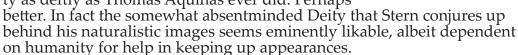
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What I Got For A Dollar Poems by Bert Stern Off the Grid Press, Boston, MA www.grid-books.org ISBN: 978-1-946830-01-2 93 Pages, \$16.00

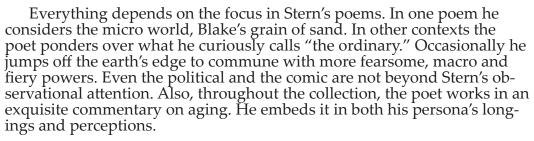
Review by Dennis Daly

f ever there were a tour de force of poetic cravings this is it. What I Got for a Dollar is Bert Stern's third poetry collection and it's magnificent. Stern craves deeply, but not shrilly, the cause behind the cause of creation. He makes the basic argument for divinity's possibility as deftly as Thomas Aquinas ever did. Perhaps



I GOT FOR A DOLLAR

POEMS BY BERT STERN



Before the first section of poems Stern positions an elegant poetic inscription, which acts as a prologue of sorts and speaks to the poet's overriding motivation. Here is a portion of it,

Behind the ripples in water, behind old age, torrents of spring plunge down mountains.

Under my face I crave another face, as if behind it all a God still sleeps...

On the Ausable, the poem that opens the collection, portrays the poetprotagonist following a riverside path in the aftermath of a rain storm, seeking the most basic things and the most tangible concepts. He appears fragile yet full of life and describes his trek thusly,

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I wobble down the rough path of the bank, propped by love and a broken stick, eyes agog with dappled water.

On the cobbled beach totter over stones, breathe beginnings in...

The title poem, What I Got for a Dollar, sounds like an intended political piece, dark and forbidding, that pushed back against its author and had its way. Comedy and newfound optimism result. Here's the heart of the piece,

...the man in the Red Sox cap who loves Jesus (it says on the button pinned to the cap), offers to help me lug groceries, and though, upstairs, I give him a dollar he doesn't do it for that because, when I look for another one, he waves it off. "This works," he says, so I know he really loves Jesus.

Contra my argument, love looks out, waiting for us to notice. It's springtime, and all the swelling renewal is like love.

I try to imagine a time after money, after celebrities have stopped shouting and the words a child says as I walk hand in hand with her sound like salvation: timbre and innocence and openness to what's to come.

My favorite poem in the collection, entitled The Ordinary, considers the scene beyond our present tame realty. Every day we pour over our books, or screens, or peer through our pleasant windows. Habit and routine control all. Only imagination delivers divergent details on sedate creation and suggests the numinous, the feral and, possibly, the continuous. The poet concludes his piece with an arresting contrast,

The palette's simple as the scene: skies gray or blue or dappled, rain, snow or nothing falling, a tree, one tree I've pruned and love because it's red and green and Japanese and longest to hold its leaves.

Up ahead a gale's coming in, but the ordinary prow keeps its nose to the wind.
Up ahead rumbling thunder, visions of shipwreck, but something sails on, and I'm haunted by this ghost, this thin aroma brilliant and concealed.
As if, behind the same old, a different face looks out Through glowing-ember eyes.

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Stern's ekphrastic poem, Samuel Palmer's Trees, works wonderfully well verbalizing the original painting, Palmer's The Gleaning Field (1833). But Stern goes much further. He uses the painting as a way in, a way to explore metaphysical implications of the work. Consider this description of laboring peasants,

...the gleaners keep their eyes on the ground, to pluck what's left from wheat stubble.

Soon darkness falls over them, but for now it's hard to name what lurks in the waning light.

I might say "God," but which? The one who sees all but feels nothing?

The people are hungrier than the cattle, who freely gaze amid the wheat still to be harvested.

God can't remember why he sent creation forth, and his creatures never knew.

Craving a deeper reality or a more fulfilling reality doesn't just happen. Usually it begins with a wound, a tear in the fabric of ordinary life. In Riding Bareback in the Tropics Stern's persona discovers an antidote to lost love by going South. Citrus delights await. Most of us at one time or another have this urge. Some even buy the epistemological ticket. But few go. Perhaps it's the coral snakes that dissuade us. Stern's protagonist packs up and leaves. Here he describes the adventure and the aha-moment that follows,

So it came about, all old ties broken, high in the canopies, spider monkeys noisier than neighbors, air orchids the horses loved to eat. One night, drunk, I galloped bareback round the rim of a great, natural bowl, with only my thighs to gird me against the unnamed hurt I somehow managed to keep dodging, even among coral snakes.

By reducing his spiritual cravings to poetry Bert Stern has, in a very real sense, already created what he seeks. Words become beginnings; they fill up nothingness with creative constructions that allow us to comprehend the nature of things and, by extension, nature. Lucky for Stern to have written this book. Double lucky for his readers.