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Robert Bly's *What Have I Ever Lost by Dying?* Margueritte S. Murphy

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BOOK REVIEWS

Robert Bly. *What Have I Ever Lost by Dying?* Harper Collins. 1992. 90 pp. \$16.00 Paper: \$10.00.

Many of the poems in Robert Bly's new volume of prose poetry, *What Have I Ever Lost by Dying?* (HarperCollins, 1992), intimate a belief that death is not final. For a "Collected Prose Poems" that draws together poems from many of Bly's previously published volumes, the notion of reincarnation is doubly apt, for many of these texts have been revised, some extensively, and many have new titles as well. Furthermore, Bly has given these works a new "life" through the headings under which they are arranged. Instead of the conventional grouping of poems under the title of the original book in which they appeared, a practice followed by Bly in his 1986 *Selected Poems* (Harper & Row), Bly preserves only one such category, "The Point Reyes Poems," the title of a small volume brought out in 1974 by Mudra Press, incorporated in the expanded 1975 edition of *The Morning Glory* (Harper & Row). The other headings vary in kind: two thematic: "Family Poems" and "Love Poems," and two referring to Bly's aims in writing prose poetry: "Objects and Creatures Glanced at Briefly" and "Looking for the Rat's Hole" (a metaphor for reading this poetry explained in the initial prose poem of that section with the Baudelairean title, "Warning to the Reader"). Thus this volume gives us a sort of retrospective on his career as a prose poet, emphasizing key aspects of this work: the poetics of place as suggested by the retained "Point Reyes" title; the intimate narratives of the "Family Poems"; the less intimate "Love Poems" where love is rendered through metaphors, not stories; the "Objects" section alluding to the tradition of prose poetry where Bly situates his own work, that of the "object" or "thing" poem; and the final section whose title seems to be a figure for Bly's most recent thinking about the aim of this poetry "in a low voice" as he has described it elsewhere.

Before examining this reconstructed body of work, we might well note what is missing. Only one poem from Bly's 1977 collection of prose poems, *This Body Is Made of Camphor and Gopherwood* (Harper & Row), appears whereas I count twenty-nine from the 1975 edition of *The Morning Glory*, the other major collection entirely devoted to prose poems. While *The Morning Glory* is the larger volume—forty-four poems as opposed to twenty in *This Body Is Made of Camphor and*

Gopherwood, this difference is nonetheless remarkable and tells us something about Bly's own sense of his contribution to the genre. Bly is among those poets whose work in the prose poem led to its coming of age in American poetry in the sixties and the seventies. And Bly has speculated about what the form does for poetry repeatedly over the years. He has said that "the prose poem appears whenever poetry gets too abstract" and that his own prose poems form part of the tradition of "the object poem," a kind of prose poem that "centers itself not on story or image but on the object, and it holds on to its fur, so to speak."

Bly has frequently acknowledged his debt to Francis Ponge, the master practitioner of the prose poem of "definition/description," and to Rainer Maria Rilke for his *Dinggedichte*. We may read, though, in his writings on the "object" poem and in his own body of work an ongoing inquiry into the proper and possible relationship between subject and object, or perceiver and perceived. In the brief preface to *The Morning Glory*, Bly notes the Taoist thought that "our disasters come from letting nothing live for itself, from the longing we have to pull everything, even friends, in to ourselves, and let nothing alone." Bly attempts to avoid such "disasters" most obviously when he resists the pathetic fallacy, as he does with humor in "The Porcupine in the Wind": "His body apparently feels no excitement anyway to be climbing higher, toward the immaterial sky: he can't remember any stories he has heard." Yet the complicity of subject and object is inevitable, and haunts even the most object-oriented prose poems, as Bly himself acknowledges in the preface to this volume, entitled "Disappointment and Desire": "When I composed the first of these poems, which George Hitchcock published in a collection called *The Morning Glory*, I hoped that a writer could describe an object or a creature without claiming it, without immersing it like a negative in his developing tank of disappointment and desire. I no longer think that is possible."

Indeed, many of Bly's prose poems begin as a narrative of discovery: the poet, in a given time and place, notices the animal or thing, even physically handles it, checking its underside or isolating it by moving it onto his desk for inspection. Thus, beyond the unavoidable subjectivity of the observer, observation itself is to a great extent the *subject* of many of these poems. In the same preface, Bly goes on to describe a process of creation that is typical of his "object" poems: "In an object or thing poem, we usually work to keep the imaginative language spare, so that the being does not dissolve into human images; but I have learned also to accept the fantasy that often appears toward

the end of the poem." This pattern—narrative of discovery; observation; fantasy—occurs repeatedly in the poems collected in this volume, indeed, in my estimation, in many of its most successful poems. There are variations on this pattern; for instance, in the prose poems "Inspired by the Poems of Francis Ponge," the observer is effaced, although still present in his anonymous handling of the object, and in the "we" that replaces "I" for the most part.

To return to the issue of the omitted poems from *This Body Is Made of Camphor and Gopherwood*, we might speculate that since these poems pursue a single line of investigation, that of dreaming through the body or of dreaming in a universal, shared body, Bly did not want to lose the integrity of this work by reprinting only a few. More likely, I think, is his realization that in sketching the contours, sensations and dreams of this universal body, abstraction entered these prose poems, as a number of critics have remarked, and their anchor in the world of objects outside himself was dislodged. Thus, as "object" poems, they are less satisfying. (The one poem included from this volume diverges from this focus and is, instead, a rather charming portrait of Bly's children working on a play.)

So much for what's absent. What Bly has chosen to include shows us the importance for Bly of maintaining interest in the object even as it initiates a stream of subjective musings. For instance, in "Finding an Ant Mansion," Bly couples minute observation of an ant-infested log with a wistful vision of the "ant mansion" as a "completed soul home" for the poet's dead relatives. The discovery and description of the log thus gives rise to a fantasy of communion and cohabitation among generations, between the living and the dead. The poet directly addresses the relationship of objects to people in poems like "August Rain" where we hear that as we age, we become more and more a part of the realm of objects: "The older we get the more we fail, but the more we fail the more we feel a part of the dead straw of the universe, the corner of a barn with cowdung twenty years old, the chair fallen back on its head in a deserted farmhouse, the belt left hanging over the chairback after the bachelor has died in the ambulance on the way to the city. These objects belong to us; they ride us as the child holds on to the dog's fur; they appear in our dreams; they approach nearer and nearer, coming in slowly from the wainscoting." As the "dead straw of the universe" betokens a life lived, there is nothing morbid here, rather a gentle pull toward the world that Bly so lovingly describes, that the poet would understand and eventually be a part of. Less successful, in my opin-

ion, are the poems where the poet's desire to assert truths overshadows the truth-bestowing properties of the objective world, as in "Morning by the Lake" with its self-proclaimed "understander in me" (a phrase added to the poem which originally appeared in *The Morning Glory* as "A Windy Day at the Shack"). And there are the tracks of the other Robert Bly, men's movement guru and author of *Iron John* (Addison-Wesley, 1990), in poems like "October at Pierce Ranch," where "that other one in me" ... "hears sounds not coming from the blood, purer, deeper, wilder." (Notably, this is the one "Point Reyes" poem that appears in neither the original Mudra Press collection nor in the 1975 edition of *The Morning Glory*.)

In reading this collection, I was struck by the marks of violence on the world of "objects and creatures"—not only the obvious violence of the oil spill killing the seal in "The Dead Seal," or the "Germans and Norwegians" who "broke into the earth, ignoring the mother-love of the Sioux" in "Rendezvous at an Abandoned Farm," but the subtler instances: the stump that "resembles an elephant's leg with the body shot off ("The Stump"), the flounder whose eyes make the poet think that "it took some violence to get those eyes twisted around to one side— probably the violence each family knows about" ("The Flounder"), the assault on an orange, narrated in "Defeating an Orange." This leaves us with the sense that while we are implicated in violence against the natural world, the natural world itself is not benign. This knowledge may be part of what Bly would show us in "looking for the rat's hole": "The bird, seeing the bands of light, flutters up the walls and falls back again and again. The way out is where the rats enter and leave; but the rat's hole is low to the floor. Writers, be careful then by showing the sunlight on the walls not to promise the anxious and panicky blackbirds a way out!" (from "Warning to the Reader") Many of the best visions of this collection have something dark and "low" about them. Reading them is like inhaling the odor of the crab in "The Rock Crab": "something has put our face close to the truth, to the bony teeth of the ocean."

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