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On Stanley Plumly

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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:
Winter is one long morning.
She will get into the car, it will be
snowing, the car will go from here
to there, in time, the car’s tracks,
like the scuff marks on linoleum,
will outlast the traffic, then disappear.

Many of these poems are portraits, the simultaneous remembering
of persons long dead (at least to these scenes) and the speaker’s place
among them — apprehended in part through the writing of the poem.
This constant positioning expresses a desire throughout the book to
acknowledge that side of one’s self which is determined by birth and
lineage. In “The Tree,” Plumly sees the various names of ancestors on
a genealogical chart as forming

the stalk of the spine as it culminates at the brain,
a drawing I had seen in a book about the body, each leaf
inlaid until the man’s whole back, root and stem, was veins.

His life, then, becomes in part a gathering of all old ghosts, and at the
same time a conduit through which a larger continuity in blood is
flowing. The recognition of what necessitates us begins our lives as
free individuals. We place ourselves at the cross of this duality.

Children with child. The night Alma
Schultz hanged herself her baby had
not been born. But it lived, blue ash,
blue coal. It came out into the room of
fathers twice tied to its past and flesh

of the flesh of her father. Alma was older
and taller. We were children. It was summer.
The dead go down and down, we were told,
in new clothes and a book. And rise among angels
and our father’s ghost. In shadow, yes, in light.

Family portraits are bound at times to be inaccessible for those
unrelated to the subjects. These poems are no exception. What must
carry us through them, then, is tone: and here that tone is one of
continual blessing. Blessing the father in the dream, “grinding bone
back into dust,” working his shift
only to lie down
among the million
upon million
and rise again,
individual, to the wheel.

Blessing the mother, and passage itself, as expressed in the passing of a train:

The whole house shakes — or seems to. At intervals, the ghost smoke fills
all the windows on the close-in side.
It's our weather. It's what we hear all night, between Troy and anywhere, what you meant
to tell me, out of the body, out of the body travel.

Rick Robbins

The Illustrations
Norman Dubie
Braziller, 1977
$3.95, paperback

Dubie's third book is a kind of well-lighted historical tour, and the lights, or “lustres,” are Dubie's own, widely varied, but immediate. Through certain historical presences and personae, he achieves a distance allowing him expression of his own stylistic nuance, his unique idiosyncracy, as it were, put to music, as in “Horace”:

Along the borders of the Sabine farm,
Runners of strychnine and lime,
A bearded man stands in a wheelbarrow
Singing. And why not? Give him
The vegetables he wants.
Or knock his brains out with the loose
Curbstone from the well. The Goths
Have been defeated, and Maecenas was his friend.