilliantly deployed unless you understand the medium you're using them in.

When Joshua Mehigan uses formal verse, you understand that the point of a rhyme is a device by which you ring meaning from what you say. There are many things you can do with rhyme, but you have to do something with it other than just stick it onto your poem. And you notice it at this point because you know if he doesn't use free verse everything will be questioned, and so each rhyme, each formal structure, everything must have a reason. But that is how good poetry has always been. In other ages perhaps looser use has been tolerated because nobody was suspicious (the way people are now about free verse), but good poetry though not flawless, always approximates a flawless ideal.

People now are going to read formal verse with suspicion. But that's how formal verse has to be written, and that's advantageous, and Joshua Mehigan surely knows it. Every device has to serve a purpose. And then after you understand the devices, the rhythms, the uses of rhyme, you still have to say it in ways that are genuine, how we speak, and not simply by cutting out thee's and thou's.

And that is what gives you the timeless, good product. You have to have at least that. Read Joshua Mehigan, watch how he speaks and what he does with his formal verse. He has been working nine years on this last book, and the effort is worth perusing.

I don't agree with his beliefs, but you'd have to be a philistine not to enjoy his poetry. You don't have to take my word for it either: Adam Kirsch reviews the second book http://www.newrepublic.com/article/11... and Jeremy Telman reveiws the first http://www.valpo.edu/vpr/telmanreview....

Erin says

Wish I had liked this more, but it just didn't connect with me. Every once in a while a line or poem would strike me, or open up a bit, but too often the rhyming felt juvenile and the meaning surface-level. Love the central conceit of the book though-- disasters and decay and death and endings.

Zach Gray says

I don't read much poetry so I don't know how to rate Accepting the Disaster. I read it aloud to my 3-week-old daughter, which was a wonderful experience despite the dark nature of the collection. The drawback was that I don't comprehend as much when I read out loud, so only the longer, less subtle poems affected me. Those few, especially The Orange Bottle, were quite affecting indeed.

Mark Ballinger says

Not every piece in this collection was my favorite, but I'm going to go ahead and 5-star this book. The last two poems, "Accepting the Disaster" and "Shark's Tooth" were each in their own way special.

The most surprising thing in reading this was finding myself alternately appreciating and then being annoyed by the rhymes and rhythms. This writer doesn't cling to free verse, but played with words and sounds much more than I see in poetry in general. He also pulled off some effective images of ordinary life intercut with, what, dread maybe? But that's not quite it.

John says

Spare and haunting poems -- many about the everyday, e.g., payphones, smokestacks, a crossroads. He gives the reader enough to imagine and build the rest.

Naomi says

A fine collection of poems that ponder life's purpose and meaning, a poetry of encounter.

Gordon Hilgers says

If there is one thing Joshua Mehigan does particularly well, it's his insanely-competent ability to write rhyming poetry that read as naturally as free verse.

I was drawn to Mehigan's "Accepting the Disaster" by a vapidly breathless review of the book in The New Republic and bought it immediately. However, mainly because I value starkly vivid and unexpected imagery more than anything else in poetry, I was disappointed by the natural ordinariness of the poems. There are exceptions here, but mainly these poems are far too gray for my tastes. That is a personal opinion because doubtless Mehigan is an accomplished poet who deserves recognition. I'm not that big a fan of the New Formalism movement in poetry, and tend to be attracted to the kind of surrealism found in poetry by, say, Dean Young.

But if readers enjoy rhyming poetry, this is a "don't miss it" collection.

C.E. G says

I wanted to check out more of Joshua Mehigan after reading The Fair in Poetry and seeing that he won the magazine's Levinson prize. And while I find his poems smart, it turns out I don't find them particularly interesting, which is purely a thing of taste.

My favorites: The Sponge, The Bowl, At Home, and The Orange Bottle.

Daniel Klawitter says

The poems in this book are not a disaster by a long shot, even though I ultimately did not find this collection as lyrically charming overall as Mehigan's first book, The Optimist.

The centerpiece is the 17-page poem "The Orange Bottle", about a schizophrenic who stops taking his medicine. It is an impressive and extended narrative work using rhyme and lyrically precise rhythm to drive itself forward without flagging. Mehigan often makes this kind of thing look easy when it isn't, but he is such a skilled craftsman that you don't always realize at first how much cleverness it takes to pull off.

Nicolaus Stengl says

Joshua Mehigan’s second collection of poetry, Accepting the Disaster, is an individual collection of work that makes use of traditional poetic forms and meter such as; sonnets, iambic pentameter, ballad, and triolet. This use of traditional poetic forms allows Mehigan to uncover a dark postindustrial world with precision, while having a sympathetic human voice who speaks to the reader. Mehigan’s work depicts a world we all know, a world of death, pollution, mental illness, and sadness. Accepting the Disaster is a collection of poetry that uncloaks a world that we could observe, though often choose to ignore.
Accepting the Disaster’s overarching theme is simple and is indicated in the title. Mehigan accepts the disaster or in other words he accepts the world for what it is. His attentiveness and awareness of the world allows him to depict a world that some humans never experience – a world of awareness. This awareness can be seen in the opening poem “Here.” Mehigan opens with “Nothing here has changed.” We then enter the aware mind of Mehigan with “ This is all right. This is their hope. And yet,/ though what you see is never what you get,/ it does feel somehow changed from what it was.” Mehigan’s awareness catches minute changes in his surrounding, which the town’s inhabitants are unaware of. “Here” then ends with the tautology “Nothing here ever changes, till it does.” In the poem “Here” Mehigan uses a subtle rhyme scheme, while illustrating how a town’s residents are oblivious to diminutive alterations and continue to live their lives unaware of the changes until it is pointed out to them. “Here” exemplifies Mehigan’s strength of awareness of his world, while some are unconscious of it.
Mehigan uses his observational skills to illustrate what he sees as disasters; being things and events in our world that we so often ignore, such as the environment. “The Smokestack” is a poem on pollution in an industrial landscape. In the poem all “The busy residents/ tended to ignore it,/ though no one alive remembered/ a time before it” it being the smokestack. Mehigan is commenting on the fact that the “busy residents” ignore “the smokestack” because it is a fundamental part of their industrial town. For “the smokestack” has always been part of their life -- the residents cannot even remember “a time before it.” However, Mehigan is aware of the smokestack and observes that:
On cool summer evenings,
it billowed like azure silk.
On cold winter mornings,
it spread like spilled milk.
Mehigan’s awareness allows the reader to visualize how the smoke emitted from the smokestack could look

beautiful “like azure silk.” However, Mehigan also shows the reader how the smoke billowing from the smokestack can also pollute the town, which is ironic because what is destroying the town’s environment is what the town’s residents lives off. The metaphor of the “spilled milk” elaborates this, for milk is what infants gain nutrition off of and spilled milk is a waste of what could be lived off of. Mehigan is able to use juxtaposition, rhyme, simile, and metaphor in one stanza while also making observations on an industrial landscape and how a town ignores the pollution that it emitting.
Mehigan is not only aware of changes in towns or the environment, but also aware of society and how some individuals are ignored as people or of their status of personhood. This unawareness is a disaster of humanity and human beings collectively flourishing. This disregard for some humans can be seen in the sixteen page narrative ballad “The Orange Bottle.” The poem details the psychotic breakdown of a man who stops taking his medication. The man’s medication then begins to speak to him saying, “’ Don’t take me!’ cried the Clozapine./ ‘Don’t take me!’ cried the pill.”’ Then the poem’s main character, through unfortunate events, ends up in a psychiatric ward. It is here where the man is treated not as a person, but rather as an animal and is restrained to a bed against his will. Mehigan is able to describe this feeling of being ignored as a human with the stanza:
and he fought, and the straps cut his shoulders,
and he gnawed at his lip, and it bled,
and he held his bladder for three long hours,
then shivered and pissed his bed.

Mehigan does not only show the inhumanness, but he also makes you feel it. This particular stanza stood up due to its cruelty, yet emotion provoking lines that make you feel as if you are the one restrained to the bed gnawing at your lip, while holding your bladder. “The Orange Bottle” follows the traditional ballad form, which assists with the recount of the tragic events that expire in the poem. Mehigan is able to use not only awareness, but also a traditional poetic form as a tool to depict this disaster of humanity.
Mehigan’s acute awareness of the surroundings allows him to have the insight similarly to that of a seer, which he then is able to describe in his lucid poems. In the poem “Sad Stories” Mehigan reflects on the self-destructive life of Michael Jackson. The poem was written in 2006, when Michael Jackson was still alive (Jackson died in 2009). Starting with the somber line “No one is special. We grow old. We die.” Mehigan then connects Jackson’s self-destructive life to that of Caligula “a prince, / extravagant like you, like you eccentric.” “Sad Stories” exemplifies Mehigan’s skill as an observer who saw Caligula and Jackson on the same path of ignorance and self-destruction. Mehigan ends with the lines “our life, this passing unendurable fever / a world of pain, a glint of joy, is done,” and “ The following day, his own guard murdered him.” Mehigan wrote “Sad Stories” three years before Jackson’s death and was, in a way, able to predict the death of Jackson by someone who was supposedly protecting him (Jackson’s personal doctor) by connecting Jackson and Caligula. This prophecy is an example of how valuable awareness is in the world and that it can be used to foreshadow events to come in our lives, which could be an asset to have in life.
Mehigan’s use of the English lexicon and traditional poetic forms is artistically simple, yet elegant and detailed. His observations are like those of a scientist, but rather than being cold and aloof Mehigan uses his unpretentious and contemporary speech, which brings his observations to life. Mehigan is attentive and aware of his surrounding, while also being able to use traditional poetic forms and contemporary language. Joshua Mehigan’s acute awareness enables the reader to be guided through a novel world and allows for the reader to accept the disaster just as Mehigan has in “Accepting the Disaster.”

Joel Van Valin says

Joshua Mehigan is one of the young, avante garde writer who seems to be turning the tide in American

poetry toward a new, more architectual style. Don't expect to find any incidental, free verse pablum in the style of Robert Bly, Bukowski or Mary Oliver in Accepting the Disaster. Nor is there a great deal of the solipsistic John Berryman/John Ashbery "I'm a genius so everything I toss off after drinking a bottle at midnight is brilliant, even if you don't understand a fecking word" kind of obfuscation in Mehigan's work. Everything here is thoughtfully crafted, often employing meter or rhyme, as in the long ballad "The Orange Bottle", which has something of Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" in it, even if it does sound more like Dr. Seuss.

His best poems are playful and unexpected, brushing a coating of brilliance over ordinary objects and making them glisten with wordplay. Take "Fire Safety" for example, a poem that simply notices all of the fire safety equipment lying about in the regular world:

Aluminum tank
indifferent in its place

behind a glass door
in the passageway,

like a tea urn
in a museum case

Writing in this style is a bit like tight-rope walking, with any misstep in word, meter or rhyme painfully obvious to the reader. And these poems often do trip up, or else give up and slowly back down the ladder; Mehigan, however inventive, doesn't have the lyrical subconscious of a Frost or Millay or Byron. But perhaps, like the title of his book, Mehigan is accepting the disaster, and goes out there and tries writing Great Verse anyway - and for this I give him a standing ovation.

Martin Ott says

Accepting the Disaster is a revelation. It combines rhyming poetry with blue collar roots. It made me maudlin about my small hometown and painted a unique picture of America in transition. Highly recommended.

Jenna says

Accepting the Disaster, Joshua Mehigan's second collection of poems, hit bookstore shelves earlier this week, a solid decade after the publication of his quietly accomplished 2004 debut (*The Optimist*). In the interval, new poems and essays by Mehigan have frequently enlivened the pages of *Poetry Magazine*, giving hints as to what this long-awaited second collection might contain. Recent magazine publications like the 2011 tour-de-force essay "I Thought You Were a Poet," an intimate and often-hilarious exploration of the relationships between poetry and mental illness, filled readers with high expectations that Mehigan's second book would break new ground by embracing a franker approach to mental illness and other taboo topics.

It would be hard for any book to live up to such high expectations. Perhaps this is why so many poets

succumb to the cringe-inducing mistake of letting no more than one or two years elapse between the publication of their first book and their second. Mehigan, at least, had the wisdom not to release *Accepting the Disaster* into the world until it was full-fledged. The result is a very fine 76-page book that feels completely finished, mature, apotheotic.

In my Goodreads review of *The Optimist* last year, I wrote: "Mehigan wields iambic pentameter with the effortless dexterity of a grandmother knitting in the darkness of a movie theater." I am so proud of having come up with that simile that I'll say it again here. Mehigan's formal mastery is simply breathtaking. His sonnets are so perfectly executed that you hardly notice they are sonnets. His triolets ("The Crossroads," "Cold Turkey") are virtually the only truly successful triolets I have ever seen. Even as he excels at writing eight-line poems, he succeeds equally well at longer forms: the two most brilliant and original poems in this collection are the two longest ones, the title poem (a wide-ranging satirical poem that could be read as a damning indictment of our society's slowness at accepting the reality of climate change) and "The Orange Bottle" (sadly the only poem in this collection that directly addresses the topic of mental illness, but a masterpiece at that).

Mehigan is a man of many diverse interests: this collection contains elegies to both Michael Jackson and Janis Joplin, for Christ's sake. Still, most of the poems in the book are concerned with small-town American life, the humanity beneath its veneer of banality, the menace behind its facade of passive benignity (If only one poem in this book achieves immortality, I predict it will be the chilling "Down in the Valley", an obliquely told crime story as subtly written as something by Li Po). Mehigan doesn't prettify or romanticize his subjects: his language is stubbornly plain, his metaphors almost clinical in their precision: "the western wall of one far building/turned by the setting sun the color of Mars." The wall was *red*, made by one celestial body to take on the color of another celestial body: the metaphor tells us not an ounce more, but also not an ounce less. Mehigan delights in understatement; he revels in self-deprecating verbal backtracking. One of his favorite verbal tricks is the tautology, the statement that seems obvious at first glance but reveals deeper layers of meaning upon rereading: "Nothing here ever changes, till it does"; "You might not know it unless you knew"; "A searchlight scanned the heavens and found the heavens." Mehigan has turned the tautology into an art form.

In the end, *Accepting the Disaster* is like a seismograph. Seismographs are not judged by how good they are at detecting large earthquakes; even a plate wobbling on a shelf is able to do that. Instead, seismographs are judged by how adept they are documenting very small tectonic quivers, earthquakes so minute that people don't even realize they are happening. This book is an exquisitely sensitive seismograph of the human condition.
