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Review

Timothy Houghton, *Where the Lighthouse Begins* (Salmon Poetry, 2020)
Mark Belair, *Taking Our Time* and *Running Late* (Kelsay Books, 2020)
Michael Heller, *Telescope* (The New York Review of Books, 2019)

America's 'spirit of place', as D.H. Lawrence calls it, has long been the concern of its poets. These four collections are no exception. They set out to experiment with perception and in doing so move the worlds they translate in extraordinary ways. In *Where the Lighthouse Begins*, Timothy Houghton makes an inventive and disorientating kaleidoscope of reality. His shuffling between the complex and simple – objects giving way to memories and vice versa – shatters quotidian life into the cosmic. A lover's tooth-marked skin is 'like a piece of moon' in the speaker's telescope and the room of a middle-school boy has 'Saturn dangling from the ceiling'. Images bring the world inside and stretch things, making time so elastic it threatens to snap. In 'Viking Warrior' we meet a 'a mobile of Viking ships' hanging from the wall. History swings into view, 'cobwebs connecting the hulls and sails' as a warrior with his 'spray of neurons' seeks the unknown quest dangling below his fleet. Seen again in 'Hoarding', this time the 'Viking ship barely moves' among a grandmother's 'stuffed things'. Its presence reincarnated in cardboard proffers the speaker's philosophical question: 'Can sameness be richness?' Houghton's poems accumulate bizarrely to break habit – of which history is a part – into rich fragments, proliferating the question by constantly differing perspectives.

While his poems illuminate the webs of life we belong to, they refuse an over-optimistic vision of connection. Black is the dominant colour, as it was for Wallace Stevens's hemlocks and peacocks. There is a black bible, a black flag, black gloves, and a black pond. The birds too are black or otherwise made of glass and porcelain. Like Stevens's intransient cries, Houghton plays on the colour's opacity and birds' noise to remind us of an unsettling condition amplified by lyric poetry. In 'Seen from the Windows', the speaker looks to a cedar 'just outside the glass' before asking 'to whom can I mention this bird?' As the moment of self-reflective apostrophe suggests, the universe, along with its inhabitants, cannot be counted on to respond. It might not even be listening. These are important meditations at a time when everyone is trying to turn talk into action. Amid all the fractious movement of Houghton's poetry there are things withstanding, as in 'Maine Bog' where 'smart life grips the earth loosely, stands prepared in the currents'. Whether this preparation will hold, we have no way of knowing. And while Houghton does not have the answer, his poetry offers new ways of looking that loosen our tight grip on earth. The collection refuses to sentimentalize stillness by suggesting that poems are distinct containers. Instead, it uses language and form to position humanity amid the surrounding chaos: sometimes in the hope of better preparation for its indifference.

Mark Belair's collection *Taking Our Time* ends with another scene of inhabitants clinging to life. Their holding on is emblematic of Belair's New England roots. In 'Beach Fog', people stand on the shore in an echo of Robert Frost's 'Neither Out Too Far Nor in Too Deep', 'all seeming captive by a wish to witness'. Bereft of a sign from God or elsewhere, 'these pilgrims' remain 'waiting in the dusk'. The scene stands oddly apart from the rest of the poems, which are full of holistic meaning. Belair's visions of work, grief, community, and landscape are often revelatory in tone. In 'Leap of Faith' water's 'mirror surface' entrances the speaker to 'hallucination then to ecstasy of revelation' as the lines cascade, being, as Belair writes in 'The Couplet', 'designed as formal yet unfolding as free'. In the American way – together in individuality – his poems often play with freefalling images that divulge design: a father watches his son's trail of mess become creative endeavour, an alley's backlog of objects transforms into dream-images. Whatever is behind such unravelling, even if nothing at all, this poetry reminds us of the delight apparent meaning can play amid the meaninglessness. For Belair's speaker, our 'soul of exile' is self-made yet prone to slip from first to last things, finding that each of our 'commonplace losses' are 'held commonly'. Its journey of displacement keeps us in contact with the making and unmaking of our everyday world: the 'construction site smell of dug earth and wet cement' carries the odour of 'a demolished soul under construction'.

Belair's leaps of faith make his poetry a place of unexpected familiarity. In his companion collection, *Running Late*, disparate figures orientate around central points of civilisation – lightning, markets, drugs, touch – stoically remaining part of a flux. Things are animated by the voice of the community. Talking back to the world, this time in lyric ecstasy, 'an old black radiator' burns up to 'a cast-iron choir'. In 'The Brace' a stone church reveals its hidden foundations 'into which the builders long ago put their faith'. Perhaps the lines refer to religious sentiment, but faith in human architecture is just as valuable. Things, like little eternities, are the central tokens of Belair's faith in poetry and so too his faith in living. In the final poem, 'The Ocean', water's vast, unanswerable questions about where we live are interposed by 'pots and pans': give 'simple devotion to all that has offered devotion', to all the small wonders that 'hold us still'. The moral, considered attention Belair pays to language and the world produces a house of objects – the house of poetry – to help us notice such stillness.

Michael Heller's *NYRB* retrospective *Telescope* roams through the places of memory, history, and philosophy, in which home is an 'accidental center'. Accidents abide as in a 'fluted vase' as it 'fell to the table', heading for a meaning as 'untoward as steel'. Often his meanings fall into voids, only to surface again as refreshed musings on existence. In 'After Montale', the speaker/poet watches a 'mere termite' disappear down a hole. 'All this took was time', he claims, in awe of what 'time itself creates or excretes', or what hole it 'simply disappears into'. Heller answers such wonder with his poetry. Reading this collection is often like falling off an edge, and purposefully so. As in 'Within an Open Landscape', if you desire to add something to the world, you must 'make your own', which requires the 'enormous effort to leave this world for that one'. It might sound like dying, but Heller's imagination, while raucous and demanding, constantly makes new worlds with a characteristic mixture of Buddhist sensibility and a sheer lust for life's hard-wired patterns. However far his poems stray from our world, they return to us permeated by a material resolve. Our refuge is reincarnation in 'the literal' so we might discover 'selves in the core of the world'.

Heller reincarnates many selves from the core of literary thinking. Sigmund Freud, Mary Oppen, and Walter Benjamin all appear, among others, woven back into the revolving texture of time. In 'Stanzas at Mansfield Gardens', the speaker contemplates Freud's famous collection of desk antiquities only to find them merging unsettlingly with his patients: 'ancient figurines he looked at ruthlessly while journals under deities lay open manifesting as his collections'. The poem is one of many in which Heller turns thoughts and things in on themselves, making his gathering propositions feel less and less accidental. The surprising circularity of his work comes to rest in language's offer of accommodation and company. Words are 'deeply old vocabularies of sea' that, whether they serve or fail, bring us 'again to a parkland'. Upon continued reflection, these poems do not land us in the wilderness or the city as it might first seem, but in the parkland, where we repose for renewal before setting out once more. And in this temporary dwelling, poetry itself is the spirit of place in which journey trumps arrival and passage trumps home, until

sometimes
Words find common centers in us
Resonating and filling speech.
Let me know a little of you.

This final line calls for a particular kind of response. It is not apostrophe asking the universe to take notice, nor the desire to make things speak. The speaker admits the custody of knowledge and the shallowness of companionship. But in doing so he finds those central pronouns, 'me' and 'you', and puts them on route to contact. That this final truth is moderate and reasonable only makes it closer to a modern enlightenment. In the end, if there is a running concern through these contemporary American poets, it is their doubly wondrous voices which keep one foot in poetry and one in the world. Their empathy extends to the worlds we read into and the worlds we read out from. In straddling both places they offer cherished moments of community.

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