

## KEEPING TIME

Michael Anania. *Heat Lines*. Kingston, RI: Moyer Bell, 2006.

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The poems in Michael Anania's *Heat Lines* keep time. That is, they are poems that quicken the past through their musicality—and references to music, place, myth and the use of proper names. Simultaneously, the present is driven along in repetition, improvisation, and through phrases and names breaking into place. The tenses river, curve, and buoy up the activity of the poems' coiling pasts; or refer to the past in a presence where "everything retreats" and "returns." Even as Anania keeps time in various presents, it is already passing and we are on to the next thing, concurrently bearing histories along.

In an interview published a few years ago in *Paper Street*, Anania talked about how "cities change so dramatically... [and they change] all the time, yet [they] give you these recurrent surfaces. You have familiar buildings, streets and sidewalks and a continual economic surge which changes places from one thing to another." It is this kind of change and recurrence that is summoned in "Steal Away," the first poem of the collection, set in the Near South Side of Chicago on 31<sup>st</sup> Street between Michigan and Indiana. We find the city within the remnants of its past even as it unfolds in present motion:

The Jeffrey bus rocks around  
The curve below my window  
Its cabinet of artificial light;

Sing the lionheaded storefront  
Lost to discount gas pumps,  
Barbershop—Leon!—whispered

Away; who died here, shanked  
On his way to play the blues  
Sterling? chorus gone silent; (3)

The juxtaposition of the active verbs—even when in the past—with the names that both interrupt and call up properties of person and history, leave us with a sense of constant movement, call, and conjuring. The poem works like time itself where the present is broken into by fragments of the past: the

lionheaded storefront/ lost to discount gas pumps,” or the names “Leon” and “Sterling” recalling conversations the poet had with the writers, Leon Forrest and Sterling Plump about this place.

Incidentally, this section of the city was once called “The Stroll” in the 1920’s and where King Oliver’s band played with Louis Armstrong. During the 70’s and early 80’s when the poet lived there, it still had the vestiges of the great record industry for Rhythm & Blues music, Chess Records. This later gave way to dereliction before being revived and turning into an area of expensive lofts. Brickwork facades and addresses are what have been left, and what the poet has said, “exaggerates the presence of change, proposing a kind of urban elegy” (Paper Street).

The poem, then, works to mark time, leaving us (but always returning) in/with outlines, remnants, stains. Neighborhoods come and go, the names of friends both present and who, as we say, “have passed” enter, along with histories that are always present. “Little Walter going this way,/ Blind Lemon, that?” (*HL* 6). What is left both remembers and is a ghostly accompaniment alongside the present. There is always a pastness in Anania’s present, an interest in the way these materials can be brought into the poem—just as they coexist in place and time, a poetic awareness of what is pushing up against the other.

Super Fly, can you see him

outlined in the plaster clinging  
to an exposed brick wall,  
the remnants of one house

illustrating another, stained  
wallpaper fresco, its sainthood,  
a dream grown arms, legs (*HL* 3)

The outline of Super Fly serves as the genius of the neighborhood, succeeding “Curtis rounding/ his round face with a smile,” a different kind of genius, as Curtis Mayfield, who used to visit the apartment complex where the poet lived, and for whom this elegy is written. Curtis gone and Super Fly only an outline, but the memory of the poet in “I remember” looms large as the 70’s character in plaster, again, providing an encompassing simultaneity.

Yet, Anania never lets us linger too near nostalgia. We are reminded that the poem is, to paraphrase William Carlos Williams, a machine. It has to work; it should run. In “Steal Away” we find a poem that moves like the Chicago Transit Authority, its spine: “the Jeffrey bus, “or where the

El/ screeches out his name.” The Chicago Loop trains do indeed “coil and recoil” ending the poem both figuratively and literally where it began, in motion, and musically “a song and dance, hands raised,” motioning.

In the mid-section’s “Adami” poems, Anania’s time-keeping takes shape within Calabria, his paternal family’s place. In this section of poems, time is marked physically and linguistically. What is always interesting in his oeuvre is to see how the poet brings these various places (Chicago, Calabria, Nebraska) together so elegantly, and yet, still acknowledges the dissonance of the materials. In “Felice’s Album,” time is something looked at, seen through photos:

Time’s  
Diagrams in face and hands  
.....  
Felice in Des Moines under  
the eaves of a mid-American  
frame house, in Australia beside  
a burro, here or there along  
the right-of-way from Consenza (55)

These “diagrams” of time allow us into the poem’s occasion, one of looking at photographs with distant relatives, even as it is a kind of diagram of Felice’s life in place, and by extension, the poet’s place in the world as an American of Italian/German heritage—and an urbanite growing up at the edges of Omaha’s West. The physicality of time moves from that of what has been caught in film to the exchange—the spoken—between the poet and Felice:

He holds my arm and speaks  
in Calabrese, certain in his touch  
that I can understand him. We are  
*brunacchio*, he says, bears together  
  
bearers, meant to carry and set down, (56)

Time, in this instance, is a confluence of physical touch, speech, and metaphor that encompasses a present, suggests the future and continues the past. It is a powerful simultaneity, pulling times and voices together. The speech found in this section is also important for the fact that Calabria has hundreds of dialects. The Calabrian poet, Michele Pane, can be heard within Anania. Pane was jailed for writing in Italian dialect rather than Tuscan. This history of the language is very important to Anania, who sees this not

only as a revolutionary act, but also as a manifestation of the place itself: “lingui di fuoco”—the hearth’s tongues, the tongues of the hearth, the fire and the smoke.” He understands the spoken word—the speech and breath around the hearth as part of the smoke, a physical manifestation of the outside landscape. And so—the past is borne, the present curves, curls, retreating; the future will be just around the bend.

In *Heat Lines* we find Anania doing what he does so well: crafting his various materials and places, calling and recalling, improvising a song for all time. It is that song we want to keep listening to again, again.