

Home-thoughts from the Valley

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OF BRENT ROBISON'S *PRIMA MATERIA*

We herald great artists, especially writers, as bellwethers of a time, a cultural climate. And yet it's rare that the same accords are given the great editors and impresarios – sometimes embodied in the same sullen, ever-busy body – who shape how we think and feel about the wheres and whys of our living.

The new, fourth edition of Brent Robison's annual *Prima Materia, Speeding Through the Night*, has just come out. As with its predecessors, it brings together short stories, poetry and memoirs submitted to and chosen by Mr. Robison – himself a fine and subtle writer who's also become a new dad, shrinking the amount of time he has to give to anything but diapers and playtime.

Robison's taste in poetry tends toward the internal narrative: longer musings on personal events and the momentum hidden in near-death or death experiences – the big acts of life, in other words, instead of the more wit-driven or solipsistic lyricism of those collections focused solely on verse. Marilyn A. Johnson's "Tires Blown Off" ties the violence of car crashes and near-misses to her own feelings about her father. Al Desetta's "A Metaphor in Ten Parts" is a hallucinatory take on family life, skewed from a shattered drinker's perspective. Anne Richey's "Trailways," which lends the collection its title, captures the sad loneliness of exurban commuting, combined with the quiet humanity that we somehow still share, despite all our modern differences. All, plus the others in this collection, play deep notes; no sestinas or cryptic wordplays here.

Leave that for the short stories and memoirs and brave mixtures of the twain. There are a number of basic styles to the prose works here, from Duff Allen's maddeningly Borgesesque exercise, "Lieder (with Analysis)," through Ellin Ronee Pollacheck's Jewish descent into organic (yet oddly comedic) hellishness, "Shiva," to Mark Morgenstern's Buddhist chimera, "Zen Master of the Hudson Valley." Straight descriptiveness with a writerly focus on the beauty of

oddly constructed sentences seems to be the only wide norm, and that overall push for the cathartic experiences in everyday life – the wormhole-like "short story instances" that make the pains of everyday life seem worth it, if only because they all echo larger, epochal struggles.

Many of the authors here will be familiar names to anyone who reads the local media. All have built up strong inner voices whose commentary on such common, otherworldly local experiences as shopping in the Hudson Valley Mall with two fatherless teenagers (Susan Piperato's "Glue") or the metaphoric realities of crossing the Hudson's soaring spans (Werner Hengst's raw remembrance, "Crossing the Bridge.")

For our money, this penchant for the dramatic moment of self-realization, even when embodied in a simple, cold observation, feels most apt to our time and place in several of the more experimental works here. Sigrid Heath's "The Boar Hunt," though based on memories of other worlds far from ours, captures the way other places live in us no matter where we end up. And Wendy Klein's quiet scream of self-realization, "Snapshots: Excerpts from a Memoir," examines the scars we carry with us in a way we could, and maybe should, all emulate.

Robison, in his introduction to this new edition, speaks of the changes in his own life: fatherhood, a journey to India to complete an adoption, a new sense of tender caring in his life. These manifest themselves in the way these selections, his edits and ordering of material and the way this book has come out at this time of year all coalesce to capture those things about our lives that seem to define where we are now.

It's all about being busy, in other words, yet trying to remember why we moved here. It's about all the journeying involved in our day-to-day lives; about what can happen when one takes the time to stop and listen, and really write down what's happening all around one instead of just reporting its speed. It's about the difficulties involved in matching our wish to be good with our need for catharsis to actually do what we wish. And it's about the ways we manifest our deep caring for each other – even if only in poems, memoirs and stories, or collections, like this latest *Prima Materia*.

Speeding Through the Night is available at most local bookstores or directly from Bliss Plot Press. For further information, visit www.blissplotpress.com.

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