

BOOK REVIEW

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Mark Belair
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Breathing Room by Mark Belair offers ample space and time for readers to move from the concrete realm of the physical world to an expansive experience of abstraction and breadth.

Small visual details like "buttery light" on an old building in the city, "empty pews tinted by stained glass," a flock of gray pigeons lofting toward "leaden skies" supply an exceptional aesthetic experience of the world our eyes can see. Consider, for example, this excerpt from "Once a Skyscraper."

Down a dusk-dark canyon
of glass-skinned skyscrapers
abides an old, tiered building
that alone
takes a buttery light
slicing in from the wet, its
decorative masonry front
glowing with a warmth
the slim, young structures, crowding it
disdain—they're hard-built for cold speed—

As beautiful as the preceding image is, the poems in this collection don't just spring from the sense of sight. They have feeling and muscle, too. One poem titled "Wrestling," for example, captures what a boy in junior high school experiences when he separates from his opponent.

It was only junior high school
but I wrestled on the team in
fierce, taut, exhilarating matches
that, once decided, my opponent
and I would separate from with
a sudden sense of how light
freed bodies could feel, a lightness
we kept until we returned to our
respective benches and sat and
lost the loss of the other's weight
and clutch and pull and regained
our own remembered weight.

The book is divided into fourteen sections which seem to be autobiographical, though they don't so much tell the story of the poet as they do the experience of all humans. Each section bears a title that begins with the words Breathing Room. For instance, sections include Breathing Room To Let Things Take Their Natural Course; Breathing Room To Let Them Grow; Breathing Room To Ponder Beliefs; Breathing Room To Imagine. Each poem offers room to reflect on the world we find ourselves in: our cityscapes, country settings and elusive realms of belief.

For the poet Mark Belair, the world within which we are immersed offers prompts for thought and word. He captures this process and shows it to us in the poem called "Steps," which is included in the section titled Breathing Room to Imagine.

Basement steps drop
down from the sunny sidewalk

I tread as something dark

rises up
their brick wall,

something
on a determined

collision course
with me,

something
accelerating

as if to escape
the obscure

life it's been living
down there so

startling me
until

I see that
it's my shadow

rising
like the prompt

for a poem:
strange and unexpected

yet, upon arrival,
matching me.

I highly recommend *Breathing Room* by Mark Belair. It will sustain you in the beautiful, muscled, ethereal experience of life on earth.

— Mary Ann Sullivan
May 1, 2016