

Small Press Review · Josephine Miles

I am going to repeat a cliché, that in the poetry of the early 80's nostalgia is the dominating tone. Grandfathers reign. Mothers-in-law are in ascension, their feminine instincts possibly suggesting the cessation of war at last. A touch of horror and of fantasy mingles with a touch of kindness and wistfulness. Surreal is real, in the cabinets of memory, financed by aid of the NEA.

These small press books are good-looking in shape and form and they are consistent in a kind of mastery of subject. I feel as if I know a lot about young poets in America today. But I feel too that there is an awful lot I don't know. How did they vote in the latest election? What ideas are they fond of? What songs do they sing? Birds, I agree, do sing too.

In the 1960's I read a great deal of the poetry sent to another quarterly. It was very different because of the times, I think, not because of the magazine. It was strongly observational, focusing on objects in describable settings. An empty cigarette package floating in a pool of water might be described, for example, but not, as now, the feelings of withdrawal, of mere relevance. Those tried to be neutral packs. What we have lost in objectivity, in sense of qualities, we have gained in relevance of association.

Take titles: *Family Salt*, by Elizabeth McKim; *My Body Was Eaten By Dogs*, by David McFadden; *Lust in 28 Flavors*, by Lynne Savitt; *Love Poem for a Bank Robber*, by Jane Teller; *Under the Weight of the Sky*, by Kirk Robertson; *Seeds in the Wind*, by Richard Blakely; *Light Years*, by Merrill Gilfillan; *November Barometer*, by James Hickson; *Wild Cherries*, by Dale Herd.

Or think of the press names themselves: Station Hill, Carpenter, Second Coming, Cherry Valley, Blue Wind, Green Harbor, Turkey Press.

Judith Harris' poem "Morning Star" is suggestive of whole kinds, as are all the poems that follow:

When I wake
I think I have nothing.

Into my life
my dangerous body

I take in both worlds
and breathe.¹

* * *

cormorant

silly looking bird
with a long black neck
like a whip
riding your cushion
of water you seem

somehow like a
young girl doing
yoga her feet
kissing her crotch

silly bird with
head in the air
I watch you
disappear
into the water

come up with a
beakfull of light
a fish too large
for your gulping
style

cormorant I know you
the way your dark beak
tears into life.²

* * *

postcard to a fetus

i just thought
since you're all curled up
inside there
i'd tell you about it
how it was
when your mother & i
came together
in a moon of cherries
squirrel ran up a tree
wind blew but stopped
when the pipe was lit
& the breath was trapped
in small buckskin pouches
i was told
you will have a tough life
all you can do
is go through it
and that's how small things
survive like grass
pushes up through
cracks in the asphalt³

* * *

So we live for the promise
that the mind may revolt
to some stronger condition

But mostly we are weak with horror
at the soul that wants to swim up
through babies and marriage
through murder and religion
yet wisdom might come from that

There are desperate contentions . . .

Beset by the strands of my own life
I am often in need of salvation⁴

* * *

Many of these 50 poets are young. Some are more experienced than others in moving lines into poems and poems into books. What I wish for is more of such motion either narrative or lyrical, musical, or even, I suppose, dramatic. The fragments of insight seem to outweigh their wholes. A couple of books of mystical or religious verse, even if less coherent to my belief, are eased by a greater assurance of context.

I don't think we have great poets here but they are interesting ones and as a group they lead to a sense of interest for the future. Lots and lots of poems!—from these the future comes, and I hope with more moving energy than is here. The motives of idea, of cadence, of rhythm, of drive, can lift these poems off the pages where they are now printed and into the bloodstream where they can be felt.

NOTES

1 *Poppies* (Washington Writer's Publishing House, 1981)

2 Al Masarik, *Nonesuch Creek* (Duck Down Press, 1980)

3 Kirk Robertson, *Under the Weight of the Sky* (Cherry Valley, 1978)

4 Michael Hannon, *Ship Without Paper* (Turkey Press, 1978)