THINK

A JOURNAL OF POETRY,
CRITICISM, AND REVIEWS

SPRING 2017
VOLUME 7.2

A Diminished Thing

Ornament
Poems by Anna Lena Phillips Bell
University of North Texas Press, 2017
73 pages / $12.95

Just Another Day in Just Our Town: Poems New and Selected, 2000-2016
Poems by Bruce Bennett
Orchises Press, 2017
214 pages / $24.95

Peccadilloes
Poems by Jan Schreiber
White Violet Press, 2014
83 pages / $16.95

David J. Rothman

... Bruce Bennett is a major American poet, and it continues to scandalize that he has not received his due. Over a lengthy career he has published ten volumes and scores of chapbooks and pamphlets, in addition to founding two of America's preeminent literary magazines (*Field* and *Ploughshares*), and teaching poetry to thousands of students. Like all strong verse satirists (including Schreiber), he has cultivated a technical virtuosity that he deploys with both principle and sprezzatura. Unlike many of them (but again like Schreiber), he also extends his skill into serious modes and even heartbreaking subjects.

Just Another Day in Just Our Town, a volume of new and selected poems, belies its modest title, focusing so deeply on small, serious subjects that they go off like depth charges. The book showcases Bennett's Horatian wit (and occasionally Juvenalian indignation), but he is also that rarest of lyrical poets, a virtuoso of his own perception who simultaneously attends closely to the lives of others—to our lives—in all their folly, sorrow, and beautiful vitality.

Two or three examples will have to do. The title poem of one of Bennett's recent chapbooks, *Swimming in a Watering Can*, has lodged itself permanently in my memory:

> Something was stuck. I thought it was some leaves,
> so I poured out the water from the top.
> There was this lump. I saw it was a mouse.
> He must have tried to drink and lost his balance.

I stood there staring. Just a little lump
wet on the wet ground. Nothing could have saved him.
Who could have heard? Who would have heard a mouse
swimming? And it was outside, in the dark.
I don't know why the thought of that upsets me.
Maybe it's all the other stuff. It's just
that awful image: paddling in the water,
helpless and desperate, nothing to catch hold of,
feeling your strength fail, little by little by little,
paddling and paddling, sinking, all alone.

This extraordinarily precise blank-verse sonnet (note the clear *volta*) is so original and powerful that it seems at least at first to overwhelm all precedents, even Burns. Like a classic, at the very least it reorganizes them in its light. The conversational grace of the syntax suggests Auden in the Musée des Beaux Arts, the theme Auden again but also Emily Dickinson's "Grief is a mouse," the willingness to fully articulate a painful dramatic conception perhaps a poet like Hecht, but the commitment and clarity are completely distinctive. Bennett does not evade or soften any aspect of the contemplation of suffering here. His craft a sure vessel, he conveys to us the full, pure cargo of agony and consciousness of it in another. The poet Milosz, in one of the strongest poems about cats, "To Mrs. Professor, in Defense of My Cat's Honor, and Not Only," muses that:

. . . after all, we know that only consciousness
Can for a moment move into the Other,
Empathize with the pain and panic of a mouse.

And such as cats are, all of Nature is.
Indifferent, alas, to the good and the evil.
Quite a problem for us, I am afraid.

All honor to Milosz, but in Bennett's poem, we actually sense that consciousness move, rather than merely characterizing it. As William Meredith once put it in a memorable review of the great Colorado poet Belle Turnbull's *The Tenmile Range*, "We feel the experience in this poem because we are not allowed to generalize it away...the 'message' of the poem can only be apprehended dramatically, because that is the only way it is stated." Such clarity coupled with craft and deep feeling comes only to a very few, and then usually only after decades of work.

Bennett hits this note scores of times, although there is a concentration of such lyrics in *Swimming in a Watering Can*. He can even do it in astonishingly small space. *Small Town Haiku* first appeared in *Here and Now*:

> "I said Hello.
> I always say Hello.
> I know it irritates him."

Not exactly a haiku, of course, but as Alfred North Whitehead once supposedly observed of Plato, wherever you're going, you meet him on the way back. This anti-haiku turns Zen observation on its head, replacing observation of nature with the delights of amoral malice. Both a satire of the haiku tradition and an epigrammatic observation about how we actually live, the quotation marks seal the dramatic deal, again conveying truth while eschewing philosophy. The mark of a master: he leaves that work to us. Such poetry may begin by appearing to be just a diminished thing, but Bennett is obviously and everywhere always after larger game.

The book does have one flaw, or perhaps one-and-a-half. Bennett is so fluid that he can spin out lyrics of almost any genre, form, theme, and tone with ease; this occasionally gets the better of him. The section "Loose Canon" contains almost 60 parodies. While

every single one is well-turned, and collectively they reveal his own influences, and many of them can stand quite well on their own, it is too much. Here is the opening of "The Cult of Eating," a Bishop parody:

> The cult of eating isn't hard to master.
> You start with something savory, like a peach,
> And chew it slowly, then you chew it faster.

In a lesser poet, such play would amuse, but given the quality of Bennett's primary work, both serious and satirical, half as many of these would have been enough here.

Bennett's more original satirical work is memorable and rich. To pick one almost at random, "The Moral Order" turns the pantoum's obsessive repetition against itself and us, particularly our youthful selves, as Bennett perhaps remembers being a student. The whole poem:

> I stayed late after tea to ask the question:
> "Is there a Moral Order?" I had to know.
> The world stood still. I waited for his answer.
> Outside the day was gray. It had been raining.
>
> "Is there a Moral Order?" I had to know.
> He stood and looked at me. I heard the clock.
> Outside the day was gray. It had been raining.
> He cleared his throat. His wife was in the kitchen.
>
> He stood and looked at me. I heard the clock.
> I knew that it was late. The pause was awkward.
> We were alone. His wife was in the kitchen.
> I sensed that he was searching for the words.

I knew that it was late. The pause was awkward.
"Is there a Moral Order?" I had to know.
I know now he was searching for the words.
I stayed late after tea to ask that question.

Take that, Philosophy! The teacher could not find the words, and yet the more mature poet now can, and as the lines and reality slowly shift, the world not exactly standing still, the answer comes in the little details: the tea, the professor, the staying late, the rain, the clock, the wife, the awkwardness. There may or may not be a Moral Order, but there is certainly a human and poetic one, and here it is, like a miracle. As we wait for the answer that can never come, life itself emerges, social, dramatic, and, in that sense, indeed moral, filled with ethics that are no less meaningful and real for being impossible to rationalize in any other order than verse. There is a moral order, but its name is poetry. That is the order that gives the speaker his winning sympathy so many years later: "I know now he was searching for the words." What did he eventually say? Another piece of the brilliance here is that Bennett knows that matters less than what was happening then and there.

The strongest books of poetry exude a presiding spirit from each page that conveys a sense of coherence quite hard to describe. Bennett's pungent yet gentle Horatian mockery of himself and of philosophy in "The Moral Order" could stand, like many of the other poems here, for a version of the whole. While he can rail with the best (his Trump poems, most of which are not included here, singe the eyes), his view of human beings, indeed of all living things, is clear-eyed yet compassionate. Our lives may be small, but the stakes could not be higher. Again and again, he shows us what we might make of such a diminished thing: a vibrant, richly dramatic world where everything that might touch a human being, even death, seems to be alive.