

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

Knock-knock By Owen Lewis
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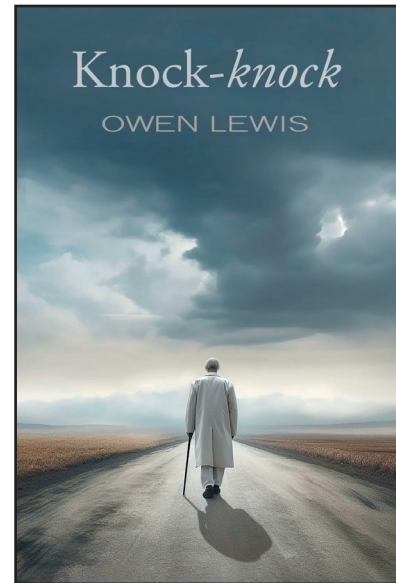
Review by Dennis Daly

Does surpassing life's expectancy bestow any extraordinary blessings of goodness or happiness or vitality? Probably not. What about wisdom, surely....? Sorry, jury's out. The legendary Methuselah, at 969 biblical years old and righteous to a fault, died a natural death (with all its attendant horrors), apparently not long-lived enough for passage on his grandson's just recently built ark, specifically that same ark's gene-saving journey into mankind's brave new world.

In his new poetry collection, *Knock-knock*, Owen Lewis notices the tragedy, the irony, and the humor in the impaired denouement of humankind. His protagonist, a card-carrying member of the AMA wanders through a fading landscape of imagination and perceptiveness bundled in symptomatic non sequiturs.

When attention to details devoid of context becomes one's dominant focus, the many dimensions of the cosmos recede into the primordial but pointed littleness. Lewis begins this recession with his remarkable opening poem entitled "Prelude: How I Started to Use a Cane." The piece lures the reader in with its curious hypnotic power. An umbrella serves the narrator as his transitional cane. Here's the heart of the poem,

*I was talking on the phone,
walking steadier, noticed the tap,
and after, the tap-step, a light
knock, a knock like someone's
at the door come to visit,
like company's always arriving
and I feel this step in my hand
and hear it keeping a nice beat.
If my feet are sock-swaddled
they get muffled and vague
and make a kind of shuffle-step,
shuffle-glide, instead of the steady
tap, the tap-step's sure contact
with concrete. Some days I set out,
I'm half-way to downtown, and
I forget. All the names and numbers
are in the phone, I know, but when
the name goes blank, the phone
directory is no use, no use at all.
The tap-step's the only sure thing.*



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Sandwiched in between fear and humor (two closely aligned subjects, if ever there were two closely aligned subjects), Lewis embeds key meta-physical elements in his poem “When I’m not losing things.” The poet’s persona perceives objects and actions in a deeper, more thoughtful way—somewhat satisfying, but not very practical. Consider these lines,

*things often fall with a clatter and break,
but sometimes without a clash or clamor
they pass into another realm, quiet winter-
light draining the day.
Then I understand
they’re not lost.
They’ve moved ahead
without so much as a knock. A prep-team
is stocking up the next time zone.*

Living life in the moment can be daunting at any age, but in one’s declining years, with enforced partitions separating crucial caches of knowledge, the notions of present, past, and future can be disconcerting in the extreme. Lewis’s piece, “I ask my doctor how one can remember” centers on the struggle for what the elderly need to know. Often humor and word-play can bridge awkward gaps in the inquiry. Here’s an example,

*... He’s one of the good ones,
holds my x-rays up to the window. Hmmm.
I can see through that. There’s a tree bough
growing right across my lungs. In my knees,
a bird nest, my shoulder of garden perennials.
From the MRI, I see a cloud inside my skull.
He’s asking about my aches—
I live with them. What does he do with his?
(My daughter glares. She comes with that nervous
Cough of hers that always makes me forget what,
What I want to ask. I should have made a list.)
What about the cumulus? What about sleep?
he insists. I insist. What about that cloud?
Am I a cloud? An i-cloud?*

Lewis explores life with dementia in his piece entitled “Before my daughter leaves.” Within a nursing home a name tag takes on aggrandized significance as if branded into the elderly patient. Here, if one loses his identifying tag, he loses himself. The poet somehow keeps these scenes comic/tragic without caricature. The result begets intensification and human empathy. And, much like viewing a car crash, the reader cannot look away. The poem opens with well-meant directions opined by the patient’s health-care proxy,

*she always promises she’ll be back
in a few days or a few months
and she pocket-pins my name tag
on my shirt and says always wear it
don’t take it off and she says Don’t
Worry and tells me she feels bad*

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*since there's no piano here but
my fingers don't play it anymore
she says just hum the fugue song
but I'm only one voice we need
at least three others she says just
say Hi each time the attendant
comes by and start with him but
I know she's even more worried
I'll forget my name lose the tag
so I don't take it off and I'm good
and even when I send the shirt
to the washers they don't take it off*

Nearing death most members of our species have concerns beyond the actual process of dying. These concerns vary from practical monetary issues before to the imagined meritocracy presumably set-up after. Lewis contemplates a split difference between these two needs. After paying the ferryman his due in preparation for a crossing of the River Styx, the soul of the dying patient returns to the body and imbues it with its forever name-tag. The arrangements continue,

*... Was I redeemed? I am
still here, still counting—Doctor!
Doctor, your patient is calling.
If he's dead he'll want his eyes
closed. Or maybe, he'll want one
left open, the secret, roving one,
the sacrilegious one. Only Moses
could look into G-d's face. (Holy
Moly!) Afterward he glowed
in divine sunburn. If and when...
a coin on just one eye.
(Knock-knock...*

Poet Owen Lewis has given those of us still here, and still counting, stage directions for our long anticipated penultimate and final scenes. His collection towers as a tour de force for which we should be immensely grateful! Bravo! Exeunt Omnes.