

Graham High, *Poetry Salzburg Review* 5 (Autumn 2003), pp. 122-125.

Urban Survivor

Daniel Thomas Moran: *From HiLo to Willow Pond: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Street Press, 2002. 123 pp. ISBN 0 935252 66 5, \$15.00 pb.

From HiLo to Willow Pond, a substantial collection of over 90 strong poems, is presented as a journey. This is not, however, a journey with a prescribed route, but is suggestive rather, of restless, compulsive movement against a background of fathomless eternity, the uncertainty principle stated with the word “perhaps” in the very first poem “Perhaps It Was Not Mars” which places the fragile and the gently human

in the shadows
on your tender neck

against a background of the planets, and the “nameless and ancient”.
The next poem, “This Journey”, begins

It is,
of course, one of
the well-worked
metaphors
employed by poets;

and wittily alludes to the image of the struggling poet of cliché on his troubled quest, before concluding –

that I have arrived at
that very place I
once saw in a dream.

It is not dream, but reality that pervades this collection, and keeps it on track. His tone, observant and self-appraising, is clear sighted and without illusion, but strangely reassuring in its ability to state things as they are, and to place them so tangibly in among so much which is unknown.

Here are real robust characters with an attitude, – the fireman, the doctor, the barber and the bagel seller; Mexicans on bicycles and the man who makes fortune cookies; characters who accept uncertainty, but have a sure grasp of the “home territory” of the familiar and the simply human.

Pains carried
and conquered.

Evidence of living
my fingers now
trace with joy.
(“Landscapes”)

The quiet heroism of life is recorded, its troubles and its small triumphs. Characters who live in the present according to a provisional ethos, always up for it, as in the poem “Volunteers” where the firemen live a life of sudden action followed by deflation and forced inactivity, but are always in a state of readiness.

Not least among these figures is the enduring presence of Moran himself, with what might seem an existential take on life, both recording and questioning, as if commuting between different impulses, in a life of constant passing through, pausing, consolidating, moving on. It’s a life in which, if he lacks a total hold on anything, he makes damn sure nothing has too much of a hold on him. Moran travels

to be
nearer
those things
I can
do without.
(“Travelling”)

He talks about what he knows, ranging from his childhood in Massapequa where

The true Massapequans
grew up wanting to be commuters.

to poems about his children and love relationships. Often, these more tender poems inspire some of his most striking images –

Those delicate places
at your hip which
mark the pulling of
love through time.
(“Landscapes”)

Always there’s this awareness of the bigger picture, ranged against the contingencies of daily life, often with ironic humour as here from “Beside the Rain at Homer’s”

Surely, this water which sustains us
could have waited until Monday.

The poems are sprinkled with aphoristic observations that impress with the truth of partial truth. –

He believed in many things
which never believed in him.

(“A Man Born of Heroes”)

They wheel and deal among the pro-tem propositions about life that mark Moran out as an urban survivor and one who speaks for those who, so tenderly, tough it out among all the reversals and compromises that modern living imposes.

Comprised, for the most part, of short, urgent lines, the poetry has its own momentum and turns corners to find its own destinations along the way. The flow of the verse seems so natural and direct that some of the poems don't seem to know where they are going until they get there, but they surge on, like the R Train of “Uptown”

The trainman,
the only one
who knows
what lies ahead.

so that we share in the passing revelations more fully as they seem unanticipated, even by himself. This adds to the poetry's sense of immediacy.

Moran's approach is discretely experimental. Not in-your-face striving to be modern or de-constructed, but always trying things out, – a different viewpoint, a new verbal strategy, but always with his own recognisable voice. This could be generally characterised as a chopped up, fast food, sassy style with its street-familiar, yet surprising contrasts and exotic suburbanness, but the poems remain quite varied. Sometimes built around an extended metaphor, sometimes using a longer-lined narrative style, occasionally a simple social or psychological observation in the most dead-pan of blank verse. Inevitably some approaches seem to work better than others. This is to be expected.

Rhyme schemes are rare but are used for the most part with humorous effect in the lighter, more whimsical poems –

Never say can't
To any ant
For you can trust
His work is a must

(“Concerning Ants”)

where the more formal capitalising of each line and the use of stanzas also feature.

His more usual free-verse style, of continuous down-paging in a rush of short lines, suits the vernacular of his vision. At times the layout

on the page is more adventurous, where form follows function, as with “Waiting for Louie the Clip” where the poetry is chopped into pieces and falls like clips of hair over the page and finally resembles the crossing, moving diagonals of the scissors themselves.

Where does Moran fit in to the broad field of contemporary poetry? Most immediately, his poetical forebears are American. One can hear echoes of the Beat Generation and of subsequent pop poetry. Something too of Walt Whitman. The lines are both exuberant and controlled but, as with his own dynastic forebears (Irish), there is a contributing European gene that seems to add to his work a broad accessibility and relevance.

Moran is an up-beat, up-town (sometimes out-of town, off-beat) guy who knows the real world and its downers but is still just about on top of it. On top of it with his words, his techniques and with his native urban resilience. Through it all, like his magician in the poem “Love and Legerdemain”,

He smiles as though
He had the knowledge
of the unknowable.