

Review · *Peter Filkins*

Kate Daniels. *The White Wave*. University of Pittsburgh Press 1984. 47 pp. \$6.95 paper. Ted Kooser. *One World at a Time*. University of Pittsburgh Press 1985. 59 pp. \$12.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper. John Matthias. *Northern Summer*. Swallow Press 1984. 222 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

Ted Kooser's sixth book of poetry brings together poems specializing in succinct and variable metaphors which, time and again, have proven Kooser a master of what on the one hand might be labeled "snapshot verse," or on the other a poetry of moment—fleeting, malleable, and deeply attached to the rhythms and oddities of everyday life. Like William Stafford, Kooser's bent is for a poetry of narrative, stories that could be true, but compressed and broken down to a bare minimum in order that their power should rest in what we imagine out of them. At times such tactics can make a poem seem contrived or set up only for the effect it hints at instead of working toward an end not contained in its beginning. Writers like Stafford or Kooser, however, work around such limitations by embracing them; never are we asked to feel that this is *the* poem, the one that they've been after for years, but rather that each piece is meant as a part of a larger whole, each book a refinement and extension of the one preceding it, and all of it put together existing as an approach to poetry as a means of being in the world by recording the haphazard toss of its becoming.

Like most poets of narrative and memory, Kooser is interested in the dustbin of existence, his penchant for the beauty of the odd and handed-down working as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of life and the small rites of tradition and observance that it inspires within us. "In the Basement of the Goodwill Store" is a good example of how he makes use of objects discarded and forgotten by setting them upon a purely human stage:

In musty light, in the thin brown air
of damp carpet, doll heads and rust,
beneath long rows of sharp footfalls

like nails in a lid, an old man stands
trying on glasses, lifting each pair
from the box like a glittering fish
and holding it up to the light
of a dirty bulb. Near him, a heap
of enameled pans as white as skulls
looms in the catacomb shadows,
and old toilets with dry red throats
cough up bouquets of curtain rods.

Reading like stage notes to a Samuel Beckett play, Kooser's use of language is at once both lovely and dramatic. His celebration of "footfalls/like nails in a lid" and glasses, "each pair/ . . . like a glittering fish," allows the objects their own rattle-bag beauty while the underplay of irony and wit keeps the scene from becoming cute. In much the same manner our sympathy for the old man both reaches out to and distances him, since as a metaphor he is meant to embody his own world of decay and absurdity as well as our own. Kooser plays upon this double edge in the second half of the poem, the story handed over, the old man's pathos wrapped up and delivered like a strange and terrible gift:

You've seen him somewhere before.
He's wearing the green leisure suit
you threw out with the garbage,
and the Christmas tie you hated,
and the ventilated wingtip shoes
you found in your father's closet
and wore as a joke. And the glasses
which finally fit him, through which
he looks to see you looking back—
two mirrors which flash and glance—
are those through which one day
you too will look down over the years,
when you have grown old and thin
and no longer particular,
and the things you once thought
you were rid of forever
have taken you back in their arms.

Kooser's sense of terror at the past constructed amid our present never becomes heavy-handed for his ability to take pleasure in the naming of things is also the source of his delight. Philosophy or ethics rarely enter into any of his poems, except in a backdoor manner by his wish to let life be what it is and all that it has been, at once. "Laundry" offers us another snapshot of this effort, and again it is the theatrical skit at work in the poem which deepens its moment through pleasure:

A pink house trailer,
scuffed and rusted, sunken
in weeds. On the line,

five pale blue workshirts
up to their elbows
in raspberry canes—

a good, clean crew
of pickers, out early,
sleeves wet with dew,

and near them, a pair
of bright yellow panties
urging them on.

It would seem easy to ask for more, to request more information about setting, motive, and intent, but to do so would be denying the very magic that such a poem is meant to convey. Though perhaps not as interesting in his use (or disuse?) of rhythm and meter as William Carlos Williams, Kooser comes out of the same school as the good doctor in his urge to present the panoply of everyday things and the innumerable funny, quizzical, and sad little moments that can be imagined within them. Moments odd, moments human, and most of all, moments stumbled on and made wonderful such as "Ladder":

. . . The kind with paint
from another world on its rungs,
the cream and butter colored spots

from another time, the kind that
before you get up in the morning
knocks hard at the front of your house
like a sheriff, that stands there
in front of your door with a smile;
a ladder with solid authority,
with its pantlegs pressed, a ladder
that if it could whistle would whistle.

Such moments are not the acts of a mind embattled and at odds with itself, but rather the graceful antics of an imagination unafraid of keeping itself open to fanciful play. That Kooser is also able to introduce a tantalizing eeriness into much of his imagery is a tribute to his talent for letting objects into a poem only to the extent that they are able to supply a life of their own. Metaphor is not allegory, and Kooser is keen to hold the distinction. Without it, he could so easily fall into truism and pastiche, but it is precisely his knack for “letting be what may become” which secures so many of his poems as the sure and imaginative feats that they are.

If there is one criticism to be leveled at the book and the poet it lies in that same sense of arbitrary rambling spoken of earlier. So many of the poems are, in fact, delivered to us “one world at a time,” but the sphere of reference out of which they are created is tenuous and hard to pin down. Though the past and its haunting pull exists as the backdrop to so much of the work, history hardly ever enters into them. Kooser is exceedingly adept at displaying any given moment within its own proper shading and light, but, without the driven necessity that the sense of place at odds with consequence can convey, there are always the dangers of repetition and superficiality to be overcome. Similarly, even though the book is divided into three sections, it is hard to make out any specific message or progression intended by the poems’ ordering. Not only does this make the use of sections seem like just a device or conceit to accommodate the reader’s attention span, but it also gives credence to the feeling that one good poem might so easily have been replaced by another, hence denying the work a measure of compulsion and need as a whole.

But this may be asking something of Kooser that goes against the very grain of what he and his poems are about. No doubt it is the free-floating

nature of his work combined with supple craftsmanship which make for its greatest delights. If one goes to such a book looking to change one's life, disappointment will follow, for Kooser is simply not a poet out to make the big sell. Instead, as a poet of sureness and wit, of the strange and unexpected, he takes a great deal of pleasure in delivering to us poems as arch and precise as "The Pitch":

Tight on the fat man's wrist
is a watch with a misty face.
His hand is hot on your sleeve.
He wants you to give him a minute,

friend, of your precious time.
He's got something for you
and the little lady. Call it
security, call it insurance,

call it aluminum siding.
Subscribe to these six magazines,
and the fat man wins a nice trip
to Hawaii, friend, a nice trip

to Acapulco. A fat man
hasn't much time in this world.
His pulse has one foot in a cast.
On his cheeks, red cobwebs appear.

He's got the Moose Lodge on his breath
like a vinegar bath, and his eyes
are yellow caution lights. Listen,
he's got a little woman, *too*.

Kate Daniels' first book of poems, *The White Wave*, offers an interesting contrast to the experienced mastery in Kooser's collection. Like most first books, there are stumblings and tenuous starts, but also the real, hard-fought challenges of a writer attempting the wrestle and press of her own true subject matter. In some ways this also allows the poems to probe

into deeper country. Less sure and devoid of restraint, Daniels' own talents for insight and steely discernment illustrate her promise as a poet of blood relations and the loaded psychology that accompanies them.

The book's first poem, "Family Gathering," is its most ambitious in both length and technical risk. Set in 1959, it describes a large family reunion from the perspective of the poet-child, its litany of images reconstructing the first felt world through the long dim light of memory:

The long sweat over the sink after the huge meal.

The women—aunts, mothers, grown cousins, grandmothers—
trading places in the assembly line of scrape and wash, wipe and
dry

Slow and calm. Their full cotton skirts twirling under their knees
their hair kinked up and sprayed in place.

In some ignored corner, I undress an unconvincing plastic doll
or run my fingers over the pictures in a book and watch them
pass the dishes back and forth, the thin white cups, the vacant
smiles
of expensive plates.

Daniels' skill at rhythm and metaphor are readily apparent. Not only is the scene described through language as clear and precise as that of a dream, but there is also a sense of specific character at work in the lines which lends an archetypal weight. Hence, it is at the crossroads of the psychological and the real that Daniels' most powerful vectors meet. Continuing with the description of the adults floating above her, the child's most powerful realization arises with the knowledge of her own membership in the clan when she confronts her sexual awakening:

And I am in my corner feeling it move under me like a body,
slow and strong.

Not fast: flowing and torpid. Not weak: wide and clenching,
stretching to fit the long moment.

My hair is brown.

My father's hair is brown.

My brother's hair is brown.

*The baby's hair will soon be brown.
I see my mother's fingers in my fingers
busy under the covers under the ruffled canopy
what it feels like hairy down there and soft-smelling.
What it means.*

That Daniels allows the language to unmask itself by violating its own grammar in “under the ruffled canopy/what it feels like hairy down there” shows how willing she is to let the psychological climax determine the shape of the poem rather than remaining constricted in her craft. Strangely enough, the child’s awakening into being confirms the existence of the adult beings that surround her rather than the grownups forcing her reality to be adapted to their own. This not only helps to support the framework of the poem by keeping the narrative within the child’s own mind, but also points to Daniels’ nature as a poet of Self, her refinement upon and shaping of the world functioning as a means of fleshing out her own temperament just as the child comes to understand her own heritage of rejection and loss at the poem’s end:

Now my father

still doesn't know how to touch me. He sees my scars
and puts his hand like a crown on top of my head
too roughly and it hurts. Then it's gone.
He's gone and the unintended roughness starts
soaking into the strange universe of movement around me,
into the dance that danced me so impossibly here
from these strangers' tall and barricaded bodies
to my own small collection of flesh and bone.

It comes as no surprise that the strongest poems in the book are about family members and the poet’s troubled relations with them. What makes them even stronger, however, is that Daniels so often avoids sentimentality or self-pity. When she does fall into such traps it comes at the expense of her own better strengths, most often the child reappearing as a weakened shadow of the being that comes to life in “Family Reunion.” A poem like “My Father’s Desk” also brings up the struggle with paternal power but at the expense of making the speaker too small and unbearably delicate when she notes:

I remember the way he touched me as a child,
the delicate latch of his fingers
on my weakling arm. I was so fresh
he was afraid for me—afraid I would break.
Something the world could never feel for me.

The problem here is that Daniels is falling into a whimper more readily than she is prepared to let the poem create its own. Filmmakers have taught us how much more powerful violence and pain are when alluded to rather than graphically displayed, and Daniels' own "Pyracantha" is much more adept at conveying the surge and bite of sex and the Oedipal struggles handed down to us by it:

Those bitter orange bullets
exploded every fall
next to the kitchen door.
You tended them on hands and knees
crushing one on your thumb
to show me the pulp and poison.

I chanted pyracantha, pyracantha,
and tied up bits with string
for your bedside table.
You loved its acridness,
the way it was nailed

into the nights he took you,
your cheek pressed in the pillow,
legs drawn up, pyracantha
oozing poison, your eyes drawn
to the tiny thorns of flame.

The difference between this and the earlier accusation is that here the explosiveness of the pyracantha, the very sound of it, is what carries the weight of the poem rather than a pleading last line working on the reader's own sympathy and sense of hurt. The poet's mother or father—they are really not what we want to learn about. Instead, it is the act of a human re-

lation, embodied and asserted for all of its violence and trust, which we are looking for, just as it is the redefinition of that violence and trust which we look for in the poem's controlled use of metaphor to rename it.

Since so many poems by younger writers nowadays deal with the struggle of family relations, there's a lot to be learned where Daniels both fails and succeeds. Whenever she does break out of her own past and deals with the world at large, her footing is less secure. Poems on nuclear apocalypse, abused children, and an elegy to the Hungarian poet Miklos Radnóti are sincere and deeply felt, but lack both control and invention. Much better are her turns towards her own battles through love and marriage, her use of irony much more supple and discreet in a poem like "Why We Won't":

have a child
is a continual

source of amazement
to the family

but I have not yet
been able

to reach my arms
around myself

and you are still
holding the shell

to your ear
and wondering

where that empty sound
comes from

That Daniels is still experimenting with both style and meter shows that she has not quite hit upon the one voice that will become her very own. Though the urgency she brings to the subject matter closest to her is often equaled by the language used to express it, there is still lacking that one

driven note throughout the book which allows the poems to echo and reflect upon one another in later readings. However, this is a trait not uncommon to a first book, and it can only be a matter of time before Kate Daniels finds her singular voice, no doubt one as dramatic, uncompromising, and intense as are some of the best poems in her first collection.

John Matthias' new and selected poems, *Northern Summer*, is a representative gathering of the poet's work from the last twenty years. Books such as this are almost always interesting for the light they shed on the development of a poet's voice over time, but in the case of Matthias there are complications which thwart such a clear overview. The main one is that he is a poet of extremely difficult and esoteric interests. That he is willing to provide reference notes for the readings involved with the poems is of little help; they function as nothing more than presumptuous tallies of the wide range of books he has read, no single work shown for whatever specific influence it has had on any one poem. Coupling this with a modernist aesthetic more Poundian than Pound, what we have is a poet with an obvious gift for language as well as a vigorous desire for experimentation, but one in the end who remains remote, eccentric, and largely unreadable.

Take for instance Matthias' "Turns: Toward a Provisional Aesthetic and a Discipline." The title poem from his second book, which he terms his first confident and realized work, is meant to provide some kind of glimpse of what makes this poet tick, namely through an analysis of the English language as an historical seedbed antecedent to his own involvement with writing. Casting the first section in Old English, he later follows it up with a commentary illustrating his own present-day historical perspective:

And make him known to 14th-century men
Even when everything favors living?
Even if we could reverse that here
I know you've read and traveled too.

So Destination and Destiny. *Quere He Was Boun!*
And yet to introduce the antecedent place.
Restrictive clause; sense of the referent noun.
A tilted cart is a cart with an awning.

Langland has it “keured”
John of Mandeville “coured”
Wycliffe “keured”

But “covert” in Arimathaea

Personal luggage: not the same as merchandise.
Cursor Mundi’s “gudes”; Purity’s “godes”

This is personal luggage/ destination/ travel

Harp and pipe and symphonye

(saf a pakke of bokes)

What this *seems* to be about is Matthias’ own command of the language as well as the requisite command that language has upon himself. An American poet who admits that he can write his best work only in England and abroad, there is also the element of his trying to come to terms with a place through idiom, especially the transformations of idiom via the siftings of history. And yet the third, more important theme at work here is the poet’s urge to understand the powerful flux of language by entering and contributing to the flux himself. The last section of the poem is written in prose and serves to elucidate just this premise in its own cagey manner:

But make him known to the 14th-century men even when everything favors the living. Reason the nature of place. Reason he can praise. Reason that he travels in a cart. With Cursor Mundi’s “gudes”; with Purity’s “godes.” With Joseph of Arimathaea, turns: to elliptically gloss.

“To elliptically gloss” is the intent of a great deal of Matthias’ work. Behind it may lie a concern for history, for place, and the language that a poet is meant to possess in confrontation with them both, but it is the evasion of direct statement through the adornment of background context which the poems hope to accomplish. All of it illustrates an active, erudite

mind willing to tangle with large and unwieldy abstractions while also remaining sprightly and energetic in its syntax. But because of the deflection of meaning involved it is so very hard to see just what Matthias is trying to get at without thinking that there could have been other ways more clear, and where the purpose of the muddle is not the muddle itself.

All of this is not to say that Matthias cannot write a good poem. On several occasions he proves himself very adept at handling standard metrics, and even in the most confusing pieces there is always the shadow of a deep sensitivity at work. Because there has always been a certain amount of sentimentality mixed up with the purest strains of modernism, it is no surprise that Matthias' best poems take on the nature of elegy. "Epilogue from a New Home," written on request for the wife of a dead friend, does an interesting turn in admitting the inability of any poem to sum up a life and that, in fact, this is the limitation any elegy must face:

Oh, I remember you that day: the terror in
your face, the irony and love. And I remember
What you wanted me to do. That ancient charge: to
read whatever evidence in lives or lies appears,
In stones or bells—transform, transfigure then whatever
comedy, catastrophe or crime, and thus
Return the earth, thus redeem the time. And this:
to leave it all alone (unspoken always: look, I have
This moment and this place): *Cum on, cum on my owyn
swet chyld; goo we hom and take our rest . . .
Sing we to the oldest harpe, and playe. . . .* Old Friend,
old debt: I'm welcoming at last your presence now.
I'm but half-oriented here. I'm digging down.

The sad irony of this is that Matthias has sacrificed none of his ideas or convictions in writing such beautiful lines, and that given such talent all the other obtuse displays of overworked learning seem somewhat a waste. To be this clear, this insightful, and ultimately this human is surely as difficult a feat as any quixotic adventure through history frustrating and mocking our urge for comprehension.

Both of the poems quoted thus far are from Matthias' early work, but it is also clear from the selection of new poems that his inscrutability remains

largely intact. Although he has relinquished much of his difficult syntax, the frame of reference remains as turgid and obscure as ever, most of the time his immense interest and research in English history resulting in a kaleidiscopic hangover of spurious details and events. Describing Kirkcaldy, Scotland in a section from "Northern Summer," he writes:

In Kirkcaldy one considers economics.
We need a dozen eggs. I leave my folly, catch
a bus near Wemyss, and walk around
this "old lang toun" that bears the name
of Mary's last defender.
Loyal old Kirkcaldy, last
support and stay of an unlucky queen,
scourge of Bothwell, keeper
of the craggy rock in Edinburgh
out of which your one-time friend John Knox
would pry you even with his
final fetid breath—

Linoleum?

From here the poem goes on with a consideration of economics by alluding to Adam Smith's stay at Kirkcaldy, his later studies and writings, the development of free market trading and the ravages it has brought upon society, while as a result "Beggared sentiment flew straight into the hills." Though Matthias' political sentiments may be admirable, it is still difficult to figure out what he is after simply because he is so reluctant to note where he is coming from. Why Scotland? Why Kirkcaldy? Why Adam Smith? No doubt Matthias is a poet stimulated by foreign soil in both his life and in his poetry, but without a communicable aesthetic or the sense of the necessity for writing this poem, at the time, and in this place, it is hard to get past reading him as some kind of wayward tourist.

In the end the best road into Matthias' work is via Pound. He himself acknowledges the connection with his own "E.P. in Crawfordsville" from the new poems, the somewhat cute elipticism of addressing the master as "E.P." already enough to qualify him as a member of the fraternity of Pound worshipers. Though the poem is much more comprehensible than

others and does draw a devout and loving portrait of the greying fox, it cannot help but strain too hard at bearing the Poundian stamp in its middle stanzas:

. . . *Gay Cino*
of quick laughter,
Cino, of the dare, the jibe.
What, asked Possum more

then once, does Ezra Pound
believe? In light. In
light from the beginning,
in gardens of the sun—
But “‘Pollo Phoibee, old
tin pan’” in Crawfordsville?
Age des Lumières! Bold
Polnesi, Jefferson, Voltaire—

Despite its hilarity, its affection, and most of all its compassion for a monumental figure playing to the crowd in his last days, the poem's reverence attempts to outdo itself with each new line, at times sounding almost like a high school cheer for a dear old chum from bygone days. No writer can deny the legacy left by both Eliot and Pound, but it is perhaps wise to think that they would have been the first to spurn their imitators, just as they spurned the decadence that came before them. Matthias is too talented a manipulator of language to be labeled as just an imitator, but in light of so much of the pseudo-modernistic confusion going on in this collection it is sad to think of how the talent could be put to better use.

In the opening section of the title poem to *Northern Summer*, Matthias gives perhaps the best description of his own concerns and what he thinks poetry should be:

Language
moving upon consequence
Consequence
upon a language: Flight
of an heraldic bird
through space that is inhabited.

In many ways this is a lovely description of what any good poetry of consequence should attempt to accomplish. Where Matthias defeats his own cause by refusing to posit his verse with flesh and blood, both Ted Kooser and Kate Daniels have shown themselves capable of grafting language upon consequence and urging that bird into flight. All that one could wish for is that somehow Matthias' deep sense of history could be combined with both Kooser's attention to craft and Daniels' handling of character and narrative. Until a poet capable of all three comes along, poetry will probably remain the specialized and segregated art form that it is right now, though no doubt it is healthy to have available as much variation, inventiveness, and wit as these three books have demonstrated. For they are pleasures, too.