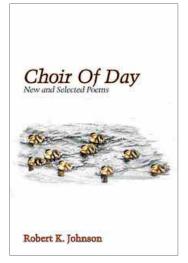
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Choir of Day: New and Selected Poems By Robert K. Johnson ISBN: 978-0-979-5313-3-0 Ibbetson Street Press, \$14.00

Review by Dennis Daly

If you like taut moments, touching scenes and wings of sunlight, these tempered yet beautifully written poems are for you. In a Morning to Remember Johnson takes a very ordinary Norman Rockwell-like slice of life memory and injects it with devastating future- knowledge. He describes the arrival and sing-song Halloo of a little boy outside his kitchen door, who

Holds up his ball and mitt—ready to play catch—the week before he drowned.

In My View of a New England Autumn, the poet relates the deaths of both his parents with a graphic realism very unlike the details of the gorgeous deepening blaze of his present autumn, "dying/ a few leaves at a time,"

My father waved back to me as I left his hospital room; and, a minute later, gasped in pain and died.

He describes his mother as steadily looking worse until,

while I bent over her bed, her eyes hardened like blue water turning to ice.

After portraying his nine year old first-born son making his way through the ordinary world of delivering newspapers and bike riding in his poem, While Driving, the poet loses himself in an instinctual, yet touching moment when he celebrates,

And my brain and pumping blood— Every part of me says, That's my son. My son.

In the poem, Our Daughter's First Time Away From Home, there is another deceptively simple scene, in which the poet's daughter discovers a little gesture,

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... when we start to drive away, an impulse leads you to discover what it feels like to blow someone a kiss.

In The Speck the winged protests of a fly unable to breech the seasonal impediments are compared to the vain protests of a poet trying to make straight-line sense out of the world's circularity,

And though, unlike the fly, I have a mind and it tells me "In vain," I—too—protest: despite the chills of age, I keep circling—in these straight lines I write.

Choir of Day is filled with sunlight, much of it falling on wings. In The Lecture the poet juxtaposes the techniques of teaching poetry with an actual moment of inspiration,

... And, glancing outside, you see the sunlight splash a swooping bluejay's wings gold-bright... and know no word your students heard roused what, in you, that flash of sunlight stirred.

In Parvane, a haunting poem, the moment of knowledge comes with winged sunlight this way:

and you will see a distant bird gliding with sunlight on its wings across a shining field where the tip of a tree's low branch waits for the bird to alight.

The poem Lover's Words starts off this way:

Each gliding gull that tips sunlight across its tilting wings will die and so will love. ...

For Johnson love seems to be yet another poetic moment or time or inspiration only more so. Therefore true love, like poetry's moment, is fleeting, does not survive death, and possibly not even our life spans, since whenever the gods decree,

the love we share will be as dead as flowers frozen by an early frost

Johnson's Choir of Day is chock-full of troubling, touching poems like these and well worth the read.