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On Nancy Steele

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Tracking

Nancy Steele

Copper Canyon Press

Port Townsend, Washington

\$3.50, paperback

Nancy Steele's impressive first book explores a stamina, perhaps even a rage, for a certain clarity of nostalgia, or "memory that refused to be stunted." These are courageous poems, "tracking" back "an ancient language/ for tongues that try to swallow themselves," and we sense in them something more than writing poetry, something more obsessive "in a throat too parched for music." A good example is "The Cremation," a short poem dedicated to the poet's mother, and, to use Tomas Tranströmer's metaphor, "intense as a bullion cube." Right on the brink of sentimentality, it lingers just long enough to taunt, and then burst:

Your ashes toss
in my blood.
I am drywood
spine-burr
twig.

Thinking of you
small flares sweep through me
like grassfire.

A dry itch at the throat
sputters
the whole length
of my longing.

What is it that burns
beyond flame or flesh?
Some wounded bird
I can't smoke out
hovering on the wings of fire.

More concerned with interrogating than with answering or prescribing, Steele exhibits an uncanny sense of control: "What sort of bird appears at that knothole/ so new to flight that it's sacrificed/ when the limb it rides goes down?"

Similarly, the last two stanzas in the last poem, "Apology", concern a question:

What animal
have our dreams scared
deep into burr and gnatmesh?
Our skittish sleep is its appetite:
recoil and shudder
toward what it craves.

Outside the gourds, bloated on August,
clutch their emptiness
climb the walls of grass
like a ward of idiots.
Tonight we hear them
fatten on nothing
banging their faceless heads
into human features.

The willingness to risk noticing the "critical" thing in a landscape, inner or outer, and the severity of vision to bring it home, to rob it of its power, or to raise it to innuendo, makes these poems worth reading. They are alive and gutsy, and they leave us waiting anxiously for Nancy Steele's second book.

Ralph Burns

Out-Of-The-Body Travel

Stanley Plumly

Ecco Press

New York, \$6.95, hardcover

One thing good poets do is to remind us of things we should all know, things we *did* know once, but have forgotten. That is, they remind us of what we have left behind in the mad dash to escape our histories, or merely the fear of sounding trite. They bring us back to our references. Their poems say, *Look here, friend, we all fall asleep too easily these days. Follow me.*

And so we follow Plumly back, into that childhood where our kin still matter, where weather matters, showing us always it belongs: