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Alain Bosquet: Selected Poems

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way of thought was mythical. . . . The distinctions that developed later between man and beast, between animal and plant, flesh and rock, did not yet exist. Grass was people, and any child today knows this is still true." "The Mushroom Grove" is a fine example of this:

Here the forest people
died of a sexual longing.

The ground trampled in their passion
healed into a cemetery,
with a few flowers
like frayed parachutes.

Their headstones are umbrellas,
black and weeping.

There is something I find genuinely satisfying about John Haines' poems. With the exception of his few "political message" poems, they are strong and masculine, in the best sense of these words. There is nothing arbitrary or willed about their images—I never question their urgency. They are even strong enough, at times, to be small or fanciful without being trivial. They speak from the source of our common humanity, yet Haines remains individual, a man at a distance from other men, as in the final poem of the book, "Love Among The Oranges":

In the big house
by the orange grove,
fire and drunkenness,
fierce, monotonous music.

But we were not going to go in;
there was something else
in the night, in the wind
that ruffled our fur

Gary Thompson

ALAIN BOSQUET: SELECTED POEMS

Translations by Samuel Beckett, Charles Guenther,

Edouard Roditi and Ruth Whitman

New Directions' World Poets Series

\$1.00

I would like to double back a decade. In 1963 New Directions published Alain Bosquet's *Selected Poems* which was the first English translation of this prolific French writer. During the past 30

years, Bosquet has written several volumes of poetry, 5 novels and several critical books and essays. This small book consists of three long poems written between 1955 and 1959. The first, "What Forgotten Kingdom?" is by far the most interesting of the three. In my opinion, it is one of the best long poems written in any language since the Second World War, and has much to teach younger poets.

Bosquet is obviously an extremely intelligent and well-educated writer. "What Forgotten Kingdom?" represents his intuitive rebellion against this ingrown intellectualism. In general, the poem yearns to push the language, poetry, and the poet back into a more primitive situation. The emphasis is placed on language because as Bosquet has often said, "The poem writes the poet." If the language can be made more responsive to the primal elements the poet will naturally follow. The basic style is almost surrealistic (is that possible?) in its richness and looseness of imagery. He adroitly combines abstract thought with concrete images. The following are indicative passages taken from the poem.

Be but a being locked up in a closet
between a sonnet hanging there
and an unaddressed fable.
Be but a written being
in a dead language,
erased by a cormorant with a stroke of its wing
like a spelling mistake.

* * *
Born in the wind
and educated by rust,
I said to the night:
"You are my safest mount."
Then I struck my earth
and called it an antelope in heat.

As I walked by
men hanged themselves
and women had intercourse with mountains.

* * *
A duel was fought
between words and their syllables,
then the poems that were too rich were put to death.
Language has been bleeding
and the last vowel has surrendered.
Men were already conjugating the great reptiles.

When I first read this long poem several years ago, I was intrigued by the fact that it never seemed boring. That is unusual for a poem of this length. Each stanza, each line has something interesting to offer.

It reminded me then, and still does to a lesser extent, of Lorca's longer poems in *Poet in New York*. Bosquet's approach or strategy is similar to that of Lorca. His choice of images is loose but never arbitrary; his language is rich, sometimes excessive; and most importantly, his control over the direction of the poem never falters. This is the key, I think, to Bosquet's success. He allows himself the freedom to stray into new ideas and new images, but only so far. When the direction of the poem becomes endangered, he pulls it back into line. This is a marked contrast to other surrealistic poets. He is like the casual hiker on a long journey. He takes time to nap in the clover, inspect closely a wild flower, and wander off into new ravines. But always in his pocket is a compass pointing West. We younger American poets can and should learn from this man. The following is the last stanza of the poem. It contains lines that have haunted me for years. I'm sure, given the chance, the poem will burrow into you also.

In every bird a mountain slept.
In every hand the sacred reptile
ate salt. In every street of the port
an old bishop questioned a tree.
The wine was quite bare, and by the river
we mourned the savannas disappeared
since their rendezvous with the snow.
Because he lacked fire, the wizard took
the burning city as a bride.

Michele Birch

FOOTPRINTS

by Denise Levertov
New Directions, 1972

Denise Levertov, in *Footprints*, gives us the comprehensive understanding of a woman who has not only published ten books of poetry, but has developed an increasingly strong voice as the impact of history has tried to find sound and shape in each successive work. Always reverent in her approach to life and people she has become increasingly believable because of her sensitivity to the violent, uncontrollable suffering that has been a part of the twentieth century, and in particular the 1960's and 70's and the issue of Viet Nam. She includes it all in a book of 67 poems that carries an impact not easily forgotten.