

BOOK REVIEWS

Holy Days of Obligation. By Susan Zettell. Winnipeg: Nuage Editions, 1998. 160 pages. \$14.95 paper.

Given a tomato still warm out of the garden, you instinctively bring it to your nose and take a deep breath. The essence of fresh tomato, the memory of every perfect tomato eaten, the smell of summer. In *Holy Days of Obligation*, Susan Zettell brings memory to instant life with writing that connects to all the senses.

The fifteen stories in *Holy Days of Obligation* move forward and back in time, as memory makes one connection, then another in a family history: the after-rain smell of worms in the backyard brings back a fishing trip; the steaming wool of ironed trousers evokes the winter memory of nine pairs of sodden mittens drying over the furnace vents. And the perfect tomato sandwich is insisted on by a dying man who won't give up the memory of appetite.

Bertie is the oldest child, big sister, responsible for helping with eight younger siblings. Nine children—the pattern of names sung into the suppertime dusk: “Bertie-Catherine-Margaret-Robert-David-Ronnie-Michael-Sandy-Simon.” The siblings appear here and there in Zettell’s stories as distinct personalities, but more often as part of a sticky, noisy, careful or houseful of too many bodies. Frank and Elizabeth are always “our father,” “our mother,” never just Bertie’s. The young Bertie watches and remembers, if she doesn’t always understand at the time: “I feel as if I’m more eyes and ears than anything else.” Before she leaves home, she knows what she doesn’t want: to end up like her mother.

But Bertie and her siblings, at best, do rather worse than Frank and Elizabeth’s example, and at worst, are tragically lost: “Every one of us divorced or separated, except Robert.” In love, newly married, with a first baby on the way, Robert takes his own life. Robert is the mystery that motivates much of Bertie’s investigation of their shared past.

Bertie has premonitions, warnings, sometimes alerting her to patterns. “Oldest boys,” she doodles, then writes in names: a neighbour, dead in a car accident; her mother’s brother, dead in the war; then her brother Robert. All oldest boys, all dead, except Robert. “That I’d seen danger there seemed like a betrayal.” Bertie’s guilt—over her brother’s suicide, marital break-ups, her own maternal angst, her father’s illness and death—drive her back again and again to her childhood memories, trying to find where to place the blame in time. Old stains, sharp words, rejected family rituals are stubbornly embedded in memory.

Recently separated from her first husband, Bertie meets her father for lunch. "I do not like myself when I am with my father, so I do not see him often." She dresses soberly, waiting for "I told you so," but at the last minute, still the rebellious daughter, she puts on dangling mermaid earrings. Later, when her father is ill with cancer, she asks him if he loved his own father. "Yes, I did," he said, 'but I didn't like him very much.'" Bertie struggles with how to act, how to make a useful connection between premonition and painful hindsight, how to avoid repetition and regret. Where Bertie makes these connections is where Zettell allows redemption, some way not to be stalled by the past.

Zettell is to be trusted to illuminate the links between family rituals and their sometimes elusive redemptive value. For Bertie's family, moving ahead with so much family baggage means creating new rituals, new ways to share grief, to lighten the load, to keep on rolling.

Susan Brown

Halifax, Nova Scotia

FLAT SIDE. By Monty Reid. Red Deer, Alberta: Red Deer College Press, 1998. 62 pages. \$12.95 paper.

Monty Reid's fourth collection of poetry, *FLAT SIDE*, is a wonderful book, original, intelligent and energetic. Like a paleontologist unearthing bones, he reveals, with compassion and ingenuity, a world often hidden from view. The voice that emerges is both irreverent and deeply moving, yet never sentimental, a difficult feat when talking about the birth of a first child.

In the poem "Lost" about his new baby, he begins the first section with the heading "Mother": "Don't blame me for those ears, blame / your father, wherever he's gone to." This light tone changes to a reflective, meditative one in the next section, "Skin," where Reid speaks to his son, and tells him that he looked like an old man at birth. And then he tells his son about mankind in general, about personal and universal grief, how one old man "broke a ukulele over your grandma's back," and how another "kicked me out when I was eighteen."

There is no end to what we have already done to each other.
... You have the extra skin in case you need to carry

what men do along with you into someone's arms.
My wrists are still scratched from where your mother

Clawed at them so desperately. We had to let go
of each other in order to hold you.

His poems are a bit disorienting. It is their rhythm and energy that make them compelling, even before they are clearly understood. Section IV, "Lullabies," ends with the speaker looking at pigeons, remarking: "They sound as if they were clearing / Their throats and then they never sing."

Reid does sing, and in many of these poems he's clearing his throat as well, reminding the reader of the absurdity of this life. He uses narrative skilfully, as in section VI of the poem entitled "Table," where he describes his parents making a table for him from a Home Hardware kit. He notes how sloppy they were in building it, how his father hates projects like this and how, on this table, they ate a casserole his mother made: "But actually, / it had broccoli in it and I can't stand broccoli. / You'd think, after all these years, they'd remember." The section travels from misgivings and complaints through irony into gratitude.

His poems are often several pages long and sectioned in unlikely places, with enough happening on different levels to keep the reader's interest. It is rare to read long poems that are this successful. It was refreshing, as well, to see no *Notes on the Text* at the back of the book; Reid's work is self-generated and he lets the reader fend for himself.

In the poem "Atkinson's Ghost" the poet is in the office of a teacher recently fired. It begins: "Oh yes there was snowfall, it was cold, and it was in Red Deer. / Only the unimaginative ignore the simplest facts." Here is the voice, funny, tough. A woman enters the office for advice. The persona in the poem listens respectfully as she tells him she has inherited a manuscript from her father, who was a medium, and the manuscript includes messages from the beyond by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ruskin, Dickens. Only when she's leaving does he smell liquor on her breath. They both agree that "the crumbs of absence may in fact be what nourishes / The wandering and not necessarily patriarchal / spirits." Various stories come together in this colloquial piece; there are several ghosts who make themselves felt, and though they would prefer

to rearrange the furniture, they know we'd rather
keep it where it is, and in order for everyone

to feel, maybe not exactly satisfied, but as if there were some
point to ongoing discussion, there must be both
and she seemed to feel this was sufficient advice.

And then this thought, under the winter sky of Red Deer: "the cold is what the ghosts let us see / of ourselves."

In their range and compassion, Reid's poems have a deeply moral quality. "La Gunilla" is a five-page poem, divided into nine sections, about poverty in rural Mexico, about corruption and violence, the hardship that comes from "barricades and broken promises and free trade." In one tempo-

rary settlement, "men hurry to appear old, so they can sit in white t-shirts / on the rusted out cars, and hold things together / with their talk." In this poem, all the disparate images—a baseball game at an orphanage, an express bus careening into a car, a woman delivering her own child—gather in a sumptuous brew in which the poem seeps. With a delicate and evocative ending, the poem is rich with feeling.

In his layered poem "The Shale Disparities," it is clear Reid is a scientist who loves exploring and conjecturing. We learn about the "scarp degrading along miles of continental shelf." Among the lines densely packed with fact and description he adds a metaphysical touch: "It is the same with all of us. Whichever way is up, / the minuscule claws begin to dig." The poem ends: "The soft heart among the rigid / ghosts is what resists, and is so preserved."

The title poem, "Flat Side," is a paean to his sleeping position. Having slept on one side for twenty years, because of the way he and his wife have come to sleep together, one side of his body has become flat. For all its pseudo-scientific discourse on what happens to the body having adjusted to this disequilibrium, the poem is deeply tender. At the end Reid comments that neither he nor his wife can remember the day they moved in together. The last two lines are: "Coffee, I suppose, would straighten this out. / After twenty years I know you take it black."

Monty Reid, a three-time Governor General's Award nominee, won the Stephen Stephansson Award for *Flat Side*. The book was also awarded the Writers Guild of Alberta Top Design Award from the Alberta Publishers Association. It deserves a wide audience. With a light touch, Reid writes with great energy and momentum. For all their buoyancy, these are weighty and substantial poems.

Carole Glasser Langille

Lunenburg, Nova Scotia

Garden of Sculpture. By Elizabeth Brewster. Ottawa: Oberon, 1998. 94 pages. \$13.95 paper.

Elizabeth Brewster asks good questions: biblical questions ("What did Dinah think?", "Which was blacker: / the night into which Judas walked / or the darkness at noon / when Yeshu was forsaken by his God?"), questions of imagination ("Will the fabled city be my own construction, / or the city imagined by John Bunyan, / John the Divine, William Morris?"; "What shall I do with the new year? / this sparkling space?"), questions of memory ("Was it on that day / I was stung by a wasp, and ran home, / spilling berries in my flight?"; "And are you still teaching in the West?"), and very practical questions ("What latitude and longitude?"; "Did you sleep well?"; "When had I packed my bags? / Had they ever been left unattended?"). The young woman at the Ben Gurion airport in Jerusalem who asks the poet these last two

questions apologizes: "I'm sorry we have to ask these questions,' / she said, / 'but we do have problems'." Reading Brewster's poetry, one is not sorry she asks all these questions, because we do have problems, and while her questions aren't of course followed by easy answers, the questions themselves point to things that matter, and the poems affirm the importance of the present and the practical, the past, the remembered, and the imagined, the spiritual in the everyday and the everyday in the spiritual.

In "Beckoning," for example, Brewster imagines the dead appearing in dreams, perhaps to call us home, and in a nicely-turned simile she ponders a spiritual question, wondering if the dead beckon,

as the grown-ups on the other side of the room
used to nod and smile,
willing reluctant toddlers
to stumble across the far
wastes of carpet to their waiting arms?

This is a question, but it is also a kind of answer. Whereas elsewhere the poet wonders of another ghost, "Should I be frightened?", here the ghosts of the dead are not terrifying, but "encouraging." Brewster draws the spiritual and the unknowable into the realm of the ordinary in order to hint at possibilities for understanding. The perspective of the poems is original: one poem contemplates the idea that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed from the point of view of a Saskatchewan farmer—"Farmers don't like it. It's a weed." And the first gathering of poems, called "Angelic Influences," includes questions about the perspective of some of the women of the Bible, Dinah, Tamar, Ruth, asking why they did what they did, and why aren't we told their feelings? The complaint here is with the literary style—while in writing the story of Dinah "an Elizabethan poet / would have opened her heart for us / and made her eloquent," the Bible and the Torah don't tell. Interested in what is left out, Brewster imagines what happens in the spaces of these stories.

In this collection she privileges an organic kind of poetry over a sharper, more dazzling kind: instead of "diamond, snowflake, ice," the poem for her is "cherry blossoms falling / on grass that grows and withers, / turns to compost." Rather than praising pure perfection, Brewster celebrates and values the imperfect because it's more interesting—the imperfect people of the world as well as imperfect things. As she speculates in "Tamar's Story,"

Surely God prefers tricksters:
sly Rebecca and smooth Jacob
rather than the dutiful Isaac
or the sturdy hunter Esau.

This is almost the God who prizes the lost sheep above the obedient ones, the prodigal son above the elder brother, except that here he prefers them

even before their rescue or reformation. Imperfection is more interesting than perfect virtue, but what Brewster doesn't get at in this poem is the idea that imperfection perfected is even more interesting.

The poem that gives its name to this collection offers a slightly different take on the subject of perfection: in Jewish sculpture each figure must be marred slightly, not simply because faults are inherently more intriguing, but because "Otherwise we might be tempted / to worship graven images." Brewster suggests that the same rule applies to poetry—"So even if I could shape / a perfect poem, / I ought not to do so"—and in titling her book *Garden of Sculpture* she implies that these poems are imperfect sculptures, "imperfect images" that "respect the Law." Most of her poems are so good, so clear, that the few not-so-good ones (including the rather dull prose-poems "Another Maze" and "Constructing the Interior" and the very predictably titled "Writer's Block in Victoria") detract only slightly from the virtue of the collection as a whole, making the book more interesting, and more humble.

Sarah Emsley

Dalhousie University

Mapping the Soul: Selected Poems, 1978–1998. By Stephen Morrissey. Winnipeg: Muses' Company, 1998. 182 pages. \$17.95 paper.

Stephen Morrissey has been an active participant in the Anglo-Québec poetry scene for many years, as the subtitle of this retrospective attests. His work has been made widely available in Canada: in literary journals, in six previous full-length volumes, and in a number of chapbooks.

Mapping the Soul presents a generous selection of Morrissey's previously published poems, along with some new, unpublished work. Here is an opportunity to assess the output of a poet in mid-career and to arrive at an understanding of what has been accomplished over the course of twenty years.

Morrissey's poems are characterized by what could be termed a documentary voice. He writes predominantly in a confessional mode that appropriates, in equal measure, the banal and the painful of life's experiences and transmutes them into a very personal art. One can readily assume that the "soul" of the title is the soul of the author, but one suspects also that Morrissey is implying that the breadth of his concerns is wider than this and that he's charting the topography of the reader's soul as well.

In his preface, Morrissey is refreshingly articulate on the subject of his sources, his methods, and his goals. "I have always aimed at a directness of statement and emotion in my poems, to communicate an image and a strong emotion; to merge the personal self with the archetypal self. Poetry is the voice of the psyche speaking through the poet. These poems, selected from

twenty years of published work, map the convolutions, terrain, and geography of the soul."

The earliest poems are also the most overtly experimental of the collection, though the experimentation is tame: restricted to fragmentary lines, lack of—or eccentric—punctuation, and words purged of vowels in the manner of bill bissett (abt for about). "Divisions," the long poem from the 1983 volume of that title, is the most striking of these. Comprising a series of observations on how life alienates people from each other, from their past, and from their surroundings, it draws on memory for much of its content. However, apart from the whimsical arrangement of its component sections, the tone and subject of this poem are very much in keeping with Morrissey's less idiosyncratic work, to such a degree that the reader wonders what purpose the atypical structure is serving. Morrissey himself must have wondered the same thing, because this poem marks the end of his experiments with form, and from this point on he rarely strays from the left-hand margins and short lines that we see in the vast majority of contemporary poetry.

Morrissey's development as a poet is difficult to chart because his subject, and his treatment of it, has remained much the same for the last fifteen years. He writes of his own spiritual development, of his family, of his triumphs and (overwhelmingly) of his failures. Clearly, a defining event for Morrissey as a man was the collapse of his marriage, an experience that is wrenchingly depicted in the poems from his 1993 volume, *The Compass*. Morrissey's quest for healing does not permit him to shrink from chronicling his damaged state of mind and revealing the frayed edges of his psyche.

Tasting crumbs found on a plate
by the kitchen sink, trying to remember
if I had eaten breakfast
when the time for lunch was long passed.
I stood in the driveway and watched
her leave. Weeks later: "Do you
miss me?" she asked on the phone.

("The Things she Left")

At times in the poems from *The Compass*, Morrissey comes dangerously close to self-pity, yet we cannot help but savour the precision with which he draws his images and admire the strength and purity, and emotional richness, of his voice.

In more recent volumes, Morrissey's tone evolves into the sturdy, reliable voice of the mature poet. Approaching fifty, he seems to have attained an equilibrium in his emotional life that is reflected in the poetry. Childhood memories continue to provide the material for many of his poems, and he remains a deft observer of the ever-present, essential moment. At a time when many of his contemporaries are immersing themselves in global events

and diluting their art with politics, Morrissey's inward-looking voice is immediately engaging and intensely personal. *Mapping the Soul* is a significant volume by a major Canadian poet. It is also a book that any reader of contemporary poetry will find rewarding and satisfying.

Ian Colford

Dalhousie University

Loves and Other Poems. By Michael Thorpe: Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1997. 68 pages. \$12.95 paper.

Deceptively, the title of Thorpe's collection promises yet another contribution to the current, popular mythologies of sexual bliss. But his poetry is not a collaboration with marketable self-indulgence. Its real concern, to quote from Thomas Hardy's poem, "Seventy-Four and Twenty," is with "What Earth's ingrained conditions are." Thorpe (a well-known Hardy scholar) shares with Hardy not only an incontrovertible factuality of approach but also the same bleak acceptance of humanity's capacities for self-deception and deliberated treachery.

Thorpe has divided the book into five main sections. Sections one through to four move gradually from the private world of individuals to a public world where private acts constitute what we roughly agree to call history. The first and title section, "Loves, I-XXII," examines protagonists who are caught, with only one or two exceptions, in situations which appear superficially to be happy (equal reciprocities of courtship or sexual connection or parental or conjugal love), but which are really struggles for power (acts of partial, deceitful and manipulative devotion, avoidances of truth or wishful retrospections). The book's second, most striking and technically assured section, "Trapped Light: A Sequence," consists of seventeen scenes from the childhood and adolescence of a mother-dominated Englishman whose emotional life never develops beyond the level of narcissistic, fearful, aesthetically distanced but latently feral frigidity. In the book's third section, Thorpe collects eight wary poems on the often unpleasant personal complexities of Thomas Hardy and their seemingly paradoxical necessity to the economies of his creative genius. In the book's fourth section, "Ordinary Men," Thorpe writes about one of the public consequences of the kinds of fragmentary and selfish love he has analyzed in the previous three sections. "Ordinary Men" is a 150-line narrative poem concerning the activities and motives of a Nazi extermination battalion in Poland, a group of "common-place policemen" whose "modest routine contribution" to the war is the death of 83,000 Jews. The fifth and concluding section of Thorpe's book, "Art, Politics, Other Loves," gathers twenty-six miscellaneous poems which are either private or public in focus. Among them are several devoted to modern writers within the context of whose work, it is implied, we might read Thorpe's. They are Milan Kundera, Czeslaw Milosz, Wilson Harris (about whom Thorpe

has published perceptive commentary) and Philip Larkin. The poem involving Larkin, written with an indirect subtlety which infuses the best of Thorpe's poems, is short enough to be quoted here. It is "Tutorial Subtext, 1951":

They thought here a giggle,
 hugely spectacled, tight-strung;
 crossing and unwinding
 blatant blanched knees,
 she smokescreened them out;
 talked the tiresome hour down—
 freed then to write
 or phone her distant one:
 they, much deceived, never rumbled,
 hazed in their fumbling affaires,
 that her life was devoted
 to their 'best young poet.'

Loves and Other Poems is Thorpe's fifth large collection, his eighth book of poetry and the most mature and substantial single gathering of his work. His sardonic accuracy and ironies will never make him popular with those lovers of poetry who require that it must vindicate lies which enable them to pose as both innocent and extraordinary. After finishing *Loves and Other Poems*, other readers may suspect that Thorpe has anticipated the reaction of such lovers by his choice of main title. Only a poet who has the courage to have his poems, his particular labour of love, accepted or rejected in the light of his own most unillusioned expectations could have made such a choice. As Thorpe writes in one of his Hardy poems, the "aftercomers will have his heart," if they are up to it.

Peter Sanger

South Maitland, Nova Scotia

Mean. By Ken Babstock. Toronto: Anansi, 1999. 84 pages. \$19.95 paper.

Ken Babstock's *Mean* is an *achieved* first poetry collection, and this adjective describes both the book's strengths and weaknesses. Babstock clearly knows what he's doing: these are poems which prominently display their competence and craft. But in the age of creative writing programs and poetry workshops, which is what the 80s and 90s may well prove to be in the history of twentieth-century poetry, craft is not enough. When hundreds of young poets can turn out skilful, well-wrought poems—poems which customarily describe objects and experiences in appropriately poetic ways—readers will quickly tire of these impeccable products. For all of Babstock's skill, what's missing for me in this book is a real sense of risk.

Instead, Babstock's collection gives the sense of a young writer who has perfected a certain kind of craft and used it to produce many poems in a similar vein. The volume reminds me in some way of Robert Lowell's early collections, before the monumental changes of *Life Studies*. Lowell's early poems bullied readers with their craft; and while they initially impressed, many people (including Lowell himself) quickly grew weary of them. Babstock and Lowell share not only a repetitiveness of theme, but also a particular language and persona, both of which are presented as gnarled, agonized, and unwieldy. Babstock's highly accented, consonantal, jagged lines fit this hardened persona to a tee. While Lowell's early verse was informed by a dark, apocalyptic Catholicism, Babstock's is unrelentingly worldly—focused on the flesh, blood, and grit of the earth. "Ex-Con: Friend" illustrates the voice and the persona well:

His jaw set out against the haze
of the upstairs room, grinding his molars
like gear-cogs. His smile was the hull
of a sailboat, white, but thrown in the bad
weather of swollen expression.
Forearms thick as rescue cables, his hands
shook at times and he spoke
openly of this. And up higher, the tattoos, fierce
green maps of the ten years spent
eyeing whitewashed cinder block and
the slow march of chain link.

The hard-boiled persona of these poems is a stoical, tough, Hemingwayesque character, perfectly illustrated by the volume's jacket photo of the poet with furrowed brow and an intense, mean stare. This character appears in poem after poem. We watch the speaker, a kind of updated Nick Adams, camping in the wilds, working outdoors, quietly observing or suffering the disasters that make up the life of this volume. The titles tell all: "School Bus Broad-sided by Patrol Car," "Two Divers Lost, Howe Sound," "Waiting on a Transplant," "Westray Dreamscape," "Charred Shadows." Like Hemingway's characters, Babstock's speaker worries, sensitively, over suicides and is senselessly attacked (in this case by a skinhead in a back alley who "spat out curses and swore / he would kill" ["Fighting Space"]). *Mean* is an accomplished and vivid survey of a particular terrain. However, this region becomes rapidly familiar, since far too many of its inhabitants are like the crabs in the poem of the same title: "brittle old men, grotesques thrown ashore by the sea."

While I am impressed by Babstock's craft, particularly his sound effects and the consonantal music of his clotted lines, I also find it at times overdone. One has the sense that every word and every element of the poem has been compulsively poeticized. Everything in Babstock is always turning into metaphor or simile, as if nothing in a poem could ever be simply itself. In

the first poem, "Camping at Glendalough," a swaying tent is a "lung on a ledge," and sheep are "like snow patches." The second poem figures the sea as a "flint quilt," while houses by the shore are "like pastel mints on drab/green and granite." Even the sun—and here we start to tire of this ingenious overfiguration—is a "loonie in a busker's fez."

Babstock is at his best when his work deviates from its characteristic mode and offers real surprises. This happens, for example, in one of the volume's most interesting poems, "Head Injury Card," a series which impressionistically reproduces the elements of trauma in language which is both artful and experimental. Here Babstock's language is more enticingly opaque and troublesome. There is a sense that the poem is not preconceived but discovered through the process of composition:

*Unusual drowsiness

As if some swell beyond, below the sea's belt
had bone-chilled us, bale-wrapped and banded
our tongues. Sentenced to stillness, a columnar,
wet-hemlock church. A sharp creak of sparrows out
from the shed ... slack-drum thud from the shrubs ...

It starts in. Pray for its passing

Ken Babstock is a self-conscious writer, but so far this consciousness has been turned to the minute particulars of craft, instead of to the larger and currently more pertinent question of what kind of work one should be doing. Babstock is writing poems which, unsurprisingly enough, sound exactly like poems. As one title, "The Expected," suggests, his images, strategies, and world view remain easily predicted, readily expected:

The sky looks afflicted; a
sallow, hairless
skull where rain worries
itself to exhaustion and falls. The clouds
are old codgers, belts cinched, bent
at the spine—wheezing—
they lean to shadow the town.

One hopes that, like Robert Lowell, Ken Babstock will tire of a certain kind of poem he can do very well and put his ample talents towards something newer and more risky.

Mark Silverberg

Dalhousie University

Labyrinth: Poems. By John Diamond-Nigh. Toronto: York Press, 1997. 75 pages. \$9.95 paper.

The front cover of John Diamond-Nigh's *Labyrinth* evokes subtly both the inextricability of language and the real, despite their arguably radically distinct modes of signifying, and the complex network of form and meaning each separately elaborates. *Labyrinth* draws, at once wittingly and with great, natural verve, upon such concepts which, yet, are seen as lived realities, written as experience rather than as pure notionality, pure intellectualization.

John Diamond-Nigh, poet, teacher, sculptor, has given us here a collection of powerful, punchily eloquent, and above all, one feels, felt and meditated poems. The landscapes of the self that all art inevitably deploys are here embedded in the teeming histories, half real, half mythical, that can draw our fascination, the swirling otherness around us with which we can seek to establish patterns of affinity or divergence. Thus do poems such as "Quartet for Then," "Guillotine" or "Three Swiss" rehearse and rewrite the fabled lives of certain artists, or some ancient woman's lovers, or times of guillotining in the Americas. There is discretion here just as there is vigorous, imaginative penetration, and the poems, whilst creating beautifully shimmering tableaux with a certain aesthetic rounding, also remain open, invite our free circulation within their mental and sensual confines, just as, one constantly senses, an authorial self stalks com-passionately (sharing passion) and queryingly the daedals of chosen alterity. To write is thus to try on, caressingly, inquisitively but beyond gratuity, the ways, the modes of the other, of others; a theatre of spiritual and visceral exchange unfolds upon the page that thus quietly throbs with this livedness.

The parataxis, the suspensions created by the use of present participles, the choice of a justified right-hand margin with a serrated, aerated, shifting left-hand margin—various factors such as these give to the poems a tautness, a firm elasticity that matches continuity with fragmentation, temporal, telluric grounding with the oneiric and the fabulous. As "An Old King" suggests, John Diamond-Nigh offers us here a "labyrinth for the silver winds / a mirror for the galaxies / fables from the languages / of ripples in the watering trough / of wrinkles in the oldest hands." A finely spun and delicately trodden labyrinth

Michael Bishop

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