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Jane Bailey, *Tuning*

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Tuning

Jane Bailey
Slow Loris Press
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
\$4, paper

Jane Bailey's first collection of poems, *Pomegranate* (1976, Black Stone Press), begins with the following epigraph:

In the Orphic creation story,
Eros, the force that attracts,
shapes a world,
sets it spinning.

And indeed the force of eros spins throughout these early poems. All the poems are concerned with erotic relationships. "I'd love to bury my face in your beard" she says in "Friendly Note." In "For Kevin," the opening poem, her concern with eros is even more explicit:

You rise, the great thick snake
slides, moving into the marshes.
My tongues lick round.
You swell, the tree thrusts
branches to me, shaking.

You're hard and good.
I'll smolder with you,
even in the rainy streets.

The best poems in this collection are characterized by a quiet, lyrical tone, lush and often dreamlike imagery.

In *Tuning*, the poems are again quiet, lyrical and candid. The eros is still there:

The aluminum tang of her deep
rushing breath
recalled his fluid taste;
she slowed to savor
that gift.

But in these newer poems the sexual imagery is not so explicit. The body takes on a new, more sophisticated significance. Her concern is no longer to “know no edges/ cunt or cock,” but with mouths that “stretch the air open” and “Amazing throaty cries.” She now has “the stomach to laugh.” She no longer sees herself merely in relation to others. Now she is, as the title of the last poem in the book suggests, “Living Alone.” She has left the claustrophobic rooms of *Pomegranate* and has, as she promised in that earlier book’s final poem, “built another kind of bed/ on solid ground . . .”

But the ground is not solid. Bailey has discovered a “landscape . . . constant as the wind.” This world is not closed but open, so open that the horizon becomes “unstrung” and people hold each other with “sparse, leathery roots.” Constantly shifting, her world has become one where hands are “wide-eyed” and sink into the “speaking river,” where deer and horses float downriver and the earth is “still-faced.” Clouds take “more shapes than the mind could encompass.” In “A Vision of Horses,” past, present and future, dream, memory and fantasy all blend:

Years ago
when they first married
she was thin
with bones that slipped
quick under his hands
Leaning against a willow
he opened a lunch pail
looked down river
for a mare, swimming
In a movie long ago
the horse and boy swam together
into the sea
Back to the sharp dry dust
of summer fallow
he and his wife rode through
to a hilltop
Miles of tiny farms
dots of horses
mouths too small
for hunger
Like the big Percheron mare
of his childhood
he'd let her graze under him

Distracted by a vision of mouths
growing and more, in her body,
he'd driven her large
Resting his thermos gently
on his belly
he saw his dream mare
floundering downstream

There is a sense of mystical participation in these poems; everything becomes an echo of something else. A truck hauling water has the "unlikely grace of a pelican/ taking off." The prairie swallows the river and

We reach out still eager,
start again to meet.
With that motion
the scene shifts,
the light changes.

Bailey's concern is no longer to understand "why . . . this jealous hold on your juices," but to gain "a strong hand on space." In this "white confusion of forms," the poet is struggling to get hold of things that she knows can't be held:

She waited on her flattening voice,
fingers closing on nothing,
screamed against the grain.

In "Stalemate" she asks:

Would it matter, my losing my grip?
I might as well ask
the damp seeping under the door.

If Bailey has not gained solid ground in these poems, she has acquired a sense that language can trivialize the terror and loss. There is a sense of punning and playfulness here that is absent in her first collection. She has the wit to juxtapose "My hand in the curling/ nest of your body" with "We have the stomach to laugh." Her wit also shows in a surprising, almost playful use of line breaks:

A long black snake, the Missouri cut
through a hundred miles of prairie
and another hundred
and another.

She has also discovered the power of naming things:

No one town had a name so long.
Missouri flowed along the tongue
with cottonwood, gooseberry,
chokecherry and willow.

Language, the names of things, punning—in a shifting world, these are what give her “a strong hand/ on space” and what she must hold to. They are the constants behind the illusory: “I feel you disappear/ in a wash of words.”

There is another, perhaps even more significant constant behind her poems: the river. More than just a metaphor for the poet’s state of mind, the river is, as mystics are fond of saying, form in formlessness. For Bailey, it contains memory, loss, all that is loved and feared, as in “Decoys on the Water:”

Rounding the point,
I saw two deer swimming
red in the sea.
I was not prepared
for red deer
swimming leisurely in the sea.

My father hunted ducks.
Small children,
quiet in the blind,
we wondered why ducks came
to papier-mache decoys on the water.
We were not prepared.

My father’s ashes
float the Missouri to the sea.
Visions drew him
through the bottle’s widening mouth
into the endless water.