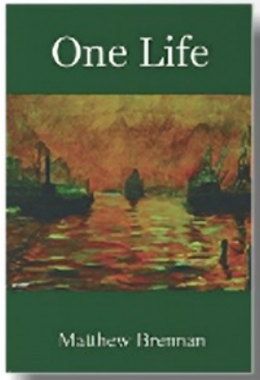
Review: One Life by Matthew Brennan

Book Review by Barry Harris



Title: One Life

Author: Matthew Brennan

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One Life is Matthew Brennan's most recent and fifth collection of poems. Its contents are arranged into five sections: *One Life; Liber Amoris; Still Life; Elegiac;* and *One World*. Brennan introduces us to the first section with an epigraph from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem, *The Eolian Harp*:

> *O! the one Life, with us and abroad*

The Eolian Harp was one of Coleridge's "conversation poems" in which he explored his idea of "One Life" – that humanity is spiritually connected through nature to the divine. It had been decades since I last read Coleridge, so I took the opportunity to rediscover a bit of the Romantic Movement before I ever laid eyes on the first poem in *One Life*.

The first few poems in *One Life* contain lots of light and dark and dreams – sunrises and sunsets and even noontime glare:

> *For even in its dying, bleeding prism,*
> *The sun can splash on any windshield's glass,*
> *Blinding as daybreak in Sahara glares.* *[Noon Glare: 12-14]*

Then, with *Home Movie,* this book begins to turn with a vignette of the poet on his eighth birthday dressed like a pirate and blowing out his eight candles with his mother:

> *She is dark-haired again, blue eyes*
> *blinded by the sun-gun's glare*
> *but shining: her teeth glow white*
> *as crossbones on a pirate's flag*
> *when it meets the morning light.* *[Home Movie: 6-10]*

This poem is the first time we are ushered in to meet Brennan's family through childhood memory. In *Flash Flood* he remembers how his mother felt exposed and vulnerable whenever his father travelled by air on business. The poem recounts a pre-dawn car trip back from the airport with siblings sleeping and dreaming in the back seat when

> *her husband nowhere near, the car broke down*
> *at Dead Man's Curve, Mom at the wheel, as rain*
> *came down at once, flash flooding drapes of darkness*
> *everywhere: All I saw was what's inside.* *[Flash Flood: 17-20]*

I marvel at Brennan's skill at extended metaphor as his Queen Anne house is a well-timbered ship patched and rebuilt after months of labor [*After an Eight-Inch Rainfall, over Labor Day Weekend*] and the branches of Daphne and Apollo – twin ash and poplar trees that survived the ravages of straight-line winds – become a church with arched branches forming a nave as the wind moves through the higher limbs whose folded hands part allowing light to "... land on each green leaf/And me, the trees translucent as stained glass." [*One Life*: 13-14]. Here his title poem echoes the "One Life" ideas laid out by Coleridge as even the wind in the trees creates a living sacred moment to the poet.

The final poems in the first section expand the focus onto a wider view of history as *Ruins* tells the story of Union troops sacking Columbia, South Carolina in 1865 and *The Tigris River* tells of twin wars: the first stanza set in 1258 when Mongol hordes rage into Baghdad and in 2003 when a coalition army invades Iraq and a mob in Baghdad burns a library down reducing the oldest Qur'an a thousand years old to ash.

As I started the second section, *Liber Amoris,* I discovered the history of William Hazlitt, the English writer, literary critic and painter. I knew the name but little else.

Liber Amoris, or the "book of love," was Hazlitt's anonymously published narrative which was an outgrowth of his sad infatuation with Sarah Walker, a young housemaid at a lodging house. Hazlitt reveals his narrator's infatuation with his fantasy object of affection even while we suspect that others see her as more ordinary.

In Brennan's poem *Hazlitt in Love*, we learn:

> *... Though friends may think*
> *her eyes are slimy like a snake's and others*
> *she's bony like crag-ends of mutton chops,*
> *I'm bit; I've lipped her as she strode my lap* *[Hazlitt in Love: 11-14]*

While in Edinburgh to obtain his divorce, Hazlitt had left Sarah Walker at the lodging house with a gift of his favorite bronze bust of Napoleon

Bonaparte. In Hazlitt Unbound, it all comes apart when Hazlitt discovers her walking with her arm around fellow boarder John Tomkins:

> *... She had played*
> *The double game with both of us together,*
> *Though no serpent ever kissed so sweet.*
> *Feeling like a man thrown off a roof,*
> *I broke the well-wrought bust into tiny bits. [Hazlitt Unbound: 12-16]*

Brennan moves on with more scenes from other volumes of the book of love. In *What the Lamp Lights Up*, he poses a scene where a riverboat pilot on the Sienne spies light coming through a window on the shore. He cannot see any objects within the room, but just then thinks of his wife's thighs through her lingerie. Inside the room is Flaubert, "a writer carving phrases with his pen/who has read the pilot's mind and sees/ a pretty, aging woman, bored with life/ and sick with the sweetness of romanticism." [What the Lamp Lights Up: 16-20]

The middle section, *Still Life*, contains mostly ekphrastic poems derived from artwork and other poems that forge moments of life into quick glimpses of life. *La Cuisine des Beaux Arts* serves up Thanksgiving Dinner as a work of art with the turkey as a canvas and some chive and oil a chef's palette. *Revisiting Vietnam* is a freeze-frame moment when Brennan finds himself in the same retirement community dining room as General William Westmoreland. Brennan, in comfortable knee-long shorts, is asked by the hostess to don a navy blazer and cautioned not get up again or he'll make the general mad.

The *Elegiac* section explores themes of death and heading home. *Dry Farming* presents us with an aging writer passing through the drought of late-term writer's block when his notebook is as "dry as the family farm" but then remembers how "from long ago dry farming grows crops too [Dry Farming: 4, 11].

In *Remains*, Brennan addresses his father, who had lived a decade alone after his wife's death, and had rarely spoken for fifty years about fighting Germans in World War II France until "At seventy, the river/You'd dammed inside since '45 broke through." [*Remains*: 21-22].

In *Afterlife*, an adult Brennan discovers his grandfather's grave and, at an extended family's Christmas dinner, blurts out the good news only to be surprised at how he had opened up an unknown family wound. His grandfather had a history of driving drunk and, after divorce, had driven his own children home.

> You drove them home, too stewed
> to keep the Packard's wheels straight, swerving side
> to side, steering with only knees and elbows,
> peering ahead as if into a blizzard . . .
> Some nights, you'd park across the street and stare
> up at the windows till the lights went out. [Afterlife: 35-38, 46-47]

The final section, *One World*, is a bit of a travelogue, consisting mostly of poems written during or thinking about places Brennan has traveled. On a river cruise down the Rhine passing the Lorelei Rock, Brennan recalls in *Cruising* that Mary Shelley's characters Victor Frankenstein and Henry Clerval had once in literature cruised past the same spot. In *Walking Man*, he writes of walking on a treadmill in front of a second-story window looking at a lanky man who ambles by on the street day after day, his swinging arms keeping pace with his moving feet while his eyes stay fixed on something unseen ahead. Beethoven's Fifth comes through the walking Brennan's earphones and he remembers reading of John Sullivan Dwight, a transcendentalist who walked long miles to Boston from Brook Farm to hear the famous first four notes.

> *But walking man is quiet, even-keeled,*
> *And calm; he takes the measure of the world*
> *In ordered, stoic, meditative steps –*
> *One who has lived through thunderstorms of grief,*
> *Trekking dark passages, and who now seeks*
> *The power underlying solitude. [Walking Man: 26-31]*

Walking Man is not quite the final poem in this section and the book, but it feels like it should be. Near the end of a fascinating mix of poems, Brennan too seems fixed on something unseen ahead and makes you wonder just who is the Walking Man.

Poets will admire Brennan's use of forms, the mathematical beauty of lines and stanzas as well as his subtle use of internal rhyme. Readers may also, as I did, avail themselves with a little bit of research and Google any unfamiliar vocabulary or references to places and people: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Hazlitt. Those who do will gift themselves an even richer experience.

Matthew Brennan teaches at Indiana State University. His most recent book of poems is *One Life* (Lamar University Literary Press, 2016). Earlier books include *The House with the Mansard Roof* (Backwaters Press, 2009) and *The Sea-Crossing of Saint Brendan* (Birch Brook Press, 2008). In 2012 Story Line Press brought out *Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* as part of its monograph series on contemporary poets.

Barry Harris is editor of the *Tipton Poetry Journal* and has published one poetry collection, *Something At The Center*. Barry lives in Brownsburg, Indiana and is retired from Eli Lilly and Company.