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Western Poets, Western Presses

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Widely separate in location and frequently diverse in style, Western writers often continue to feel in general isolated and ignored; the same may frequently enough be said of their small-scale publishers. This is hardly news, as the recent Western States Arts Foundation Literature Survey Report only confirms. The real “news” is that Western presses continue to issue carefully crafted, enlightened, provocative books—work which rewards readers’ attention several-fold.

Gary Young’s Greenhouse Review Press (3965 Bonny Doon Road, Santa Cruz, CA 95060) has produced, in Sherod Santos’ *Begin, Distance*, a book no commercial press could afford. A letterpress and limited edition printed on fine papers, its design is both elegant and muted, meant clearly to complement its contents.

As a National Poetry Series author this year (*Accidental Weather*, Doubleday), Santos’ work is certain to receive considerable and deserved attention. It is, above all, work carefully considered, the pacing in the poems most often deliberate, intricate. Santos is a meditative poet. As such, he shares with such diverse contemporaries as Robert Penn Warren and Charles Wright an approach which makes each poem an act of both inquiry and validation. It is an attempt to at once discover and understand, an attempt clear in this first section of “The Evening Light Along The Sound:”

I.

As if the sky could no longer hold its color, that pale blue light sifts down onto the water like talcum onto a tabletop, or like the fine powder of memory settling again in the mind in that hour toward sleep, in that season toward autumn when the trees begin to fill with a sorrowing air. Still, there’s a moment then when it all seems so impersonal: no sign that something difficult is reappearing in our lives, no image of a feeling, but a feeling itself, like a mis-directed letter from someone sad and faraway.

Also evident, even in a quotation as brief as the one above, is Santos’ sure musical control, particularly in the first sentence’s repetition and modulation of *r* sounds—longer/color/water/powder/hour/sorrowing air.

*Begin, Distance* is a book that asks to be read slowly, a book of complex resonance and depth, detachment and sudden emotion.
The most beautiful moments are beyond our reach.
And nothing is more ordinary
than a girl in brown shoes
walking down the street as it begins
to snow. Or love,
which comes mysteriously back to us.
And yet, as is always the case, it was
just so—and it asks the question
of what happened before all this time
we've been waiting, and drawn in so close
around ourselves, and at every moment
turning farther in with an enthusiasm
we have rarely known in the past.

(last stanza, "Winter Landscape With
A Girl In Brown Shoes")

With its address still officially Amherst, Massachusetts (Box 800,
Amherst, MA 01004), Lynx House Press may not appear to qualify as
Western; and with its considerable backlist and obvious commitment to
commercial-quality production, it may not seem to qualify as small scale.
Still, many of Lynx's authors are Westerners, and Oregon poet Carlos Reyes' chapbook was printed at John Laursen's Press 22 in Portland.

Reyes' poems in At Doolin Quay are, for the most part, quiet, almost
transparent revelations of Ireland. As one of the poems explicitly suggests,
Reyes' technique is often designed to achieve a photographic effect; Reyes
wants us to see this place, and in seeing it to locate (however briefly) our own
places in it. True or not, Reyes' assertion is that the Irish live, or at least
appear to live, not separate from their countryside, but of it, with the same
naturalness as wind or tide:

Walking Along The Hills Above Cloonanaha At Dusk

The beauty of what once
was more than symmetry and form,
these stone walls
go with us, along roads
and sidehills, up mountains
and down into valleys,
holding in the lives
of cattle and sheep
and the man
in the worn grey wool suit
who comes to count
the animals or to drive them
home. And the woman
who comes with the tin pail
along this pathway to milk,
the dog with her
snapping at the heels
and dewlaps of the cows.

At dusk I pause and look back
over the meadow toward Mal Bay
listening hard for the story
of these walls, hearing only
the slightest whisper
as I pass on,
leaving them to settle
into the centuries
as sure as people settle into beds
at dark along these bogs.

As I clamber over this wall
one stone falls, complaining
with clattering song. Reaching for it
I start to replace
stories told well,
the stone that comes to my hand.

It is a seductive vision—it amounts to a statement of faith—and Reyes’ power is such that reading this book one feels little impulse to question such faith.

* * * *

Located in Wyoming, in a town with the unlikely and lyric name of Story (Box 221, Story, Wyoming 82842), Tom and Barbara Rea’s Dooryard Press is one of the West’s newer letterpress publishers, though if the Reas are inexperienced printers, it does not show. Their third title, Ripley Schemm’s Mapping My Father, is a subdued, careful, two-color book printed, as the colophon indicates, “during a splendid October.”
That timing seems appropriate, as one finds a similar splendor in Ripley Schemm's poems. Part of one's pleasure here has to do with Schemm's steady accumulation of place names: Hound Creek, Gurney's Butte, Wind Mountain, Green Gulch. It is not simply the names that matter; it is an insistence that landscape matters, affecting, altering, in some ways uniting the people Schemm sees so clearly:

Today you greeted the ground owl
guarding her nest in the cutbank.
This same morning you took the wheel
in your hands to learn the gravel
and its grades. Tomorrow you will be
sixteen, will forget you once rode
snug on my hip. The creek floods,
chokecherry buds widen, we sleep,
we wake, to the same pleasant air.

(first stanza, "Lolly Du Dum Day With My Daughter")

Whether she is looking at her daughter, at fire fighters ("hopeless from 2nd Street South, / their burnt out lives just right / to save a canyon, a forest."), or at herself ("the map my face has become"), Schemm's eye is acute, consistently seeing past surfaces with an empathy and concern that is as quietly astonishing as it is humane.

Of the three books under discussion here, Mapping My Father is the most immediately intimate. And its title poem is an honest masterpiece of its kind.

Finally all three of these books testify to their publishers' awareness that small presses must, if they wish to survive, produce quality physical objects—books of tasteful and intelligent design. More importantly, each of these books, read once with interest and without haste, will work to call readers back, and repay their attention. That ability, that insistence, is one useful and basic criterion for what constitutes good literature.