FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Poetry

Divina is Divina
Jack Wiler
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“Ay, in the very temple of Delight / Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine.” These lines from Keats’ “Ode to Melancholy” open the latest and third collection of poems by Jack Wiler, a New Jersey poet who died just after this manuscript was accepted for publication. And so begins our tour through the painful, beautiful world of a vital iconoclast of a man who wrote poems with an ear for the vernacular and an eye for the absurd and the broken.

Of course, the indignities of illness are a major theme here, and often it’s not pretty, though Wiler transcends the grim and gives us transcendence, written as the poems are from that in-between world where death isn’t intellectual. Wiler delights in small things—the fleeting: summer light, leaves in the wind, a lover’s laugh—and his poems are instructions on how one might live well despite devastation. In the wake of his own AIDS diagnosis, Wiler crafted a defiant, roomy poem about the 9/11 attacks, which had occurred around the same time: “You’d think it would make you sob deep gasping sobs / and you would be right but you would be wrong. / You should get up and walk a couple of blocks north or / wander up to where I work on 9th Avenue and watch / the real world go by.” He gives us a close-up of a beloved city, the people he meets at the butcher’s, at the Bellevue bar, and in seedy neighborhoods. It’s a love poem for a place as full of living as he is.

Wiler worked as a poet in the New Jersey schools and was an editor at Long Shot magazine, though for many years he was also employed by Acme Exterminating in New York. This last may account for his clear affection for the least among us, including cockroaches, rats, and bacteria that colonize the drains of even the privileged. “Why not stroke their hard skin, their rough fur. / Why not offer them some wire for gnawing, some toy,” he writes. Over and over we are reminded that we are not so special, no matter what we believe about ourselves; these poems argue for a truer democracy, one in which all beings have value.

It’s easy to imagine how Jack Wiler would have made friends with the people in his poems—the bums and addicts, transsexuals and mop pushers—because his heart is capacious

and compassionate. A few of the poems are over-written, but mostly they are their own, smart selves, and it is easy to picture him reciting them in front of a boisterous audience, completely himself and utterly unselfconscious, everyone cheering for him to keep going.

Holly Wren Spaulding