

The Afterimages
Poems by David P. Miller
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Review by Dennis Daly

Scientists argue that the observation of any physical event changes it forever. I suspect that the same holds true for mental constructions entertained by the human mind—like memory. Memory



needs distance and a delicate touch to keep it relatively undisturbed. Overly ambitious seekers of densely packed mnemonic truths and ham-fisted psychologists promising new age detective tools show very little for all their well-meant delving. On the other hand poet David P. Miller eases into his personal memories with a gentle touch and his efforts pay off with impressive poetic dividends.

The opening poem in Miller's collection, *Man with Teeth*, touches with dutiful sensitivity an awkward moment shared between youth and age. It's only a moment, but, in its oddness, one that lingers on through space and time. A four year old bus rider understands perfectly,

*You contract your upper lip
toward your nose and use
your index finger
to indicate your teeth.
He takes this in.
His mother, mortified, mutters
"Don't ask to see people's teeth."
But it's too late. You and he
have shared a transgression
He will probably forget,
but you never will,
now that it's in writing.*

Buses become almost a mythical means of transportation into modes of being and remembered place. In his piece entitled *Route One* the poet takes us past a leviathan's famous flukes into the city of Burlington Vermont. He searches for his own nativity. Here is a bit of the magic at the heart of the poem,

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*Across the cusp,
Route One begins the steep descent
toward what remains of old inland sea,
living lake still vast enough
to host its own rumored sea monster.
Gradual passage down Main Street
past the school building
where Melton and Dorothy went steady,
they who became my parents.
Where trees thin
water comes clear into view.*

Miller skillfully treats another unique bus moment in his piece *One Step Down*. An elderly woman struggles with mobility and the dignity it brings. A chivalrous poet offers temporary assistance, not a personal relationship. The details exude subtlety. Poetic objectivity nudges the reader with its honest, but unsettling, last line exclamation. The poem ends this way,

*I lurch from the pavement,
Offer my arm
As her balance worsens.*

*She finds vertical.
Her grip is steel.*

*Three steps and I
Pry her hand away.
We're not going home together.*

"Doing pretty well," says the poet's seventy-five-year-old father in an existential, if momentary reflection. He means it. Oh, there is irony here, but a natural brand which flows from the nasty, short, and brutish backdrop we all call home. The poem, entitled *1955*, Miller sets into two scenes fifty-four years apart. I very much like his working of the juxtaposition of two age-appropriate sets of struggles. Shakespeare had it right: "What a piece of work is a man, how noble...how express and admirable." The poet opens his piece with the younger version of his pioneer-parents,

*The mother of twenty
the father of twenty-one
went away from home
together, he and she.
A boy of one month
nestled between boxes
in the back seat,
they drove, Vermont to Indiana,
left parents behind.
Her piano music packed
with the starter groceries
sent along to save the poor couple money.*

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I must say that I am familiar with the concept of starter groceries or tangible help with no guarantees. Shared moments like these—as simple as they are—generously passed on by Miller, amaze with their singularity of reference and power of understated emotion.

In his poem Tangelo Peel Miller escorts us through life's denouement with the sensual scent of citrus. His father sends a Christmas gift of Florida fruit. It affirms life loudly as the poet details whispers of death and aging. There is an undertone of religiosity here and the repetition of the word Christmas adds to it in an intriguing way. Miller puts it like this,

*The scent of tangelo peel on my fingertips
midday at work.
The surprise package
of oranges, tangelos, and grapefruit
to be eaten while they were still good.
My father's surprise
Christmas shipment of Florida citrus.
My father finding
Christmas again for himself.
My mother's summer death...*

Miller's title poem, *The Afterimages*, does triple duty for me in this collection. Without question it also doubles as the poet's master work, and thirdly it is, by the way, my favorite piece. Miller's central character with her "rhinoceros limbs" rules the poem. She blinds gentlemen with the rudeness of her infirmities. The young, the healthy, and other mere mortals need to make way as she ascends into her mystical bus. Her staunch ally, the bus driver—a good man—supports her with absolute authority as she moves through the coach. Righteousness and civilization triumph, a poet finds wisdom, and a (perhaps) once-lovely woman finds her bus seat. Great climax! Miller describes his protagonist's earlier journey thusly,

*Supporting herself with
A little folding grocery cart
on the bus at the supermarket
off the bus at the subway
determined smile and
the small voice of a girl
wears so many layers
dressed for November in May.
She pushes forth,
thanks the driver for kneeling the bus to her,
enormous, weak, tired.*

Grab a suitcase full of your own memories. Get on this bus at the Cervena Barva Press stop. Then let first-rate poet and tour guide David P. Miller take you on his deftly-plotted magical spin.