

Review · *Richard Robbins*

THREE ATTENTIONS

What We Did After Rain. Art Homer.
University of Nebraska at Omaha: Ab-
batoir Editions. Letterpress, limited
edition. \$25.00.

In the nature of the meditative poem, Art Homer's meanings surface on the page in small measures, and at shifting volumes. There is the context—the kitchen cutting board before supper, for example, the streets of Portland, Oregon, at dawn—there is the self with its baggage of grief and delicate faiths, and there is the fact of the world: changing, revealing itself, disguised. Homer's integrity as a poet derives in part from his attempt to pay equal attention to all three elements of meditation. He won't objectify the context or the world, and he won't create mere monuments to pain or self-betrayal. Rather, he allows the free interchange of each with the others. Cutting mushrooms, he remembers

Even Lee, with a violent
nickel in San Quentin
under his thick belt,
proved he could cook
beef and onions
black in a skillet
the night our family rushed
accident-prone Clarence
to Emergency. And he
meant trouble early,
sending his sisters back
two miles in snow
to find something they dropped:
their footprints.

He remembers how, following his own “private schedule of defeat,”

Years later I found a swallow
tumbled on a warehouse floor,
imagined it circling
that dark room, dirty windows
wheeling before it, just as I
circled all day for my wage.

(“Short of Grieving”)

What the speaker and we come to realize from these attentions is that something is always missing, either in context, self, or world. In childhood, Father is the one who’s disappeared, becoming “a dark cloud / ending my favorite story.” Later, growing up makes clear the missing familiar:

Morning works closer as ages slip through
the body of all things. Shrimp-like in ponds,
mosquito and salamander hatch. Mayflies dry
their wings and things become other things.

(“I Am a Boy Under Trees”)

What can result is the dehumanizing of the father, of the other beaten lives that are doled out their embarrassing dignity on the newspaper’s front page. They judge their worth by how much power has left them. Or what results is denaturing, as when children forget “water and promise,” even “how poverty and work / beat love out of their parents.”

More often in these poems, though, Homer records the adult complement to the disappearances of world or self. In the book’s second half, he demonstrates an acquired faith—that is, a hope borne out by action—in the conscious creation of relationships. Still in the attitude assumed at the collection’s beginning, still triple-focused, the speaker in these latter poems goes beyond the earlier ones to *welcome* the daily, the difficult, and the fair or unfair. In this section are the poems that celebrate detail, a group of wireworkers’ “curled boots pointing heavenward.” Here is the “Anthem to a Little-known River” and other anthems not only to the Oregon Coast, barn swallows, and an urban reservoir, but to insomnia (“I

begin by building my sailboat”), the spirit of a long-dead Indian cave-painter, and—in one of the book’s finest strokes—the whim that takes a man outside in the wrong season to hose down his driveway, to be part of a passing world:

Because you love
the usual, rain, tired sky, you cannot pray—
not even if it helps explain your sudden wish
to be the old man watching all this from his porch,
not asked for any pretense of work or joy to take
what sight still gives of color, and in slack
light to lift no hand to change a thing within
this perfect world of promised dark—
just to see, and in plain seeing judge, as well
as any god could ask, all things good
which do not chorus for attention.
(“Duplex on Main”)

Some readers might be too eager to condemn the few flaws of this collection; the one or two examples of easy pastoralism, the handful of lines so rhythmically dense they leave a person dizzy by their end. What these readers would overlook in their reaction against the book, however, would be its rare attempt to establish—in the imagination and in its music—an equanimity based on more than the sentimental yearnings and despairs of an isolated ego. Everyone knows there’s enough of that bad writing around already. What we get here, instead, are the true stories.