ForeWord Reviews

How Men Pray
Philip F. Deaver
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Of the many risks that poets may choose, this one opts—unusually—for quietness. These poems speak in an understated, direct voice, with few verbal flourishes or tricks with language. “Gray,” for example, begins with the prosaic “This was our pretty gray kitten, / hence her name” and ends with the nearly sentimental “So many years after, / I can’t get her out of my mind.” Yet within such unassuming frames, somehow, Deaver creates both genuine feeling and real depth in this first collection.

Well-published as an award-winning fiction writer and a teacher at Rollins College in Florida, Deaver is adept at putting techniques of prose narrative, especially suspense and voice, to good use in free-verse poems. He often “works small,” beginning with incidents and details that seem insignificant but reveal larger human dimensions and mysteries under gentle pressure. “Me in Roy’s Old Office” shows the narrator looking through the things left behind by (it seems) a colleague whose vanishing is not explained clearly. The small artifacts lead to quiet but resonant reflection on “what he knew and why he left like that / and whether, indeed, I’m as lucky as I think.”

This question—just how “lucky” it is to be a middle-class, middle-aged American man—runs through many of these poems. To Deaver’s credit, he is neither complacent nor content with merely registering one private moment after another. Longer poems like “Switch Engines” reach for a larger vision, as the sound of rail activity in the night leads Deaver to envision all the “lives that don’t sleep” and their connections to him and his family. “Tell it to my children,” he asks, “who tonight sleep in their beds at peace / while I in middle age stare at the ceiling, frozen against an empty prayer.”

Deaver does not take his privileges for granted, but he has little interest in liberal guilt or apologetics. Often, he seems bemused by the small pleasures that can be found even with darkness threatening, as when his mother, four weeks before her death, smiles as she opens her menu at Shoney’s and says “Isn’t this fun?” Loneliness and human connection, weary knowledge and satisfaction with transitory pleasures, often are sharply poised against each other.

Readers interested in verbal pyrotechnics or complex linguistic structures may find Deaver’s work a bit flat; these poems offer themselves to readers with a plainness that is both

their accomplishment and their limitation. Those who read for connection with another human being struggling for insight into the pains and joys of this life will find plenty here to treasure.

Jeff Gundy