Song and Dance by Alan Shapiro. Houghton Mifflin, $22.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL THEUNE

If I said, "Let's everyone do the Elegy," you'd know the routine: the room would get divided, half performing the "work of mourning," that slow, methodical movement, those processional measures from grief to consolation made so famous by Milton and the Gang, the other half going for the latest craze, "the failure of that work," a tortured, traumatized stomp, tribal, transgressive, fun. In *Song and Dance*, Alan Shapiro performs the elegy, mourning and meditating on the death of his brother, David, a Broadway performer, a song-and-dance man. However, Shapiro is wary; he, too, knows the routine, is aware of its either/or, and, as his book's title indicates, he is worried that his own performance may be just a repetition of the elegy's ol' song and dance. Amazingly, in *Song and Dance*, Shapiro manages to stay in the middle of the room and to sing convincingly for both sides at the same time, performing a poetry that is at once stately and clear, and a complex, severe interrogation.

Perhaps inevitably, in this book about the horrible suffering and death—by an incurable brain cancer—of a man devoted to entertaining, the central technique of *Song and Dance* is contrast, the juxtaposition of opposites. The song and dance stand in stark relief from the dying. Sometimes, momentarily, they

relieve; "Last Impressions" offers a catalog of the shtick, the desperate attempts to keep the spirit up, David performed while undergoing treatment. At other times, this contrast only dismays, offering a vision of life as problematic as the knowledge of death. In "Joy," Shapiro meditates on a moment of juxtaposition; at the threshold of a deep despair, he witnesses life's eruption, but, rather than comfort, it offers only a stark realization:

> My lovely daughter—
> walking me to the car
> to say goodbye
> the day I left
> to keep watch at my brother's
> bedside—
> suddenly
> singing "I
> feel pretty, oh so
> pretty"
> as she raised
> her arms up in a loose oval
> over her head
> and pirouetted all along the walk.
>
> Savage
> and magisterial—
> the joy of it,
> the animal candor of
> each arabesque,
> each leaping turn and counterturn,
> her voice
> now wobbly
> with laughter ...

Unwilling to settle for realization, the poem, in its second half, leaps toward vision, panning to and finding a wild and fitting metaphor for the girl's joy in the image of a herd of antelope "zig- / zagging, / swerving as one ... leaping higher, / faster" which, even after escaping its pursuer, seems to keep on running "for nothing but / the joy of running / though / it could be / any one of them / is running / from its fallen / mother or father, / sister or brother, / across the wide / savanna, / under a bright sun / into fresher grass."

Juxtaposition and dark countervision are central elements of *Song and*

Dance's finest poem, "The Accident." Opening with an accidental sighting of a hummingbird—"While it was happening, / the absolute / not me of it, the all / of a sudden see- / through whir of wings beside me / that the late sun / just as I looked up / turned to a hovering / flash, a watery gray—"—the poem builds toward vision and even entertains consolation: "even the thought of death, / just then, consoling, / shaping itself inside me / as the now there / now not there hovering / of bird, flower, late / sun iridescences—" This movement of mind and spirit, this ascent which assents even to calling death "Mother / of beauty" is checked in mid-flight, when the poet realizes that at the same time, in another state, David, now half-paralyzed, had slipped while getting up from the commode and the nurse who had tried to help him, in an effort to catch him, accidentally ripped off his flimsy hospital gown, leaving him "naked, / utterly exposed—" This correction results in the absolute relinquishment of elegiac consolation:

> beloved singers, tricksters
> of solace, if
> you had known this, seen
> this, as I did not,
> you would have offered him
> no sumptuous
> destitution, no fire-
> fangled feathers,
> or blab about death as being
> luckier than one
> supposes. You would have bowed
> your heads, you would
> have silently slipped back
> into the shadows
> out of which you surged forth,
> singing to me.

Daring leaps and bold self-critique occur not only in the poems of *Song and Dance* but also between them; the poems converse with each other, commenting upon and questioning each other's assumptions, stances, and claims. In "The Big Screen," Shapiro and others gathered at David's bedside try to figure out David's cries and gestures. Beginning with twenty-nine lines of questions—"What did it mean, the moaning? Or could you even / call it a moan, what bore no trace of voice / we could recognize as his? / Was there even a his by then? Or was it only / a sound, mere sound of the body becoming a

thing . . .?"—the poem makes a metaphor for its unknowing, viewing the dying brother as a movie screen and the concerned gazes of the attendants as projectors whose lights tangle and, therefore, fail to reach the screen, so that

> . . . [t]he screen
> stayed blank, the screen of the moaning, the screen
> of the dry sobs, of the shaking fist and clenched eyes—
> all of it blank, white, empty,
> as if the theater were closed, the seats all upright,
> the aisles swept clean, and the four of us somehow there
> too late and too early, before the previews,
> after the feature presentation, our eyes
> fixed on the big screen nothing flickered on.

If this metaphor, for all that it admits it doesn't understand, still seems too confident, too knowing, the book's next poem, "Three Questions," complicates matters by pressing the issue; it begins by asking a question similar to that of "The Big Screen"—"What was it like to see him die?"—then rethinks the issue with new ideas, situations, metaphors. The poem that follows "Three Questions" extends this skeptical trend by making it self-consciously theatrical. In "Broadway Revival," the poet becomes a bad actor who doesn't know his lines and so demands them of his dead brother, who watches from the wings. When this rather traditional plea for the muse's inspiration, for some word from the dead, fails to produce results, the poet revises his understanding:

> And did the silence mean
> you were enjoying this?
> Or were we both
> in being there that way
> just following another
> script
> in which
> my lines were
> these, and yours
> your silence,
> as if
> the theater were itself a stage
> inside
> a theater in which
> I play

the brother
who doesn't know his lines,
and you the actor
who waits there in the wings,
who holds the script,
who knows it all
by heart and
will not say.

For much of his career, Alan Shapiro has been interested in metamorphosis, moments of mythic transformation of the real. Perhaps not surprisingly for a poet, Shapiro seems especially fascinated by transformations of the voice, instances when the human voice becomes otherworldly. This interest appears, for example, in two poems from his 1996 collection, *Mixed Company*. "Wife: Labor" begins, "The pain inhaled you, / and you groaned it out in no voice / I had ever heard before, a voice / anterior to yours, archaic, fierce, / from so far deep within you / I could hear the rock-vein, mineral / motherlode / the aboriginal / first freak of pulse was / ripped from ..." In "Night Terrors" Shapiro wonders at and meditates on the transformation of his own voice when he must calm an anxious child: "Whose voice is it in mine when the child cries, / terrified in sleep, and half asleep myself I'm there / beside him saying, shh, now easy, shh, // whose voice—too intimate with all the ways / of solace to be merely mine; so prodigal / in desiring to give, yet so exact in giving ... Is it my mother's voice in mine ...?" Though Shapiro's poetry has long been aware of and interested in such primal utterances, his poetry itself so far has eschewed such radical transformation, never becoming itself primitive, never trying any sort of faithful transcription of the grain of such voices. It cannot be known if such an undertaking would be good for Shapiro's work; such an evaluation can be made only after the attempt. What is certain is that Shapiro writes amazing poems around and about that voice, poems that are powerful yet collected, clear yet exploratory, emotional yet aware. In *Song and Dance*, Shapiro's poems remember and respect, even as they transgress, the space between self and other, between conscious self and unconscious self, between the living and the dying. With care and cunning, these poems seek knowledge even though, as David, in a moment of lucidity, declares of his pain in the refrains of "The Phone Call": "You can't imagine it," "You can't know what it's like," "You can't imagine it at all," "You can't. Don't even try to."