



Choir of Day: New and Selected Poems
By Robert K. Johnson
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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 breach 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.