

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

From the Box Marked Some Are Missing
New and selected poems by Charles W. Pratt
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Review by David P. Miller

This first volume in the Hobblebush Granite State Poetry Series presents selections from Charles W. Pratt's three previous books – *In the Orchard* (1986), *Fables in Two Languages and Similar Diversions* (1994), and *Still Here* (2004) – with about half the volume consisting of previously uncollected poems. The first and third of his earlier books center on the lives he and his wife Joan have led as owners of an apple orchard, though the poems spiral out from there to touch a variety of themes. The subject matter of the recent poems range more widely, though several are inspired by memories of family summers and trips to the British Isles. His work is marked, for me, by a keen sensitivity to the metaphors that life itself presents to the observant mind, fresh descriptive power, and an elegant approach to form.

It is difficult to explain, to those who are New England-hostile, the specific attachments this region holds for those of us who do better than tolerate it. In many of his poems, Pratt expresses the distinct sensuality of New England of this part of the world, as in the final stanza of "Harvest":

*Midnight, midwinter. Under the full moon
The trees, like twisting smoke, like rocks
Whorled by tides of air,
Stand stock-still in their shadows
On the new snow, precise and mysterious
As spiders on a linen tablecloth.*

Though he writes about the full spectrum of seasons – in the same poem, he describes "the mild October sun / That brings back summer, softened" – he understands winter as something quite other than the dead time too many mistake it for. (And perhaps, as I write this review on the threshold of winter, these images draw my attention most.) In "Prayer for December," the cold time comes as a blessing after the strained labor of harvest:

*Clusters of grapes like udders droop from the vines
And the burden of apples bends down the apple boughs

Till the boughs break from the burden,
As we bend to breaking now.
Thin December, come, with your landscape hardened
By a reticent sun, come with the comfort of snow.*

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Throughout, Pratt finds the image or event that suggests a greater subject for contemplation. In "Learning to Prune," though he imagines his poetry will benefit, he discovers life allegories while working with his expert neighbor:

*I had it in mind this morning
I'd get a poem out of pruning,
about discipline, I thought, and form,
like Herbert's "Paradise" –
but Jock has taught me already
it's not a question of that so much
as of opening up the center
to sun and air, taking out what
grows too upright or crosses,
and keeping the top in reach.*

In "Wolsey's Hole," Pratt learns that "a hollow carved by an eddy into the sheer / Granite under a fall" was named for his father, who sixty years earlier "slipped into it swimming and couldn't get out." His father was rescued, but this sudden knowledge brings an epiphany:

*Oh, when I heard,
How there arose from some hole in my heart a magnificent bellow,
Cold and afraid and delighted!*

. . .

*And I thought: Can I learn
To think of death not as infinite contraction,
Curtains closed over midnight, but as curtains drawn back
To let in the moon and the stars, the whole horizon,
To let in the dead and the living—a rope thrown down
To haul me from the hole of my heart, all dripping and shining?*

Of the many poems here which reflect on time and its resonance with family generations, I am particularly taken with the brief "In Drumcliffe Churchyard." As two of his children pose for a photograph by the grave of Yeats, Pratt sees "the shadow / Curling over them like a wave." This warning of the inevitable, which might paralyze, must nevertheless be lived:

*Though our crazy hearts may rave
And insist it isn't so,
We know there's nothing we can save,
Mountains fall and children grow.
Snap the picture, then, and go.*

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This insistence on the darkness as something inextricable from the daily, celebrated life is sharpened to paradox in the final poem, "Resolution":

*When the tsunami draws back its fistful of waters
And crushes the city, let me for once be ready.
Let me be washing the dishes or patting the dog.*

...

*When the suicide bomber squeezes the trigger
And fierce the flames spurt and wild the body parts fly,
Let me be holding my lover or drinking my coffee.*

Let us be drinking our coffee, unprepared.

A review can't cover the range of imagery, the humor and reflection, the rewards of careful reading that fill this volume, and the constant reminders of "all that our beautiful seeing makes beautiful" ("Exercise of the Imagination"). The reader might find one kind of summation in Charles W. Pratt's poem "The Words," where the words that "shape urns that will endure forever" also "float out like blossoms from an apple," and that "leap out living" when a book's cover is opened also "sweeten like squash laid in the cellar" through the winter. Words and world are one body.

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