# Against Ponies, Against Airplanes

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**Elegy on Toy Piano**
by Dean Young.
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$12.95 paper.

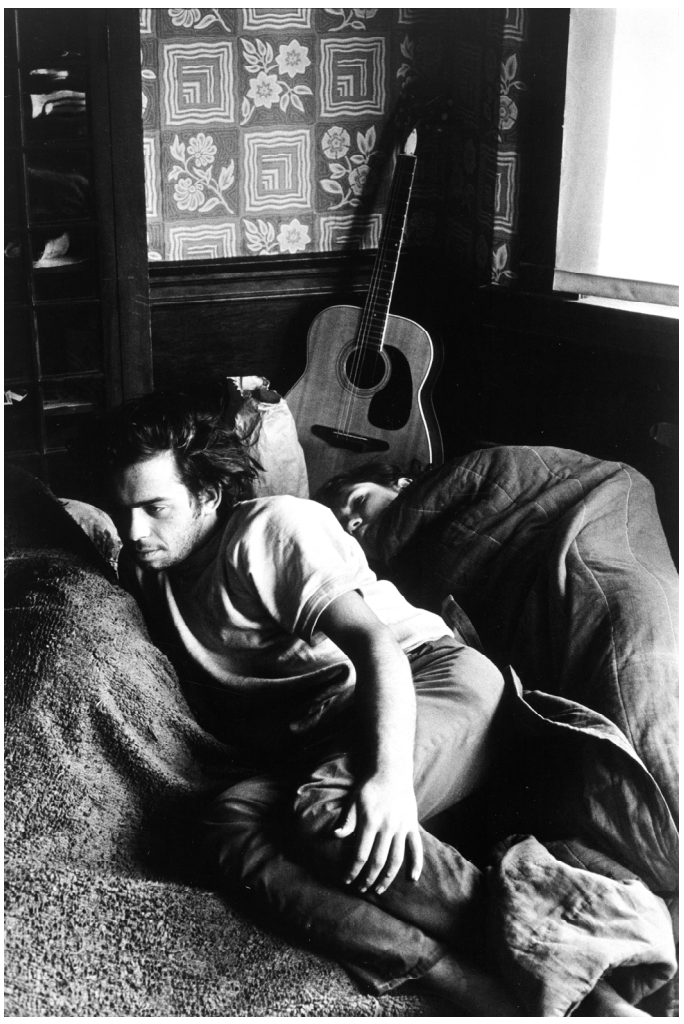
I'D HAZARD a guess that Dean Young isn't always quite sure he's a poet, or ever wanted to be a poet, or frankly has much of an idea what a poet is supposed to do. I don't mean Dean Young the human being, who probably couldn't conceive of being anything other than a poet, and might be ill-equipped to be anything else, at least as I imagine him (and it's hard *not* to imagine him—in a stylish leather jacket, perhaps, and enormous clown shoes). I mean Dean Young the inimitable poetic voice, the narrator who seems bemused to remark that "in the 45th year / of his education, Dean Young falls / into the Amphitheater while attempting / to rappel without a top-rope anchor."

Dean Young—interloper, gadfly, hero—has fallen into the Amphitheater, and we are all the better for it. Dean Young's work, I've concluded, will delight only two kinds of people: those who generally read poetry and those who generally don't. The former will find a promising revitalization project and unalloyed pleasure. The latter will find, to their unalloyed pleasure, that perhaps poetry isn't how they imagined it.

In Dean Young's egalitarian economy of irritants, in which the difficulties of capital-E Existence are no more fraught than issues of plain old life, there's not much room for the marshy ponderousness that characterizes so much self-important verse. "Will we never see our dead friends again? / A motorcycle roars on the terrible screw / of the parking structure, lava / heaves itself into the frigid strait." In this typical progression, from the book's opening poem, a painful and blunt question is set against an unremarkable cross-section of today's noxious strip-mall geometry, and then both are obviated by a huge and stunning geological image. There's a swiftness to all of this, a carefully rigged sense of the haphazard, which characterizes his tone of offhanded deflation.

Sometimes, however, that deflation is more straightforward. In "Little Black Squirrel," he begins, "frozen to the ground / I'd see on my way to work / when you weren't covered with snow. / So now I'm supposed to explode syntax?" Dean Young resents the pressure to make something big out of something small, just as he resents the retreat into an unexplosive couplet of sentimentalism that so often follows in the wake of an extended and pompous metaphor.

In that poem, Dean Young the interloper is angry about these tendencies; for the most part, however, his métier is comic, and approaches this poetic arrogance as one more species of pathetic authoritarianism. In a poem that begs to be read aloud, he declares that "I am an exchequer and this is my retinue. / No one knows precisely what I do. / Where to put the excess of speaking voice? / But Professor, there's too much / nitrogen up there for any known life-form / to survive!" Later in that same poem, he deadpans, "I am Walt Whitman but so? / Everyone's Walt Whitman. / Clouds of unlimited portent. / Insert anecdote here." Amidst cinematically anxious sci-fi alarmists and self-styled inheritors of the Lofty Tradition and all those superabundant clouds of unlimited portent, Dean Young publishes anecdotes. They're not so much poems as they are the kinds of postcards we would get if we knew friendly and hilarious geniuses.



Dean Young's adversarial relationship to these haughty pretenders was made explicit in a poem from *Skid*, his last collection, where he imagined these heavy-handed heavyweights as a sort of rival gang. "In the bathroom was a book of poems / by H**** C*** about how sad and exquisite / and made of goopy lace everything was. / I hated those poems. Even a regular burrito, / no guacamole, was more full of life / than those poems yet each time his school / met mine, they won, walking away." These poets, it seems, have won by snottily labeling Dean Young a surrealist poet, and many of the poems in *Elegy on Toy Piano* cultivate a response to this pigeonholing. "Surrealist" is one of those labels that make people uncomfortable, and for good reason: it means you're inventive and probably funny, but it also means you're easy for the grittier realists to write off as inauthentic or dandyish or, worst of all, unserious. But Dean Young sees through the pretenses of blinkered realism, "which is a form of surrealism / on a time-delayed fuse." Relegating him to the lower ranks of the surrealists cheats him of the hard-won poignance of his work. "My agony is no sillier than yours / even if it's riding a tiny unicycle. / All I'm asking for is a fellow monkey / to accompany my original monkey / in his bridal sadness." It's nonsense to claim that emotional resonance only obtains within the corsets of a stuck-up realism. There's a hallucinatory quality to his poetry, but I'd suggest you take a long, hard look at yourself if you can't see the hallucinatory quality of, say, America under the Bush administration or, to borrow Tom Lehrer's famous example, Henry Kissinger's Nobel Peace Prize.

So what becomes central to Dean Young's poems are the stolen moments of clarity in spite of this atmospheric surrealism, the lines where our bromides don't hold up under reflective scrutiny ("Precious moments of life ebbing away. / What a pathetic thing to say. How / did we get on this subject?"), where what we take as timelessly foreboding is revealed to be overgrown superstition (on Daffy Duck's daffiness: "How unlike being a dead pharaoh / which is damned serious business"), where our historical mythologies are lanced with drollity (on World War I: "When a woman smoked, it was like / she was naked so that must have been fun"), where we realize that our confusion is often at the hands of other people's inside jokes ("I can't find the anvil / but then 'Go find the anvil' / turns out to be some kind of joke / at the peach farm").

Which is not to say that surrealist is always a pejorative term. In "Lemon Garlic Duck," Dean Young refers to "the true surrealist state where / the border has dissolved between / the oneiromancer and the pragmatist / as it has for the seahorse." Dean Young as surrealist is part superintendent of dreams and part superintendent of plumbing, and this is nowhere more apparent than in "True/False," a poem so marvelous that if space permitted and copyright law didn't exist I would not only reproduce it here in its entirety but would also give serious thought to tattooing it on my back. The poem consists of a 100-line true-or-false test, of which a representative sample follows:

3. I hear voices.

4. I am good at following orders.

18. Quarks exist only in theory, thank god.

34. There are more colors now than twenty years ago.

36. My wrong answers won't count against me.

41. Some of the Commandments seem extreme.

43. Everyone should study history because the present is too / complicated and no one knows a fucking thing about the future.

56. Glitter should be strewn, never drizzled.

60. Before answering a question, consider who is asking and why.

64. Stay with me and be my love.

67. Tiny transmitters have been put in my back teeth.

74. Zinc.

88. Literacy is higher than ever but reading is at an all-time low.

89. The policeman is there to help you.

98. I am sorry.

100. The results of this test will be kept confidential.

This test poem is a perfect distillation of Dean Young: a surrealist composite of oneiromancer and pragmatist. There's paranoia (#3, #18, #67). There's obeisance (#4, #89). There's the bureaucratic test-giver spitting right in your eye with a big smirk that says I'm lying to you and you're going to believe me anyway (#36, #60, #100). There's pure absurdity and delirious charm (#34, #56, #74). But most of all there are occluded pockets of startling feeling and unvarnished honesty. Some of the Commandments do seem extreme. He's right about studying history and right about literacy. Stay with me and be my love. He *is* sorry.

Dean Young is the architect of an amusement park, but he's also the mescaline-addled raconteur in the truth-teller's booth at that amusement park. He's both dreamscaper and landscaper, spinner of fantastic yarns and unremitting bullshit-detector. He's initiating protests with water guns. He's composing dirges on plastic accordions and elegies on toy pianos.

He begins the collection's title poem with the advice that "You don't need a pony / to connect you to the unseeable / or an airplane to connect you to the sky." Dean Young has use for neither the lustily magical nor the plainly mechanical, the two cartoonish poles of a fake tension. What he offers instead are surrealism's realistic varieties of the functional imagination, a world of poems like seahorses.