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## REVIEW

**Mark Pawlak, *Present/Tense: Poets in the World*. New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2004. 212 pages, Paperback, \$16.00 ISBN: 1931236399**

Reading *Present/Tense: Poets in the World* in ten or twenty years may offer us a truer picture of the bitter political realities of this age than an archive of newspapers. The issues are here – from prisons to racism, from violence to poverty, from gay bashing to the dark side of capitalism – and they're here with poignancy and a great diversity and strength of voices. Not a collection of poems to take readers away to another place, these pages ground readers in the reality of the news, of personal experience, and of community struggle.

The collection, as noted in the title, is a snapshot of the present by U.S. American poets, so, as anticipated, war and 9/11 circle in the imagery of the poems even when their topics reach beyond. The first stanza of Quincy Troupe's "Transcircularities," reads "bombs & bullets & flag-waving guiding the way into madness / drunk on power / [...] / the sad war dead made over into blood-dripping saints, / converted to propaganda-iconography." The poem "I Am New York City 2" by Jayne Cortez begins, "I have been wounded / In the lower Manhattan of my abdomen." She continues to render the dynamic motion of the city through physical excavation and philosophical change, as "flags are flipping and flying / And the censorship is censoring / and the global crusade is crusading."

However, not all poems are tied to our literal wars – a conscious decision on the part of the editor, Mark Pawlak, who describes collecting poems which were "broadly speaking, political in nature." Martín Espada in a poem titled "Thanksgiving" describes the holiday meal bridging the speaker's world with the world of his wife's family. The speaker remembers the holiday of his youth, "turkey with arroz y habichuelas and plátanos, / and countless cousins swaying to bugalú on the record player." At the family home of his wife for this meal, he now realizes that "when I started dating her daughter, Mother called me a half-Black, / but now she spooned candied yams on my plate."

Though many of these poems arrive in a first person voice, they rarely fall into emotional purging or self-consumed interest because of their sense of great compassion and open eyes, saving the poems from self-indulgence. Salvaging grace, hope, and redemption from the newspaper headlines and a bleak streetside view, the poems steer toward nuance, ambiguity, and questioning things which otherwise remain safe. In the last poem of the book, “Walker Evans in Bridgeport” by Bill Zavatsky, the speaker responds to a critique of the Walker Evans photo of four women riding in a parade with a banner, “America, Love It or Leave It.” The difficult truth with which he grapples is that “And yet these are the faces I come from, / with their mouths’ edges twisted down in anger – or in sorrow – like bent machine-shop metal.” “How should we expect their faces to look,” he asks, “even with babies in their arms, even on their day off,” and we remember our own wrestling with recognizing the look of a trigger-happy U.S. defender in our own parents, our mothers.

At its worst, the collection features some poems which reverberate too narrowly from the news headlines and too little from the authentic voice of a witness. When I think of political poetry– the Polish post-WWII poets come to mind – the phenomenon of writing about war and suffering which lives next door to you is different from writing about the news – and that act is immediate and unsafe and moving. Even when they write about an event half the world away, poets can be smart, compassionate, and thoughtful, but the Martín Espada and Sherman Alexie poems will likely be more compelling than those which seem limited to a story as portrayed in the *Times*. Reading widely in political poetry – and even reading this collection in its entirety – will help one discern the difference.

Recommended for most public and academic library collections, the poems from *Present/Tense* are often haunting – sometimes because you will want to look back and re-read, and sometimes because a random image from a poem read only once will lock hold and not let go.