

PATHOS · HUMOR · HISTORY · CREATIVE NON-FICTION



CALLAHAN COUNTY

STAR SPOTLIGHT

WRITERS SHOWCASE

(All submitters retain ownership)

Poetry Media Service

THE KINGDOM OF ORDINARY TIME

Marie Howe's conversational and intimate poems address the daily and the divine.

By Averill Curdy

Poetry Media Services

The Kingdom of Ordinary Time, by Marie Howe. W. W. Norton. \$23.95

The "kingdom of ordinary time," as it is mapped in Marie Howe's third book of poems, is comprised of what might be considered several provinces. First, and most obviously, there is the spiritual, where ordinary time signifies the absence of the miraculous and the divine, when "One loaf = one loaf. One fish = one fish," as Howe writes in "Prologue," and "the so-called Kings were dead." The uses of attention, which was compared to prayer by Simone Weil, to dignify the quotidian, even the squalid, has long been a project of American poetry. But the kingdom of ordinary time can also be understood personally, even politically, as a point in which certain illusions, whether personal or historical, must be left behind and the individual (or nation) abandon its notions of itself as somehow extraordinary, pure, its ideals uncompromised. Howe, in a poem titled "What We Would Give Up," asks a group of college students in Florida, "What would we be willing to give up to equalize the wealth in the world?" and tries to answer for herself a few stanzas later:

Would I give up the telephone? Would I give up hot water?

Would I give up makeup? Would I give up dyeing my hair?

That was a hard one. If I stopped dyeing my hair everyone

would know that my golden hair is actually gray, and my

long

American youth would be over—and then what?

As can be heard in the discursive tone and seen in the long prose lines above, one of the things that many of Howe's poems seem willing to give up is any traditional idea of the lyric that includes concision, or that subjects the poem's materials to pressure, particularly that of silence. The tone of the poems in the first and third sections of the book reminds me of Frank O'Hara, resolutely anti-poetic in their chattiness and apparently artless transparency of statement, while quintessentially urban in their inclusiveness. Like O'Hara, like Whitman, Howe welcomes the highs and lows of modern city life into her poems. One word for this is democratic; another is distractible, as Howe acknowledges in "Prayer," one of my favorites in the collection:

Every day I want to speak with you. And every day

something more important

calls for my attention—the drugstore, the beauty products, the luggage

I need to buy for the trip.

Even now I can hardly sit here

among the falling piles of paper and clothing, the garbage trucks outside already screeching and banging.

The mystics say you are as close as my own breath.

Why do I flee from you?

My days and nights pour through me like complaints

and become a story I forgot to tell.

Help me. Even as I write these words I am planning

to rise from the chair as soon as I finish this sentence.

The risk of Howe's method, of course, is that some poems can feel like mere transcriptions—yadayadayada. But the rewards are intimacy and the kind of tonal variety one feels when talking to the greatest of friends, whose conversation can embrace the election, the prose of Elizabeth Bowen, a short history of photography, and a summer afternoon's quest for the perfect sandal.

The tone and strategies of the poems change and deepen in the book's middle section, a short sequence called Poems from the Life of Mary. The Mary poems are contemporary unrhymed sonnets, which make use of the form's compression, movement, and shape on the page. And the sonnet as a kind of theatre seems the appropriate vehicle for poems in which Mary speaks from the center—as the center—of the Christian drama. Her body in several ways represents a window between ordinary time and sacred time: first she's a girl, a seeker in the world; then she's the mother of Christ. Her womb is divinely full, then it's mortally empty.

Howe's first name, Marie, is a cognate of Mary, and it's not difficult to see how the figure of Mary reaches towards Howe's experience of motherhood as well as her experience as a daughter, writing of her own mother's death. It is the variousness of Howe's book—conversational, worldly, human, vulnerable—that enables her to write about the more difficult issues of faith or injustice which also concern her. The very distractions that often get in the way can force room for the sudden swerves and calms of attention to more urgent matters, as the final poem of the book, "Mary (Reprise)," suggests. The last image readers are left with is that of Mary as she is often painted in Annunciations: an angel appears, distracting her from her reading, a finger keeping her place in her book, but also, "keeping the place of who she was when she looked up."

The poems of 2007 NEA Grant recipient Averill Curdy have been published widely, including in Pushcart Prizes 2007. This article first appeared in Poetry magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Marie Howe, and her poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

© 2009 by Averill Curdy. All rights reserved.

Submissions sought to:

Star

P.O. Box 29

Eastland, TX 76448

email: thebairdspotlight@att.net

S.A.S.E, for returns

--WANTED--

20 lines,

double spaced or less

Poetry

Fiction or Non

Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or libel material.

Falcons Field

Such sadness leapt from pensive eye
As listened I this tale revealed
How fallen comrades came to die
And mangled lay on Falcons Field.

From tempting Fate they epic pressed
As fools and dreamers slip and crawl
Sapping strength with a will obsessed
They fight to rise and rise they fall.

The land grew quiet past many days
Choking all to see how unsealed
The dying lay in dread array
O'er gentle slopes of Falcons Field.

We feel the shock of comrades killed
Unknowing why such madness planned
But here they lie on Falcons Field
Where many died yet no man ran.

To stay they must and stay they did
Though Hell broke out at every hand
And scattered all lost souls amid
The purple hills of this fair land.

Perceiving eyes search out and know
How fiery hot that pain so real
Which bosoms both the friend and foe
And plants its rows o'er Falcons Field.

That place above so richly sought
Cause all such mortal men to vie
Their valor rich through battles fought
Their bloody banners raised on high.

Such rising comes through pain and tears
And true it is for every man
But once we own such lofty Fears
We ne'er shall fall so low again.

This viewing deep inside each one
Brings dread emotions stoic ban
And plants thy Feet 'long side someone
And freely gives what none demand.

Falcons Field has taught us this
Though ghoulish customs plan defied
And search for lofty joy and bliss
Only comes from deep deep inside.

- Weldon L. Smith

Eastland, Texas

Honesty

Honesty is
A mirror; reflecting the cuts and bruises
Of man made words.

Honesty has
Integrity; the hope and conscience of
A person's will to fear.

Honesty is
A leach; sucking the life out of
You until there is no power to defeat it

Honesty has
Life; for without it we would know
Not the intense friendships we have.

Honesty is
Daring; daring you to test it and
Become the next to fall against a fatal wrath.

Honest has
Patience. the will to wait and explore the endless
possibilities.

- Brenna Coffman

Baird, Texas

American Life In Poetry

Column 214

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Sometimes I wonder at my wife's forbearance. She's heard me tell the same stories dozens of times, and she still politely laughs when she should. Here's a poem by Susan Browne, of California, that treats an oft-told story with great tenderness.

On Our Eleventh Anniversary

You're telling that story again about your childhood, when you were five years old and rode your blue bicycle

from Copenhagen to Espergaerde, and it was night and snowing by the time you arrived,

and your grandparents were so relieved to see you, because all day no one knew where you were,

you had vanished. We sit at our patio table under a faded green umbrella, drinking wine in California's blue autumn,

red stars of roses along the fence, trellising over the roof of our ramshackle garage. Too soon the wine glasses will be empty,

our stories told, the house covered with pine needles the wind has shaken from the trees. Other people will live here.

We will vanish like children who traveled far in the dark, stars of snow in their hair, riding to enchanted Espergaerde.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org), publisher of Poetry magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Poem copyright (c)2007 by Susan Browne, whose most recent book of poems is "Buddha's Dogs," Four Way Books, 2004. Poem reprinted from "Mississippi Review" Vol. 35, nos. 1-2, Spring 2007, and reprinted by permission of the author and publisher. Introduction copyright (c)2009 by The Poetry Foundation. The introduction's author, Ted Kooser, served as United States Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 2004-2006. We do not accept unsolicited manuscripts.

Words You Can Use:

Arsis: This is the section of the metrical foot that is not stressed. For instance, the part of the word section that is not normally stressed is "tion," so that would be it's arsis.

Brume: This noun is a word for mist or fog. The word is not used frequently around Callahan County, Texas.

Calathiform: The next time you have coffee and drink it from a cup, you will be drinking from a vessel that has this shape. Tell your family what you are doing.

Haulm: This word denotes the plants of things that can be considered a stalk of a plant. Some say it applies to things like beans or potatoes.

Logogogue: This is the person who dictates law about words, but you know here we just suggest what the common notions are about words.

Rhymes To Use:

Ainfandel

Philomel

Bagatelle

Cell

Dwell

Dispel

Pastel