

Jerry Harp

ON *Last Call: Poems on Alcoholism, Addiction, & Deliverance*

As Jeffrey Skinner indicates in his introduction, the editors offer this anthology in the belief that poetry can offer something helpful to the current efforts to address “the nation’s substance abuse problem.” As the introduction further points out, writers have long been confronting addiction and related issues. One might think, for example, of John Berryman’s unfinished though insightful novel, *Recovery*, or of such poems as Robert Herrick’s “His farewell to Sack,” Hart Crane’s “The Wine Menagerie,” Robert Lowell’s “To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage,” and John Berryman’s “Drunks.” Thus, the poems in this anthology fit into a sort of tradition; but as far as I know, this is the first poetry anthology to appear specifically dedicated to these issues.

The reader will encounter here, along with moments of rebirth, plenty of struggle, ambiguity, and pain: “a man/ whose drink of choice was Listerine” (Raymond Carver, “NyQuil”); a woman standing frozen while “her husband weaved and stammered up into the room where her daughter slept” (Marie Howe, “The Mother”); the memory of “that face, the extraordinary ruins thumb-marked/ with the hollows of heroin” (Lynda Hull, “Lost Fugue for Chet”)—a memory like that of “your eyes/ ruined and terrible in a face/ even now you are leaving” (Tess Gallagher, “Even Now You Are Leaving”); “The family around the table and a silence/ so compact no words can break it” (Jeffrey McDaniel, “1977”); the healing in the way “the torn mind/ puts forth tendrils” (Joan Larkin, “How the Healing Takes Place”); and the exaltation of “rising/ like the drowned out of our shirts” (Denis Johnson, “The Heavens”).

Skinner points out that addressing what is involved in all this struggle and letting go brings us into realms of paradox, partly because “to gain any progress toward redemption the addict must accept, must live within, a number of

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paired statements that are both true and contradictory on their face: *Addiction is a disease, and the behavior it led to out of my control/ I must make amends for the trouble I caused.*” Referring to Keats’s notion of negative capability, Skinner asserts the necessity of poets’ familiarity with paradox. Presumably, then, poetry should be able to speak articulately of the problems and paradoxes involved in addiction and deliverance.

One paradox that arises here is that of fearing what one longs for. In her poem “Recovery,” Marie Howe compares the situation of a woman moving with her husband through his process of recovery, to the situation of Noah and his wife setting out to build a new world after the flood. Some of the more striking lines occur, though, once the speaker lets go of this comparison to address her and her husband’s present moment:

We walk together, slowly, on this your fifth day
and you, occasionally, glimmer with a light

I’ve never seen before. It frightens me,
this new muscle in you, flexing.

The closing line returns to Noah and his wife to ask the central question: “Can we endure it, the rain finally stopped?”

Why would this new world of deliverance from the deluge be frightening? Thomas Lux provides one answer in “Loudmouth Soup,” a recollection of times when the speaker and his companions “were so numb/ a boulder on a toe/ was pleasant pain, all pain/ was pleasant since that’s all there was, pain,/ and everything that was deeply felt, deeply,/ was not.” I read this statement to mean that, while the numbness reduced the physical pain, the physical pain itself numbed the deeper pain (of grief, anger, sadness, fear, etc.) so thoroughly as to make it seem unreal. But for the seemingly unreal, or unknown, to become real and known, and therefore less threatening, one may need to find a voice with which to address the “shadow/ that’s trying to kill me” (Cindy Goff, “Addiction”), whatever its origin, as happens in Jane Mead’s “Concerning That Prayer I Cannot Make.” Much of this poem dwells in the ambivalence signaled by its opening line, “Jesus, I am cruelly lonely,” a line somewhere between exclamation and the direct address of prayer. In this in-between space, the speaker struggles to pray and to discover or believe in the

soul; but she finds herself unable to do so: “what I *meant* when I said ‘soul’/ was that there should be a place.” Something happens, though, when she declaims her self-affirmation to the details of her world:

Listen—
all you bare trees
burrs
brambles
pile of twigs
red and green lights flashing
muddy bottle shards
shoe half buried—listen

listen, I am holy

While the speaker may not have found precisely what she was looking for, this final affirmation of holiness answers, if only in a small way, to her desire for prayer and knowledge of the soul, a knowledge that comes in another poem (“The Memory”) with an image from a winter of her childhood: a stranger on a playground unfreezing her “hands from the swingchain” with his breath. In the presence of this memory, which “will never fully leave” her, she can declare, “But now, at least, there is nothing/ between me and my soul but myself.”

The need that comes across most strongly at the end of “Concerning That Prayer I Cannot Make,” as demonstrated by the repetition of the word “listen,” is the need to be heard, if only by an audience that exists in imagination or memory. Such is the case in Jean Valentine’s “The Drinker’s Wife Writes Back,” in which the letter writer is able to tell her husband about “how the lighted house/ went out in the gin brightness/ you called ‘the war’—and that I did this to you—/ I did not do this . . .”. The distance provided by the device of the letter gives the persona freedom to state her truth, and I take the ellipsis at the end of the poem to indicate that more is about to be unleashed now that she has begun to write.

On the other hand, finding a space to listen attentively can be of equal importance, as in Etheridge Knight’s “A Wasp Woman Visits a Black Junkie in Prison.” Given the situation established by the title, the man in prison is

understandably suspicious: “Somebody’s got/ Likely as not, a big fat tongue in cheek!” As understandable as his reservations about this visit are, however, he comes upon a fundamental flaw in his thinking:

Hold your stupid face, man,
Learn a little grace, man; drop a notch the sacred shield.
She might have good reason,
Like: ‘I was in prison and ye visited me not,’ or—some such.

As he lets down his shield, the poem opens into the woman’s “small/ And funny talk:/ ‘My baby began to walk . . . simply cannot keep his room clean . . .’”; this openness leads to the realization that a simple and temporary deliverance may be enough for the moment:

No shackles were shaken
But after she had taken her leave, he walked softly
And for hours used no hot words.

A more extended deliverance is recounted in Raymond Carver’s “Gravy.” He recalls “these past ten years” which, according to his doctors’ projections, he was not supposed to have had. But, told that he had six months to live, “He quit drinking! and the rest?/ After that it was all gravy, every minute/ of it. . . .” As he says to his friends, “I’m a lucky man,” thus expressing the gratitude of one who is healing—not just avoiding drink, but working toward serenity. Despite the commonplace use of “gravy” as a metaphor of unexpected gain, the poem succeeds in making its frank statement, as do many poems in this collection, by its honest and unadorned approach to large, even life-and-death, issues; in fact, this poem may succeed in part because of the commonplace metaphor, when “no other word will do.” No doubt, some of the poems in this collection are less skillful than others and would not work as well outside the context of the anthology. But then, one of the central tenets of recovery is that one heals, not in isolation, but in fellowship. The creative energy of this gathering helps the poems to address the issues involved here. In this context, Carver’s “Gravy” provides a fitting and decisive concluding statement: “Pure gravy. And don’t forget it.”