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Not For Art Nor Prayer: a journey of a poet's gratitude, wonder and love

John McCormick · Wednesday, January 27th, 2016

Often when I read a book of poetry, I find myself saying either “There are a lot of good, memorable poems, but it didn’t feel like a book” or “The book has a great impact, but I can’t recall a single poem or sequence in particular”. In this case, I found myself drawn in by lines, entering the house of each poem, swept away by the force of the sections, and very satisfied with the fullness of the *Not for Art nor Prayer*.

It’s been said that we owe debts as poets, and readings should start by giving voice to another’s poem. Beyond the epigraph, Darren C. Demaree accomplishes this through his opening sequence of “Adorations”.

Adoration #83

for my grandmother, Gloria

Ninety
broken
pieces

can be
turned in-
to any-

thing you
want. Meld
the truth.

And with these broken pieces – these short lines – we see Demaree cobble the poems together into a mosaic of gratitude. While the poet looks outward in praise, we learn about the importance of that praise – like a haiku tells us as much about the worldview of the poet as the world that is shown. Demaree finds instances of resilience and joyfulness in his subjects and catalogues them for future use.

In the section “All of Them Whole” we do see the fragments rounded out more. Individuals and their actions are certainly still present, but now we receive a broader sense of place and how it gets into the blood of the people and their actions. Setting is not passive for the people or the place, there’s a definite striving. These poems often bring up the decisions and commitments we make to the landscapes we call home. For the poet, a recommitment to Ohio.

The next section “Wednesday Mornings” transitions us from the outward to the inward. Like “Adorations” these are short poems, haiku-esque in their appearance and sense of discovery. Unlike haiku where seasons and nature are fore fronted, these short poems explore, through glimpses, the life of the poet at home with his family.

Wednesday Morning #35

Soft-hearted, beating
hard,

I must look tough
wanting

this gentleness
to be everywhere.

My rebellion opens.

In this poem, and in this section, we see the grandeur and humility of the home. The recognition of hard work, the craft of poetry, the joys of family, the moments when we catch ourselves through the eyes of another watching us. These snapshots and diary entries show us the poet we’ve seen out in the world appreciating other people, other places, and now places him in his home with the same sense of resilient dedication to wonder.

These sections have built and readied the reader for the section, “Emily As A Mango Hitting the Ground.” In this sequence of “Emily as ____” poems, we are set to swirl in the mind of the poet dedicating and rededicating his love poems. We are in the midst of his imagination, fully dedicated to exploring all the aspects of his relationship with Emily. A few sample titles: “Emily As The length of a fox”, “Emily as the aftermath of a vibrant image”, “Emily as the Cicada’s song crests”. We see narrative and metaphor put to the use of mythmaking his relationship. Added to the blood that was so present in “All of them whole,” we encounter references to dirt, structure and falling – such primal elements to any myth. As well as the retelling and shifting as Emily, his love of Emily, and his ideas of Love all play the part of Emily in the poems – sometimes quiet, sometimes daring and mischievous.

To build a good soup, every ingredient must matter, and each must be added at the right time. This book is a tasty bowl of soup. Each line, each poem, attended to carefully and added at the right time, allow the reader to drink in the depths of the poet’s journey – a delightful blending of observation and imagination.

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