

Fence Line

Curtis Bauer

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“It felt like cold wind on a hot day,” ends the first poem in this collection, and such calm, understated Midwestern images are one of the poet’s signature notes. This book, winner of the John Ciardi prize for poetry, offers many such luminous moments—some of them not so quiet.

The volume begins with a series of rural poems; titles like “Waving to a Neighbor Around Dusk” and “Summer Storm” suggest their gentle, direct approach. “Imaginary Homecoming” works in crafty way toward some chillingly unexpected images that mix violence and nostalgia: “Here you were run over by a tractor. / There you shot at a rabbit four times. ... / Here, I think this is what they told me, / you started to walk.”

The next two sections shift toward a more interior and cosmopolitan voice. The famous Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca is invoked more than once, perhaps a risky move, but Bauer’s spacious imagery generally bears up well: “The sound of men slapping / wood with hammers / echoes across the valley. / The silence is vast enough / to hear a swallow memorize / the air beat under its wings.” If “I’ll Say it This Way” owes something to the exuberant, grungy energy of Lorca’s New York poems, Bauer has chosen a worthy master and poetic partner, and finds his own (distinctly heterosexual) version of Lorca’s “soft surrealism.”

The poet holds a BA from Central College in Iowa and an MFA in poetry from Sarah Lawrence College; he currently lives and teaches in Iowa. His poems have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *The North American Review*, *Rhino*, and other journals; this is his first book. In it, shadowy female figures move throughout, sometimes distant, sometimes nearer, and erotic energy fuels many of the poems, especially in the second half of the volume. “The woman I think I can love / is upstairs and / the man I want to be / waits in the basement / for the other woman / he desires to leave,” Bauer writes ruefully in “The Sound of Habitation.” In “Landscape with Swallows” he writes of a wife who “wants to be a bird / flying above Barcelona,” and the magical realism deepens into a beautifully oblique sense of just how tenuous one’s hold on another person may be.

Several poems in the third section are set in a mysterious “City of Q,” a slightly blurry European sort of place, and those poems threaten to become a bit stagy. Bauer is at his best when he finds an uneasy but productive balance between his impulses toward surrealism and straight description, erotic mysticism and realism, as in the ominous “Waiting,” which concludes memorably: “Here they come. Where have you been boys? / Give me your ears. Today we learn to die.”

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