

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

Farmers, Queens, Trains and Clowns

By g emil reutter

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Review by Dennis Daly

Urban infrastructure rules! g emil reutter masterfully escorts his readers through the gritty limbo of despondent souls and derelict sprawl in his new collection of rust-laden and poetically powerful dirges entitled Farmers, Queens, Trains, and Clowns. In reutter's world "no one is safe." Fame and celebrity are phantoms. Barrooms proliferate. Nature does intrude but usually does not comfort. Birdsongs of dawn and hope are met by a madman with a hatchet. Other birds become bullies. Only love, faultless observation, and an attachment to the past, both to place and to another time, seem to matter. These exceptions, however, are intrinsic to the poet's persona and center that persona with dreams of commiseration and tenderness and feathery lyrics.

Under the Pilings, the first poem in this collection sets the atmospheric. The poet returns to his childhood stomping grounds seeking remembered exhilaration. He finds instead that times have changed. His once magical portal which had promised a brave new future has now been covered with cautionary warnings. reutter describes the glory and the singular importance of that long ago escape structure this way,

*... In the middle of
the swarth was a tall piling as a ladder to the sky.
Underneath we created makeshift diamonds in
the summer and grids in the autumn. When the
day wore on and boredom hit we would climb
the ladder to the sky and while most only made
it up two stories, Jim and Tommy always made
it two the top, stood with arms raised between
insulators and wires as if they were kings of the
sun. So now, an old man, I return...*

Also, early in the book, reutter sets two of his bar-culture pieces, Lonely Nights and Trina. They're spot-on devastating, both with similar haunting cadences. reutter nails this underclass folk, who frequent such establishments, with precision. Experienced drinkers will recognize them immediately. Lonely Nights concludes with a one-way conversation,

*...Tip the bartender who made
sure I didn't send a drink to the wrong
gal. Chain smoke, chain drink, pint, shot
send another round out. Soon there were
fifteen markers on the bar by my beer.
Hit the head, slide on the floor, grateful
Avoided a fall. At closing the door man*



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*would chant, Time to go, out I went lucky
to get home, sat on the couch, mumbled
into the darkness.*

Trina, on the other hand, derives its power from confrontation and love's cruelty. The heart (if that is what it is) of the poem rubs the reader raw with its messiness and therefore authenticity. Dressed to kill, the desperate skinny girl seeks finality at "his bar,"

*...She took her place
at the bar and watched him hold
court at the corner. White Zinfandel
after White Zinfandel then gin after
gin, she fixed her gaze upon him.
He would point and laugh as would
his court until she stood, yelled at
him in slurred words. He grabbed
the girl next to him and walked to
the door, she followed yelling I love
you. The door slammed shut...*

My favorite poem in this eye-opening collection reutter calls Anger Management and that is exactly what it is. A young man, believing in the exceptionalism of humankind, confronts cheery songbirds with a hatchet for disturbing the peace of his suburban domain. He is successful in intimidating a nightingale and a robin. But a downy woodpecker has his number. It's bad to lose a confrontation with the champion of another species. It's worse to be mocked in doing so. Here are the climactic lines,

*...And so it goes, anger
hatchet, thump on the tree if caused by
a slight, or a songbird or anything that
pisses him off. On a warm July morn
sound asleep he is awakened by a
reverberating staccato, drum, drum, tap
tap. Downy woodpecker hunts on tree
plucks chubby worms from bark, taps
to find a nest. He drums on tree with
hatchet, bird rests on branch, he
turns to leave only to hear tap, tap,
tap. He returns not noticing his thumps
are an imitation of the reverberating sounds
of the Downy. There is a quiet about the
tree, he turns only to hear drum, drum, drum
of the Downy. Defeated, he throws the
hatchet on the ground...*

Sometimes love poems are better delivered straight with sentiment attached. Even in the city (especially in the city!) such sentiment finds its own nature and weaves it into a lovely cadence. Reutter's paean to his lover's beauty does just that. Consider this stanza delineating nature's efficaciousness,

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*In the midst of the urban garden we sit shaded
under umbrella's canopy, enjoy the flags of the
iris, yellows, blues of tulips, hyacinths, reds and
pinks of azaleas. Watch the ballet of sparrows
cow birds, cat birds, cardinals, the hop of the
robins. You walk the garden, take in the fragrance
return, more beautiful than before.*

Interestingly, Reutter pieces drift beyond nightmare and sentiment into aspiration. His Whitmanesque poem Philadelphia celebrates a new age and new neighborhood fabric. Here the lyricist metamorphosizes into a full-fledged oracle. The poet sings of hope,

*I dream of my city, of Philadelphia, of a
time when peace will come to its streets.
I see the people of this city, a city I love
in white, black, yellow, tan, brown. I
celebrate the people of my city, the good
people who love their families, aspire to
the same goals of peace, comfort, love.
This is not an easy city, a city named for
love.*

Reutter's poetic dreams rise organically from their hard scrabble beginnings. He returns the urban back to its natural garden of conviction and ideals. First Philadelphia, then Boston, then New York. And on and on... a future faith of steely blue-collar purpose and unfettered