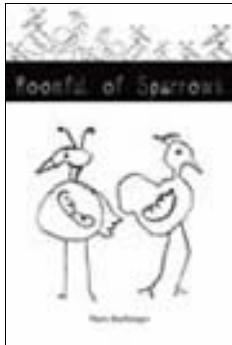


**The This and That of Balances in a "Roomful of Sparrows"  
poems by Mary Buchinger**



The This and That of Balances in a "Roomful of Sparrows," poems by  
Mary Buchinger

( Finishing Line Press POBOX 1626 Georgetown, Kentucky 40324 \$12)

A poet is her or his language and poems, like people, as T. S. Eliot said, communicate before they are reduced to understanding. The poems in Mary Buchinger's Roomful of Sparrows beset us again and again with surprising juxtapositions of terms (great and small, present and past, nature and technology) that jar and intrigue us to an unpredictable, lively sensibility. They are poems deft rather than copious in observation of the natural world around us, as we find in the final poem "White Cairn Trail, Mid-October":

...we breathe in esters of pine  
as we hike a path lit by ferns  
until all is granite undulations with dark

pearl basins and we, alongside blue jays,  
look down on the shiny backs of ravens.

We sense, breathe and see the wooded area of the description, but the next line,

The world is made of gold

—as though the lens were suddenly filtered, turns the landscape

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suggestively to allegory.

We can not take for granted or literal only the meanings of “esters” or “pine,” and see more closely that the poet’s observation has de-materialized the landscape already into “undulations,” its physical essence. We wonder what “pearl basins,” “blue jays” and “ravens” betoken, perhaps the way the Ant and the Cicada in Jean de la Fontaine’s fable are masks in a dialogue between frugality and prodigality. Yet when Buchinger announces that she is going to speak about object and its meaning, in “The Higher Purpose of Bees,” she gives us simple intransitive statements that hint at a flirtish—or is it serious?—stubbornness and reticence:

The bee is a bee  
—in all cases, a bee...

can be holy, can be desired,  
studied, can hurt, can be all  
but without meaning...

She so nearly says that language is subjective and the point of the poem is that bees, “unknowable alone,” take on meaning “in relation” to whom they may concern,

to the beekeeper,  
to the gardener, to the poet,

to the artist with the gold-  
dipped brush. The bee to the  
botanist. The bee to the boy

with the swollen lip.

Like herbs, lemon and wine in a sauce, these lines need to be held in one’s mouth to be tasted and analyzed. How many different ways to see an intricate creature! For its resources and guardianship, for its natural function of pollination, for its symbolic or phonetic meaning or aesthetic beauty, for the threat it poses. Basil, thyme, oregano...

The passage with its subtlety reminds us why reading poetry is like

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reading no other form of writing.

If Buchinger can be so simple—so difficult?—as to craft the line, “The bee is a bee,” she has a dazzling knack to undermine expectations between noun and verb. In the book’s first poem, “Grizzly Bear on Pratt Museum’s Alaskan Webcam,” we read among much else that

...fish prance...

I comment: !

The poem begins remarkably with a mountain stream, in which the bear fishes, suddenly compared in the stroke of a conceit to a modern convenience:

—dip that paw one more time  
dig around in the back of the refrigerator  
must be something there...

The potential for allegory again is striking. Is the poet talking about a bear fishing in a river or about me watching a Patriot’s game? (I only watch figure skating, steeple chase, and Doug Holder’s Author to Author, really...)

Buchinger herself is not spared subversions or surprises in the life with the oddly matched. In “Mosquito Lesson,” the minute insect sends her into a frenzy,

I beat the air  
slap my neck  
chase her neediness...

What are mosquitoes these days with the repellants we have? Who am I to act this way?—the poet is perhaps asking. Human is human. Buchinger is vulnerable. She can also be tongue-in-cheek spoiled the way we find her in “Flying to Vancouver,” a passenger in Business Class, being served “chicken risotto and tapenade” — with a sense of humility remembering her childhood,

how on the farm I used to hoe  
sugar beets and soybeans, knowing

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nothing about tapenade or Chardonnay.

My jean cuffs holding straw,  
I knew kernels of red wheat  
could be chewed to gum...

I appreciate the proportions in registers of sentiment Buchinger has kept to. The common resounds more commonly throughout the book. She observes sparrows, beetles, reads Tolstoy, goes skating (on a pond with a frog frozen in it), companionably in a day to day world that is familiar to us. As she trumps the exceptional experience of flying in Business Class, she elevates mundane occurrences into exceptionally perceptive moments. In "Reading A Wrinkle in Time " moths gathered at a porch screen door by the light in the house are seen as an intense illustration of the poet's deepest endearment:

— their ache for the light  
primitive as my love of my mother's voice  
reading L'Engle's book to me.

This deepest spring of her feelings is mediated through books, seen in a marvelous conceit of the nocturnal insects:

How the moths beat  
their own white pages  
against our porch screens

thin spines rippling as they  
opened and closed against  
the fine mesh holes...

In "Redeem/The unread vision in the higher dream" Buchinger probes further to that which is behind the mother's voice and intimates,

We all want...that finest shot of ourselves, but what we need is someone with the eyes to look for it, to show us what it is.

In her muse, in her memory and with her fellow poets she has found the

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elements of this “someone” who gives us an excellent “shot” of her. The medium forms a circle to us. When I read these poems my faculties put on different lenses that help me find something truer and better within myself. That is the benefit of reading good writing.

Mary Buchinger’s *Roomful of Sparrows* is available online at [www.finishinglinepress.com](http://www.finishinglinepress.com) as well as at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

Review by Michael Todd Steffen (winner of the Ibbetson Street Poetry Award 2007)