

# Midlife Regret

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## *INTERROGATIONS AT NOON*

Dana Gioia

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James Merrill once remarked that preserving “the lyric impulse during the middle years is no easy matter.” Dana Gioia’s recently published third book of poetry, *Interrogations at Noon*, embodies and overcomes this struggle both in its gestation and in its many accomplished lyric poems. Gioia brought out his second book in 1991, shortly after turning 40; however, although his debut volume, *Daily Horoscope* (1986), had sparked impassioned reviews nearly everywhere—both laudatory and hostile—*The Gods of Winter* generated little critical response. A decade later, Gioia has remained productive, his credits including the controversial book of essays, *Can Poetry Matter?* (1992), as well as numerous textbooks, translations, articles, and anthologies. Nevertheless, not until passing his 50th birthday has Gioia the poet returned to *Books in Print*: at last, he marks the milestone with *Interrogations*, a strong and varied collection of 37 well-crafted and often moving poems. Fittingly, in a volume examining the noon of life, many of the best works are lyrics about midlife regret.

Gioia sounds the note of regret early and often. Three pages into the book the title poem presents a double, “the better man I might have been,/ Who chronicles the life I’ve never led” and who “views his wayward brother with regret.” Moreover, the last of the book’s five sections comprises several elegiac love lyrics. An especially powerful lyric of loss is “My Dead Lover,” whose blank-verse quatrains mourn a woman whose “body was the first I ever knew/ Better than my own,” but who now is “nothing,/ Not even

ashes.” Thus, the speaker cannot honor her grave with “a wreath of old regrets”; instead, he offers “a hand of earth” to the wind, ultimately not for her but for himself. While she is “free of earth,” he knows “[o]ur rituals are never for the dead.”

## *Gioia deserves our praise for keeping the lyric impulse alive and well.*

The motif of regret further extends to both merely anticipated lovers and long-married spouses. The love lost in “Summer Storm” is less substantial than in “My Dead Lover,” never having really lived at all, except in the speaker’s mind. But twenty years after a chance and brief meeting at a wedding reception, he wonders about “that evening’s memory/ Return[ing] with this night’s storm,” and he finally confronts the seeming arbitrariness of any of life’s plots:

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

Then, Gioia closes the poem with an adroit offbeat rhyme that undercuts the senseless but unavoidable pining of memory “[f]or places it never went./ As if life would be happier/ Just by being different.” Juxtaposed to these poems of regret for old loves are the lyrics of domestic unease. “Spider in the Corner,” for instance, ends expressively with tentative resolve and internal rhymes, which avert the consummation of a rhymed pentameter couplet through not one but two sets of sounds: “But we will stay—until the *weather clears*,/ the endless rain that keeps us *here together*” (my emphasis).

The regrets of these poems escape self-pity, partly due to their disciplined form (even the free-verse poems are sculpted into stanzas), and partly due to the interspersed poems of genuine hope. After the death of his first son in 1987, Gioia says his view of poetry changed: “Writing took on a spiritual urgency I had never experienced before—

at least in so sustained and emphatic a way.” This spiritual sense informs the poems that measure the past and its losses by employing a lens of perception that leads to renewed vision and hence a modicum of hope, or at least the solace of acceptance. “New Year’s” trains the eye to the future, “what we want”: “A calendar with every day uncrossed./ A field of snow without a single footprint.” In “Entrance,” the way forward from an irretrievable past and a deadened present is to recognize our “eyes...have forgotten how to see/ From viewing things already too well-known.” Similar in theme is the brilliant poem, “The Voyeur,” which, with Seamus Heaney’s “The Skunk,” is one of the best marriage poems we have. Here Gioia imagines a husband seeing himself “suspended in the branches by the window,/ entering this strange bedroom with his eyes” and “watching” his wife “undress.” While the husband “hears a woman singing in the shower,” “[t]he branches shake their dry leaves like alarms.” This pentameter line ends the wry poem perfectly, both through the humorous yet resonant simile and through the rhythmic intensity of its bunched stresses (in “dry leaves like”).

But the most memorable and emotionally satisfying poems are “The Lost Garden” and “Words.” “The Lost Garden,” the penultimate work, opens its blank-verse, five-line stanzas with adult resignation, the realization that even if “those gardens” of the past could be seen again, “our summer” would be gone. “The trick,” Gioia discovers, “is making memory a blessing.” This means, he beautifully writes, “wanting nothing more than what



has been” and knowing “the past is forever lost, yet seeing/ Behind the wall a garden still in blossom.” Thus, Gioia deftly evokes something of the spirit of Milton’s closing lines in *Paradise Lost* about the fortunate fall. Even more impressive is the first poem we read in *Interrogations at Noon*. “Words” lays bare the essential human need that poetry fulfills: The poet names our world. Although “[t]he world does not need words” as “[i]t articulates itself/ in sunlight, leaves, and shadow,” the poet names the world because we need “to know and remember.” So while our human condition enchains us to inevitable regret, “Words” movingly enacts in free verse a spiritual resolution that preserves our link to the greater world and our memory of it.

This multifaceted theme of facing both loss and the future in midlife lends depth to the smooth surfaces of these lyric poems. But the book sounds other notable motives too: engaging satirical light verse in “The Archbishop” and “At the Waterfront Café”; three “songs” from his just-published libretto to composer Alva Henderson’s gothic opera *Nosferatu* (2001); and two lively retellings in blank verse of classical mythology, “Descent to the Underworld” and “Juno Plots Her Revenge.” To be sure, this solid book includes a couple of less effective efforts, too—“Divination,” which is clever but bland, and the eight-line “Accomplice,” whose compactness creates grammatical confusion. Altogether, though, *Interrogations at Noon* is the best book yet by Gioia, a poet in mid-career who deserves our praise for keeping the lyric impulse alive and well.

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