

The Salt Ecstacies. James L. White. Graywolf Press, 1982, 53 pp. Hardbound, \$10.00; Paperback, \$5.00.

We respond very curiously to posthumous collections of poetry. Such books tend to either be ignored completely or to suddenly become the lurid sacred texts of poetry cults. The *Ariel* cult has existed for years now, and a similar following has lately developed around the work of the late Frank Stanford. But the finest posthumous collections, such as Vallejo's *Poemas Humanos* and Berryman's *Delusions Etc.* are able to both escape neglect and avoid the distorted adulation of the cultists. James L. White's *The Salt Ecstacies* is one of those rare posthumous collections that should belong to this latter category. The book was in proof at the time of White's death from heart failure last year at the age of 45, and with *The Salt Ecstacies* White had become a significant poet. The book is a haunting, troubling statement, obsessed with loss and mortality. But, finally, it is also redemptive, and White's accomplishment should not be ignored.

There is little in White's three previous collections, *Divorce Proceedings* (1972), *A Crow's Story of Deer* (1974), and *The Del Rio Hotel* (1975), which prepares us for the achievement of *The Salt Ecstacies*. Although the new volume reprints two poems from *The Del Rio Hotel*, the earlier books are often apprentice work, interesting largely because they reveal the variousness of White's career. Born in Indianapolis in 1936, White received degrees from Indiana University and Colorado State University, served in the army, was a dancer for the American Ballet Theatre, and lived for many years in the Southwest among the Navajo. His last years were spent in Minneapolis, where he supported himself as a member of the Minnesota Poets-in-the-Schools program. The poems in the early collections are scrupulously attentive to the Southwestern landscape, and show a great respect for Native American culture. But their speaker often seems strangely impersonal, and his stance is finally reportorial rather than committed. The poems are technically superior to much of the regional poetry found in so many areas of the country, but they suffer from the central problem of most regionalist writing—a thematic tunnel vision.

In *The Salt Ecstacies*, landscape grows unimportant. Though place

names abound in the new volume, particular landscapes and locations are eschewed for a larger locale, the realm of memory. The central tension in the volume, the dilemma around which White creates his personal myth, is between the immediacy of approaching death and the poet's desperate need to abandon nostalgia while still making sense of his past. Like Cavafy and James Wright, the poets he seems to have been most influenced by, White views recollection as an ambivalent process, both comforting and frightening. For White, viewing the past nostalgically is not a way of recapturing our earlier lives, but of diffusing them, and he wants nothing of this. Instead, he seeks to remember *precisely*, no matter how discouraging the result of this process may be. These ideas are best conveyed in "The Ordinary Composure," the prose poem which opens the volume and which serves as the book's *ars poetica*. I quote the poem in full:

I question what poetry will tremble the wall into hearing or tilt the stone angel's slight wings at words of the past like a memory caught in elms. We see nothing ahead. My people and I lean against great medical buildings with news of our predicted death, and give up mostly between one and three in the morning, never finding space large enough for a true departure, so our eyes gaze earthward, wanting to say something simple as *the meal's too small: I want more*. Then we empty from a room on Intensive Care into the sea, releasing our being into the slap of waves.

Poems break down here at the thought of arms never coupling into full moons by holding those we love again, and so we resort to the romantic: a white horse set quivering like a slab of marble into dancing flesh.

Why remember being around a picnic table over at Brookside Park? My mother wore her sweater even in the summer because of the diabetes. Night blackened the lake like a caught breath. We packed things up. I think I was going to school that fall or a job somewhere. Michael'd go to Korea. Before we left I hit the torn softball into the lake and Michael said, "You can't do that for shit James Lee."

Going back I realized the picnic was for us. It started to rain in a totally different way, knowing we'd grow right on up into wars and trains and deaths and loving people and leaving them and being left and being alone.

That's the way of my life, the ordinary composure of loving, loneliness and death, and too these prayers at the waves, the white horse shimmering, bringing it toward us out of coldest marble.

The poem's principle impulse is mnemonic, moving from its reliance on statement in the two opening paragraphs to the childhood memory in paragraphs three and four. The usefulness of art and poetry is doubted in the poem's opening sentences ("I question what poetry will tremble the wall into hearing. . ."), just as the usefulness of nostalgia is questioned as the poem continues ("Why remember being around a picnic table over at Brookside Park?"). But finally, as the poem concludes, the impulses of both art and memory have somehow fused, not into a new synthesis that clarifies these issues for the poet, but simply as a way of explaining their obsessive power over him. The ending of the poem, while not transcendent, is at the very least courageous, and informs us of White's resolve to come to terms with both memory and loss during the course of the volume. The book's other major concerns—the poet's need to confront his own mortality, and his struggle to exist in our society as a homosexual—are filtered through White's desire to comprehend his own past, and therefore to understand the nature of time.

As with "The Ordinary Composure," the volume's most poignant poems do not appear to win this struggle. They either reach an uneasy stasis, or, as in "Making Love to Myself," finally admit to a kind of failure that is nonetheless compelling. "Making Love to Myself" may begin as a masturbatory fantasy, but its impulses are hardly sensationalistic, or even very sexual:

When I do it, I remember how it was with us,
then my hands remember too
and you're with me again, just the way it was.

After work you'd come in and
turn the TV off and sit on the edge of the bed,

filling the room with the gasoline smell from your overalls,
trying not to wake me which you always did.
I'd breathe out long and say,
"Hi Jess, you tired baby?"
. . . and I always thought I'd die a little
because you smelt like burnt leaves or woodsmoke.

By the end of the poem, the speaker's memory of his lover grows too painful to continue to evoke, for White insists on recreating his experience in absolutely faithful detail. The ending of the poem, so flat and yet so affecting, recalls the James Wright of *Two Citizens*:

We promised there'd always be times
when the sky was perfectly lucid,
that we could remember each other through that.
You could remember me at my worktable
or in the all-night diners,
though we'd never call or write.

I have to stop here Jess.
I just have to stop.

The resignation implied by these lines, pained but not despairing, is also found in the book's longest and most ambitious effort, "The Clay Dancer." The poem might be called a *self-elegy*, but it avoids self-pity through a linguistic *tour de force* and a discrete surrealist narrative. The poem's length allows it to incorporate a large range of diction. There are Strand-like litanies, straightforward confessional passages, and an element of black humor, all crescendoing into an almost operatic finale. In terms of technique, the poem is rather an anomaly among White's work, but in its concerns and scope "The Clay Dancer" is the central poem in the volume. Though short quotes from the poem will not do it adequate justice, this interrogatory from the second section is particularly chilling:

Then what did you write of?
"How I failed as a man
or what was asked of my manhood,
through the long distance,

dreaming wrong.”

Then what did you write of?

“Trains under my sleep to Dearborn and beyond.”

Then what did you write of?

“My first time
in the hot room.

The guilt, the shame making it perfect.”

Then what did you write of?

“Only what I chased.

Dust in a hundred cities
and the blind swaying just right.

Mother hanging sheets by the steaming tub.

The bluing smell of my father’s shirts.

His white Sunday strolling suit.

His never being dead enough.”

Here is the poem’s final section, an eerie epilogue spoken, apparently, after the protagonist’s death:

Here at the Del Rio, honey,
your shaken steps are voided.
An anonymous patron has picked up your tab.
Your room’s off the verandah.
It’s quiet here except for weekends
when Reba brings the girls down for the sailors.

You look quite young in your famous blue button-down.
A sax and piano begin the waltz.
Sweet chocolate sends you your first drink.
The neon lights up tit-pink:
 and the night
 and the night
 and the night!

Remarkably enough, White is usually able to avoid the pitfalls of solipsism and self-pity that this kind of writing often results in. While

the majority of the book's poems are concerned with the issues of self and memory, White balances these themes with a number of character studies and monologues. The subjects of these poems are always figures existing on the fringes of society—a transvestite singer, a farm woman who has left her husband, a childhood friend crippled by strokes and inertia. It is significant that White chooses these subjects not simply to enlarge the concerns of his more personal poems, but to display a true empathy. Like Denis Johnson, whose cast of outsiders is remarkably similar to White's, he neither judges nor romanticizes his subjects. The drag singer of "Oshi," dissipated and numbed by drugs, nevertheless "has a very large Buddha in him." Similarly, the infected sailors and prostitutes who are the subjects of "Syphilis Prior to Penicillin" become almost heroic figures as they struggle to accept their irreversible disorders:

Those who knew their condition
often banded together
trying not to infect others with
a 'taste for mud' as the French say.

They were a cavalier and doomed lot,
trying to hold back the dawn
in their foreign hotels,
where the night porters filled rooms
with verbena and gardenias
to hide the cooking smells of sulphur ointments.

At last there were signs they couldn't hide.
The motor nerves giving way so they walked with
odd flickering steps. That's why Amelia and Rose Montana
would sit the evening through playing mah-jong,
and the old sailors, Paul and James,
rarely asked the whores to dance.

But it is neither in the book's more ambitious efforts like "The Clay Dancer," nor in character studies like "Oshi" that White displays his most powerful writing. The last poems in the volume, written shortly before the poet's death, may be White's finest achievements. Their language is deceptively simple, employing a quirky diction that without

warning shifts from plainness to embellishment. In contrast to “The Clay Dancer,” these poems appear to have come to terms with mortality. The knowledge of approaching death gives the speaker an almost paradoxical belief in self-renewal. Characteristically, it is a renewal born not of Rilkean mysticism, but of lucidity and attention to immediate experience. “Dying Out” begins,

I love the cambric night snowing down First Avenue
and the heaven of being near things I know,
my apartment, the old rugs and chair, the moons
of my nails above which I write.

And the snow in distant woods where animals
give silently all
and everything into dying—their fossils in spring,
the jonquil and pure bone.

In the poem’s conclusion, White again returns to the sculptural metaphors of “An Ordinary Composure”:

I’ve left so many this year
who’ve felt too comfortable with my old design.
Because I want another life rinsed new in middle age,
the way a hard sickness changes a person.
The way snow changes the billboards
by my drugstore to read VANQUISH PAIN and
RELIEF FROM THE ORDINARY.

I don’t want forgiveness from people,
only to be seen from another way,
like the back of a sculpture,
perhaps the nape of a neck or an open helpless palm,
some familiar form viewed from another direction.

The stance here is one named in the book’s penultimate effort, a sequence called “Poems of Submission.” And the reader finishes the book believing that White has not triumphed over the forces he has battled, but he has *submitted* to them and in doing so has found a kind of liberation that is partial, but nonetheless convincing. In “Poems of Submission” and

in "Naming," the book's final poem, the issues of memory, mortality, and sexuality that have propelled the collection are finally brought to closure. "Naming" is a moving tribute to the poet's mother. Here is its final stanza:

Old woman, my mother,
so full of sickness it becomes acquaintance,
don't die. The world is nearly empty for me.
Take me to your river of first words again.
"Look son, this is stone.
Here is flower.
Here between my legs you entered the world.
Call it 'door.'
Look son, another flower called going away, and this
is called too soon."

Perhaps a significant achievement in poetry cannot rest on a single collection, but there are moments of grandeur in *The Salt Ecstacies*, and they equal the best efforts of almost any of the poets in White's generation. Whether this means that the book will be widely read or not remains to be seen, but *The Salt Ecstacies* is a superb collection, and it deserves to be recognized as such. A word of praise should also go to Graywolf Press, certainly one of the country's finest small presses, for producing another finely printed and attractive volume—few writers are graced with such a fitting memorial.