

Inside the Box

W. S. Di Piero

SELECTED PROSE

"W. S. Di Piero is
one of the best and
most under-recognized
writers of our time. His
prose style is powerfully
attractive and unique."

Wendy Lesser

Good art changes on us as we change. The form-finding imagination that brings
certain works into startling existence has an afterlife in the dialogue between
viewer and receiver. We continue to look at certain works because we want to
understand the tropism that won't let us turn away, that makes us lean into what
holds the eye, because we want to better understand ourselves. *We interrogate
painting while it interrogates reality, we puzzle out a picture because it's
puzzling out the very activity of seeing the world, we watch it as it watches us
and shapes our consciousness.*

UNBOUND EDITION PRESS.

Previous Praise for W. S. Di Piero

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Wendy Lesser

Mallarmé said the poet's job is to purify the language of the tribe. W. S. Di Piero does just that, mainly by aligning his rich, working-class memories with a larger world of art and politics.

Library Journal

W. S. Di Piero is probably the most consistently compelling and idiosyncratic prose writer among contemporary American poets.

Poetry

Like other young intellectuals who came of age during the 1960s, Di Piero returns repeatedly to the bloody crossroads of literature and politics, to what he calls a passionate interrogation of history and memory.

The Washington Post

W. S. Di Piero is one of the most bracing critical intelligences now at work in our national scene of writing.

The Boston Book Review

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Atlanta

ALSO BY W. S. DI PIERO

Poetry

The First Hour

The Only Dangerous Thing

Early Light

The Dog Star

The Restorers

Shadows Burning

Skirts and Slacks

Brother Fire

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City Dog

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Translations

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This Strange Joy: Selected Poems of Sandro Penna

Night of Shooting Stars: Selected Poems of Leonardo Sinisgalli

Ion, Euripides

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Foreword

W. S. Di Piero finds Joseph Cornell's shadow box assemblages "so mysteriously designed to keep us out that they of course draw us in." The same holds true for Di Piero's prose selected for this volume. I find myself leaning forward, physically pulled to the page to discern what shimmers before me. The arresting clarity of his insights reveals the refractions of a mind at work on the page — of a curiosity drawn through the transparent surfaces meant to separate genres, cultures, and epochs.

The title piece sets the stage for the rest. Taking Cornell's shadow boxes as both subject and structural principle, Di Piero reveals how memory works through creative or conceptual tension rather than narrative, how meaning emerges from an unexpected proximity of the dissimilar. A restored Milan streetcar running through San Francisco becomes a time machine, a meditation on urban archaeology, a Cornell box in motion. His grandfather's henna-dyed hair connects to Caravaggio's bloody saints. Nothing should quite fit together, yet everything does.

... there must be invisible wires of consciousness in the air, or neurological fractals popping and trumpeting one to another, because I feel delivered back to Philadelphia in the 1950s, heaven help me, riding the 10th Street trolley, forehead pressed to the glass, eyeballing the huge shadow boxes of Gimbel's window displays, jeweler's row, hoagie pits, Dickensian apothecaries, five-and-dimes, and candy stores marked with big tin badges die-stamped FRANK'S BLACK CHERRY WISHNIAK.

Above all else, Di Piero is a *seer*: of poems as they emerge, syllable and space dancing together to discover their own rhythms; art as it exists before the eye, in meticulous detail, and as an artifact of its own creation and a mirror of the present as a prism of light; people, spaces, humanity, culture trying to fit together in some way that makes sense of our shared experience. He sees correspondences between sensual and intellectual experiences that become evident only once he pulls them into focus.

The way his prose pulled me closer to and through the glass wasn't simply engagement. It was something more primal, natural, undeniable, irresistible. The careful reader of this most careful writer suddenly, imperceptibly, surrenders to the visions — and music — in Di Piero's mind. The experience evokes something close to magic, like the way one might move through a museum, somehow knowing the way to what feels important even if still unknown, full appreciation sensed or intuited though not yet fully formed.

This bodily response becomes essential to reading Di Piero's essays because they demand we acknowledge that the very act of reading, like all profound aesthetic experiences, happens through and in the body — true also for the act of writing. When he pulls his readers close, it's a summoning to confront the truths, challenges, and creations of humanity and how one mind brings order to them across time and subjects. This summoning results in a suspension, not of disbelief but of being held in a specific moment of time. That moment is when Di Piero's mind and the reader's mind meet, suspended in the amber of the page — both, together, inside the dreamlike box. In describing what Cornell chose and assembled for his shadow boxes, Di Piero defines his personal dedication to and across the arts: living “in the amber of their own queer, jangled logic.”

In my own experience, I confess to full surrender — astonishment, wonder — to the flow of the writing itself: my nose pressed to the glass of his radiant thinking. Was it a trick of light? No. It was the awe of elucidation. Di Piero's prose comes closer to incantation than nearly anything else in recent literary culture. He writes in the *belletrist* tradition, but his writing is no relic of the past; it is the way forward in an age of dispersed, disposable, disconnected “content.” This is writing — and reading — that demands we slow down, pay attention, and consider rather than consume.

The essays — if that is what we must call them — selected for *Inside the Box* span more than thirty years, yet they feel startlingly present, even urgent. This isn't the urgency of breaking-news headlines but something

deeper: the urgency of consciousness trying to make sense of itself through encounters with art, no matter its form. Di Piero writes from a place where Dante's *Inferno* and a South Philadelphia street fight occupy the same psychic terrain. Carpaccio's pictures and a childhood memory of selling Bibles door-to-door illuminate each other in unexpected though utterly sensible ways. It is a wonder: The essays — assemblages of their own — work because Di Piero fearlessly engages in a process of exploration and experimentation rather than a predetermined plan. He trusts that he can give voice to the vibrant, flirtatious dialogue among the different art he loves. *Eros* is at work here. I'd say of his writing what he says of Cornell's work: “It's an intensification of the real and of our experience of it. It sharpens perception and appetite the way sexual desire does.”

What strikes me most forcefully is how these pieces refuse, actively reject, critical distance. Di Piero doesn't write about art so much as write *through it*, using paintings, poems, and photographs as ways to crack open consciousness itself. When he discusses Van Gogh's letters or Giacometti's sculptures, he's not performing scholarly analysis, though his learning and wisdom run deep. He's conducting something that seems closer to spiritual interrogation, asking how these works might keep us awake — conscious, present, attuned — in a world designed to lull us into complacent, even complicit, sleep. This places his global historical readings within a decidedly American literary genealogy. His attentiveness to what is worthy of our reverence feels like a channeling of Thoreau: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.” Di Piero is that same sort of confident braggart: He writes to understand and wants the literary citizens who are his readers to do the same. What might our world be like if we each dedicated our voices to helping our neighbors understand?

Di Piero's background matters here, though he never trades on it in some folksy or “street cred” way. Working-class, Italian-American

family, South Philadelphia — he came to high culture as a curious outsider, teaching himself and making his way without mandated or restrictive rules. His rigorous intellect missed — no, smartly ignored — any simplistic lesson on *you can't do that!* His origin story could easily become sentimental, though he makes it something more: a way of understanding how cultural transmission actually works, how art moves through communities and across generations, how beauty survives in unlikely places. In so doing, he reveals the artifacts of humanity across cultures to be evidence of our collective status as natural phenomena.

In “Pocketbook and Sauerkraut,” which opens this volume, he traces his relationship to language through the macaronic English-Italian dialect of his neighborhood: The title phrase of “Gots Is What You Got” becomes a kind of koan about linguistic poverty and the deep richness it also can contain. In “Fathead’s Hard Times,” chronic pain pulses and burns inseparably from jazz beats, as David “Fathead” Newman’s saxophone crackles through a hospital radio at 3 a.m. Di Piero transforms personal stories into investigations detailing how aesthetic experience weaves into the fabric of consciousness, how art becomes part of the body’s memory.

The range of reference (and reverence) across these pieces is profound. In a single essay, Di Piero might move from Lewis Hine’s photographs of child laborers to Dante’s *Purgatorio* to Sam Peckinpah’s films to his grandmother’s devotional statuettes. But this is not mere display, just as Cornell’s boxes are not. Each reference becomes necessary, pulled into Di Piero’s contextual orbit by an artist’s logic of association. He trusts his readers to follow the thread of connection — the sound and sense and implied rhymes — across a Tintoretto painting and a family argument, between a jazz solo and a passage from Homer.

He flatly and brazenly refuses to separate aesthetic from social experience. When he writes about Cézanne, he’s writing about labor — the tireless work of making a painting, but also the broader human work of trying to see clearly. His essay on photography resists analyzing images and asks what photography does to memory, how it changes our

relationship to time and mortality. “Poetry in Common” opens with a Hopi ceremonial dance and unfolds into a meditation on what common culture might mean in a radically diverse democracy. He doesn’t solve problems or resolve conflicts — he’s too honest for easy answers — but he reframes them in ways that feel fresh, current, and relevant. He encourages curiosity, *ignites* it, then passes the torch to his readers so that they, too, might see.

For Di Piero, the prose itself is the point, the instrument and medium of seeing and thinking. He writes with a poet’s ear, precise but not precious. His sentences often run as long and complex as nuanced thought, carrying the full weight of meaning, whether fully realized or full of promise. His are working sentences; they do the labor of thinking and rendering it plainly. From “Late Arrivals”: “The apparition of the instant is smashed by what fills it: leaves, wind, trees, a broil of pure becoming.” This is the persistent, sustained frisson of his writing: language trying to keep pace with consciousness itself, to capture it before it flees while never calcifying it through rigid interpretation.

He returns with a necessary obsessiveness to essential questions: How does memory work? What connects art to suffering? How do we live with beauty in a world of violence? He doesn’t answer these questions; he allows them to inhabit him fully so he might turn them over repeatedly, let them complicate each other, and become entirely embodied. This makes each piece a panel in an expanding self-portrait of a mind rapt by contemplation without ever promising resolution. Di Piero considers, and deeply so, *what is*. He, even more than Sontag, stands “against interpretation” and its self-imposed limitations, and his critical practice is generously democratic. He brings the same attention to a Philadelphia trolley that he brings to Dante’s *Paradiso*. He knows that attention, devotion, and meaning can lodge anywhere; revelation abides no hierarchies. A rosetta roll from an Italian bakery can evoke the same type of aesthetic wonder as a Renaissance fresco.

Reading these essays in the non-chronological order animating this volume, I'm caught up by their cumulative power. These pieces intentionally zig and zag, leaping across decades, through different moments of reflection held together by relevance. *Inside the Box* is its own Cornelian box. Images recur and reassociate. Workers, for example, keep appearing. Van Gogh as a laborer in paint, Giacometti as a sculptor who never stopped working his materials, Di Piero's own father coming home from his hospital maintenance job. The work of writing becomes a metaphor for consciousness itself. His lucid observations are the daily labor of making sense on the page.

Memory threads through everything but never devolves into the nostalgic. Di Piero conjures and deploys memory as disruption, direction, demand. In "Late Arrivals," he attempts to escape memory's pull, to write "a poetry erased of memory that expresses only the experienced instant." This proves impossible. Memory saturates everything, even — especially — our attempts to escape it.

Though this selection takes its title from Cornell, its pieces are hermetic but not sealed. They invite us in, they pull us close to the glass, and always preserve their mystery and wonder. Di Piero's prose offers something better than conclusions; it offers a model for how to think and feel simultaneously, how to live with heightened awareness that makes us widen our own eyes. He presents a time-tested survival strategy, not one for the body but for the survival of attention itself, for our ability to see in a world that prefers, and profits from, collective historical blindness. In detailing how Hart Crane's poetry momentarily delivered him from clinical depression, he means so literally. Crane's poems were his emergency meds, which proved effective, at least in the short run. That's why it's vital to allow Di Piero to pull us in and through the glass so that we're included in the scene, inside the box, where things do not make sense until they do.

He quotes William James, a favorite writer we both turn to: "The word 'and' trails along after every sentence." That captures the essence of

Di Piero's way with essays: always one more connection to make, one more thing to notice, one more bit of context to create meaning. His writing delivers us to that charged space between revelation and mystery where the real work of thinking happens. Reading him, we return to the world with sharpened senses, ready to construct our own Cornell boxes from the materials at hand, pulling each of us closer to ourselves and each other.

Perhaps most importantly, through all these essays runs dark matter, the unsaid, the unknowable, the mystical that Di Piero comes close to capturing but must keep pursuing through its endlessness. That is why we read: to touch whatever it may be that connects us, makes us whole. As he says of Cornell's shadow boxes:

Some collectors believe Cornell boxes contain spirits. When one of them fell off a table and broke open, its owners insisted that the piece had been destroyed, although the only object that broke was a replaceable drinking glass. The owners protested that the spirit had escaped the box and that the piece was therefore a total loss. The insurers paid.

As you open this book, may Di Piero's spirit escape but not be lost. Rather, my hope in publishing this outstanding selection of essays, remains that they might inhabit and guide us each to unexpected assemblages — ones we did not know we even needed but which insist we peer through our own glass and ask what it means *to be*. Di Piero's magnificent challenge, in the end, is to dare us to fully exist in a constant state of desire, as he does, yearning to connect with what else, what spirit, might be inside the box.

Patrick Davis, Publisher