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On Michael Poage

Milo Miles

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A few of the stories in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* are perhaps a little too similar, but with stories this good that is certainly forgiveable. And there is a kind of theme and variations substructure to the book that climaxes in the title piece. It does however bring up the question of Where next? for Carver. But that's his problem. Ours is how to get a hold of a copy of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*.

— Rich Ives

**CONFESSIONS OF A DOUBLE**

*Born*

poems by Michael Poage

Black Stone Press 1975

$7.50 hardbound $3.50 paper

This first collection by Michael Poage is brief but potent. In the space of twenty-five poems an intense voice emerges, working rapidly to possess words and form images deep in a personal line of perception. Poage's opening poem snaps together on first reading.

**COMING APART**

Something else hit my mind.
A dream
on the edge of my tongue
sweating words.

I am not alone out here.
There are many of us
and tomorrow
we are moving up the road.

We have a war on our hands.
That's all I know.
“Coming Apart” is an exemplary *Born* poem. No words are wasted to embellish or diminish the impact of language. Although it is impossible to say exactly what the poem is “about” in the world, the structure and meaning are quite clear. The dream which grips the voice causes tension or reveals the tension of a situation: an unexpected group will move with unshakable certainty “up the road.” In an environment with so many possible connections, the sole knowledge of “a war on our hands” becomes as sinister as certain death or the inevitable decay of worlds. The short lines of simple words drive into each other, increasing the sense of compulsion, no escape. In a dark time, “Coming Apart” becomes the final blow, the last “something else.”

Not all the poems in *Born* have the negative implosion of “Coming Apart,” although the usual starkness of language gives many an abrupt edge. “Sweetgrass” revolves around more mundane events and shows a bit of Poage’s wry lightness.

**SWEETGRASS**

Before the phone rings
I want to write this down.
I want to tell you how the snow has turned to rain. How the work we did melted white as steel like any man.
The wind wrapped our faces like cloth.
We crawled nights through Judith Gap, across the ridge, covered

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our tracks
with branches,
took a bride
and showed her
someone crazy
enough.

This poem is like a Chet Atkins guitar solo—the effortless flow hides the fact that it's a small technical gem. Sixty-four words total and only two lines have more than three words, but like Robert Creeley, Poage is able to extract maximum resonance from sound by selecting exact words for emphasis and making the poem read longer than it is. The voice might have poured six months detailed history into this letter. No stanzas are end-stopped and “Sweetgrass” calls attention more by line breaks and single-word lines (“Before the phone/rings,” “and showed her/someone crazy/enough.”). The final sentence is particularly riveting and only a twist with as much good humor as the last two lines could provide a satisfying ending. Poage tools his work so that only images with a particular, clean inevitability remain. Snow turning to rain becomes work melting “white as steel/like any man.”

The *Born* poems fall very roughly into four types: those dealing with events (“The Avon Cemetery”), those exploring human relationships (“The Rumor”), poem of the self (“Born”) and fantasies or poems with a secretive core (“The Sink”). Although Poage most frequently writes with tenderness to a lover, “The Sunrise Motel” grinds harsh enough for the most hard-boiled “confessional poem.”

**THE SUNRISE MOTEL**

When you're an old woman
you can tell your own story
but now this small room is mine
and I came here to rest,
to get away.

On the other side
of that green door
ice is broken into tiny windows
and men, younger than I am,
watch for girls going in and out.
The plainness of language and directness of imagery in this poem would not be strange to William Stafford. Words from the prairie unify the various directions in *Born*, usually adding weight to ethereal subjects.

Compared with earlier, uncollected work by Poage, the poems in *Born* appear to be moving toward more private meaning, a hermetic language. This shift causes the poet’s *persona* to develop clear attitudes and self-awareness—almost an autobiography in some cases. This *persona* is eerie, nightside, a self envisaged in the place of the traditional rational one. This special self or double overwhelms ordinary phenomena and makes them new in a disturbing way.

**IN BED**

The wind always
comes to one side
of the house. Yellow

flowers stay close
to the ground. Warm.
Safe in their weeds.

All night
that wind came
like flies through cracks

in the wall.
If it had been warmer
I would have gotten up

to kill them.

Poage begins this poem much like Madeline DeFrees might initiate a reflection; but by the end something uniquely Michael Poage has occurred to that north wind. The brittle sound and meaning of the last line fully support its separation.

The richest blend of the “everyman” and “double” parts of the poet’s sensibility appears in “Born.” Here a young man examines his birth, suffers in childhood, gets married, switches body proportions, and (maybe) fathers a turtle. “Born” is divided into six parts. Part two is an excellent example of Poage’s brief poetic conundrum, almost like an Inca folk tune.
II
That was the end
of my fat woman period.
I was born in Peru.
No. No.
In the south,
in this country.
Near dinner time.

Poage is not a prolific creator but a solid one. The durability combined with mystery in his writing may become noted, but already is promising, encouraging. Part six of "Born" is a deft, optimistic poem that embodies, to my mind, all the virtues. You can sit down hard on this poem, even toast it.

VI

"You were sold for nothing, and you
shall be redeemed without money."

I am early.
Old men call this winter open.

I've worked in blood
all my life. Now, follow me
to my own door.

Come and drink the bride.

Milo Miles