

Making and Breaking Worlds: A Review of Brice Maiurro's Hero Victim Villain

written by Guest Contributor | June 27, 2019



Hero Victim Villain by Brice Maiurro
[Stubborn Mule Press](#), June 2019

In his second collection of poetry *Hero Victim Villain*, Maiurro spills his mind onto the page with fervent energy, chasing after each notion through a series of rabbit holes as though it may never run its course. In his characteristic narrative prose style, he brings together a seemingly paradoxical combination of grim confessionalism and romantic idealism while inhabiting a surrealist world—a recognizable-yet-dreamlike corner booth of Denver, Colorado; where canaries swallow fire and poets swallow cities; and where cities are moving, breathing characters comprised of the people who reside in them. For example, in the poem “Boulder,” he describes the nearby city in a list of anthropomorphic paradoxes: “Boulder meditates in downward dog / passed out in the sundown saloon [...] Boulder went to a silent retreat / and wants to talk to you about how life changing it was [...] Boulder is getting a tarot reading from Charles Schwab.”

Maiurro occupies a poetic multiverse in which every chance encounter diverges into a web of possibilities to be imagined and played out in a series. He turns the familiar joke line “a man walks into a bar” into a recursive series of fictional vignettes with ordinary patrons, telepaths, bears, magical genies, intelligent apes, disembodied egos, bartenders with mystical warnings, and a man with a device that remakes the rules of language to startling poetic effect, then he concludes with a psychological metacommentary detailing his own attempts to solve this series of riddles he has created for himself. Similarly, he turns a simple interaction with a waiter in a restaurant into ten possible scenarios, each inflected with

abstract quasi-Buddhist meditations on love, time, joy, death, deceit, perspective, anger, and identity; for example, “the soup isn’t cold, you are too warm for / the soup [...] a sloth doesn’t see itself as slow moving / but rather revels in the joy that the world / is moving so beautifully fast around it.” But rather than preserving this symmetry, Maiurro abandons the waiter refrain altogether to speak with the rain, the ocean, and beyond. In each of these instances, Maiurro demonstrates his commitment to postmodernist destruction of the poem, bending the fictional worlds he creates until they break.

At the same time, he sends bits of reality crashing through the glass of abstraction, leaving shards for the reader to step around and puzzle over—cold pizza from Lil Caesar’s and a KFC drive through, a repurposed Radiohead lyric, a monologue from a customer about a television purchase, and numerous places that can be pinpointed on a map—giving the impression that his poetic worldbuilding might just be reality after all, described precisely the way Maiurro pictures it in his mind. In an encounter on a snowy bench in the poem “Bus Stop Koan,” he describes a man who won’t stop yelling until the author responds to his call: “He sounded as if he was imitating a telephone – ‘Ring ring! Ring ring!’ / ‘Hello?’ I said. / ‘Oh, hello,’ he said smiling, ‘how are you today?’” Even in this believable encounter that could have happened to anyone waiting for public transit, the word “Koan” in the title, which refers to a paradoxical anecdote or riddle used in Zen Buddhism to challenge logic and provoke enlightenment, obscures whether or not this encounter originated in fact or fiction.

This collection also pushes his poetry in intimately personal directions as he finds himself struggling to make sense of his changing values, such as in his second poem to the late Charles Bukowski (the first appeared in Maiurro’s debut collection *Stupid Flowers*) in which his literary hero’s personal flaws have greater consequence. He finds himself navigating hopeful anxieties, heartbreaks, and the cartoon bluebirds of falling in love. In a particularly haunting series of images, he rewinds a broken relationship in Martin Amis-style reverse chronology to watch everything unhappen—plates unbroken and returned to the hand that threw them, tears leaked back into the eyes that cried them, tea stirred in the wrong direction, lights switched off to unbrighten the room, fire blown onto candles until the wax builds up—until their love is made whole again; but he pushes past this conceit, past the point when the relationship ends by never beginning, arriving at what might just as easily be the moment before their first encounter, or the origin of the universe: “in the beginning.”

Through all of this abstraction, metacommentary, and philosophical curiosity, Maiurro remains a poet of the people, never straying into academic or literary pretense. Instead, he speaks onto the page like a punk-themed poetry night microphone for anyone willing to listen. All told, these poems make for an imaginative and readable collection by a storyteller who captivates readers, whether they consider themselves fans of poetry or not.



Tim Becker is a teacher, musician, and poet from Chapel Hill with an MA degree in English from North Carolina State University. He is the author of four collections of poetry and has released three music albums with another forthcoming: *The Plaid Album* (2017), *Galapagos* (2018), *Treeshadows* (2019), and *Moss* (coming soon). He currently lives in Baltimore with his wife Naomi and their two cats.