



One Lark, One Horse by
Michael Hofmann.
Farrar, Strauss and Giroux,
87 pp., \$23.00

Review by Ed Meek

MICHAEL HOFMANN is in that small, eclectic, erudite group of internationally recognized poets that includes Frederick Seidel, Jorie Graham, Paul Muldoon, etc. He is well-known as an excellent critic and translator. This is his first book of poems since

1999. During that protracted interregnum he once said, "I've forgotten what a poem is—or worse can only remember." In this new collection, he appears to have remembered. He has a self-deprecating sense of humor that is similar to Frederick Seidel's. The title of the book comes from a joke about two Jewish deli owners. One, Goldberg, has a much more successful business. "What's your secret?" Cohen asks him. "Lark pate," he says. "But how can you afford it?" "I add a bit of horse," Goldberg says. "How much?" "One lark, one horse," says Goldberg. Is this a metaphor for Hoffman's book or just a joke? Here's the first poem:

The Years

*Nothing required an account of me
And still I didn't give one.*

*I might have been a virtual casualty,
A late victim of the Millennium Bug.*

*No spontaneity, no insubordination,
Not even any spare capacity.*

It's a brief explanation of his absence from poetry writing, and it is witty, although it doesn't give us much to grab onto. Like Seidel, Hofmann likes to take on a number of different sources and topics for poems: a ride along the Hudson, Brexit, Australia, poems for Seidel and Auden, commentary on the age we live in.

Less Truth

*More denials, more prevarication, more #real
Hashtags, and pop-ups and calculating interesticles, more clickbait,
More straight-faced, bare-faces, faceless, baseless
Counter-allegations, more red herrings, crossed fingers,
Rehearsed answers, turned tables, impossibilities
Before breakfast, more 'accepting responsibility', less truth.
Lusher menus. Bigger bonuses. Less contrition. More Shamelessness.
Less truth.*

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Hofmann nicely captures our age of truthiness and alternate facts and multiple perspectives as well as the temporary feeling of everything from the news-cycle to pop-up restaurants amidst all the money and advertising and he does this in a playful tone with internal rhymes and surprising turns.

In a poem entitled "Auden" Hoffman refers to an earlier time period, maybe the forties or fifties when Auden was in his prime. "It was another world, the world of turned collars and polished shoes..." It does seem to be such a different world today from the world those of us over sixty grew up in:

*Suitcases wore characterful labels and tags on their
heavy, leather-effect cardboard...*

*The world of facecloths and napkin rings and coal-
scuttles...*

*And shoe trees and tie racks and plumped down
pillows and cufflinks and weskits and hats
And hardbound children's books for our hardbound
children ...*

How careless, cheap and profligate we have become...

How true! Details like this bring back memories. Even if they don't apply directly to our experience, they call up images of Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart and Katherine Hepburn dressed up for dinner in *The Philadelphia Story* and enjoying a cocktail by the pool in the moonlight. We were more formal then, as was the poetry of Auden. Of course, that formality had its drawbacks. The hardbound books were nice, but the hardbound children, not so much.

Later in the book, Hoffman has a funny send up called "On Forgetting." It begins

*'Empiricism' has been gone far more often than not;
I think I originally learned it in my teens.
Now I sometimes find it by alphabetizing, but most of
the time it's gone and stays gone.
I don't know if I dislike it because I can't remember it,
or I can't remember it because I dislike it.
It's as though it's on permanent loan somewhere...*

He goes one to list places he has gotten lost, times he's mixed up terms or events. "I disappear into my room to look for a book, / and emerge hours later with the wrong one, or with none at all." For those of us getting older, this all sounds very familiar. And Hoffman is only 62! Plenty of time to write more poetry. As long as he can continue to remember what poetry is. For all of our sakes.