

REVIEWS

Music I Once Could Dance To by Roy J. Beckemeyer

Music I Once Could Dance To is not only a walk across Kansas, it is a walk through time. Roy Beckemeyer's poems in his first collection are fresh and vigorous with originality. His experiences range from learning the Baltimore Catechism to F-105D repair in Vietnam. His love poems are layered with sensitivity rather than sentimentality. His descriptions detail the physical world with vividness and are not encumbered by philosophical abstraction. The collection's overall theme of music is divided into five chapters: invocation, exposition, theme, variations, and recapitulation. The poems within are honed with sound. In the second poem of the collection, "Lessons," Beckemeyer writes of a young boy listening for his father to come home at night:

His father's feet
would ascend the stairs like notes of a scale
on a staff. Ear-trained, he would listen
for the door to slam, hoping to hear
perfect intervals of footsteps, wincing
at sharps, at flats.

And like many children, the boy follows his mother's "cues" as she directs her son's behavior: "she conducted with/glances, quick nods—as she kept their little/duo always in harmony." The boy and the mother respond to the moods of the returning father with the right music for family harmony: "...no matter/ how dissonant the opening chords/ of his father's homecoming cadenza." The use extended metaphor plays clearly the tension in a family.

Roy Beckemeyer's poetry allows the reader to enter the landscape of the poet's home, focusing time's passage onto an unchanging landscape. The poems read like a journey to the Kansas of the poet's youth, through his coming of age, and into his mature reflections on both. In "It is August in Western Kansas,"

...small towns shimmer
into view on wavering roads.
I plane along, windows
down, 'Okie from Muskogee'
blaring from the 70's
as if they never really ended.

He transports the reader like a passenger into the small town rising on the horizon, a constant reminder of traveling across the prairie. The highway itself remains nameless since it is a spiritual journey that Beckemeyer sees, one where all roads return home through time and space. In this case, the poet is carried through the hot summer sun, music "blaring from the 70's." Memory, itself, is brought alive by themes revisited in Kansas imagery: "Center-pivot sprinklers/dance a spindly-legged/ballet around the fields." The mechanics of a farmer's survival in a land of one hundred degree heat harmonizes with the ubiquitous meadowlarks that "launch /themselves off fence posts /with abandon, their liquid/warbles bubbling and boiling." The music of the Kansas summer sings in Beckemeyer's ear. He hears Kansas because he has driven its roads and listened to its music. As a poet and a country boy, he rides with his arm out the window—"the sun burns my left/arm brown" while "miles wear away tires/to the smell of hot rubber/and road tar..." Beckemeyer's road is a metaphor to the horizon. Like the poet, it

reaches, stretches toward
the horizon forever, as the wheels
of the car spin and push and shove
the whole hot world
behind me, mile
by westward mile.

Beckemeyer's imagery encapsulates the seeming endless Kansas highway, the countryside paradoxically monotonous and enthralling—the summer sameness interrupted by startling birdsong and brooding storm. The poet writes of the extremes which caress and pummel Kansas, often changing in a heartbeat. "Tornado Warnings" speaks of the living, fierce beauty of the thunderstorm "...the sky a swollen, spitting, sullen/yellow, thunder growling and grumbling/somewhere out beyond the county line." The broiling beauty of the approaching storm, which fits only in a setting of vast distance, is both



beautiful and dangerous—"huge raindrops, mortar shells cratering/the ground, splattering/mud like shrapnel." The storm's approach reminds the reader that there is a power that threatens to have us "skewered like St. Sebastian/by wheat stalks and splinters of straw." The poem ends wonderfully in the barnyard. The poet's final image is that of the "mule alone in the barn/braying for redemption" which ironically in Beckemeyer's modern world is "the closest thing/to a wailing siren/we can hear—"

Roy Beckemeyer's poems are like prairie stones, washed by storm, and carved by wind and time. Each is different. Each is formed by the experiences of a lifetime.

About the author:

Al Ortolani's poetry and reviews have appeared in journals such as *Prairie Schooner*, *New Letters*, and the *New York Quarterly*. He has published six books of poetry. His newest collection, *Francis Shoots Pool at Chubb's Bar*, was released in February of 2015 by Spartan Press. He co-edits *The Little Balkans Review*, a regional journal out of southeast Kansas. Currently, he is teaching English in the Kansas City area and serves on the Board of Directors of the Kansas City Writers Place. He performs his poems widely and is a member of the troupe White Buffalo Poetry and Blues.



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