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Louis Jenkins' *Just Above Water*

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Louis Jenkins. *Just Above Water*. Duluth: Holy Cow! Press, 1997. Cover painting by Ann Jenkins. 73 pp. \$10.95.

“One must have a mind of winter . . . and have been cold a long time . . . not to think of any misery in the sound of the wind. . . .”

(—*The Snow Man* by Wallace Stevens.)

One can't help feeling that Louis Jenkins must have had Stevens' poem in mind when he gathered this latest collection of prose poems, *Just Above Water*. Winner of the 1995 Minnesota Book Award for Poetry for his book *Nice Fish: New and Selected Prose Poems*, Jenkins continues to astonish us with his cogent, comic observations of the cold, hard struggle we call living. Many of the poems, as a consequence, focus on winter: the snow, the cold, the bitterness of endings. A quick glance at some of the titles from the collection reveals that Jenkins has a mind of winter indeed. “Snow People,” for example, argues that because we are “mostly water . . . it's not so bad living in a cold climate like this one. It gives you a certain solidity.” And as the speaker observes in “A Patch of Old Snow,” even in the depths of spring, winter, or the memory of winter, helps us to define who we were, and who we have become: “It's startling to come upon this old snow on such a warm day. The record of another time. It's like coming across a forgotten photograph of yourself.” Furthermore, as if to reinforce the notion that the “nothing” that is winter can define us, the speaker of “February” anguishes about the snow “[piling] up on the roads, mile after gray mile . . . like debt, like failure.”

On the other hand, the title of the book suggests a wider theme than winter and explores images that go beyond snow. The selections in *Just Above Water* describe in turn a fishing lure that rides just above water to attract the unsuspecting; a young woman who “looks far away across the water”; rocks that “stand waist-deep / in the water and refuse / to come into shore”; a piece of a tree limb riding above a rushing torrent caused by a storm; a skiff riding into the wind—all of these images reminding us of the tenuousness of life, the dangers of survival, and the rush of experience that is over much too soon. The run-off of melting snow fills the pages of this book with the transcendent music of passing time, and as the arrival or exodus of each season is signaled by some kind of precipitation, so are the stages of living and dying reflected in the glistening images of these poems. That existential flicker has never been better dramatized than in the tightly controlled mini-scenario of “The Skiff,” which describes a sailor suddenly disappearing overboard without a sound. His partner is startled to find half of a peanut butter sandwich on the seat, with a “bite out of one end. . . . That sandwich was the only thing to prove Jim had ever been here at all.”

But in describing these thematic ideas, I am not suggesting that the book serves as a kind of documentary of living. As Stevens himself suggests in “The Snow Man,” the reader of poems is the listener “who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that

is.” In other words, poems suggest truths about life that often have little relation to the perceived reality we experience in life. The poem is a construct of words, the play of an imagination floating in illusion. Words, in a sense, create the reality of the poem and of its speaker. The reader of the poem is then himself/herself created by experiencing the poem, by “beholding the nothing that is not there”—an illusion constructed of words— “and the nothing that is”—the lesson in living. Take for example, the most enigmatic poem of the collection, “Gravity.”

It turns out that the drain pipe from the sink is attached to nothing and water just runs right onto the ground in the crawl space underneath the house[. . .] It turns out that the house is not really attached to the ground but sits atop a few loose concrete blocks all held in place by gravity [. . .].

The poem continues to detach seemingly solid, concrete objects (rocks, trees, water itself) from the ground until everything hovers tremulously, and reality becomes a trick of illusion, a mere stage on which are conjured the narratives that make up living. Gravity, as the speaker understands it, means “seriousness,” and indeed poems have a serious purpose. Moreover, seriousness implies “firmly in place,” but nothing in the poem is “all that firmly in place.” There is nothing to anchor the poem to reality except *gravitas*: the seriousness of the language, the seriousness of the poet’s intention, the seriousness of the reader who seeks meaning from the poem. As is suggested by the speaker of “Autumn,” a companion piece, “our brains are unable to make sense of our own lives.” It may turn out, then, that what actual living teaches us about our lives may not be enough for us to know what it is to live.

But, that’s the crux, isn’t it? Our lives in constant flux, even when we appear to be in the same place, in a world continually changing, even as it appears changeless: what are we to make of it all? Writer Joseph M. Ditta puts it this way in his essay “Imagination and Technology”: poetry presents the imagination

with an enormously complex task of synthesizing, interpreting, and grasping a meaning whose truth is not to be found in reality [. . .] a truth moreover that, the more deeply we grasp it, the more profoundly it confirms our suspicions that our notions of reality are inadequate.

Thus, poems compliment and enhance our inadequate grasp of reality, and Jenkins’ well-turned poems specifically offer us the opportunity to experience other truths. That these poems take the form of prose poems contributes to their impact, for prose poems demand a compactness of means and a collocation of elements within very conscious limits to achieve their purpose. Jenkins himself suggests in his introduction to *Nice Fish* that he chose prose poems

because they are made “for travel, quick and light.” One might say that the poems in the present collection are like finely crafted skiffs, similarly made for travel, quick and light. Reading them, we are buoyed by the experience, and we are also grateful that, in Jenkins, we have at the tiller a poet who is willing to disappear and let us get on with the business of riding “just above it” all.

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