

On Michael Heffernan · *Peter Junker*

IN GIVING HIS THIRD full-length book of poems a title suggestive of domestic peace and quiet, Michael Heffernan commits only a little white lie. *The Man at Home* is filled with passion and unambiguously chaotic dreams. A few core poems do take place around the house, where the poet indulges in introspection that ranges from the comic to the rapturous to the mundane. But despite its occasional images of neighborhood, television, and plumbing, the book's sense of "home" has none of the cliché we might be led to expect. Heffernan's epigraph, "Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee," is as profound a charge to the contemporary poet as it was to its hearer in the gospels—the miraculously healed lunatic, the man who lived among tombs and knew no home but madness. "Home," here, isn't defined by familiar surroundings and ordinary experience. It is the place of return, where tales of long, strange journeys can be told. For Heffernan, it is a territory between uncontrollable joy and unavoidable darkness, where memories of both—and of other encounters with the miraculous—must be pondered, crafted, and shared.

"The House of God" depicts a Sunday morning spent at home with the poet's three-year-old son Mick, "while Mom goes praying with the others." The scene is anything but tranquil. Yet the poem's blank verse gives it a genuine solemnity, and the language manages to encompass both satire and sincere rejoicing. Mick is equally fascinated with a TV preacher and a Hulk Hogan doll, while his father, enraptured by a recording of violinist Josef Suk (a presumably more elevated distraction), wonders felicitously at the concept of tele-salvation:

Our souls are rich with this the Lord's own musick.
Why should we spend them on the likes of these
who labor to break our hearts and keep the change?
With this, I'm shut from braver utterance,

Michael Heffernan. *The Man at Home*. University of Arkansas Press, 1988. 72 pp. \$14.95 (cloth), \$8.95 (paper).

for lo, behold, the Hulkster is on the wing
like a great beefy bird from Mick's embrace,
and Mick jumps up to meet him in the air
so both of them can tumble down again
released and rescued under Josef's bow.

At times, Heffernan seems to wonder whether the very stability of home and its commitments increases the writer's struggle to achieve musical, truth-telling language. This often gives the poems a sense of stock-taking, as if the costs of love and survival are being calculated. "Lines from the Interior," the first poem, is a letter to a distant friend. It is also a darkly comic self-appraisal that ambivalently recalls the persona of the poetic magician/maniac familiar to readers of Heffernan's first book, *The Cry of Oliver Hardy* (Georgia, 1979). Having survived his chosen engagements with life's madness through wit and technical wile, the mature poet now claims to find himself lumbering through the minor indignities of middle age armed with only a "lockstep neofascist strophe."

First I was going to say I think my numbers
have grown so numb they're frozen tight with rime
beneath which every nerve inside me slumbers

As they've been slumbering now for a long time . . .

. . . I'll admit my wit's exasperated

By certain things neglecting to go right
that once I might have bent my brains to fix
when ample forces kept me wild and wet

that now am winded pulling up my socks,
gone flaccid at the loins, loose at the knees
and so plush in the guts my carcass looks

about to burst with griefs and grievances—
the daily round of consternations—taking
up room amid my noontime reveries . . .

As the terza rima by turns marches and wanders, it clearly proves the poet's fears of dotage groundless. What amazed in *The Cry of Oliver Hardy* and *To the Wreakers of Havoc* (Georgia, 1984) amazes here: the poem's indulgence in authentic melancholy manages to be simultaneously comic and poignantly revealing. In a passage of literal stock taking (perhaps including a portrait of the self-pitying artist), one section ends:

Yet we're a glad house otherwise: two dogs
three boys, eleven fishes — one a poor

gruesome plecostimus who only lugs
his dreadful self around when he's awake
or dozes like a troll among some crags.

In his previous collections, Heffernan sometimes enlisted the ghosts of madmen, poets, hermits, and patriarchs as spiritual guides or adversaries. By trying their voices in his verse, the poet works toward understanding what is attractive and abhorrent in them, thereby discovering something about his own desires and fears. Two new apparitions in *The Man at Home* are surprising for their contrasting visions: Ronald Reagan and Walt Whitman. Reagan's mystique is explored in "Presidents" and "The Neighborhood Crazyman Talks to the President on the Eve of the Libyan Raids"; and the ageless contradictions of the so-called new patriotism "in the age of Ronaldus Africanus . . ." are expressed in the poem "All That You Can Be." The harbors of these poems are mined with cynicism and irony, and Heffernan's successful navigation through such dangerous water is shocking in its apparent simplicity:

I flung imagination forth and saw
what life was like in Dacia in the 1st century B.C.
while the Legions were pulling up stakes against
hordes of primordial white-trash in dogskin overalls.
This was in the garden in the chaise lounge
before coming up attic to tap this out
on the old low-tech Underwood Noiseless . . .

Kathy has gone upstreet with the three boys,
none of them big enough yet to kill for Christ
or Merrill Lynch. I notice the flamboyant
pair of blossoming redbuds on the berm
across the street while Mick in his white shoes
traipses around the corner dragging a stick,
and I am happy and sad enough at once
to weep for my country and my neighborhood . . .
(“All That You Can Be”)

Whitman, while not called by name, is unmistakably present through his spiritual (if not formal) influence. In “Blackbirds” the poet muses on his predecessor’s excesses like a fond great-nephew, vaguely aware of excesses of his own (“I think I could turn and live with vegetables / they are so savory and unperplexed”). Echoes of Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” can be heard in “Manchild,” in which Heffernan’s reminiscence of childish artistic awakening—despite his knowledge of death and doubt—inspires the poet’s rededication to innocence:

Thunder, birdsong, rainfall were
divine ideas of an earlier
redemption in the skin. I was a boy
of seven underneath. Multiple sins
against the sacred idiom of desire
cried out to be expunged. This joy I mention,
it was like candy-drops in little tins,
like tiny coals nesting inside the fire,
the look of larks taking a turn in sunshine.

What did you mean by that, madman? Whatever
it ends up saying is the thing I mean.
I mean to say precisely what the lover
says when he finds beloved words again
to make beloved talk for his beloved.

The poet’s role in the world is that of the wooing lover (and in two of the best poems, “In the Forum at Lugdunum” and “Willow,” the speaker

really is a wooing lover — although the fact is kept secret until the poem is good and ready to tell it). Loving life as it is, wooing it, with eyes open to its injustice and suffering, sounds like resignation, but it is a resignation *to love*. “Manchild” ends:

. . . what a man could do I did
about the things I had some say about.
Anything much else was in the mind of God,
even the daybreak, what there was of it.

Michael Heffernan’s poetry suggests that having “some say” — telling stories, making beloved talk, or risking a bellylaugh — is what the lover, the poet, and the woman and man at home can do.