

Restless Messengers: Poetry In Review

Empty Mirror

[Charles Borkhuis, *Rearview Mirror*](#)

BlazeVOX, 2022, \$18.00

Review by Burt Kimmelman

A car's rearview mirror shows where it's been and what's coming from behind. If you tilt the mirror toward you, you see yourself in the driver's seat. If you lean forward in back, you see the driver's face—let yourself sink into the rear seat and you see your own eyes. In “Rearview Mirror”—the title poem of Charles Borkhuis' latest collection (2022)—his alter ego is being taken for a ride. He chooses to mention he's “no longer in the driver's seat.” A gungel sits beside him. It's night. The driver's “eyes are captured / in the mirror's intimate embrace” when cars pass. The book's cover sports a grainy still from an old film noir feature, a haunting image of the driver's face (his cheekbones, eyes, hold the road's glow). Borkhuis lifted the image from a TV rerun.

Traffic has stalled. It's “time to face up to the big slow-down / in the rearview mirror,” the alter ego says to himself, and to the eavesdropping reader in this moment of self-reckoning:

you were caught with your pants down
playing hopscotch with the boss' squeeze
now the motor's running in your dreams
you can squeal that wasn't the real you
but they hold the last card
and it's a joker full of holes

All possible perspectives have coalesced into a single percept, a grim epiphany in which time has become an image. Borkhuis's readers look forward to moments like this, when he casts deep thought as patter.

Borkhuis found success in the seventies, winning awards and earning a MFA from San Francisco State. In the eighties, back in New York, he found a home at the Poetry Project within a budding theatre community, getting involved in Language poetry, and running the Segue readings at the Ear Inn. Recently, he won the James Tate International Prize for Poetry and was a finalist for the W.C. Williams Book Award in 2021. He is now resettled in San Diego, where production of his script *Blue Period* (about young Picasso in Paris) was named one of the city's best ten plays by the *Times of San Diego*.

Rearview Mirror is his eleventh poetry collection. His works are rendezvous with the real or what seems to be real but never suffice. He never stops thinking about how we know what we know, and whether that's enough to live. I'm reminded of Pascal's radical skepticism. Borkhuis also recalls other predecessors in the skeptical tradition: poets and playwrights like Breton, Beckett and Oppen, philosophers like Wittgenstein and Derrida, and especially Baudrillard, whose stylized thinking, preoccupied with the phenomenology of appearances, Borkhuis reimagines. He might be creating chronicles, but in them, time is up for grabs.

Like Baudrillard—take his 1995 essay, “The Perfect Crime” (a Borkhuis favorite)—he's captivated by cinema. What complicates matters is their shared understanding of the world's profound asymmetry. Baudrillard recognizes “the material illusion of the world” and how it rises out of the “absence of things from themselves” (“The Perfect Crime,” trans. Chris Turner). Leibniz asks, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Baudrillard retorts, “Today, the real question is: ‘Why is there nothing rather than something?’” (“The Perfect Crime”).

Film noir's sensibility, its characters' struggles, belong to modernism, to “something.” Borkhuis' personae struggle with postmodernism's vicissitudes of cognition, which emanate from the existentialist world of nothingness. This is a world that contains loose ends. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard posits cinema as “blessed [...] with an intense imaginary” that possesses “something of the double, of the

phantasm, of the mirror, of the dream” (trans. Sheila Glaser). The mirror is their ultimate signifier, and what makes the mirror possible is the nothingness underlying it.

Borkhuis goes Baudrillard one better, in conflating film noir, cinema and mirroring. In “No One To Speak Of,” an anonymous “someone [. . .] stares in the mirror / and sees another.” In “Truth Serum” the speaker apologizes for being

[. . .] attached
to a portable wrecking machine
they laughingly call the self.

In lieu of the modernist ego, the best to be hoped for is a

phantom gaze squinting
through truth’s delicate armor
mirror buried in a quark of emotion
with a bow tied around it
special delivery from the void.

The “armor / mirror” rhyme captures a duality Baudrillard may not have recognized: the individual’s resistance to self-knowing and, simultaneously, despair over the missing known that, in turn, evokes the emptiness of narcissistic striving. Baudrillard peddles uncertainty. The younger Borkhuis wrestles with it. For him, alienation is predicated on his struggle to maintain the fiction of individuality in a world shaped by postmodern science and technology, which make individuality unfeasible.

There’s a quiet anguish in Borkhuis’ work. The signature tough guy persona in his poems and plays is a tactile, sharply etched creation. He’s developed this unlikely seeker into a larger-than-life, cosmic wanderer who’s accommodated himself to the unreal-real, nevertheless struggling with it, refusing to compromise. He’s the ultimate antihero, playing out his psychodrama on behalf of us all. The mirror, as image and idea, is

pivotal to his thinking, since it is integral to all cinema. With the advent of film noir, which evolved from German Expressionism's intense play of shadows, its flickering nature has become a part of our sensibility. Later, neo-noir, with its polluting technicolor and formulaic scripting resulted in an ironic postmodern pastiche. Borkhuis renounces this, turning back to classic film noir for his inspiration.

There's an "enigma" at the core of the world, the consequence of a disconnect and sense of "dread" we feel because of it—"from which we protect ourselves with the formal illusion of truth" ("The Perfect Crime"). Borkhuis realizes the vacuity of such "formal illusion." Postmodern formulations are never enough. This is because, he says, "a crime has taken place upon the body of reality." What's to be "revealed" from this circumstance is "another order of reality parallel to our quotidian, taken-for-granted one" (email to author, 20 July 2022). Hence, his various alter egos look for clues that might point them toward the solace of clarity.

What tells us all this is the deceptive mirror. We are haunted by uncertainty. It "remains our greatest fear," Borkhuis writes in "Silence Is an Openness Words Can't Close"; conversely, we're no better off with the "certainty" that "makes life insufferable." Film noir's rich plots and performances were driven by its characters' compulsions, how their lives interweaved to no good end, supplying the basic metaphor with which Borkhuis elaborates the restlessness of our present moment. It underlies the genre's ambience and becomes a principle of consciousness. A Borkhuis character complains that "darkness is never dark enough," another that "the real is never real enough." The real "recoils at the slightest provocation" ("Half-Life"), from even an unwitting glance. The unmoored, unperturbed *actual* floats peacefully on the surface of such a riddle.

Borkhuis' work centers on the befuddlement of his personae, leaving us delightfully buoyant. An exquisite, mordant humor becomes the substance of a living real; we come to think of it as our unreal unobscured by darkness. It's a flashlight. He constructs marvelous pirouettes of dialogue, not unlike a carnival funhouse mirror's infinitely

receding, distorted reflections. The unreal's ephemeral appearances beckon, yet what gain can there be in their depiction? It's "as if to say that we are haunted / by other versions of ourselves in morphic / resonance" ("Confused," from his penultimate collection, *Dead Ringer* [2017]).

On a ride to nowhere, the tough guy backseat hero in "Rearview Mirror" sees everything. The image of the mirror contains the self-conscious gaze, possibly nervous anticipation, nostalgia, or all three. In the instant of watching one's gaze, it dissolves. Yet in this timeless instant, when you look at the appearance of yourself, you've been caught, like Narcissus, in your own idolatry.

Rearview Mirror is an important milestone in a game changing career. The book is a triumph of execution, a synthesis of Borkhuis' existential quandaries. What Borkhuis achieves, how he elevates the existential predicament of postmodern life to the grandeur of darkest comedy, reveals his affinity with Beckett most of all. Like the characters in Beckett's fiction and drama, the Borkhuis antihero is the device through which, as Susan Lewis puts it, he "deconstructs the pathos of satire."

His characters are memorable, but not for their suffering. We chuckle over his "Self-Reflexive Detective" who encounters constantly shifting appearances before him. The character is a marvelously facetious construction. He awakens "in someone else's dream" only to realize that "someone was dreaming me." The macabre surrealism is unsettling. In *his* dream, at least, "ghostly voices" can be heard. They try to explain what's going on:

*we're all statues around here
why don't you leave through the window
stop feeling sorry for yourself
he doesn't look like a murderer
they never do
would you recognize the dead man if you saw him again
as if I were already dead*

*stop reading between the lines
stop coming up roses
I need someone to fill in my silhouette...*

These voices disrupt the staid coherence of the world as known. A perfect crime, in leaving no loose ends, would have to be symmetrical. To any investigator, such a crime would be impenetrable, unfathomable. In “Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear” Borkhuis’ seeker

[. . .] wakes only to realize
he’s been living in a recurring dream
the perfect crime that leaves no clue

but of course we know that’s not true
no crime is perfect
there’s always something that doesn’t quite fit
The truth doesn’t add up.

The haunted, doomed fallibility of film noir protagonists has shaped our contemporary sensibility. But for our destinies, we’re not alive, yet an awareness of destiny alone, Borkhuis makes clear, is not enough to save us. He thrives on film noir’s flickering interchange of light and shadow, a reminder that beauty keeps us alive. Perversely, we’re made alive through the trope of crime. Such dark beauty!

What hasn’t changed with respect to the modernist figure in Borkhuis’ creations is the antihero’s errant character. No one is innocent in the world of film noir. The heroism in Borkhuis’ work, however, is no illusion. His characters are tormented by what they see and hear, which they’re incapable of ignoring. Fatedness may be exquisitely subtle in a classic film noir feature, sometimes part of the film’s anxiety and fun. The question then, in modernism’s mid twentieth century, was simply how the film, in *its* inevitability—in which the starring antihero has a part to play—can work itself out. In the world of Borkhuis’ antihero, there’s simply an ever-present, paradoxical flow of events. Borkhuis explains that

[. . .] one is captured
by the magnet draw of uncertainty
the nuanced realm of multiple lives
until one looks back

and all possible positions collapse
now you are called upon to act
to break the mirror's hold
and step through your image

this time you are asked
to put your life on the line
facts may crumble into an infinity of points
but that is not for us
now you get to play the game

Borkhuis never drifts from any one scene he's established, simply letting his film noir conceit do its work. The mirror becomes the instrument of our surveillance. His character ruminates on his fate, not having anything better to do, in what becomes the metaphysical moment that's "played through the eye of an unseen camera" ("Truth Game").

Rearview Mirror is a tour-de-force that leads us to look back upon its author's entire oeuvre. His earlier obsessions are still with him, now fully developed. Silently, from the backseat of the vehicle, he ends "Rearview Mirror" with a rather thoughtful, downright theoretical, accounting of life.

you remain uncertain to the end
why this turn in the road
where does the big nothing take us
and why is the thug next to you smiling
while you watch your life
rewind in the rearview mirror.

Borkhuis' characters move along their moebius strips as they haunt others, finding no way out, ensnared in mirror images of themselves.

To be affixed in the mirror's gaze is to be blind. To look into the rearview mirror is to discover that you, like any passenger, are at best on a "bumpy ride from here to nowhere." It's a fantastically dark comedy of the unlikely. In "Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear"

the limits talk back
like bricks in a wall like street punks
hanging out at the dead ends of sentences
like shrunken heads in birdcages
taking their revenge upon the writer
one peep at a time

everyone wants a self
they can call their own
everyone wants to unload
into a shout-box during lights out

but the writer dismisses the rabble
of inner voices as fragmented *false unities*
desperately grabbing for the mic...

In "Antimatter Twin," Borkhuis maintains that the missing unitary self, which "once seemed authentic," views authenticity as emptied-out absence. Arrogating the figure of the antihero to his present needs, Borkhuis turns it into a trope meant to get at something deep within our present-day culture, which he finds disturbing, as do we, in an entirely new way. His surrealist poetics has the capacity to grapple intellectually with Baudrillard's "reality deficit" ("The Perfect Crime").

The world of the antihero is one of darkness. Borkhuis has us relive our nightmare through this persona who's not always sure what's going on. He senses, though, the nightmare whose essence is the threat of self-

dissolution. The criminals and detectives in Borkhuis' world, no longer killers in their own right, constitute the classic modernist antihero except for one important distinction: their lack of agency. The reimagined antihero's glaring inability to act establishes the character's authenticity precisely as the antihero of *our* time. Thus the antihero in Borkhuis is just as genuine as those of the Spillane/Hammett/Chandler genre of fiction, which Borkhuis exploits for a new end.

Destiny becomes the great sendup. In a world of endless permutation, Borkhuis acknowledges the noir story not as our founding myth, but rather as something we simply gravitate toward. We might choose to laugh at his sleuth yet we keep silent, feeling the poignancy of his lostness. As Breton writes in "Manifeste du surréalisme" (1924), another key influence on Borkhuis, "Such is the belief in life, in the most precarious aspects of life, by which is meant real life, that in the end belief is lost" (trans. A. S. Kline). For all the loss of certitude in Borkhuis' writing, however, there's never despair. The less-than-real must suffice—better to embrace it than fend off its innate estrangement.

Burt Kimmelman's recent books are *Steeple at Sunrise: New Poems* (2022), *Zero Point Poiesis: George Quasha's Axial Art* (2021), and *Visible at Dusk: Selected Essays* (2021). More about him can be found at BurtKimmelman.com.

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