ForeWord Reviews

Homonym
Edward DeBonis
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"All words are homonyms. They mean different things to different people. To Justice Scalia the words in the Constitution are dead … incapable of more than one interpretation." So says the poet in this book of poems about the crucifixion of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Wyoming; about the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center; about the devastation of AIDS on a whole generation of gay men; about family and the meaning of words as they change over the course of a lifetime.

DeBonis surprises the reader with the images his words invoke, always simple words that carry the power of lethal weapons. In "Fireflies," he introduces the tendency of boys to rough play, then later to violence like that committed on Matthew Shepard: "Screams / smothered by the vast plains, / flicker, insignificant as fireflies, / and disappear, extinguished." On the aftermath of the World Trade Center attack, in his poem "New Ash," DeBonis writes so simply the words' strength is softly disturbing: "The winds shifted on Friday and on our / terrace the table is covered with new ash. / I'm sure I should collect it and put it in a sacred urn."

But the poet's words are most basic and startling when the son becomes the caretaker of his elderly father in "The Time of Your Life." When "Dad wets himself after dinner," the narrator takes him upstairs to wash him: "As the washcloth passes over his ass, Dad says to himself, 'Geez, you can't beat that.'" The poet reminds the reader that in life's little things, simple words take on the most meaning.

This collection of poems is accessible to everyone, including those who don't read poetry as well as those who make a lifelong study of the art. A graduate of State University at Buffalo with a law degree from Southwestern University in L.A., DeBonis is the managing partner of the New York office of the Lucas Group. He also serves on the New York chapter of Dignity/USA, an organization of gay and lesbian Catholics. His poetry has previously appeared in literary and university publications; this is his first full-length book of poems.

In an image of an AIDS sufferer playing the piano shortly before his death, DeBonis writes: “The notes came raining down on me like sweet shrapnel,” evoking an indescribably tragic and ironic use of simple words. All words are imbued with different meanings in the different contexts of experience. “Homonyms,” the poet calls them.