William Thompson

Recommended Reading

Night Vision, by John Foy
(St Augustine's Press, 2016)

In our best poets we hear the voices of other poets too: Williams in Ammons, Stevens in Ashbery, Lowell in Walcott, Donne in Donaghy, Moore in Ryan. The remarks on the dust jacket of John Foy's *Night Vision*, winner of the 2016 New Criterion Poetry Prize, place his poems "in the tradition of Frost, Bishop, and Larkin." There are echoes of other poets as well, though Foy's voice is manifestly his own:

> When Wilbur accidentally killed a toad,
> it was the power mower once again.
> He clipped its leg, and off it went to die
> beneath a cineraria. He used the words
> "ebullient" and "emperies"
> to talk about the life he'd compromised.
> What would Philip Larkin think of these?
>
> When my turn came, it happened in a field.
> I hadn't known that I'd gone over it,
> but there it was, a rabbit much the worse
> for having been beneath the rotor blades.
> I'd laid its back right open to the bone,
> but it was still alive and looked at me,
> and then I had to kill it with a stone.

Like Larkin, Foy opts for a plainer diction than Wilbur used. Wilbur's toad is buried unsympathetically beneath the poem's rhetoric:

> He lies
> As still as if he would return to stone,
> And soundlessly attending, dies
> Toward some deep monotone,
>
> Toward misted and ebullient seas
> And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies.

Foy's poem is as literary as Wilbur's, but its reserve makes us feel a little of what the helpless speaker felt: *it was still alive and looked at me.*

Foy's poems about the death of his mother naturally involve much more complex emotions and, sometimes, a refusal to be comforted:

Oh, Father McRay, fuck you and stick
your bereavement journey up your ass.
We all have to die, and what
you've found to say is not enough.

(from "The Answering Machine")

You've lost
her now, few care, and nothing
can help, and no one knows the cost
you've paid—but everyone knows
we die like dogs in the deep snow.

(from "Condolences")

Finally, after grief and anger and sadness, Foy arrives at another possibility:

What if, past a certain point, it weren't
so bad to die? What if it were like
lying on a couch at 3:00 a.m.,
the mind aloft and quiet, given over
to a few piano notes finding ways
melodically through predetermined loops
in Brian Eno's *Music for Airports*?
That's what you'd be listening to,
music for those places where we go
to go away, the music of going away,
and you just disappearing into it
without effort or pain,
finding peace in knowing to obey
means at its root only to listen.

Just under half of the poems in *Night Vision* are sonnets like this one, often with non-rhyming or off-rhyming heterometric

lines, the kind of thing that, in the wrong hands, can come across as slipshod. But Foy's variations are pleasing both rhythmically and phonetically. One of my favorite parts of *Night Vision* is "Jovian," a sequence of six sonnets that apostrophize Jupiter, four of its moons, and the space probe Juno:

> What is it, Juno? Why have you come back
> to visit Jupiter? So much went wrong,
> and after so much time what's left to say?
> Your husband is a dead gas giant now,
> encircled by some sixty-seven moons
> that can't appeal to him or slip away.
> There's nothing untoward here anymore.
> You, too, perhaps have made a compromise.
>
> You are a spacecraft now, an artifact
> embarked upon a one-way trip to look
> your antipathetic other in the eye.
> You'll go around him more than thirty times
> and then drop down, unbearable though it be,
> to feel again the might of his command.

The more time I spent with *Night Vision*, the more deeply I enjoyed Foy's poems. This is a book I will happily read again.

***Devotions*, by Timothy Murphy**
(North Dakota State University Press, 2017)

In a 2012 T.V. interview with North Dakota's Prairie Public Broadcasting, Timothy Murphy described himself as a "formal poet" who is "highly confessional": "The protagonist in almost every poem is Tim Murphy. And I don't pull any punches. I have not had an easy life." *Devotions*, a selection of poems spanning the 8 years since he re-embraced Catholicism, was written by a man who has endured "the struggle between belief and disbelief, struggles with alcohol, [and struggles with] my sexual orientation." And yet, to paraphrase St. Paul, Murphy's endurance has produced character and hope. The abiding temperament in *Devotions* is one not of struggle but of gratitude:

> I have a brother who's no blood of mine
> except, perhaps, back in the Viking days.
> Nobody else so passionately prays
> I'll play my minor part in God's design.
>
> He's never smoked, never drunk to excess.
> Inches taller and years shorter than I,
> two times he saw me such a sodden mess
> he told his wife, "I think Tim's going to die."
>
> Ranging afield for years with dog and gun
> we forged a bond that is unbreakable,
> and certain as the rising of the sun
> we share a faith that is unshakeable.
>
> Samaritan, he found me in a ditch.
> With that which matters most I am most rich.

Murphy knows full well that he is lucky to be alive. Some of the most moving poems in this collection have to do with one who was not so lucky, the poet and translator Alan Sullivan, Murphy's partner who died in 2010 after fighting leukemia for five years:

> I draw to the close of my sixtieth year
> without you. Still I reach for the phone
> every morning, right after I hear

my frail monsignor's baritone:
Through Him, with Him and in Him.

We treasure your versions of the Psalms.
I've started working for Vincent de Paul's
charity, raising the needed alms
for our parish poor. St. Vincent calls:
Through Him, with Him and in Him.

You perch on my shoulder much of the time,
whether I'm wrong, whether I'm right
on matters of faith, reason or rhyme,
and I trust that we shall reunite:
Through Him, with Him and in Him.

Dana Gioia, in his preface to this volume, places Murphy's poems in the long tradition of Christian devotional verse. But Murphy, whose passion for bird hunting rivals his love of verse-making, is also a poet of landscape:

The prairie is a poem rarely read.
    Its looseleaf pages blow.
Too many students of this landscape fled
    its poverty and snow.
  Today I limp on stiffening knees,
hoping that heedless pheasants take their ease

in pigeon grasses sprung from durum stubble,
    in fragrant cedar shadow
where a boy watched his father down a double.
    Maker of marsh and meadow,
  grant me more time to understand,
more years to walk and memorize this land.

Often in Murphy's poems, the spiritual and the natural flourish together as struggle gives birth to hope:

A year ago Steve saw me in seizure's throes
and told his wife he'd bidden goodbye to Tim.
Frank Miller gave me the last rites, and Frank knows,
Christ's priest that he is, when eyes go dim,
pulse slows, blue takes the fingers and the toes,

pray for the soul.
Tonight a full moon rose
and sang over my head a harvest hymn.

When describing himself in the interview mentioned above, Murphy put the strongest emphasis on this statement: “From the age of 17 on I have had one goal, and that is to become a major poet.” He must know, however, that most poets' reputations rise and fall unpredictably. On the other hand, he clearly realizes that he has found something infinitely more important.