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Book Review: Darwin's Garden by Lee Rossi

John Brantingham · Wednesday, January 30th, 2019

Lee Rossi has that gift so many great poets have of being able to pull universal truths from purely personal experiences. Rossi's new autobiographical collection, *Darwin's Garden*, follows the narrator through childhood to fatherhood. We follow him through a confusing boyhood of Catholicism in St. Louis with a father who has sometimes violent emotions. Later, he faces the sexual sublimation of the seminary and frustrated sexuality of adult life, and he ends in a fatherhood where the narrator has seemed to find his footing at least to some degree through love.

One of the ideas that emerges early is the fear that children often feel at the hands of a father who is struggling with his own past and is careless in the way that he deals with his kids. The narrator speaks of his relationship with his father in "Sudden Harvest" when he is given the chore of gathering bagworm cocoons out of the tree in the backyard. The child is frightened of the larger implications of killing the worms and of the worms themselves. Having been raised with a mystical understanding of death, he associates worms with hell and the afterlife. After he gathers them, his father burns them, and the boy's sensitivities clash with his father's emotional toughness.

> Oh, they curled too in the sudden heat,
> blood smoke rising sideways in the pit.
> What must he have thought, seeing me
> staring, fists clenched, the moisture
> boiling from my cheeks and eyes,
> trying to read that fiery script? (13).

As his father is confused by the boy's misunderstood complexity, the boy is confused by his father's. My favorite view of their baffled relationship is in the poem "Last Stand." Here he makes an attempt to understand how the violence of his past must have made and remade his father.

> Where is my father,
> the man who died fighting
>
> his own battle with the world,
> damage and destruction
>
> the surest way of knowing he's alive.
> Was it Iwo or Guadalcanal,
>
> was it the Bulge? Or was it

some back alley brawl, fists no match

for knives, knife unequal to guns? (34).

Of course, it is the nature of life that we will have these distances in our relationships, and that is the power of Rossi's fine writing. He is able to capture what so many of us feel, the simultaneous lack of connections to those we love and our need for it.

There is much to admire in this collection including the way he captures the painful end and aftermath of relationship. In "Lip Service," for example, he explores the daydreaming that follows the end of a relationship. Here, he imagines his ex talking to her new lovers about him. The imagined gossip is painful because he knows it well from his relationship with her.

My ex is there, I'll bet, and her new beau,
a beefy former-cop-turned-security-consultant—
I think his name is Jeff. They'd be laughing by now,
and she'd be telling him for the 33rd time all the ways
I failed her (77).

If he shows us the pain of love and of its denial, he also gives us a vision of what love can be at its best in his relationship with his children. In "" his son has climbed a tree, and his daughter, worried about the boy, is begging him to come down.

They know I am
watching, that I will catch him when he falls
and save her from loneliness.

They know I will be watching even when
I have sunk into the ground like the water
I sprinkle on lilies and grapes.

How they know this I do not know (98).

So if he has shown us a vision of how distant love can be, he gives us the hope that love can be exceptionally close, close beyond words even.

*Darwin's Garden*is a tremendous collection, and there is so much here beyond what I have discussed. This is the work of a gifted and reflective poet.

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