



Club Icarus

Matt W. Miller

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*From slick covered stacks
of capes and masks a boy begins
the walk to school with ganglions
blitzing comic book kinetics.
One step bat, one step spider, fists
popping claws, carrying shields
and totem boomerangs, he walks
the rooftop ledge of sidewalks swinging
across greenlight crosswalks on webs,
on hooks, on wings, on fire, and hunts
the menaces of the world and city to save
the girl in second period math who sits
next to him and smells like berries ...*

"Like Superman"

Matt W. Miller

Matt W. Miller's new collection of poems, *Club Icarus*, is poignant, frank, and eloquent without resorting to dry, mannered rhetoric. His imagery is original and memorable, and it's earthy enough to be accessible and authentic. Numerous poems are based on anecdotes, wrenchingly honest and illuminated with just the right details to strike a nerve. In "Candy Land," an act of kindness by Miller's mother is rejected by the narrator, who aches with inadequacy when he considers his standing in the world of men: "been feeling small, say you already know / you're a weakling in a world of crowding." What might have been merely a personal, confessional story takes on larger implications as Miller expands upon the premise as a life attitude: "life. Say you see yourself starting / to do things like this to your wife, acting / as if a man is made from yell and spit." Miller effectively turns the situation into an allegory any man (or woman) can relate to.

In "Pall Bearers," he describes the extreme discomfort of attending a friend's funeral: "We're tired from the standing, / the waiting, the carrying / of a weight we never knew // till then would be that heavy." Miller exploits the enjambment of "a weight we never knew," implying the burden of their deceased friend's life. The piece culminates in an image of the six answering a nature call: "Instead we shuffle out / ... kicking rain from the grass / in the backyard, and line up / against a wooden fence / ... Then all of us laughing // at this terrible salute as steam / rises from the puddles / we make in beds of mulch."

A lesser poem might have aimed for something loftier that failed to mention the less pious aspects of shouldering a coffin. We might dismiss the ending as the sort of blue humor that often accompanies male bonding, but "Pall Bearers" exemplifies a pattern in Miller's poetry, that (like the work of Mary Oliver or Pattiann Rogers, for example)

grounds the spiritual in vivid, palpable imagery. The six have no desire to: “go inside / the house to use the toilet, / to stand all alone staring / at the shamrock wallpaper.” So in a spontaneous act of brotherhood, they are able to find comfort in an act that binds them in sorrow, mortality, conviviality, and irony.

There is, undoubtedly, a distinct irony that permeates *Club Icarus*: “Birding” discusses songs of birds he’s never heard and can’t identify; “Like Superman” debunks the need for superheroes; and “Partus” turns a piece about childbirth into a rollercoaster of terror and catastrophe. There is an unmistakable dark side to much of Miller’s poetry that is solidly anchored by carefully chosen, understated description. When Miller describes the birth of his daughter in “Partus”—“the baby now by heaving rips out / brown and beet now... / black blood and no crying”—he conveys the experience with precision but without yielding to the temptation of gore or excess. Occasionally he might fudge with diction more intuitive than grammatical—“but do they throat the dawn / with whistles, chortles, rattles” (from “Birding”)—but thankfully these instances are rare. Miller’s grief and delicacy, his resignation, dedication, and buried rage are executed with skill and grace. *Club Icarus* is a great choice for anyone who appreciates nuanced, wry, intelligent poetry that finds redemption in steadfast humanity.

CHRISTOPHER SODEN (Summer 2013)

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