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Four Young Poets [Reviews of Robert Hass, Gregory Orr, Tom Wayman, Michael Ondaatje]

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Anyone professing to be a "new" poet today has the usual two routes open to him. Either he must do what the old masters were doing—organic form, swift image, juxtaposition—and do it better; or he must map a really new course. The difficulty of the latter seems evident from such disparate innovations as Robert Bly's "deep image," Michael Ondaatje's poem narratives, and the countless experiments of the New York poets. For every claim to innovation, history provides an earlier example of that new method or theme, as antidote. But this is hardly news: Eliot wrote the classic statement on the matter of tradition and the individual talent over fifty years ago.

The modern reader is hard to please. He demands proof that a newly published poet can excel in one of the two alternatives. Does Gregory Orr out-Williams Williams and Ignatow, or does he take us in a new direction? Is Tom Wayman's persona, Wayman, another Maximus or Paterson, or rather a wryly cryptic fabrication of Wayman's identity? Given, this truth: that all readers in the past expected from new poets was a fairly consistent voice, some good poems, and a sense of craft. Those charitable days are, unfortunately, gone, buried deep under the flood of published poetry that does—thank God—now surround us.

These four books are good evidence that readers, critics, and publishers expect more than passing poems from young writers. Each of the collections is distinctive in one way or another; several include striking poems; two—Hass's and Wayman's—are fine books.

Robert Hass's Field Guide is an impressive first collection, whether one is looking for a poet who develops a new track or one who proves his skill along older routes. Without many contradictions in tone or method. Hass appears to do both. Reminiscent in his sharply detailed lists of the purist Imagists, Hass can just as deftly move from image to the statement of the experience which crystallizes the happening for the reader. The poet's consistent voice is the unifying device. His poem "Measure" opens with the concrete
Recurrences.
Coppery light hesitates
again in the small-leaved
Japanese plum. Summer
and sunset, the peace
of the writing desk
and the habitual peace
of writing . . .
and shifts slightly into the more subjective area of writer and his relationship to his writing. The poem continues this movement between detail and the poet’s reason for finding that detail important, with the culmination of meaning giving us, too, a wider gloss for “Measure.”

. . . these things
for an order I only
belong to in the idleness
of attention. Last light
rims the blue mountain
and I almost glimpse
what I was born to,
not so much in the sunlight
or the plum tree
as in the pulse
that forms these lines.

The poet finds his measure, and his life’s, in the recurrences of writing which opened the poem. More than just a metrical designation, the title then becomes Hass’s rationale for his vocation.

Field Guide as a collection also has integrity. The poems in the three sections fit well together; they are arranged, as the title suggests, to provide a guide, a map, to both natural phenomena and human experience.

Part I, entitled “The Coast,” pictures the various areas of California which Hass chooses to write about—Sausalito, Palo Alto, Los Altos, Bolinas. But he carefully opens the book with two poems less obviously geographical, more concerned with the Emersonian theme of knowing the self in and through its responses to nature. The first poem pictures the poet fishing, unsure of either his catch or his own motivation, but moved by his affinity with the ugly cabezone: “Creature and creature, / we

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stared down centuries." The second poem describes the anxiety of the amateur mushroom collectors, instructed only by what Hass terms "the terrifying field guide." Even a man's most commonplace acts bring him to the edge. "Death shook us more than once / those days..." The experience—of both life and death, or coming close to it—is the heart of Hass's field guide, for only through the knowing does he come to words, names, the logical distinctions that reality unmercifully demands.

... Earth-wet, slithery,
we drifted toward the names of things.
Spore prints littered our table
like nervous stars. Rotting caps
gave off a musky smell of loam.

Hass's view of knowledge is convincing. As we read the sonorous and generally regular poems, we are aware that the poet has achieved his apparent tranquility by living close to the edge. The control that he has, the pleasure that he brings to lists of foods and objects, the loving emphasis on the very thinginess of his images—one can be reminded only of the best of Hemingway.

A clean taste for bitter things,
unripe almonds or bitter words.
I touched the cold surfaces of rock
and peeled the roughened bark
from pepper trees. The air was thick
with birds, linnets like wounds,
slow towhees, dumb earth-colored birds,
hawks overhead riding in the wind.
("Lines on Last Spring")

Stanley Kunitz, in his helpful foreword to this book, points out Hass's debt to the Orient in his emphasis on the immediate and the detailed as well as his evident knowledge of Williams and Whitman, Roethke and Stevens. Such ancestor hunting may be unnecessary, however, so long as we realize that the objects of Hass's poems act as the best concrete images should, with life both within themselves and emanating from themselves. The things of Hass's poems reveal him and his attitudes to us. He not only appreciates the beauty of reality caught off-guard, he will force his life to create that beauty for him. Loveliness for Hass becomes an act of will; the slow and hesitant movement of many of his poems recreates that careful searching, just as his slow tempo suggests his ease with the whole process. Field Guide is an affirmative collection, but the
process of writing it may not have been simply affirmative.

As we see the poet reacting to this witty epigram and that succulent menu, to this line of coast and that conversation with his wife, we absorb the directives of the sometimes terrifying field guide. It comes as no surprise when, in the effectively understated “Letter,” Hass equates his love for his wife with his elusive map for living well:

... I wanted
to be walking up with Leif, the sun
behind us skipping off the pond,
the windy maple sheltering the house,
and find you there and say
here! a new blue flower (ovary inferior)
and busy Leif and Kris with naming
in a world I love. You even have
my field guide. It’s you I love.
I have believed so long
in the magic of names and poems.
I hadn’t thought them bodiless
at all. Tall Buttercup. Wild Vetch. . . .
Words. You are the body
of my world, root and flower, the
brightness and surprise of birds.
I miss you, love. Tell Leif
You’re the names of things.

We have sensed all along that these poems are the result of one man’s encounter with the abrasive modern world, and his struggle to find peace, sometimes at great cost, in that encounter. “Letter” and Hass’s Buffalo poems help to convince us of that cost.

Gregory Orr’s *Burning the Empty Nests* is an interesting first book. Many of his short poems are forceful and arresting, and one feels frequently that he is close to mastery of Bly’s “deep image” technique. But the impact of the book as a whole is less successful than that of some individual poems because Orr coasts through Part IV, the last twenty poems. In these the poet persona becomes “the stone,” and every poem describes what soon becomes a singularly uninteresting object.

The stone nibbled black bread.

The stone has some seeds it is saving.

The stone eyed him carefully.

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Whether the stone persona is evading vampires or the woman who haunts him, he is too coy a device to remain vital for so long. Orr could have gotten away with his sometimes oppressive use of such images as leaves, bones, mirrors, wheels, fire, and stones in the earlier poems if he had left them unprogrammed, scattered as they are throughout the short poems; but to structure the book so that it culminates in this long sequence of stone poems harms the impact of even the beginning three sections.

There are some excellent poems in this book, however, and Orr’s command of both conventional image poem and surreal pastiche deserves notice. “I am a jar of fireflies dying” is surely an evocative description, as is Orr’s view of “farmers sanding smooth the little squares of their fields.” But the most compelling of his poems are those in which the “deep image” dominates. “The Wooden Dancer” is a study of metamorphosis and loneliness done in shades of white:

She wears a necklace of light.
Each bead is a deserted room
you enter: bare light bulb, a white
glove on a table. You walk to the window
and stare out at the snowfields.
A flock of sparrows is eating your footprints.

Unlike the modernist technique of juxtaposition, one image laid beside another without explicit transition, Orr’s method here assumes relationships that cannot possibly exist. That the necklace is of light is improbable; that one can “enter” each bead, with the beads having as identities the bare light bulb, the white glove, even the deserted room; that any of the beads has a window. But the coalescence of all the white and single images—giving us separation, isolation, cold—makes the last line, once again, plausible.

“When We Are Lost” is one of Orr’s best poems in this vein, and it is also a relationship poem similar to the provocative “The Fast” (father and son) and “Poem to the Body” (mother and son):

Darkness surrounds the dead tree. Gathering around it, we set a torch to the trunk.
High in the branches sits an old man made of wax. He wears a garland of wounds; each one glows like a white leaf with its own light.
Flames rise toward him, and as they touch his feet he explodes, scattering insects made of black glass.
A moth lands on the toe of my boot.
Picking it up, I discover a map on its wings.
Orr, like Hass, has his own interest in maps and field guides, and his use of nature imagery—however surreal—suggests parallel attitudes. Yet Hass identifies his direction through his use of concrete detail; he seems intent on sharing his knowledge in fairly explicit terms. Orr, conversely, is at his best relying on suggestion and outright mystery.

The only weakness of Orr’s work is its obvious surreality. No reader ever believes that his imagery and metaphor are anything other than imagery and metaphor. With Tom Wayman’s poems, the artifice is less obvious. The poems in Waiting for Wayman, his first collection, are apt combinations of convincing concrete imagery with an exciting turn to the deeper image. In “Opening the Family,” his lead image can be read on both literal and metaphoric levels:

Conversation opens the family.
As we talk, the doors of the faces swing apart
like the mirrored front of a medicine cabinet.
In each opening is the face of a child . . .

“What the Shoes See” parallels images of the new lovers (“each box of clothing is carefully labelled / as to its owner”) with the old and disen­chanted:

But at last, after years, in the midst of a packing
is a carton marked “shoes.” Inside is one flesh:
a jumble of leathers and patterns, loafers and boots.
This is what they have come to.

And here it ends. The moccasins start to quarrel
with the slippers; runners and brogues join in.
A pair of galoshes splits on the question . . .

Wayman uses the surreal not to mystify but to illuminate (he pays his debt to both Pablo Neruda and Robert Bly in the poems included). “For the American Deserters” opens “Their parents want them to be dry
sticks, / old bones with bits of meat still on them.” The poem could end with the same tone, a comparable image, and be very effective. It doesn’t. Wayman’s poems are Vorticist—they refuse to rest on an image, no matter how good it may be; they move quickly through nuance and tone as well as from image to image; and in that shifting of attitude and scene Wayman captures the whole range of “meaning.” In this poem, for example, he races past the anti-patriotic opening to give us a definitely sympathetic look at these bereaved parents (his speed creates a comedy and lets Wayman handle some very difficult subjects). Finally, he pictures the Canadians and their idealized view of the young Americans:
The people of Vancouver want the deserters
to be birds, sea-gulls.
To fly high as an eagle and
disappear. They want them
to be walking along the street
and turn into something delicious,
some marvellous confection Now Available in Canada . . .

One of the most striking qualities of Wayman’s poems is his use of language. Whole poems are built on syntactic patterns; “Untitled” uses as refrain, “lead in the clay, he is still: / mucked in under the earth / like a half-rusted gun, / dead / at the end of his war.” Or, like Hass, Wayman can use sound and line division to control pace:

Into the light blue room
the perfect Siamese
brings morning:
the walk of the cat
along my blanket
eases in hot sea sunshine . . .

In contrast, the pace of the lines in “Working It Out” is sonorous, regular. The poet is in complete control.

And north on Kaien Island, the small boy I was fifteen years ago
hears the rainwater falling in the drainpipes below the eaves.
In the night beyond his dark bedroom
fishboats, on the long inlet swells, come riding home.

Whether Wayman is writing social satire, love poems, comic self-portraits, or history, his poems work. There’s a distinctive voice here, a real compassion (“The Projected Poems of Lyndon Johnson” is a miracle). Waiting for Wayman is worth it.

Difficult as it is to read Michael Ondaatje without interest, Rat Jelly comes a bit short of the dynamism of his previous three books. It’s partly the dilemma of every established writer: if he repeats himself, he’s censured; so too if he’s gone another route. Damned either way. In Ondaatje’s case, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid is a hard book to follow: each poem in that 1970 collection was shaped to fit a specific intention; the forty poems in Rat Jelly are much more random, having been written over a six-year period. The book as a whole, then, has a much more diffuse focus.

There are many nightmare poems, some horrific, some using the
dream-nightmare theme as a parallel to the process of writing, some a
means of evoking the larger-than-real image. "Fabulous Shadow" is a
brief but incisive moment from myth:

They fished me from this Quebec river
the face blurred glass, bones of wing
draping my body like nets
in a patterned butterfly

and peeled green weed from scorched shoulders
and the dried wax from my thighs

In this same vein are some King Kong poems, and many variations on the
insect theme.

The tough speaker of the title poem—and the sequence of rat poems
that follows—provides one discernible focus. "A Bad Taste" is the most
striking of this group; here Ondaatje uses that telescoped syntax and
brusque language to good effect in his eulogy to Ezra Pound.

... But it was the rat in Ezra who wrote best,
that dirt thought we want as guest
travelling mad within the poem
eating up punctuation, who farts
heat into the line. You see
them shaved in the anthology...

Animals of all kinds appear in Rat Jelly—beavers, cats, birds, nu-
erous dogs, a few flies, iguanas, spiders, fish, snakes—sometimes as
personae themselves, more often as the alter egos of the people that
would normally be the subjects of the poems. Some of these animal
poems are among the best poems Ondaatje has ever written. In the long
evocative opening of "Heron Rex," those "mad kinds... proud of their
heritage of suicides / —not the ones who went mad / balancing on that
goddamn leg, but those

whose eyes turned off
the sun and imagined it
those who looked north, those who
forced their feathers to grow in
those who couldn't find the muscles in their arms
who drilled their beaks into the skin...

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As the kinds of birds begin to separate out, we realize that this is not a surreality—concrete details used to escape patterns—but rather traditional allegory. Ondaatje helps with our recognition in the penultimate stanza when he uses the same unpunctuated catalogue arrangement to picture men as well as birds:

There are ways of going  
physically mad, physically  
mad when you perfect the mind  
where you sacrifice yourself for the race  
when you are the representative when you allow  
yourself to be paraded in the cages  
celebrity a razor in the body . . . .

This is Ondaatje at his best, and there are many moments like this in *Rat Jelly.*

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