

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Best Man
By Owen Lewis
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Review by Dennis Daly

BROTHERS BOUNCE OFF ONE ANOTHER GROWING UP. It just happens. One moment they discover secret and wondrous passages through the earth together, the next, locked in sibling rivalry, they upset family structures of comfort and decorum. Years later these mnemonic moments deepen with impassioned understanding, love, and sometimes layers of regret. It gets intense, yet one works through it. But add the demonic intruder drug addiction, a disrupter of the most intimate kind, into that mix and emotional chaos occurs.

Owen Lewis' *Best Man*, his new collection of poems, makes sense out of chaos in his powerful, yet strangely tempered, stanzas of poetic reconciliation with his deceased brother, Jason.

The prologue of this book entitled *Post-Script, Unwritten Letter*, serves as a connective tissue, a prayer of conclusion and beginnings. It opens with the simplicity of children,

*Taking every memory that came to me like a hand in the dark,
sometimes leading, sometimes waiting to be led, sometimes grabbing
For your hand to wrestle*

*the night—or did you find me, brother, reaching between the planes
of the dark? When you were speaking, I wanted to know from where
what unfolded shadow,*

*and I made myself get up, scratch ink to paper like the children we were
digging through the backyard soil, determined to get to China*

The journey of unfettered drug addiction leads with some surety to a wasteful expenditure of life. Lewis faces this knowledge of almost Calvinistic predestination with imagistic logic and undeniable irony in his poem *Thaw*. Bitter memories of spring flowers initiate the piece. Next comes icy reality. The poet explains,

*... who's to celebrate
the scatter of white snowdrops?
They shame me, their strength,
each lifting a plaque of ice. The snow lies,*

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*a smoothing of contours across the yard.
Now, a jagged branch, an elbow sticking through,
a poke in the side it prods what lurks,
what hides within any person's body as if,*

*from the start, that body's death note
were already written, Mother's cancer,
Father's failing lungs, so it's March 12th
At 7:32 pm, doesn't matter the year, the decade,*

Again the scatter of white pills across your bed.

Early on in his poem *The New Museum*, the poet delves into scientific classification of the Linnaean type in his teenage museum only to be disappointed by the illogic of his brother's destructive and precursive tendencies. Destiny appears irrefutable. The poet laments,

Three minutes to opening, kid brother

*jumps the stairs, trips, collapses a leg
on the display table. Insects crushed,
cicada cracked in several pieces —*

*I'll be 29 when they next come
out of the earth. Heart and brain
lying next to each other on the floor.*

*Almost used to him ruining things.
Outside the garage I take down the sign:
Line Forms Here (with an arrow)*

Perhaps this collection of poems, imparted by his brother's "hand in the dark," makes up for that past grievance by replacing the original ill-fated childhood collection.

Visiting a jailhouse can be disconcerting, even transformative, so Lewis' piece *Advice*, presumably chronicling one such visit to his brother, suggests. Denying tactile moments between loved ones is a serious business and can be tolerated for only so long. The plexiglass impediment allows vision and elicits voice but sternly denies humanity. Lungs of unwashed air and restraint-like feelings exit with the visitor. The poem concludes with this observation,

*... twenty minutes are over
that seem like twenty days
and the doors close and you're
outside in the air of the season
you brought inside and what's
in and out or right and wrong
aren't clear and when you stop
at the deli for a coffee and tuna
sandwich you don't know how*

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*you passed a bill to the cashier
or how she passed you change
and why she is smiling or how
your hand could lift the cup
past the barrier or the sandwich
right up to your open mouth.*

Above I mentioned that this collection seems “strangely tempered.” Well, maybe not so strange. In any case Lewis’ poem *The Clamp Inside the Body* grabs one with its rawness and hurt. The poet has steeled himself to face the brunt of objectivity, truths seen from afar but no less passionately felt. Denial gets pushed aside in the opening lines,

*Okay, brother,
give me what you got.
A kick to the solar plexus*

You want to make it hurt.

*There’s a clamp in there,
like a surgeon’s mistake.
Where I clamped it all off.*

*So many mistakes
are left in my body.
How many in yours?*

*I broke the phone
You called on...*

Reliving great hurt and anger in a poetic catharsis can deliver both private and public purpose. In the title and climatical poem, *Introducing*, Lewis has transformed the ghost of his brother by acceptance. Instead of an ache in the poet’s soul, this brother-turned-muse has messaged a book of beauty and value. In a sense the two siblings are now colleagues in creation, one comfortably a part of the other. A public ceremony doubles its significance,

*So you’ll be there, I’m sure
Where, how, don’t know.
A pea-face in my boutonniere?
Static in my bride’s veil?*

*I’ve been trying to figure out
how to introduce you.
You didn’t like the first wife.
She kept that nose in the air.*

*This one, you’ll like. You will.
So, Jason meet Susan...*

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Notice the playful humor in this piece as Lewis' elegy sequence ends and his hidden ode to love defines itself into the foreground from life's detritus, and then continues on. Extraordinary.

Dennis Daly is the author of a forthcoming book of translations from Cervena Barva Press titled Alisher Navoiy (1441-1501), Twenty-One Ghazals — from the Uzbek, translated and interpreted