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Louis Jenkins' *Nice Fish*

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Louis Jenkins. *Nice Fish.* Duluth, Minnesota: Holy Cow! Press, 1995. 70 pages.

> "The task of the poet is to remember and recreate the immeasurable plenitude of the world."
>
> "Keats And the Use of Poetry,"
>
> - Helen Vendler

What better contemporary example of a poet remembering and recreating that plenitude than Louis Jenkins? In a quiet and understated collection of prose poems, Jenkins shows us a world full of wonders and delights, in language as felicitous as it is concrete, as allusive as it is firmly grounded in the real.

The collection gets its whimsical title from "Fish Out Of Water": "When he finally landed the fish it seemed so strange, so unlike other fishes he'd caught, so much bigger, more silvery, more important, that he half expected it to talk, to grant his wishes if he returned it to the water." But the fish makes no promises and people tell him "Nice Fish. You ought to have it mounted." The speaker does have it mounted and, armed with this trophy, begins the downward spiral that ends with his divorce and the fish, now with a broken fin, cast off in the attic. "When he was moving to an apartment, his wife said," 'Take your goddamn fish.'" It's hard to imagine a more resounding line than that one, which seems to sum up the finality of the failed relationship. But the poem isn't about failed relationships; it's about that "goddamn fish": "Boy, it was big. He couldn't imagine he'd ever caught a fish that big."

The title is echoed in a D.H. Lawrence poem, "Fish," which serves as the apothegm of the collection:

> They are beyond me, are fishes,
> I stand at the pale of my being
> And look beyond, and see
> Fish, in the outerwards,
> As one stands on a bank and looks in.

In other words, Jenkins's poem is about going beyond the self and one's limits and catching the "really big ones." In fact, *Nice Fish*

itself is a collection of really big ones. It is an outerwards journey that brings together prose poems that Jenkins has been working on for 25 years. In a brief introduction, he offers his insights into the form itself, calling it a "rectangle, one of our most useful geometric shapes." In an unassuming way, he describes the formal limits of the form: "think of the prose poem as a box.... The trick in writing [one] is discovering how much is enough and how much is too much." Thus, in recreating the "immeasurable plenitude of the world," Jenkins stores and displays it in tidy little boxes, balancing how much and too much with wit, with ringing detail, and with the finely-honed language of a master.

The choice of language and the choice of form here indicate to me, moreover, that Jenkins seems to be caught up in the larger question of the use of poetry. In his brief introduction, he gives us three useful metaphors for understanding the form of the prose poem-a small suitcase, a canoe (from a poem by Tomas Tranströmer), a door (from a poem by Francis Ponge). "One must pack carefully," Jenkins says of the suitcase. And of the canoe, Tranströmer writes, "the canoe is incredibly rocky...rhetoric will ruin everything here." As Jenkins concludes, "The poem is more than the luggage, it is also the journey." He also slyly adds that we should think of the prose poem "as a door, another useful rectangle." By inviting readers through the door, by promising to leave all rhetoric behind, the poet offers us a journey of discovery, all the while breathing life into language; preserving a sense of ourselves as individuals and as part of a culture, and elevating in us a sense of our humanity. In short, the poet's larger social functions may be aesthetic, mimetic, and ethical. But Jenkins doesn't insist on these; he allows the shape of his work to make them known to us.

For example, in "The Cure For Warts," the speaker prescribes an "incantation, words not to be spoken aloud in the presence of another human being….A few words to say in the silence and the dark. A phrase to worry over, polish and perfect, to believe in, despite all evidence to the contrary." Compare this to the "Language of Crows: "Crows have a limited vocabulary, like someone who swears constantly, and communication seems to be a matter of emphasis and volume…listen carefully, the language of crows is easy to understand. 'Here I am.' That's all there is to say and we say it again and again." And, thirdly, in the "The Poet," a mediation on the beauty of words themselves, a dark and serious young poet talks about poetic language. "Since I was a child," he says, "the word *meadow* always had connotations of peace and beauty." But when he looks the word up in the dictionary, he is

disappointed to find that it means a "small piece of grassland used to graze animals," and as a word it no longer is a "thing of beauty." The next stanza, however, provides us with a bracing, coolly objective, anti-romantic pastoral setting, complete with "muddy meadow" and "blackened snow." But it ends with "the *azure sky"* above it all.

That's certainly one of the things a poet does: to tease meanings out of darkened language, to purge it of false connotations, to give us incantations and mantras to recite over and over that communicate "Here I am; I am here; I am."

On the other hand, many of the poems in the collection focus less on the individual than on the community we find ourselves in. In trying to define that community, Jenkins describes odd but tell-tale moments that not only ring true, but that illuminate with force and grace what it means to be part of the world. The book begins with a poem from an earlier collection, *An Almost Human Gesture.* The opening riff is a quiet, still moment in time when a boy shoots some hoop in his driveway on a "huge summer afternoon." There is no "poetry" here, except that the concrete description engages all five of our senses: we hear the "thumps of the ball on the ground," we can almost taste the dust in the wind, smell the dry grayness of leaves, feel the round, pebbled surface of the ball itself, and see the "open fields that stretch a thousand miles beyond the horizon." This is what it means to be alive, to be capable of human gesture. Similarly, in "The Blind Man," the careful progress of a blind man making his awkward way down a hill is so meticulously rendered, one can hear the soft taps of his cane above the sounds of traffic and wind. Again, the effect is felicitous, quiet, reassuring, but urgent in its message for us to get on with our own, cautious, groping lives.

The second part of the book is from another earlier collection, *All Tangled Up With the Living.* "Automobile Repair" describes the desperate but ingenious ways the speaker goes about making do with what life has dished out to him. Similarly, the farmer in "Kansas" rummages through the detritus in back of the barn, "looking for exactly the right part or one that might do." These poems further describe the community of the living.

The third section rounds out the collection with new poems that demonstrate that Jenkins has mastered the form. The penetrating language is still there, but now these little rectangles of poetry have another dimension to them, a ruefulness I missed in the earlier poems. I sense in these that third use of poetry, the ethical dimension, what Charles Simic calls the poet's "act of love." For instance, "The View

From Scovill Point" sums up eschatology in this way: "This is not the end, but you can see the end from here.... Beyond all are the open waters of Lake Superior...each passenger receives a hug, a bouquet of flowers, a small box of candy." "Sainthood" is described the way one would describe an unwieldy ball of gas, "tethered like the *Hindenberg."* An angel pretends to be "a nineteenth-century poet, a misunderstood genius," but he has "no important functions in the array of mythic beings." The speaker in "No Hired Man" admits that "everything I've written is untrue." These lines at a glance seem to suggest a pessimism, a negation of sorts, but every journey has its misadventures, its detours and lost luggage. But what's important is that we and the poet have traveled together this short way, if only to get beyond the pale of our being.

Wallace Stevens, describing his life in Hartford, Connecticut, once wrote, "My experience…has taken place in a very limited space." There is nothing limited in the plenitude of these well-crafted, honest poems, nor in the reassuring experiences they bring.

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